

Ruined Nights

28 years is a long time to be away from reality. That's how long I was out, they told me—that's how long my coma lasted. I remember waking up lying in a hospital bed, the bright white lights blinding me, my eyes throbbing painfully from lack of use. It felt so surreal, the whole ordeal did. It took me a while to orientate myself—to figure out whether or not I was still dreaming.

The first sounds I remember hearing that day was a woman's cry to the doctors telling me that I had woken up. The next few minutes were a complete blur. After being jostled and hugged more times than I can recall, a stir of voices and movement all around me, I finally starting to come into consciousness.

I looked around slowly, my eyes still a bit painful, and saw a handful of people standing in the room. Some I saw were doctors and nurses, others were ones I knew or could at least vaguely recall...the rest were a group whom I had no recollection of.

"Where am I?" I asked groggily, still rather disoriented.

"At the St. Marcus Hospital," a nurse replied, and then smiled at me.

"Why am I in a hospital? What happened to me?" Questions began to run rapidly through my mind as I struggled to jar my memory.

"It was a skydiving accident, Midnight," a short woman with bronze skin and black hair in a ponytail kneeling next to me said, her voice soft and sweet.

"Skydiving at midnight?" I asked even more confused.

"No, no...Midnight—that's your name," the woman replied. She took my hand in hers. "Don't you even remember your name?"

"No," I answered honestly. My name...Midnight? What sort of a name was that? I looked across the room to my mirror reflection to get a better sense of myself. There I was, lying there in not much more than a hospital nightgown. My dark, reddish skin covered my scrawny form, and as I squinted a bit, I noticed that my face seemed to resemble the face of the lady holding my hand.

Swallowing hard, I asked my next question with bated breath. I turned to the woman and asked, "And who are you?"

I'd give anything to take that question back now. Or at the very least, I'd give anything to forget the look of despair in her face when she realized that the part of me that knew her was now gone.

"I'm your sister," she said, tears welling up in her eyes, "Rainwater."

I didn't quite know what to say. I had just been awake for not even five minutes, and I'd already made someone cry. I wanted to ask something more important, but all that slipped out of my muzzle was, "Who named us?"

Rainwater gave a gentle laugh at this and replied, "Our parents were Native Americans."

"Oh," I responded. "Were they really?"

"Yes," my sister answered again.

I paused again before asking my next question. "A skydiving accident?"

A tall, lank aging doctor stepped forward to answer this time. "You're lucky to have survived it. Apparently, your parachute never opened."

"I skydive?" I didn't really have any recollection of ever having skydived before.

“You loved it,” a man wearing a white suit standing in the back near the open doorway replied. I recognized this guy, though he seemed to have aged a good deal since I last saw him. He was my best friend, from what I could remember.

“William?” I asked of him, and he nodded. Rainwater glared at him a bit enviously.

“You said that it freed you, that you could truly fly that way,” he went on, smiling weakly at me.

“How long was I out?” I asked finally. “What day is it?” Some people in the room exchanged nervous glances before an answer was given.

“You went into your coma on May 3rd, 2003,” the old doctor told me a bit heavily. “It is now June 24th, 2031.”

I blinked, stunned. “2031?” I repeated. My mind quickly did the math. “I’ve been out for nearly three decades?” That was harsh. That was becoming harder and harder to take in as I realized more and more how much my world was likely to have changed, how everything I thought I might have known would have simply disappeared. I looked to the window, which had the curtains still drawn around them. I started to get up to go look out the window, moving slowly, when I was stopped.

“Take it slow!” the doctor ordered. I glanced at him half-heartedly, then slowly swung my legs out off the bed and set my feet on the floor, sitting upright facing the window. Taking the tubes out of my nose and monitoring patches off my body, I tried to stand. I wobbled for a moment, then fell backwards onto the bed again.

It was then that I broke, burying my face in my hands. I couldn’t even remember how to walk. My world was gone. Why hadn’t I just died in that accident? What good was I now? I felt a cool hand on my shoulder, and heard the doctor speak again.

“It’s going to be a long process getting back on your feet, so to speak,” he told me softly. “You’re very fortunate that you don’t have to learn to talk again. Most coma victims do.”

I looked up at him through misty eyes, and all I could manage to say was, “Why? Why me?” He frowned a bit, dipping his head down and closing his eyes, obviously unable to answer.

“Sometimes, there are no answers,” I heard William say from behind me. “Some things just happen, and we can never know the reason why. There may not even BE a reason why.”

“Oh, you can say that easily!” I told him. “You didn’t just wake up to find that you had been asleep for 28 years!”

“No, but I had to see my best friend miss out on so many great adventures in life,” he responded, a bit coldly. “I’ve had the time to ask ‘why’ as well, you know.”

Again, I didn’t know what to say. I was upset, and I couldn’t think straight. In retrospect, I figured that I shouldn’t have gotten angry at him like that.

“I think,” started the doctor again, addressing everyone standing in the room, “that this man needs some personal time to recover.” Everyone took their cue and left, except for the doctor and his upbeat nurse.

“I’ll see you in a bit,” William said to me on his way out, and was the last one to leave, leaving me alone with the doctor and nurse.

“So what’s the game plan?” I said a bit dryly to the tall doctor, who got to work promptly checking my vitals. He went into an overview of learning to walk again, taking

it slow, checking other body controls, taking it slow, staying in the hospital for some time longer, and, oh yeah—taking it slow. So I somewhat reluctantly allowed the staff to take their sweet time in helping me recover. I was actually rather torn the whole time—I wanted to see how much the world had really changed, but at the same time, I was afraid of what all would be missing and of how much had really changed, and my hospital bedroom served as a rather safe haven to prolong the inevitable. It's a scary thought, realizing that you don't know how different the world you're soon to step out into might be. You think you have a grasp on things in life, and you suddenly wake up one day only to have reality flipped upside-down. In the end, I could only work slowly, as the doctors were instructing me, and simply hope to soon see at least some remnants of my world.

The process of “getting back on my feet” was indeed long and tedious. Countless hours were spent relearning how to walk properly. The only thing that made the whole ordeal endurable was the fact that I got visitors daily. Usually it was only my sister or William, who would help fill me in on the history of the world's affairs since I went under. However, once in a blue moon, I'd get the occasional odd friend or relative. Some of them I remembered. The others...well...let me just say that on those days, I felt as if I had taken a few steps back again.

