

THROUGH SPACE: A SHORT STORY COLLECTION
ABOUT FAMILY DYNAMICS AFTER THE APOCALYPSE

By

Dani McCormick

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Approved by:

Kevin McKelvey, Faculty Advisor

Dr. James B. Williams, Interim Executive Director, Strain Honors College

First Reader

Second Reader

Abstract

To try to present the topic of family dysfunction in a new light, families dealing with death, addiction, sickness, cheating, and divorce were written into a fictional post-apocalyptic world. This suspension of reality revealed the usual dysfunctions in a new light and so made them interesting again. The collection of short stories created contains interrelated stories that each individually followed a character through a pivotal moment in their life. During the collection's creation the author learned about the writing process extolled in multiple craft books as well as what worked best for herself. The finished product could be submitted as a collection or as individual stories to literary journals and competitions for publication.

Table of Contents

Cover Page	i
Abstract	ii
Statement of Purpose	1
Introduction	3
Method	5
Conclusion	23
Reflection	27
Works Referenced	31
Appendices	32
Appendix A: Product Produced	32
Earthshock	32
Apanthropy	41
Radiate	58
Shadow Dances	68
Cygnet Song	93

Statement of Purpose

Using three stories that were already drafted and two that would be written for the project, I endeavored to recreate familiar family dysfunction in a short story collection set in a post-apocalyptic Chicago. The stories (Appendix A) follow five characters through pivotal moments of their lives that lead to the potential dissolution of their families. The foci of the stories are illness, death, addiction, infidelity, and divorce, which translates into the focus of the collection as a whole, or how the aforementioned problems affect the families and the character reactions in the stories. By setting familiar stories, like those of family dysfunction, in an unfamiliar setting I was hoping to reenergize archetypal stories and make them more interesting.

To open readers' eyes to the problems in the world around them, I placed my stories in a distant future world. As a culture, we have been desensitized to too much of the violence, death, poverty, and pain around us because it is so common in our world. By putting my characters in positions that highlight the problems facing our own culture, I hope to give my readers a new way of looking at the various problems and give them the tools to make their own decisions about the causes and effects. While each story has a specific family dysfunction at its core, I included other important issues in the world of the collection as well like feminism, poverty, and classism to name a few, which I discuss in the Method section. No event exists in isolation so it was important to create an entire

cohesive world behind the five stories in my collection including societal upheaval and negative cultural histories.

The purpose of the short story collection as a whole was to make a social commentary on the world we live in while also creating something representative of myself as an author. When finished, the collection was ready to be submitted to chapbook competitions, publishing houses, as well as submitting the individual stories to literary magazines for publication. The individual stories were harder to place in literary magazines due to their length, but at the time of this writing, I was still on the hunt for a proper home for them. The collection, however, will be submitted to Dzanc Books' Short Story Collection Competition, Iowa Press's John Simmons Short Fiction Award competition, and Black River Chapbook Competition when their submissions open for the 2016 editions.

Introduction

Growing up, I devoured books. The person I knew the best in my elementary school was my librarian, Mrs. Oakes. She, along with my teachers, encouraged a voracious appetite for the written word that carried me along through high school and directly into an English degree in college. I read everything from the *Magic Treehouse* series to *Watership Down* to *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Through all my reading, though I found that not all books were interesting, just like not all stories were interesting. I gravitated towards books of the surreal, the fantastical, the imaginative. In college, I learned that was called “speculative fiction,” but at the time all I knew was that this type of book could take me places I had never been to experience things I could never have experienced in the comfort of middle class suburbia. I began reading authors like Garth Nix and Scott Westerfield, leaving behind Sarah Dessen, whose large sans serif covers called out for girls like me. I denied the romance hiding within the pages of the “girl books” as my male classmates called them, and instead dove headfirst into adventure.

Looking back, I now realize that this early predilection for fantasy and science fiction over realism formed the fiction I would write. I have wanted to be an author since the third grade when, for a class assignment, I concocted my first book, complete with pictures, about a unicorn and a chess board. Creating a world and a plot for my fellow classmates to read filled me with such joy that I decided right then and there to renounce my goal of becoming a doctor in favor of a future in the literary arts. In all honesty, this really was the best choice, I found in high school that I didn’t react well to blood and that fictional blood was much less bothersome.

When deciding on my honor's project, I toyed around with a few different ideas that would utilize what I had learned in my majors, Creative Writing and Professional Writing, as well as my minors and honors college to the greatest advantage. I began with a service project with the Garfield Park Farmer's Market, but decided that did not apply to my majors so much as it did my general passions, and reconsidered. I ended up writing a short story collection of interrelated stories because I had already written two stories to be included in the collection and thoroughly enjoyed the idea of intermingling storylines and characters. The post-apocalyptic setting began as a way of distancing myself from a story whose elements I was using, *I am the Messenger* by Markus Zusak. Though written completely realistically, and therefore not in my preferred genre, it had compelling characters that I wanted to try to emulate. To prevent myself from stealing completely from Zusak, I changed the world around the character into a post-apocalyptic version of the city I knew best, Chicago.

I suppose it could be said that my catalyst into post-apocalyptic fiction began with the rise of dystopian young adult novels. I was spellbound by *Uglies* by Scott Westerfield when it debuted, and subsequently stunned by *The Hunger Games*, *Maze Runner*, *The City of Ember*, and many others. The characters, mostly strong females, always surprised me with their ingenuity and bravery, but also with how they dealt with the crumbling societies around them. Post-apocalyptic fiction taught me to question the world that people before me built and remember that it had faults like the seemingly perfect societies in the books. I began to see social issues through the lenses of my favorite novels and learned about compassion and social justice through the characters. My view

of the world was formed through the broken eyes of the narrators but I learned more from them than any teacher could have taught me in class. Since then, I have always viewed reading, and fiction in particular, as a vehicle for social commentary and social change, which was, in part, why I wanted to write a short story collection for my project instead of doing a more academic but possibly less impactful research study or public action project.

To make my collection accomplish my social justice goals, I read many different books by a variety of authors to see how they empowered their short stories and novels with the ability to challenge their readers. Since my stories were interrelated, I thought it important to read authors that successfully wrote interrelated short story collections, such as Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Cathy Day's *Circus in Winter*, who exemplify the format of a novel-in-short-stories, as it has come to be known. I also read other science fiction novels, like *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood, which is a post-apocalyptic novel as well, and *The Martian Chronicles* by Ray Bradbury. To help with revision, books on craft like *The Art of Fiction: Notes for Young Writers* by John Gardner and Jerome Stern's *Making Shapely Fiction* helped me identify areas that needed rewritten. All of the books affected my writing in different ways because, besides being written by authors of different ages and genders, which does affect their viewpoints somewhat, they all have different ways of viewing the short story as a vehicle for social commentary, or even simply a way of producing emotion in the reader. The differing views made them all instrumental in constructing a well-integrated short story collection that accomplished my goal of providing a social commentary on family dysfunction.

I can submit the completed short story collection to publishers whole, or edit it into a shorter collection for chapbook competitions. My advisor, Kevin McKelvey, helped me edit my book and create a publishable finished document.

Method

I began my project with three short stories that I had already written in previous fiction workshop classes with Professor Sal Pane. During one of his classes during my sophomore year Professor Pane brought in a list of writing prompts that he thought would help I and the other students through a problem we were having as a class. None of us seemed to be able to form coherent, three-dimensional characters that were believable and could carry a story. The prompt led us through a series of questions to create a character that was more than just a tool to push the plot of the stories along. We were tasked with imagining what the character looked like in detail: eyes, skin color, hand shape, hair length, scars, etc. Then we were directed to give them a job and imagine a usual day in the life of their job. I had just read *I Am the Messenger* by Markus Zusak which was about a taxi driver and thought that a job as a taxi driver could lead to many interesting stories. Originally, I was thinking my character could be a window into the lives of the people he gave rides to, but then the third leg of the prompt was given. I had to create a backstory for my character. I usually get bored when I read stories that are too realistic so I decided that the backstory of my character should be post-apocalyptic without venturing too far from what I knew. He lived in Chicago, a city I know well, with a flirty sister, a quiet and weak-willed mother, and a father with thyroid cancer, something for which I have a family predisposition and a generous amount of knowledge.

Combining these, I created a new world and new scenarios without leaving my realm of knowledge.

I wrote the first story in my collection from the prompt Professor Pane gave in class that day. The first draft was just about a son trying to hold together his family as his father died of cancer. I submitted it for workshop and got many critiques from my classmates and professor for how to make the short story more publishable. I applied those critiques and came out with a story I loved. When we were given a prompt the next semester in a different fiction workshop class with Professor Pane, I was given the chance to work with that character again. The prompt was supposed to help the revision process by fleshing out the world around the characters. We were directed to take a secondary character from one of our stories and write their backstory. I chose the best friend of the main character of the story I had written the semester before, March. He ended up with an addict mother, missing father, and terminally ill brother. His story followed his discovery of his mother's addiction through her selling his brother's medicine for drugs to a finale of her death where he wrestles with the idea of being the sole caretaker of his little brother. I submitted this story to workshop in class as well and got great feedback, which solidified my desire to keep writing stories in this world.

I realized two things while writing the second story: that I really enjoyed writing stories in the post-apocalyptic Chicago I had created, and that my stories seemed to be fixated on family dysfunctions and how people deal with different dysfunctions in different ways. I wrote a third story to test the world and see if it really could carry multiple stories without breaking down or becoming melodramatic by writing a story

about the sister from the first story, Sali. To enlarge the world and give her somewhere new to explore, I built a new culture on a different planet. I decided that, since she was so close to the subject of the first story, if I had placed her in Chicago I would have ended up with a rewritten version of the first story only from a female perspective instead. While having a separate perspective of the events of the first story could have been interesting, I decided that it was time to broaden the horizons of my world and created life on other planets.

Placing Sali on Venus gave me the chance to create a culture completely different from what I know as well, which tested both my skill as a writer, and my skill as a researcher. I tried to create a culture that was unlike any on Earth while still having an obviously negative view of misogyny. The Venusian culture I created centers around the idea that women are second class citizens whose only value is in their marriageability. Female babies are married off to male toddlers as soon as possible and given to the husband's parents to raise where they are brought up with the knowledge of exactly how they are expected to behave and what their husband likes in every aspect of his life. If the parents cannot marry a female baby off, she joins the ranks of the Unmarrieds, a caste of women without husbands that work as secretaries, ticket salesmen, and various other jobs that the Venusian men find demeaning. While this would have been misogynistic enough for my story, I decided to add in one more layer, which was, incidentally, also how Sali got access to this very exclusive Venusian world. Infidelity on Venus is not a sin; it isn't even frowned upon, as long as the one committing it is male. Men are allowed to cheat all they want as long as their wives bear their children. Women, on the other hand, are not

allowed to cheat simply because how would the husband know it was their child afterwards? So, if a man is unfaithful, it cannot be with another man's wife; it must be with an Unmarried woman, or a foreigner.

Sali is the foreign mistress who doesn't realize her lover is married and Yely is the Venusian wife who tragically loves her husband though he doesn't return her affection. This set up enabled me to examine not only the relationship between husband and wife, but also husband and mistress and mistress and wife. I used the last relationship to invert the power dynamics present in the Venusian culture to give the power back to Yely and Sali, who use it to plan an escape from the misogyny around them. I submitted this story to a class second semester of last year and received good feedback that made me sure that the post-apocalyptic Chicago collection was what I wanted to do for my honors project. I decided that there were really two more stories that needed written before I could really call the collection completed. I needed to finish the storyline that had begun with Sali and Yely, and I needed to tell the story of Dilly, the dreamy little brother from the second story. In completing these two pieces, I felt that the loose ends would be wrapped up and my characters' arcs would come gracefully to a close. While I do not allow any of my characters to have fairytale happy endings in a desire to keep some sense of realism to my dark and dismal world, the endings of each of their personal narratives carried finality and a sense of conclusion that I believe put to rest any questions the readers might have had throughout the stories.