I remember one specific day, close to the end of my rehab, when William came in that ended up changing my life again. He walked in, donning his white suit again, his bouncy walk rather jovial as usual (as far as I remember it), though he seemed sensitive at the same time, a warm smile on his face. He looked at me somewhat oddly before speaking to me.

“I have a special visitor here today, my friend,” he said to me somewhat heavily. “She hadn't mustered up the courage to come talk to you until just now. She's waiting right outside.”

“Who is she?” I asked, sitting up in my bed.

“Well...does the name Sylvia Shadows ring any bells?”

After thinking long and hard, I had to reply honestly, “No, sorry. Perhaps if I could see her, I might remember. Who was she?” I heard some soft sobbing from right outside the room, and before William could answer, I saw a petite black and white figure run into the room, rushing right at me, and hugging me tightly, sobbing onto my shoulder. As awkward as it felt to have a complete stranger show so much affection towards me, I found her hug oddly warming for me, and wrapped an arm around her, caressing her gently.

“Sylvia was your girlfriend, Midnight,” Williams told me over the gentle sobs. “You two had broken up not a week before the accident. She's been worried about you ever since, but didn't have the heart to come see you until now.”

I looked down in wonder at the small mound of dark skin and zebra-striped fabric still clutching my body. “Forgive me,” I said to her, doing my best to console her. “I wish I could remember you—some part of you. You, er, seem like a very nice lady.” It seemed to have worked, as she pulled back a little and looked at me with full, beautiful (yet still teary) eyes.

My god, she was gorgeous! I wish there were better words to aptly describe her beauty. There was a strange but comforting aura about her—perhaps given off by the bottomless wells of her blue eyes—that gave me a warmth and a comfort that no one else

I knew had ever given me. At the same time, though, she seemed all too distant, beyond a vague memory, as if her very soul was shrouded in a thick mist on some distant, unmapped island. During all the time I knew her, she was always this way: ever present, but always so distant. Nevertheless, there were hints about her that held a history—a lifetime of pleasures that begged my remembrance, for which I struggled and racked my brain.

“I’m surprised I wouldn’t remember someone so beautiful,” I said softly, more to myself. She smiled when she heard it though, her face lifting up a bit into a soft smile. “Forgive me, Sylvia,” I said again, “but what made you so nervous to see me?”

“It’s just,” she started in a soft and near-heavenly voice. “I wanted to see you—I swear that I did! I still love you. I always have loved you. I just didn’t know how you’d react. I’m so sorry for leaving you!” She hugged me tightly again, kissing and nuzzling my neck, and I couldn’t help but hug back, her warm body a welcome change from the cold hospital rooms I was accustomed to now.

She pulled back once again, holding my face in her hands, and regarded my eyes for a moment before advancing on me again—this time kissing me full on. I was shocked at first, but closed my eyes a split second after and simply allowed myself to melt into her deep kiss. It was unlike anything I had a recollection for: warm and tingly, oddly comforting, and certainly invigorating! When she pulled away again, we both looked back at William, who was still standing near the doorway.

He had a peculiar, anxious look about him. “Anything wrong?” I heard myself ask him.

“Oh, no!” he replied merrily, his face brightening up a bit. “Just glad I can see you two together again is all.” He rubbed his hands a bit, almost nervously. “And you know,” he continued, “since you’re almost finished with rehab, I think we ought to go out and celebrate once you are good to go. Just the three of us, like the good old days.”

“The three of us?” I repeated. “No girlfriend for you, Will?”

He laughed nervously. “I see you don’t remember *everything* about me...” he started.

“What am I missing?” I asked, looking curiously from Sylvia to William.

“I’m gay,” he answered frankly.

“Oh. Well...boyfriend, then?” So what if he’s gay? A friend is a friend, especially one who sticks around after 28 years of the Sandman.

“Nope,” he answered, looking down at the floor, an odd twist in his smile.

“Well, maybe I ought to help find one for you,” I said, winking at him with a smile.

He smiled back and said simply, “You just worry about getting out of this place, and then we’ll see about all that later on. I’ve survived for some years now—I think I can survive for longer.”

Sylvia looked at me, kissing me again lightly, and then said with a slight frown, “I have to be going.” She planted her soft lips on mine once more, kissing me passionately. With a final hug she got up and started to leave.

“We both need to go, actually,” William added. Waving with a gentle smile on his face, he led Sylvia out of the door, who looked back to blow me a kiss just before she disappeared from view.

That first day leaving the hospital was quite an experience for me! I remember the anticipation of looking upon the outside world for the first time. William and Sylvia had come to pick me up, and as I signed all the necessary paperwork, I took that first nervous step outside. My legs almost felt like faltering, but I resisted and followed through as I stepped through the sliding doors to behold the new world.

"Wow," I said as I looked around at the tall skyscrapers surrounding the hospital at a fair distance. I turned back to Sylvia and William and said with a bright smile, "I expected things to look a lot different, but the world looks the same as I left it!"

"Well, the surface barely changed, really," William informed me. I carefully placed a foot onto the pavement sidewalk in front of me, taking my time to make sure it was all real. Once I was satisfied, I bounded off, running a ways on the sidewalk before pausing to let my two guides catch up.

"What," panted William as he ran up, "was that all about?"

"I'm sorry," I exclaimed giddily. "It's just...wow...you know? This!" I cried out, thrusting my arms wide open and looking ahead, as if to embrace the wonderful world before me. I felt a single tear fall carefully down my face. "You have no idea," I said, turning back to them. "No idea what it's been like in there," I nodded to the hospital. "It's been a real prison," I said, my face drooping just a bit.

Sylvia looked concernedly at me, walking up to me. She was shorter than I had noticed in the hospital room, only coming halfway up my chest. Hugging me gently but meaningfully, she looked up at me and said, "I know we don't know what it was like, honey. But we're here for you all the same."

"I know," I beamed down at her, hugging back and kissing her lightly on the cheek. "And thanks," I added. "It's been a nightmare, and I don't think I would have pulled through without your support."

"Well," William interrupted, "shall we be going?" I nodded and followed him as he led the way around the corner of the beige and lifeless building, leading us to a parking lot.

"The cars are certainly different then how I remember them," I noted. We hopped into a small red convertible, the top down for the nice, breezy day, with William at the wheel. I frowned a bit as I got into the back seat with Sylvia. "I just realized that I'll have to learn how to drive again."

"That can be easily arranged," Sylvia said, caressing my arm.

"And what about a job?" I asked. "What did I do before...?"

"Not a heck of a lot, my friend!" William guffawed, and pulled slowly out of the parking space. Once we exited the parking lot (I noticed the gate system was still the same as ever), we were off in a flurry as tall buildings whipped past me, my eyes struggling to keep up. Downtown turned into the highway, the highway turned into a country road, and I couldn't help but cry out and laugh with excitement. I pointed my face straight into the air and simply laughed as I felt the sun's warming rays beam down on me. The air whipped around my body in jubilation, and I felt like a kid again. I felt free, totally and utterly without restraint, and I eagerly took in the world's sights, sounds, and smells during the long drive.

We were deeper into the country, the rolling hills blanketed with trees, and I was about to ask where we were headed when we turned a long corner, and my unasked question appeared to be answered. In the near distance, upon a high cliff overlooking

the sea, the road wound up to greet an ostentatious mansion. It was entirely white, and looked to be like one of those old Southern plantation homes, the porch and second- and third-story balconies on the front side supported by huge white columns.

"I hope you don't mind," Sylvia started with a mock Southern Belle accent that made me smile even further. "We decided to retire to my villa until this evening's festivities."

"It's a wonderful villa," I replied, wrapping my arm around her shoulders.

"I'm glad you like it, because it's going to be your home as well for a while—as long as you'd like, in fact," she said warmly in her regular voice.

"Really?" I asked, a bit confused. "Why's that?"

The small woman frowned a bit and said quite honestly, "Your home had to be sold at auction. We tried to save it—we really did. They got us in the end with some legal mumbo-jumbo about how you hadn't been there for years."

"So I'm homeless now?" I asked nervously, feeling my stomach flip.

"No!" she answered concernedly. "Not as long as you've got friends like me or William willing to take you in. I would *never* dream of seeing you homeless!"

That comforted me some, and I kissed her lightly just as we pulled up into the rounded driveway in front of the villa. I got out and looked up at the grandiose mansion, noting the fine curves and décor of its outer faces, and couldn't help but smile. This looked like the start of a good life, I thought to myself as Sylvia unlocked the front door and invited me in.

"This is a good cognac," I remarked somewhat wetly as I reclined in the deep plush leather chair, one arm resting nonchalantly on the huge arm. The drawing room was massive, to say the least, fitting in nicely with the rest of the villa. I couldn't help but compare the sheer size of the house with the comparatively miniscule hospital room I had been taken prisoner in for so long.

"You remember your liquor, it seems," replied William, who was busy pouring himself a third glass of the same. His lightly sloshed steps seemed a bit erratic as he made his way back to his seat on the couch next to Sylvia, who was still holding her first glass, only barely touched. She was still smiling at me.

"I don't know why," I said to William rather solemnly, my eyes, however, fixed on Sylvia. I took another sip and looked desolately into my glass, continuing to say, "I wish I did."

"Well, I certainly hope you don't plan to spend your time here so glum," Sylvia said, lightening the room a bit with her voice.

"I don't remember you," I said to her, feeling so damn guilty. "I don't even...know you." The last words struggled to make it out of my mouth, and Sylvia could only respond by coming to sit on my lap, fitting easily with me into the huge chair.

"Then get to know me," she said earnestly, smiling some as she beheld my eyes. "Over dinner, perhaps?" she added, glancing at her watch and getting up again.

"Good idea," William said cheerfully, standing up quickly. I smiled wryly, though sincerely, and got up as well, working for a second to gain my balance. After a quick change of clothes (though William still in his white suit), we were back in the convertible, its smooth sheen reflecting the night as if the darkness were a familiar other world.

I always felt more at home, more at peace, during the nighttime. I don't know why—it always just felt more natural and safe. Perhaps it's because of how we used to go out all the time, or so I've been told. In any case, the night air smelled wonderful, tingling marvelously on my tongue. It tasted like nostalgic summers of a lost childhood, where all one might have to worry about is how many fireflies could be caught that evening. A night on the town seemed to hold much magic, and tonight was no different.

We parked ourselves a ways down the street from the fine downtown restaurant, since William never trusted the valet parking. Strolling casually towards the restaurant, we passed a dark building emanating a deep purple flashing light from within its tinted windows, and a loud noise that sounded like radio static fading in and out, but with no distinct signal coming through.

"What is that place?" I asked, having to raise my voice to a near-shout over the static sound.

"It's a rave—a dance club," Sylvia hollered back.

"Where's the music?" I asked, somewhat confused.

"We're shouting over it now!" she replied.

"This static noise is music?!" I asked incredulously, my voice slowly returning to normal as we passed far enough out of the sound's radius.

"It's the latest thing," William said, grinning.

"You don't say," I scoffed, and the three of us made our way up to the restaurant's entrance, where the doorman—a small young lad in a dapper suit—nodded and smiled as he let us in. The fading static-music quickly was replaced by the soft ballad being played by the live big band in the restaurant. "They have a dance floor," I remarked, somewhat in question.

"Yeah," Sylvia smirked, "but you were never much of a dancer. We *could* try again tonight, if you want." She winked at me, grinning widely, and I was left only to smile back as we were led to a small table in a room adjacent to the room with the dance floor. A small aquarium built into the wall next to our table had some tropical fish swimming happily about.

"Those look expensive," Sylvia said as we sat, nodding towards the fish in the aquarium. "They appear to be of the rather rare sort."

"That's how they were designed," William replied casually, opening his menu to the wine list.

"Designed?" Sylvia and I asked in unison.

"Watch carefully," William said, and we all stared at the aquarium instead of our menus for the first couple minutes, the big band in the next room heard to be playing a bright tune. After a moment, I had to do a double take, because it looked as if one of the fish...well, it's somewhat strange to try to describe. It looked like it flashed and fizzled in a way, as if it were a bad television signal getting static, the "picture" of the fish flickering in and out for a couple seconds before it returned to normal and continued swimming about.

"It's a television?" I asked, confused.

"Not quite," William answered. "The aquarium and water inside are all quite real, but these 'expensive' fish are nothing more than a new type of 'living art,' if you can call it that." William snorted at the fish and took a sip from his glass of water the waiter had just placed in front of him.

“Holograms, then?” Sylvia suggested.

“Not exactly,” William said again. “More like a computer program—a crude form of AI that allows for some interaction.”