The project started with a substantial reading list which I pared down to a cursory reading of the post-apocalyptic books I loved in high school, as well as an in-depth

reading and analysis of two books each of interconnected short story collections similar to what I was creating, science fiction novels set in worlds similar to mine, and craft books would be helpful in the formation of the other two stories as well as the substantial revision needed in all five stories. The six books worked together to inform my writing in general concepts I would need to include as well as problems I would face along the way. I read the short story collections *Circus in Winter* by Cathy Day and *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien. Both were composed of interconnected short stories similar to the structure of my collection, however they were significantly different compared to each other as well as compared to my collection.

The Things They Carried is a short story collection about the author's time in the Vietnam War, though the specific situations and characters are fictionalized. This was useful to me because I was taking situations from real life and putting them in a fictional world to see how the characters would react. Though O'Brien's collection is not science fiction, it is very similar in format in that the stories themselves are character driven narratives. I paid special attention to how he referenced one event in a few of his stories. O'Brien speaks multiple times about a situation in which he had to kill someone, a trauma that scarred him emotionally if not physically. This event is referenced in a couple stories before being explicitly explained about three-quarters of the way through the book. While my stories did not repeat the emotionally scarring parts of the narratives because they were told from multiple perspectives instead of one like O'Brien's, they did repeat scenes between the stories. I wanted to keep the emotion captured in individual stories, but to interlink them, I used *The Things They Carried* as a touchstone on how to

have the same scene in multiple stories without it being repetitive or going stagnant. O'Brien shows a different side of the scene, a moment where he shoots a Vietnamese boy, each time he writes about it, either using a different character's perspective or by telling part of the scene that was not mentioned in a prior description of the scene. One such scene in my collection was when three characters, Cal, Sali, and March, were playing war together as children. Following O'Brien's example, I briefly mentioned it in the stories of two of the characters as a passing memory to use as a connecting point but reveal the entire scene in the first story through Cal. This repetition also worked to stitch the stories together into a collection instead of leaving them as five individual stories that were arbitrarily put together.

Cathy Day's influence on my writing was much more structural than Tim O'Brien's was. *Circus in Winter* as a collection is formatted almost exactly like how I wanted my collection to be formatted. The biggest difference in her formatting and mine was that *Circus in Winter* was a book-length short story collection that encompasses almost all of the secondary characters involved in the circus central to the book's narrative. My collection was only five stories and the central narrative of the series of stories was the family dysfunctions that are linked to the Thill family: Cal, and his sister Sali. Day explored the characters surrounding the circus as it progresses through time, showing the children growing up and the adults aging into grandparents. While my collection doesn't move through nearly as much time as Day's, I paid close attention to her time markers between and during stories. For example, "Jennie Dixianna," a story set up very similar to my opening story, has a nonlinear plot line that goes from present to

past to present again, following Jennie, the main character, through a character development arc from emotional and sexual abuse by her father in the past through her revenge to her self-empowerment in the present of the story. Jennie then played a minor role in several of the other stories, showing up as a performer and a lover, similar to some of my secondary characters. In a way, reading *Circus in Winter*, though the story structures were similar to mine, was more of a clinic on how to advance my pieces through time without getting lost in a timeless void in the stories. Day's handle on the dynamics of time in her collection and how her characters react to time passing and memories being referenced was instrumental in my own structuring of time in my collection. I tried to emulate her control of the passage of time, though on a smaller scale, with how my stories related to one another on a timeline, as well as how the timeline of my characters related to the timeline of the solar system as a whole with the macro-historical events that had happened. Day's iron solid understanding of when each event happened in relation to everything else led me to nail down my timeline and ensure that nothing was mistimed.

Outside of the short story realm, I read two science fiction novels to see how other authors in the genre were creating worlds and how they worked. The first science fiction novel I read was *The Martian Chronicles* by Ray Bradbury, a very imaginative novel about a possible future where Earth has colonized Mars, because it's subject matter is similar to mine in that it also deals with interplanetary travel and multiple cultures. In the book, interactions between Earthlings and Martians have become strained and the book examined the different ways that they reacted to each other which varied from violence to

disease to acceptance. This novel, though longer than my chosen form, did an excellent job at one of the most difficult parts of writing fiction that is not realistic: creating a realistic setting. Settings require space, time, and culture and in Bradbury's novel these things merged together seamlessly so that the reader never questioned the logic of the story or the reality of the world. I examined the setting in *The Martian Chronicles* so see how he expanded and defined the rules of his world and if I could apply that to the world I had already created in the previously written stories. By looking at the pieces of culture that Bradbury chose to change, like the physical appearance of the Martians versus the Earthlings, a reader could infer what issues are important to Bradbury. For example, he did not change the way people relate to each other, so it could be inferred that Bradbury was at least partially interested in interpersonal relationships. I used this theory to help highlight certain topics that I was concerned with in my stories, like the strife of the impoverished or the feminist battle against misogyny. The novel also progressed through time similar to Cathy Day's collection only Bradbury accomplished this in one narrative instead of multiple. Watching how Bradbury negotiated the time dynamics was an interesting comparison to Day's version in that Bradbury used a little more distance to allow him to adjust to time while Day was much closer to her subjects and accounted for the passing of time in the switching of stories. I decided that in my stories I should employ a mix of the two, using the Day technique to show the passage of time between stories, while using Bradbury's slightly more distant narrative strategy to show the passage of time within individual stories.

The other novel I read was by renowned post-apocalyptic novelist Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*. *Oryx and Crake* was a novel of science fiction, that was placed in a post-apocalyptic world not entirely unlike the world that my stories are set in. Margaret Atwood was an excellent creator of setting and character and I learned the most from her book by the way she weaved the two together to form a compelling story while also not neglecting plot. The character development of the main character, Snowman, followed the novel's plot arc without distracting from the story of the world as a whole. Even reading as a writer and trying to analyze the way Atwood used different techniques in her work, I was extremely impressed by the story as a whole and how each part works to make the novel a well-tuned machine. I truly believed this story benefits best from a holistic reading which led me to the realization that I needed to edit my work at the end of the writing process so that not only would the stories be able to stand alone as short stories, but also have the cohesiveness necessary to work together as a connected connection. The central conceit of my collection was that the stories would be connected and placed in the same world and use some of the same characters. After reading *Oryx and Crake*, though, I realized that my collection should also work as a novel in itself, with a larger arc composed of the storylines pulled through all five stories. This was accomplished in revision when I reshuffled my stories to make the collection's plot more cohesive, as I discuss later, and work through each piece to ensure that threads that appear in the first story are either tied up or carried through the other stories. The most difficult part of this revision was identifying what themes needed to be included in each

story to prevent them from disappearing from the readers' minds without taking over the other stories either.

The last set of books I read were not in the same vein as the first four; they were craft books. I read *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* by John Gardner and *Making Shapely Fiction* by Jerome Stern which was probably the most recommended craft book I've encountered. In this seminal writing craft book, Gardner advocated the idea that fiction should be like a dream with nothing to wake one up from the dream. He claims that the biggest mistakes that young writers made was breaking the dream, or in other words doing something that popped the reader out of the story. He listed many different mistakes that could do this to the reader and I made sure to go through my stories with the list and a fine tooth comb to ensure that I had not made any of them in my writing. He denies the adage I was taught of "write what you know," meaning write about people, places, and situations you know, and instead advocates writing the kind and type of story that you know the best, like what you enjoy reading and are most familiar with. His advocacy for genre fiction supported the type of writing I did in my project which bridged the gap between genre fiction and literary fiction. He discussed plot as well in connection to genre and how a well formed plot could passively support or actively improve a story by making it work better within its own structure. I applied these three very different credos to my stories by ensuring that the world I created was complete and held up by the plot structures of my stories, writing them in science fiction, one of my favorite genres, and ensuring that nothing broke through the dream of the story with careful reading.

The other craft book I read, *Making Shapely Fiction* by Jerome Stern, was a book detailing the different shapes plots and stories can take. The different story formats outlined in this book helped to restructure my stories to make them easier to read and flow better. My advisor actually helped Jessi, my revision partner, and I to identify different structures from the book that could be beneficial for each story. I revised them each multiple times to see if the new structures worked better than what I currently had as individual pieces as well as within the collection. In the end, I usually chose the structure the most similar to the one I began with, but experimenting with the different structures helped me better define my scenes and character reactions. Actually, rewriting the stories and experimenting with different plot shapes and structures helped me better understand how the stories all work together and how to better utilize the scene placement within the timelines as well as which archetypal scenes were missing from my pieces and which scenes were included too much. *Making Shapely Fiction* was also helpful because it had a glossary of terms and symbols as well as how they are usually used in literature of different forms. I used this to help me define my scenes and make sure they were not stereotypical while also ensuring that they were recognizable which gave readers something familiar to connect with. Stern's book was the most helpful in the revision process because I could link the themes, symbols, and shapes of my stories to how other authors had used them and how they operated within the larger literary canon.

After the reading came the main action of my project, writing, which was not the most difficult part of the project. Before I could start revising and putting my stories into a collection, I had to draft the other two stories to complete my quota of five. I sketched

out a couple stories for secondary characters from the three already-written stories to see which ones could form complex characters that would fit my goal for the project. I ended up choosing the wife of Sali's lover and March's little brother from the initial sketches and had to then decide what direction I wanted to go with the collection as a whole as well as with the stories individually. After deciding that Yely, the wife, needed to liberate herself in her story and that Dilly, the brother, needed to die, whether in the story or outside of it, I wrote a rough draft of the stories. It took multiple tries to get it quite right. Originally, I had also written a third story about Sali's lover and Yely's husband, but when I began writing, I realized that his story and Yely's story overlapped too much and could not reconcile the two as separate stories. Instead, I merged the two, eliminating the presence of Olli, the lover and husband, and combined the events into one larger story. I also had to toy around with Dilly's death, figuring out how it should happen and whether or not it needed to be shown or not. I finally settled on a grim setting, a hospital in the middle of a broken city, with a lighter story, two children exploring their surroundings, which ended with the knowledge of Dilly's death without dwelling on it. After the combination of the stories of Yely and Olli and the chosen death of Dilly, my five stories were written and ready to workshop with my workshopping partner, Jessica Tillman, and my faculty advisor Kevin McKelvey.

During the first round of workshops, my partner and I both had very rough drafts to start with. We read through each other's pieces and then met to offer suggestions for plot, character development, and story arrangement as well as story structure and plot holes. Professor McKelvey showed us his favorite way to revise which involved multiple

colors of post-it notes as well as a rainbow's worth of pen colors and scissors. After our round-table discussion, he sat us down with our stories spread out over multiple tables and we covered our stories with sticky notes. Different colors denoted different revisions needed: index-sized sticky notes meant a scene needed to be added, green meant motivation was lacking, blue signified that repetition was needed for theme or metaphor, pink showed a lack of interiority or reflection. Any notations in pen were minor revisions like grammar mistakes, misspellings, or spots where paragraphs needed rearranged.

We were sent away from the workshop with many neon post-it revisions to make. We were still in the phase of revision where we were working on the individual stories, not the collection as a whole, so I did not need to worry as much about the overarching plotline of the collection yet. I started revising the first story I had written, "Earth-shock," and moved through the revisions in chronological order of formation. "Earth-shock" had already been through numerous revisions as an individual story and so did not need that many edits in the first round. As the story that laid the groundwork for the rest of the collection, I needed to build the relationships shown more while also giving the rules of the world and the apocalypse that happened to create it. Since the story is in a non-linear format, adding in scenes that made sense to the plot was not hard. I added a scene about three of the main characters in the collection, Cal, March, and Sali, playing war as little kids which simultaneously gave me the chance to explain the Venusian War while also allowing me to characterize the three more and explain their relationship a little better. A similar effect was achieved in revising a scene already included in the story where Cal attends a Take Your Kid to Work Day with his father. I expanded the scene to show how

Cal is being pressured into becoming the man of the family while also showing how unready he is to accept that role, even as an adult.