“Interaction?” I repeated. “How? You mean we could touch them?”

“Well, as much as I think the restaurant would frown on you fetching your hand into the aquarium, yes, you could touch them. They’d feel as real as any natural fish. I personally think the concept is far too underdeveloped.”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, I feel I can speak frankly on this, being an artist myself. They call this ‘art,’ but it’s really nothing more than a way for the restaurant to save a few grand by not getting real versions of these tropical fish. Plus, the technology behind it still has many bugs to it. You saw how that fish flickered. It really shouldn’t do that.”

“I think it’s remarkable,” Sylvia said gleefully.

“You would think that,” William jested.

We returned to our menus, reading quietly for a few minutes until the waiter came back and took our orders. While waiting for our food to arrive, I took up Sylvia’s offer of getting to know her again by asking some simple questions. She turned out to be Sylvia Fawn Shadows, who enjoyed (among other things) good literature and independent films.

“What do you do?” I asked her.

“Less than you, which is saying something,” she answered.

“Why is that?”

“I inherited my millions from my father, who was a big captain of the oil industry before the big decline in the world’s market. When he passed away, his company passed to the stockholders, and I got the estate.”

“You must feel really lucky.”

“Lucky?!” she spat incredulously, laughing rather darkly at the idea. “I hated my father and everything he stood for. He was obsessed with making money, and little more ever entered his mind. It drove my mother to an early grave, and left me to accept the only life I ever knew: a life lived in vast riches, where I didn’t have to worry about working or education. I’d change that, if I had the opportunity.”

“I don’t understand,” I began. “If you have all this free time and money, why not just get an education or a job? You could go to any university you wanted!”

“It’s not as simple as that,” she said dejectedly. “My father knew how much I loathed his money-worship. In his final will—written when his years of business-related stress was finally taking its toll on his brain—he fixed it to where I would lose all my inheritance, including having to pay back anything I had spent previously, if I attempted to find work or attend a college. I accept the life I live in now out of necessity, and only you and William here have really made it worth living at all.” She attempted to smile at me, which I returned, though not really knowing how I should feel. “You’ve given me happiness, Midnight—a concept my father never understood.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” William interjected. “Everyone understands happiness, on one level or another.”

“I don’t think happiness was ever in his nature,” Sylvia said quickly.

“Well, I disagree. I happen to believe that happiness *is* nature. After all, that is the point, isn’t it?” William replied. “Making yourself happy, I mean. Personal desire.”

“I beg your pardon?” Sylvia replied.

“Well, think about it,” he started. “Everything we do, every choice we make...isn’t it all based on our one single instinct—to make ourselves happy?” Sylvia and I simply shrugged, so he continued. “Think about it. Why do you live where you live? Why do you watch the films you watch, or read the books you read? Why did you order what you ordered from the menu for your dinner tonight?” He cocked a crooked grin, and left us dangling for a moment.

“Because we’re hungry?” I offered, leaving William to turn his wry smile into a slightly annoyed frown. “Because it’s what we want,” I said more plainly.

“Precisely!” the man in the white suit exclaimed, his smile returning. “It’s what you want, and, quite naturally, you want what will make you happy! I mean, think about it: Who ever chooses something that they believe would specifically make them unhappy?”

“What about going out of your way?” I argued. “You know, doing something that makes you uncomfortable for the benefit of someone else? Say...a friend?”

“Then you’re simply sacrificing one happiness for a different happiness you hold in higher regard. If you go out of your way to make friends happy, then it’s because you find happiness in making your friends happy.”

“You make it sound almost selfish,” I said in slight disbelief.

“Maybe that’s because it sort of is selfish,” he answered. “But such is our nature as the sentient beings of this world. We can’t deny natural instinct—not something so basic as this. Might as well go along with it, right?”

“But there are rules, right?” I said. “Unwritten codes of conduct on how to go about it? I mean, you wouldn’t go killing someone just because it made you happy, would you?”

“That’s where it becomes a matter of perception,” William answered. “Some people would believe that the negative consequences for murder would be outweighed by the happiness that the murder would bring them.”

“So what’s your point?” I asked, having become intrigued.

“My point is...the food’s here, and I’m starving, so it would make me very happy if I could just eat for the time being.” He winked at me and began to chow down as soon as the plate was set in front of him. Sylvia and I followed, eating in relative silence, admiring the swinging music coming from the big band close by.

“You know,” I began after a while. “You never have filled me in on what exactly I did for a living.”

“Oh, that,” William said casually, looking up from his near-empty plate. After taking a sip from his glass, he continued. “You were an artist.”

“Really? Like you?”

“Not quite, my friend. I’m a sculptor, primarily, whereas you worked as a freelance animator.”

“Was I any good?”

“You did moderately well, worked on a couple of independent animated films and web comics.”

I closed my eyes tightly, concentrating hard, trying to bring up any sort of memory of what I used to do. “I think...” I began, but never finished. Next thing I knew, I was in the sky over some open fields, falling fast towards the earth as it zoomed dozens of feet closer by the second. I was panicking, looking every which way,

scrambling to make the parachute on my back open. The impact was coming...oh, god, why wouldn't this damn thing open?! I was going to die, I knew it...I heard a distant screaming... Everything was a blur of blue and green, and then it all went black.

When I opened my eyes, my vision was blurred by tears welling up in my eyes and streaming down my cheeks. My side hurt, and I noticed that I was laying on the floor, crouched into a fetal position.

"Oh, my god! Are you alright?" Sylvia's voice rang clearly as I was helped back to my feet. I wiped the tears from my eyes as I tried to catch my balance and figure out what had just happened. Looking around, I saw that everyone in the room was staring at me, making me feel even more uncomfortable.

"Come on," William said urgently as he threw an arm around my shoulder. "I think we'd better leave." After paying quickly for the meal, William hurried me out, and we made our way back to the car.

"What happened in there?" Sylvia asked concernedly, clutching me tightly to comfort me.

"I'm not sure exactly," I said, still disheveled from the whole ordeal, trying to recall the images that had just flashed before my eyes moments ago. "I think I remembered the few seconds before the accident." Sylvia and William paused and regarded me carefully, shocked expressions exchanging between them.

"Are you certain?" William asked. I paused a moment to think.

"It felt so real," was all I could say.

"We'd better get you home," William said, and started moving again. That night was long restless for me, as I would later recall.

Sylvia invited me to come to bed with her, but I had to decline, since I rarely even knew her yet. So I adjourned to a separate bedroom, lying down quietly to get some sleep. I barely slept, though, fitfully turning in my bed as the images of my accident kept replaying in my mind. I was afraid, for the most part, to fall asleep; I didn't want the same thing that happened to me in the restaurant to happen again.

Yet part of me wanted to fall asleep. I stared at the decorative crown molding that lined my bedroom's ceiling, listening to the quiet and subtle noises of the old villa, and considered how I could make myself fall asleep. I tried reading a business magazine I found on the nightstand—not really as boring as I thought it might have been. I tried counting sheep—nothing. So at about three in the morning, I got up and decided to get myself a glass of water, having nothing better to do.

Walking down the portrait-lined corridor, I noticed Sylvia's bedroom door to be open a crack. I fancied I'd just peek in to see how she looked asleep, but as it turned out, she wasn't asleep—she wasn't even in her bedroom. The bed lay empty, the covers in slight disarray and obviously slept in.

Going downstairs, I quickly got myself a glass of water from the kitchen and began to search the huge house for her. She wasn't in any of the downstairs rooms, nor was she in any of the bedrooms. I could only find William asleep in his own room further down the hall from where I was rooming, but as panicked as I was becoming, I didn't feel like waking him at this hour. Instead, I went back to my bedroom and laid down again, setting my nearly-empty glass of water on the nightstand beside me.

I awoke to a low-lying sun just over the horizon of the sea, warming my face, and to the sounds of a television inside the great house. It was then I realized that I was out on a balcony, not in my bedroom. *How did I get here?* I wondered silently to myself, looking around the balcony. A gentle breeze washed over my face, the salty air tingling my nose. I got up from the reclining lawn chair I had been laying in and leaned over the balcony some, looking into the distance of the sea before me. Guiding my eyes downward, I saw the jagged rocky shore at the base of the cliff on which the house stood. Small waves were visible there as they crashed softly into the rocks, making little sloshing sounds. I stared at them a while, searching my mind for anything that would have shown me how I got from sleeping in my room to sleeping out here on the balcony. I couldn't figure it out, and my head was beginning to feel more and more like Swiss cheese.

I decided to make my way back inside and downstairs to the living room, where William sat on the couch, his arms stretched out across its back. The sizzles and smells from the kitchen close by told me that breakfast was on its way.

"Hey!" William greeted me, turning his head away from the morning news as I came in. "Rest well, buddy?"

"I suppose so," I answered, still a bit groggy. "Where's Sylvia?"

"In the kitchen fixing eggs. I saw you asleep on the balcony this morning. Have a difficult time sleeping?"

"Yeah, pretty much," I said honestly. "Where did Sylvia go last night?"

"What do you mean?" he replied.

"Well, I didn't see her in her room last night when I got up to get a glass of water. I looked all around the house."

"I was in the basement," Sylvia called from the kitchen, obviously having overheard our conversation.

"But I thought I checked the basement..." I started, a bit confused. This was making less and less sense. Why couldn't I remember all of last night? I could have sworn that I looked in the basement...but now, my mind's eye didn't want to bring up any images of what it looked like.

"Well, you were probably half asleep," William replied. "I'm sure you either didn't check and thought you did, or you checked and weren't very observant."

"Alright," I said, still trying to work it out in my foggy mind. "I don't sleepwalk, do I?" I asked William.

"Not as long as I've known you," he replied. "Why?"

"No reason," I said quickly, not wanting to draw too much suspicion. "Why were you in the basement, Sylvia?" I called, walking around more towards the kitchen.

Sylvia came out of the kitchen and into the living room with a metal spatula in her hand to meet me. "If you must know, I was having difficulty sleeping as well. I thought I'd go admire some of William's work some more down there and I ended up falling asleep on the old couch."

"You're right," I said, turning to William, who was starting to look at me strangely, as if he suspected something wrong about me. "I must have not checked the basement—I don't remember ever seeing it now, from the description she gives me." I said this more to quiet any questions the two might have had for me than out of true honesty. Something in my gut still told me that I did indeed look in the basement and

saw nothing, but it was a trivial point at best, and not really worth debating. I decided I'd check out the basement later on and see if it wouldn't help me remember anything.

For now, though, William simply nodded, seemingly content, and turned back to the news. The news reporter on the television was standing in front of a large pile of rubble, where EMS personnel, police officers, firemen, and a host of onlookers were milling about.

"Hey turn that up!" Sylvia said eagerly, to which William complied.

"...As you can see behind me," the reporter was saying, "there seems to be little remaining of the mansion where J. R. Rynatt, the famous corporate millionaire and head of Rynatt Industries, once called home. The deceased bodies of Rynatt and his immediate family have been pulled out of the rubble, where they were found, as one police officer reported, 'grotesquely misshapen and beyond belief,' early this morning. Experts are unsure as to who or what could have caused this, but it is believed to be the work of middle and lower class union employees, who have been recently gathering into violent mobs and demanding increased freedoms by attacking those in charge. So far, however, these attacks had not escalated to anything so physically brutal and destructive until now..."

"That was John's home," Sylvia began, shaking rather violently. Sitting down on the sofa, she hunched over, appearing to be on the edge of breaking. "He lives—lived—not seven miles from here." She buried her face in her hands, dropping the spatula, and sobbed.

Instinctively, I sat down beside her and began to caress her. She latched on to me and sobbed heavily on my shoulder. "I knew him well," she cried out through the sobs, her voice muffled by my shoulder. After a few minutes, she came back up again and kissed my cheek. "Thank you," she said to me softly. I kissed her cheek gently in return, inadvertently catching one of her salty tears on my lips.

"It's just not right," William said fairly dryly. "These people have gotten out of hand," he went on, gesturing to the television. "It's not like they have bad lives! Why do they have to continuously attack their bosses? If they don't like the conditions where they work—which, I'll have you know, are legal and sanitary and not hazardous in any way—then why don't they just leave? I mean, where do these people think they get off, demanding more freedoms? Don't they have enough freedom? This isn't an anarchy you know."

"I know," I lied to reassure him, not really knowing too much about the system in general.

"I'm sorry, Midnight," William sighed. "I didn't mean to go off like that. It's just...John Rynatt was my friend, too. I just can't believe he's gone...did they really say that he was dead?"