The second story, “Apanthropy,” has a title that literally means an aversion to the company of men. I thought it an appropriate title since the basic plotline of the story entails two women abandoning their respective lover and husband to escape the confines of a patriarchal, misogynist culture. This story needed much more revision than the last one because it bleeds into the fourth story. The ending of this one was the beginning of the other. The hardest part of revision was separating the two into two distinct stories. I started by changing the main character, originally Sali, into Yely because while I was writing the story I noticed that the most symbols and metaphors fell on her. She had the most conflict in the story and the most to lose while Sali was really just transitioning from one phase of her life to the next. In making it Yely’s story, though, there were a few scenes that I had to shift perspectives on or delete entirely. I also added a new ending to the second story so that the fourth story, “Shadow Dances,” which almost serves as a continuation of “Apanthropy,” could start smoother and include more motivation and interiority. Originally “Apanthropy” ended with Sali being arrested on the way to her childhood home and Yely forcibly returned to her husband. This did not work very well for the world I was trying to build as well as being rather boring and without motivation. Instead, I had Sali successfully take Yely home with her. Yely learned what it was like to be poor and chose to return to her husband instead of being forced there. This gave her a more complete transformation and character arc.

Third, “Radiate,” also entered the project rather complete already. In my fiction workshop, my classmates voiced concerns about the ending, so I played around with various other endings, attempting to achieve the right balance of addiction and abandonment. Originally, the mother died of a drug related illness, leaving the two sons to figure out how to take care of each other in a world that seemed determined to bring them down. Instead, now the mom leaves the two to follow her addiction and March gives her an ultimatum of the drugs or the family. This worked better for the continuation of the brother’s dynamics into the fifth story which centered around Dilly. I also had to change the way the family related to each other and to the world around them, specifically the drugs in the world by showing more of the mother’s addiction before she got admitted to the hospital.

“Shadow Dances,” a continuation of “Apanthropy,” originally was set from Yely’s perspective but I changed it to be from Sali’s perspective instead because Yely had already dominated “Apanthropy.” Sali was established in the second story as the wandering soul of the pair, and since the story entails them traveling across the solar system, Sali seemed the logical focalizer for the story. I expanded the middle of the story and included more vignettes from their travels than I had in the original. Before, the two went to Jupiter on a social justice crusade, confronted Yely’s ex-husband, and succeeded in helping the homeless of Marius, the capitol city of Jupiter. While the story was very satisfying as a writer with this turn of events, as a reader, it read as a cop out on what the reader could feel or what the characters could do at the end of the story. Instead, I took the husband out of the story all together and made it a story about the two women finding

their power in a society that had disenfranchised them both in different ways. In the end, they do succeed in helping the homeless, but have more influence on the turn of events. Also, by lengthening the central travel sections, I could show the parts of the world I created that the middle and upper classes ignored, the underbelly where the poor and forgotten lived. While the point of the project is to highlight the things that can pull families apart, I also wanted to include more than that. Showing the darker parts of the civilization not only rounded out the world but also created new situations that my other characters had not been exposed to. I was also able to include some of my other social concerns through the vignettes like feminism, homelessness, poverty, and hunger.

The last story, “Cygnet Song,” broke from the tone of the other stories because it followed two innocent children instead of a complicated, confused adult. A cygnet is a baby swan and, since the story serves as the two children’s swan song, the last thing they get to do before they die, I thought “Cygnet Song” to be an appropriate title. The story came to me pretty whole cloth after a little bit of floundering to find the proper setting for Dilly’s story. I only needed minimal story revisions like cutting one character’s dialogue down to make him seem younger as well as masking some of the more overt metaphors so that they were not too strong. I seemed to want this to be a brother story and layered in so many different metaphors and symbols of brotherhood that it distracted from the actual story. I did not notice the heavy-handed symbolism until it was pointed out to me in workshop.

After the first round of revisions, Jessi and I resubmitted our stories to each other and did another round of workshops in a twelve hour write-a-thon. Professor McKelvey

brought us lunch and a large roll of paper. I claimed a fifteen-foot piece and taped it to the wall to layout my stories and my world. I began by outlining the stories' scenes and then figuring out the chronology of the collection as a whole. Professor McKelvey and Jessi helped me identify the themes of the stories and gave me the assignment of making sure that each scene helped further the theme. For example, the theme of the third story is abandonment so it was important that each scene showed abandonment or gave context to abandonment. This led to some restructuring and scene additions or deletions to help tie together the themes. This theme threading also gave me a chance to look at my stories with a little more distance so that I could see how the five stories worked together as a collection on a macro scale.

While outlining the stories, I also noticed that I had five stories and my last story had five scenes. Professor McKelvey mentioned that with a little bit of tweaking I could make my collection into a five story, five act structure and my last story could mirror the collection's structure as a whole. Each scene in the fifth story takes place on a different floor of the hospital and I linked each to a previous story in the collection. "Earthshock" has a central theme of coming of age, which linked with the trauma and cancer center at the beginning of the story where Dilly takes control of his own care. "Apanthropy" links with the maternity ward because of Yely's youth. The addiction and psychiatric ward connects to "Radiate" and gives Dilly a reason to talk about his own mortality. The gritty underbelly of civilization shown in "Shadow Dances" rears its head again in the Free Clinic on the first floor of the hospital. The last act in "Cygnet Song" represents itself and

takes place on the roof. The structural mirror works well to tie up the loose ends of the collection in the final story without leaving the reader with nothing left to ponder.

Another great advancement on my project was the substantial world building I did. Probably half of my fifteen-foot paper was cultural and technical definitions of how the world worked. I began by writing down exactly what happened between Earth and Venus that led to the conflict and the War. Though most of the details do not actually make it into the stories, it was important that I knew what happened so that I could more accurately display the ramifications of it through my characters' eyes. In short, Earth colonized Mars and turned it into an agricultural planet then moved on to colonize Venus. Due to the beauty and convenience of living on Venus, the upper class slowly immigrated there. The cultures of Venus and Earth grew apart until they were almost unrecognizably different. Finally, Venus wanted independence from Earth, which they considered to be a lower-class planet. Instead of using diplomacy, they declared war, wiping out the agricultural fields on Mars and targeting the nuclear reactors on Earth. This turned Mars into a desert wasteland again that was only really valuable for the minerals that could be mined. Earth became a broken world of urban wreckage and rural emptiness. Venus is secure in its position as the place to live in the solar system.