"I believe so," I answered, frowning. I sniffed the air and said suddenly, "What's burning?"

"Oh, god, the eggs!" Sylvia cried out and tore off into the kitchen, and William and I followed her. A couple of smoke-filled minutes later, the burnt breakfast had been thrown away and the pan was soaking in the sink.

"Sandwiches, then?" William offered. "It's more like brunch time now."

"Sounds good to me," Sylvia replied, blushing a bit. Just as we finished brunch, I heard a loud and ancient doorbell reverberate throughout the large house. We all went to

the door to see who it was, and were greeted by the diminutive figure of an elder, balding man on our doorstep. He was wearing a fine pinstriped suit and was supporting himself by a cane in one hand, the other hand clutching a Bible to his chest.

"Dr. Dorall," William greeted the goat. "What brings you here?"

"I trust you've heard the news by now," the goat replied feebly, his scratchy voice shaking with his loose jowls as he held out the envelope. We nodded. "Sad, sad thing. He was a good and decent creature. I've been asked to go around and offer counsel, but I don't suppose this particular theology—" he held up the Bible "—is anything that would be of comfort to any of you, is it?"

William looked at Sylvia and myself as if to make sure before answering. "No, I'm afraid it isn't, Doctor."

"Ah, I thought as much," the Chaplain responded, reaching into his suit's breast pocket. "In any case, I do have this for you," he said as he pulled out an envelope. "I do hope that you can overlook religious differences enough to pay your last respects to our old friend."

William took the letter slowly and opened it, quickly skimming over the contents. "The funeral is on the 14th, then?"

"That's what it says," Dorall replied.

"They're rather quick," William said.

"I know," Dorall said, peering over the rim of his gold-rimmed bifocals at us. "He planned that date in his will. It was almost as if he was expecting to die around this time. Very odd. Very odd, indeed."

"Yes it is," William said carefully.

"If you'll excuse me," Dorall began, "I really must be going now. Death is an gloomy news to deliver." He turned and headed for his shiny black Oldsmobile, and William closed the door.

The funeral took place at a large Catholic cathedral on the other side of town. William looked off-kilter wearing funeral black since I was so accustomed to seeing him in the white suit he always loved to wear. Sylvia, too, seemed different—more distant than usual in the black dress and veiled hat she was wearing. I looked at her concernedly, giving an audible sigh towards her, and she looked up at me quizzically.

"I guess this whole business of death just made me realize how much I cherish you," I told her. "I wish I could remember more of you—you've been an excellent and a dear friend to me during the short time I've known you."

"It's because I love you," she replied, her voice sounding more firmly earnest than I had ever heard her speak.

"I love you, too," I revealed to her. "I find myself being absolutely content just to be with you."

"Thank you." Even through the veil, I could see how wet her eyes were becoming, and she wrapped her arms around me once again, holding me...simply holding me. I would have given anything to remain in her embrace, even there in the back bench of the car, for an eternity. "But I mean that I'm IN love with you. Even after 28 years, I still am."

My heart skipped a beat, and I thought silently about how to respond. Did I really feel the same way about her as she did about me? It's a confusing feeling, I must say.

How does anyone really know? “So do I,” I finally decided to answer, and she looked up at me with deep, hopeful eyes. Without much warning, I was suddenly lost in a long, passionate kiss with her. She was so warm, and so full of love, her spirit felt nearly palpable.

Pulling away was a certain hell, but we had to, as William silently pulled up to the towering cathedral where the service was taking place. I got out of the car to find scores of people—friends, family, employees, press—all here to pay tribute. They were all making their way inside; the service was about to begin.

The memorial was long and tear-filled, with long eulogies praising the Rynatts given by a select few that knew them well. In addition to the solemnness I would expect to sense at a funeral, the air seemed to be tense and foreboding, as if someone expected something dreadful to happen at any moment during the service.

Nothing did happen, however—at least, not until the reception afterwards, which took place outside in the courtyard, surrounded by well-manicured greens. Sylvia, William, and I decided to wander for a bit to socialize with people Sylvia and William knew. Not knowing anyone myself, I simply remained silent for the most part.

It wasn’t long before we heard rumors of some rather alarming news. There had been another attack just last night—the same kind that killed Rynatt—only this time, the victim was some other member of high society: a vice president of some big oil company. Violent union groups were to blame again, even though neither the news nor the police had been able to prove that the alleged suspects were indeed responsible.

The three of us were headed towards a good and reliable friend of William’s to verify this claim, when we heard a cry just to our right. “How dare you!” a shrill voice attempted to say quietly, and we all turned to see what had happened.

“How dare you show yourself here!” a tall, elder, and pompous-looking woman in a sequined black gown continued. She was berating a shorter man of mixed nationalities wearing a dark suit and a stunned look across his face.

“Mark Ralks,” William said heavily and in disgust, addressing the half-breed man. “What are you doing here? I thought the police had you in for questioning.”

“They let me go,” the man replied gruffly. “Because they—and none of you—have any evidence that shows that any of us had anything to do with this. I never wanted Rynatt dead, and neither does anyone else in the union. We don’t work like that. But if you really want me gone, then fine—I’ll leave.”

With that, he turned to leave. As William and Sylvia wandered on, I decided to go pay Ralks a short visit, running to catch up with him. I caught up with him halfway across the courtyard, and called his name.

“What do you want?” he said dejectedly, turning around to me. “Didn’t finish insulting me? Who do you think you are, anyway?”

“Look, I’m not with them,” I nodded back to the crowd. “Well, I am, but not exactly—at least, not on this...”

“So what do you want?”

“I just wanted to ask you—if you and your union didn’t do it, who do you think did?”

“How the hell am I supposed to know?!” he exclaimed, flailing his arms. “Rynatt was a decent man, for the most part. He had his problems, which we were trying to work with, but none of us ever wanted him dead.”

“What exactly was your beef with him, anyway? My friend tells me that the working conditions offer many freedoms and that you guys really don’t need any more.”

“It was never about working conditions,” he sighed. “That was just a marketing ploy the media grossly exaggerated—as they often do with most things—and used to make us look like the bad guy.”

“Then what ARE you fighting for?”

“For a new world. A world that doesn’t rely on money or materialism for a society to function well.”

“I don’t get it...are you some type of Communist?”