I also worked out all of the kinks of the Venusian culture as it opposed its Earth counterpart. I had written it into the original version of "Apanthropy" in some detail but it came off too complex for a fiction story which, as John Gardner warns, popped the reader out of the story. I wanted to include some sort of feminist leaning in my story, but I

thought it would be too much to have my characters talking about it overtly so I created a misogynistic culture for one of my characters to escape from as I mentioned earlier.

The last thing that I figured out (which took the most time because I am moderately bad at math) was the travel times between the different planets and the different speeds of space vehicle that would be available to my characters. I ended up choosing scaled-up versions of the shuttles we have now: Ion A, Ion B, Shuttle, and Solar Sail. Since about one-thousand years has passed, I upgraded their speeds and attributed them each to a different type of vehicle. The Ion M is the fastest mode of transportation and replaces the sports car and luxury cars we have now and are reserved for upper-class people and car rental services. Other Ion cars, like J, K, or L, are slower and used by more middle-class people. An industrial ferry carries people and things across the asteroid belt and goes about the same speed as the shuttle between planets, which is significantly slower than the Ion cars and is based off of the speed of our manned space ships. The last option, a solar sail, is only a little slower than the Ion M but much more dangerous and unstable; I let the hippies drive it in “Shadow Dances.”

I also laid out the roles of the different planets in the economy of the solar system as a whole. Since the planets really are not inhabitable past the asteroid belt, I made only Jupiter inhabited as a concession that technology will have advanced and it could be possible. Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune were all only used for mining for precious gasses. Jupiter had one metropolitan center, Marius, which was named after one of the astronomers that discovered Jupiter’s moons. Galileo was credited to discovering the moons so I gave Marius a little credit in the city’s name. The city itself descended into

the upper layers of Jupiter's surface with layers of the city built one on top of another. The asteroid belt got mined as well for choice metals that are used to build the cloud colonies on Venus. A ferry carried the mined materials from the outer planets into the inner planets while Jupiter was in other parts of its orbit. When Jupiter was nearby, the ferry was converted into a passenger ferry. Mars was an agricultural planet before the War and devolved into a desert planet of mines afterwards. Earth was a wreck with no resources to speak of besides its housing capabilities. Venus was the rich suburbs of the solar system, where the wealthy lived and worked in colonies that were anchored to the ground but floated above the surface. Mercury was too hot to colonize and so was only used for emergency resources when necessary due to how much work it would take for a ship to stay on the planet and not melt.

The final revision included all the larger bits that I hashed out in my workshop. I put in the backstory of the way the solar system worked as well as how the War came about. I hinted more at the way the Venusian world worked as well as the times needed for travel and the modes of transportation used. Most of my revision dealt with structural corrections and rearranging the scenes within the stories so that they better worked within the themes. Reshaping the stories was probably the hardest part of the revision because it meant changing the underlying form of my stories. Without sounding trite, the large revisions where I rearrange scenes and change the format of the stories almost hurts. This type of revision is necessary though if I want the collection to work as a whole as well as the individual stories to succeed on their own. These revisions are far harder to describe as the smaller ones but no less important.

When the macro revisions were done, my collection was complete. I put it away for a few days and waited to clear my head of what I had been filling it with for weeks. I read through it and corrected any minor details that did not connect from one story to another while also checking for spelling and grammar mistakes. I was originally planning on laying out my collection in InDesign to create an actual book file, but found it superfluous when I discovered that most of the contests prefer to get their submissions in .doc or .docx format.

Conclusion

My completed project goal was to create a collection about the dissolution of families, but many people have written on that topic already. In order to attract and keep the attention of my readers, I decided that I would write my stories in an unrealistic, science fiction setting. The realm of science fiction is more accessible in novel form simply because of the difficulty of creating a believable world in a short format like the short stories in my collection. This difficulty is subverted by connecting my short stories together and therefore giving me the option of spreading my world building out amongst all five stories instead of trying to distill it all down into the first one. By creating a series of interconnected stories, I also open up the ability to look at my characters from multiple angles, showing more of them than I would otherwise be able to with one story per world.

The characters have their own developmental arcs to follow that are separate from the plot arcs of the individual stories but since my characters exist in stories outside their own, they continue to develop past the end of their individual stories. For example, the main character of the first story, Cal, exists in every other story in various contexts. In his own story he goes through the death of his father and his family's reaction to it. In the second and fourth story, he is a protective son trying to keep his sister from breaking his mother's heart. The third and fifth stories paint him as a generous man helping his best friend through hard times. The reader gets to see many different sides of the same character from the different ways the other characters perceive him in their own stories.

The structure of my collection follows a five act structure similar to Shakespeare and Greek dramas. Each story in the collection serves as an act with the final story, “Cygnet Song,” also having a five act structure itself with each act reflecting on the themes of one of the former stories as I mentioned in the Method section. For example, “Radiate” deals with addiction and the theme of abandonment. When Dilly and Zaba go to the psychiatric ward in “Cygnet Song,” they confront their own abandonment and reflect on the addiction and neurosis they are seeing in the patients around them. Putting the collection in a five act structure places it within a literary tradition and helps to ground my speculative, science fiction genre piece in more classical style. Doing this helps to ground the piece and keep a familiarity to it without discounting the post-apocalyptic setting or futuristic world.

The stories could be thematically analyzed individually as well. “Earth-shock” centered on Cal Thill, a driver of a car company that drove wealthy businessmen back and forth between the planets. His father contracted thyroid cancer and his family slowly dissolved after that with his sister leaving and his father dying. This story’s overarching theme was coming-of-age. The form of family dissolution that it dealt with was illness. Though the main character himself was not sick, his father was, which fulfilled the goal of the project to show family dysfunction. Each scene showed a different coming-of-age test. Though the scenes were shuffled chronologically, the tests vary in strength until finally Cal was left alone with only his mother and was forced to claim the role as head of their family. The ending was left open so that the reader did not know at the end if he had passed or failed the test.