“No,” he said quite firmly. “We’re more like Transcendentalists. Everyone thinks that we’re Communists or Anarchists or something, but we’re not. We just want to do away with the system of trade and form a society where everyone helps each other out, and no one takes more than a fair share.”

“I still don’t think I understand,” I said, frowning.

“It’s okay,” Mark sighed. “Most people don’t. Look, I gotta go. Sorry.” He turned around and started for the parking lot, leaving me standing in the courtyard feeling more confused than before.

“He try his propaganda on you?” I heard William’s voice call to me from behind.

“I think so,” I said, still watching him leave.

“C’mon,” William said. “I think it’s best that we leave.” I looked at him a bit peculiarly, and he continued, “This place is just getting me down, and I want to go home, if you don’t mind.”

“No, I don’t mind,” I said. Sylvia came up to me and took my arm, and I led her to the car. Tears were streaming down her face silently, and I could tell that she was fighting back heavy sobs.

Hugging her close, she whispered into my ear, “I have something to tell you.” She sounded afraid and remorseful, and I looked at her with great concern. “Later, once we’re back at home. I don’t want William to hear. Either of you would think this is crazy, but you’d believe me more than he would.”

Trying to speak carefully, all I uttered back to her was, “I’m here for you.” With that, we got into the car and headed home.

“I think I’m a murderer,” Sylvia said shakily, gulping hard. We were sitting in her bedroom on her queen-sized bed. William had gone to take a nap for the afternoon, so Sylvia and I felt safe talking for now. I was here for her, of course—I loved her. But this was something that just took me aback.

“How do you mean?” my shocked voice asked her.

“Those reports about Rynatt and that other vice president dying...you think I’m crazy for this, I know you do...but I think I’m the one that killed them and destroyed their homes.” I must have looked at her the wrong way, because she continued as she stared at me, “You DO think I’m crazy, don’t you?”

“No,” I said immediately and without thinking. After pausing for a moment, the stillness of the room and house quickly becoming unnerving, I spoke carefully, “I don’t think you’re crazy. You might be confused and emotional right now because of the funeral. But I don’t think you’re crazy.”

“But you still don’t believe me, do you?”

I paused again, not sure exactly what to say. “I’m not sure what to believe,” I said finally. “I’m still supposed to believe that I was asleep for three decades, that I lived a lifetime before that which I barely remember at all...” I came to my senses just then—what was I doing? What was I saying? “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be doing this to you.”

“No, it’s okay,” she responded, wiping a tear gently from her eye. “Would you do me a favor, though?”

“Anything,” I pledged.

“Stay with me in this room when I sleep. I can’t exactly remember well those nights that each of the murders happened—all I truly remember was that I slept fitfully.”

“But you told me you went down into the basement that one night,” I said, remembering.

“I thought I did. I figured I must have, since that’s where I woke up the next morning.”

I nodded and agreed. “Alright,” I said. “I’ll stay in here with you. I must say, it’s not exactly something I wouldn’t look forward to.” I winked at her, which made her smile and kiss my cheek.

“Thank you,” she whispered earnestly. “If something does happen, I have a small video camera in my closet which I want you to use to show me what happens, if anything.”

I nodded and said, “Just one thing.” My mind went back 28 years again.

“Yes?”

“Did I really love to skydive? Remembering that...episode I had in the restaurant, it all seemed rather frightening to me.”

Her look then was rather indiscernible. “Yes,” she said with a bit of a strain, as if trying to remember herself. “You told me once that it was more like flying than falling to you. You let yourself truly go when you flew. It made you happy.” She smiled reassuringly at me.

“There seems to be better ways of becoming happy...ways that last longer...” I gazed into her eyes, feeling as if I was falling into their vast, unfathomable depths. “I love you,” I told her, and kissed her passionately.

That evening, we got into bed together and snuggled close, my large arms wrapped around her smaller frame. I watched her fall asleep quickly and easily, then fell asleep myself with my arms still around her, as if to protect her. Nothing happened, however—not that night, nor the following week, and no reports were ever on the news about any more murders. I remembered some nights were a hell in their own right to me, as I did my best to not take advantage of her in this situation. Then one evening, I awoke abruptly in the middle of the night to find Sylvia out of bed. I caught her just in time, it seemed, as I saw her small, white body drifting slowly out into the hall just beyond the open doorway.

She looked frighteningly ethereal, almost ghostly, and I hopped up quickly and ran to her, shaking her gently to try and snap her out of it. She didn’t wake, though, not even when I called her name. I remembered the camera, and rushed into her room to get it. I followed her down the stairs and out the front door. Her eyes were open, but they were gazing distantly, as if she were seeing some other world.

The air was particularly cool that night with a moderate breeze blowing through. Sylvia passed by the convertible and merely walked down the road, her pace quickening some. I jogged to keep up with her, watching her intently through the LCD screen of the recording camera. The roads were empty and quiet, so at least I knew she seemed safe to continue her travel on the roads.

We traveled for a while, and all the while my mind was wondering how exactly she would murder these people—if she murdered at all—and how she could bring a mansion down to rubble all by her lonesome. When we reached a large estate sitting ominously dark in the night a couple hours later, however, my question was answered.

To my horror and disbelief, I saw an impossibility happen in front of my eyes. I rubbed them, and checked again—yep, it was still happening. Sylvia was growing. And, my, was she growing! I have no idea how she was doing it, and I could only watch in shock as she zoomed up from the five-foot-tall vixen I knew into a towering beast almost a hundred feet tall (by my guess).

“A beast,” I wondered aloud, whispering to myself, “or a goddess? She seems both lovely and terrible to be either.” For a moment, nothing happened—she just stood there, towering over the grand house in chilling quiet of the night. Then, without warning, she raised an arm high over the house, her paw balled into a fist, and brought it down fast and with full force. The sight was incredible, and I ran backwards to avoid the flying debris. Now hiding behind the safety of a large tree, I peeked out to continue filming her, wondering how such a creature I knew to be benign could be truly wreaking the havoc I was witnessing.

She smashed the house again, and it quickly caved in. She stomped it, and I bewilderedly thought how no one could hear the loud grinding and crunching that was being made. Why was no one else coming up to stop her?

After a few minutes, however, she seemed to finish her job. Were there people in there? I suspected there was, though I didn’t feel like searching for any corpses. She shrank back down to her normal height as quickly as she had grown, and we made our way back to our home. I tried to shake her awake again, but to no avail. She simply continued to walk on as mildly as if nothing had happened. When we got back, she simply slipped quietly downstairs into the basement and fell back asleep.