The second story, “Apanthropy,” centers around a young woman’s escape or venture to freedom. Sali Thill, Cal’s little sister, realized her lover was married and left him, taking his wife with her. They venture to Earth where Sali and Yely, the wife, joined Sali’s family and Yely learned what it was to be in a loving family. She decided to return to her husband to lighten the burden on the Thills. The family dysfunction involved was very obviously cheating; the opening scene of the story was Yely listening to her husband cheat. Freedom was the thematic center of the story and each scene related to freedom in some way. Sali freed Yely from a husband who did not love her and then they both freed themselves from an oppressive culture by choosing to leave Venus, which was highly misogynistic. During the ride to Earth, Yely met people that are completely unlike anyone she had ever met, solidifying her freedom from the life she was used to. This gave her the ability to find her own true personality on Earth with Ceraline, Cal and Sali’s mother. By the end of the story, Yely has empowered herself to the point of enabling her to choose her own path. Guilt about being a burden on the Thills’ made Yely want to go back to Olli. After returning to her husband, she realized all of the freedom she had given up. The taste of freedom changed her and she could not simply return to a life of being disenfranchised.

“Radiate” follows a nonlinear structure that highlights the theme and cycle of abandonment in one family. Cal Thill’s best friend from childhood, March, had a mother who was addicted to a Venusian version of heroin while his brother suffered from birth defects and health complications related to the War. This story, like “Earth-shock,” went back and forth through time, shuffling the chronology to display the elevation of

abandonment throughout March's life. The dysfunction dealt with was addiction while the theme carried throughout the piece was abandonment. Each scene showed abandonment in March's life in various ways. His father abandoned him and his brother after his brother was born because of his illness. Shortly thereafter, his mother began doing drugs to dull the pain of his father leaving and the stress of having a permanently sick child. After his mother sold some of his little brother's medicine, March confronted her. She was clean for a little bit before slipping back into her old habits and disappearing. The brothers found her in the addiction ward of the hospital after being found in a drug house. March gave her an ultimatum: the drugs or her family. She chose the drugs and did not return to the family giving March the choice of whether he should abandon his brother as he had been abandoned or stay and take care of what was left of his family. The theme of abandonment is laced throughout all of the scenes and culminates in March having to choose whether to follow what happened in his life or if he should break the cycle and make the hard choice to stay with his brother.

The theme of "Shadow Dances" was the hidden poverty or dark underbelly of the world. This story had a different structure than my other stories because instead of scenes that flow seamlessly into one another, it was comprised of smaller vignettes that encapsulate the multiplicity of scenes that occur in the story. The story followed the girls from "Apanthropy," Sali and Yely, as they explored the solar system. They traveled from Earth to Jupiter where they spontaneously got involved with a grassroots social justice movement to help the homeless where Yely found a potential love interest in a fellow social justice warrior. Central to this story was the recurring theme of the dark underbelly

of society. Each scene showed a different hidden piece of the world I created, from immigrant migrants to druggies to impoverished families to sex workers to homeless camps. They all showed a different side of a world of darkness and crime that underprivileged those without power whether it was in the form of money or influence. The final scene depicted the homeless of Marius triumphing over the rich in a social revolution. The symbolism was stark as the houses of the rich were short circuited in a planned attack and all go dark, switching the positions of power from the rich to the impoverished.

The last story, “Cygnet Song,” was more complex thematically because since each act of the story was attached to each of the other stories, the acts had to perform double duty. The overall theme of “Cygnet Song” was consequences, both of the War and its effect on the social structure of the world as well as the actions of the other characters in the collection. Each act corresponded with a story, as discussed in the Method section, and carried hints of the respective stories’ themes as well.

All this is to say that, though I wrote the stories for entertainment value and social commentary, no little effort went into making it critically acceptable as well. While many of my revisions worked on the readability and clarity of the stories and the collection, many more were dedicated to the symbols, metaphors, and themes of the stories and collection. In comparison to other short story collections of its kind, I believe that mine stands out as uniquely science fiction as well as being crafted by a young author. Though not of the same caliber as more established writers like Margaret Atwood, my collection shows quality and potential while also teaching me about my own writing process.

Reflection

When I began this project, I did not expect for creating the collection to be as intense as it was. I expected to write stories, revise them and submit them. I did not know how much work actually went into creating a story collection or the full-scale revision of a short story. The short story collections, books, and craft manuals that I read had a significant influence on my writing. During the project I solidified my creative process and the cycle of writing and revision that worked the best for me and my writing.

Doing this project helped me not only identify what worked for me in my writing process, but also what did not. Some of the things that Professor McKelvey, my advisor, suggested as revision strategies did not fit my personal style for revision or creation, like using color coded post-it notes, but other strategies did. For example, my workshop partner and I both used fifteen foot pieces of paper to layout our stories and timelines. I also have to admit that I work better isolated from others where I can actually write instead of talking about writing. The cubicle chairs in the library worked well as an isolating barrier between me and the distracting outside world.

This project really forced me to realize how much work actually goes into my chosen profession. Writing is much more difficult than I thought and takes more effort in the revision process than the drafting process. Looking back, I falsely believed that all writing sprang forth from the author's head fully formed and ready for publication. Any revision that occurred I believed to be minimal and cosmetic only, for grammar and

spelling, not structure, character, and symbology. Instead, I came to realize that most of the writing process is actually revision, the least fun part of writing.

The biggest thing I came to realize is something my professors have all but shouted in workshops but I never seemed to grasp until now. Each story has its own world with its own rules and its own history. It's my job as the author to be able to identify those rule and histories even if they never make it to the page. Writing is more off-page work than anything else. Planning, both of the story and the world containing the story, are almost more important than writing. Writing is really just getting something on the page to revise, but the before and after are what makes or breaks a writer. There are millions of people who take part in National Novel Writing Month but never do anything with their creations. They have the easy part down, the actual writing, but the revision and planning elude them. What this project taught me is that those things cannot and should not be avoided and are necessary steps in any writing process.