Still shocked beyond belief, I stood there dumbfounded another half an hour, watching and filming her sleep. I finally decided to rest myself, and turning off the camera, I slumped into a nearby chair and drifted back into an uneasy sleep.

The next day was difficult. I decided it was best not to let William see the tape I had made last night, so I dragged Sylvia up to her room and let her watch the tape. I fast forwarded through the hours of walking and came finally to the part of interest. Her eyes opened in wide-eyed horror as she realized that her worst nightmare was true. She wasn’t crazy to believe that she was a murderer, and she started to panic.

“Oh, god, Midnight! What have I done?! What am I going to do?!” She sobbed heavily, clutching me tightly. “Please tell me that the tape isn’t real. Please, *please* tell me it isn’t so.”

“I wish I could,” I cried back to her, my chin resting on top of her head as we embraced. “We’ve got to find a way to get you to stop this, though.”

“But how?” she cried. “It’s hopeless. What could stop me from becoming such a monster?”

“I don’t know. But I do know that we at least need to get a way to calm you down.” She looked up at me with frightened eyes. “Maybe you should just find some way to relax right now. Listen to some soft music, take a bath—whatever you need to do.”

“A bath sounds good right about now,” she sniffed.

“Alright,” I said, and let go of her. She headed for her bathroom, and I went downstairs to talk to William. I figured it was best he know that something is up.

William was watching the morning news again, and as I had expected, they were doing a story on the mansion Sylvia had just wrecked last night.

“People are starting to get scared,” William told me as I entered. “Many of us well-to-do are getting killed off, and it’s frightening people. I honestly hope they catch whoever it is doing it.”

“William, there’s something I need to tell you—” I began, but was interrupted by a loud and long shriek coming from upstairs. The zebra and I exchanged glances, and then dashed upstairs with me in the lead to Sylvia’s bathroom.

The door was open, and I looked in total horror as I witnessed the sight before me. Sylvia was sitting in the half-full bathtub, the water turning a murky red. A razorblade lay loosely in Sylvia’s unmoving paw, and I cried out loud when I saw her wrists. Her empty, hollow eyes were pointed upwards, and she wasn’t moving.

I did nothing but let loose a long, hurtful howl. Sylvia was gone. She couldn’t take the guilt of being a murderer, so she ended her life. William and I stood in silence for a minute in the bathroom until something I never expected happened.

The now-lifeless body of the vixen whom I had loved more dearly than anything disappeared. Not just suddenly, though—it turned off, like a television. Sylvia went fuzzy like the salt and pepper of a bad TV channel, then just...turned off.

“Oh, shit,” I heard William say, and I turned and looked at him. He had a guilty look on his face, and turned to me to say, “Midnight, there’s something I need to tell you.”

“What?” I said curiously, fuming, but I was already guessing what he would tell me.

“Sylvia...was...well...do you remember the fish in the restaurant?”

“I don’t believe it...no...I refuse to believe it...” I didn’t want to believe it. Sylvia...a program?! Just like those damn fish?!

“Whether or not you believe it, it’s the truth,” he said heavily.

“No!” I shouted defiantly. “You said you hated those fish! You said you didn’t want anything to do with that art!”

“What did I say?” he argued back angrily. “I said those fish were created not as art, and that the technology was cheap. I *perfected* that technology!” he said proudly.

“Why?” I asked him, feeling as if I had just been betrayed.

“Because I’m an artist. It’s what I do. Sylvia was the ultimate piece of artwork I had ever created. She was my masterpiece!”

“She was a tool for you to murder people!”

“That was the message!” he shouted, defending himself. “These damn Communists that wanted to do away with money—people like that Mark Ralks—if they

had been successful, then people like Rynatt and those others were as good as dead. We all would have been! I was simply delivering an ultimatum.”

“You don’t think a world without money would have been good?”

“I don’t see the problem with money. It makes you happy, and it’s not hurting anyone. Didn’t I say that happiness was what mattered?”

“I thought there was more to life than that... When did you create her?” I asked him angrily and shaking, my paws balled into fists.

“Shortly after you woke up,” he admitted. “While you were still in the hospital learning to walk again.”

“Then she was never my girlfriend before the accident?” I asked with a shaky voice.

“No,” he admitted, bowing his head sadly. “I’m sorry...” He looked up at me, and I saw in his eyes true remorse, but I didn’t care.

“You USED me!” I shouted at him, tears welling up in my eyes. “You—you exploited me and my being in a coma and having no memory! You lied to me!”

“I just wanted to be close to you,” he admitted, bowing his head again, his eyes cast to the floor and his tail hanging limp. “I know I shouldn’t have, but I’ve always loved you...”

“She wasn’t even real,” I continued, not really hearing him. “I was in love with her, and she wasn’t even real. And now she’s gone. I don’t know what to say or think anymore. I need to go. Goodbye.” I started to leave, not sure exactly where I was heading.

“I can create her again if you want,” he offered eagerly, and I stopped and turned around.

“You don’t understand,” I told him. “I loved something without a soul. How can any being so fabricated have a soul?” I turned away from him, preparing to leave again, but he stopped me once more.

“I was the soul behind her,” he said, approaching me. “It was my soul in her creation, and it was my soul in her as long as she was alive.” He placed a hand on my shoulder and said sadly, “Can’t you love me the same way you loved her?”

I turned my head back around to him, gazing into his deep, hopeful eyes. I felt sickened looking at him, even though my vision was blurred by the tears now streaming down the contours of my face. I tried to think of something aptly vulgar to say in return to him, my hatred for him building every second, but all that managed to escape my muzzle was, “You’re twisted.” I turned back and started to leave.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

I broke into a run, heading for the balcony overlooking the sea. “I should have never survived that fall 28 years ago,” I cried out. I heard him running after me, calling for me, but it was too late, and my mind was made up. Without looking at the jagged rocks far below, without even thinking, I leapt over the railing of the balcony...

They were right, you know, my friends were. I love the feeling of falling...of flying. I didn’t hear my comrade’s cries far above me, nor did I see the ground rushing up beneath me. No... All I knew was that moment, the air whipping around my sleek body. I didn’t even care whether or not it was real. It was liberating; and, oh, how I loved it! After all, that’s the point, isn’t it? Personal desire...happiness...