I believe that the collection I produced is polished and complete enough to be ready for submission to chapbook contests and short story collection contests for publication. I also am looking forward to submitting the individual stories to literary journals to get them published on their own.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Product Produced

Earth-shock

Cal's dad had called him and his sister into the living room. The tarp still covered the hole where a stray piece of space shrapnel took out a part of their wall. They never quite made enough money to fix it. They worried more about buying food and paying for his dad's medical bills. The doctors said there was something wrong with him, but they weren't quite sure what.

His dad stood in front of the tarp, his old sweater patched at the elbows and fraying at the hem. Brown reindeer danced on a background of faded maroon, and a yellow star hung dejectedly in the center of his dad's chest. Sali sat next to Cal on the couch, waiting for whatever their dad wanted to say. She had told him that she thought they were finally moving off of this mess of a planet. Cal disagreed; if they couldn't pay to fix the wall, how could they afford a new place? His dad cleared his throat and both of their eyes riveted to his tired face.

"I have some bad news," he began, holding a folder in front of him. He had come home from the doctor's earlier that afternoon clutching the folder. Cal picked him up in his car for the driving service he worked for after his shift ended. He asked his dad how

the appointment went, but his pale face and wide eyes told Cal that it was nothing good. His dad had already shown the folder to his mom. They cried right there at the kitchen table. Sali had been out with one of her Venusian boyfriends. Cal didn't like them because they all flaunted their daddy's money like it was something to be proud of even though they hadn't earned a dime of it. They always tipped horribly and filled Cal's car with the blue vapor of their e-cigs.

"I'm dying." His dad sighed. "They found a cancer in my lymph nodes that hadn't shown up on the initial scans. It's too far along to stop. The radiation on those damn asteroids did it." He threw the folder on the coffee table and pulled off his old Cubs hat, fingering the holes along the brim, a single tear running down his face. He wasn't a man to cry, but death changes people.

Cal froze. His dad had been indestructible. He worked on an asteroid mine blowing apart the smaller asteroids to get at the various precious metals in their cores. He was gone for weeks at a time and could handle giant flying pieces of rocks, but not a gland the size of a peanut. Sali began to cry, her shoulders shaking and the sobs echoing through the barren living room. Their dad sat down next to her and she leaned on him and cried into his shoulder.

Cal didn't want to yell at Sali in front of their dying father, but he couldn't believe she was being this selfish when he was the one with cancer eating his endocrine system. He stormed out of the house through the flapping end of the tarp. He didn't know where he was going, but it had to be better than here.

His mother found him at a little pocket park a couple blocks from their house. She walked up quietly to where he was sitting on the swings. He wanted to tell her not to worry about him and that he would take care of her but when he opened his mouth all that came out was a strangled sob. He choked it back and looked away from his mother who came up and held him against her. He looked down the street at all the broken terrestrial cars, their wheels popped and sagging. That's what he felt like, a sagging wheel taxed with holding up a family.

"It's okay to cry, Cal." His mother's voice was soothing but it just made him feel like more of a child.

He looked up at his mother. "I will take care of you," he whispered. She had tears in his eyes and he hugged her back, repeating, "I will take care of you."

Cal's best friend, March, worked in the radioactive waste fields. Sunflowers stood in tall rows of yellow, sucking the waste out of the soil. March's job was to harvest the plants for processing into cheap flour, sunflower seeds, or other foods for the underprivileged people who lived on Earth. It wasn't healthy or ethical, but it was affordable and everyone needed every penny they could save. Cal flew March to work every day. Cal could see March's shame when he dropped him off. March promised he would pay him back once Dilly, March's little brother, got better.

"I swear, man, once he's healthy, you'll get your due."

"Okay, March," Cal would reply. March would give him a small smile. They both knew Dilly wouldn't get any better.

Dilly had been born with radiation poisoning from the Venusian attack that targeted the nuclear power plants. Nuclear waste poured out and ruined miles around the power plants. Chicago sat in the middle of a triangle of three and was particularly badly hit, spawning a generation of sick children. Dilly had never been quite right in the head, always fixating on things like the twinkling stars of broken glass on a night time sidewalk. He loved to stare at the sky and pretend to see the constellations through the haze of smog and the crisscrossing rays of exhaust smoke. He would tell Cal and March the story of Orion the Hunter and how you could always find him by the three stars on his belt. He told them about the North Star that people used to navigate in the old days before Solar Positioning Systems.

March and his mom could barely afford Dilly's medicine. Once, he even had to ask Cal to loan him money just for a couple days. Cal had a hunch that it might have had something to do with March's mom's drug problem, but decided if March wanted to talk about it, he would. Cal agreed, forking over the 6,000 units. When he told his mom, she had shuffled to her room and returned with a hundred more units to add to it. March refused to take the extra, but his mom insisted. He swore he would pay Cal back in full.

Good to his word, the money was waiting just inside the tarp two weeks later, with a hastily scrawled thank you note attached. Cal was amazed that March would just leave money sitting like that where anyone could take it, but he supposed March had other things to worry about.

Cal's dad had taken him along to work once. Take Your Kid to Work Week only happened once a year if the bosses were feeling generous, because of the lack of extra oxygen masks. They didn't actually get to help either; they floated on the space station in a specially designed room with monitors watching the progress of all of the workers. It took them four days to get there and four days to get back; Cal slept on a cot in the back of the station while he waited for his dad's shift to be over.

Cal's dad had been the shining star of the day. One of the men working on a larger asteroid had calibrated a charge wrong. The two halves of the asteroid shot apart, one leaving the belt to float aimlessly towards Jupiter. It would probably crash into the gassy surface of the planet without causing much damage, but the other half was rocketing right towards the command center. Cal's father, instead of following code and letting the rogue asteroid damage a billion dollar piece of equipment, quickly hooked his own blast charge to his smaller asteroid and launched it at the larger piece. They collided in an explosion of rock and ore that rained on the command center, denting some of the antennae, but leaving it mostly unscathed. The children cheered at the amazing show, and his fellow workers clapped him on the back.

Cal's father had been reprimanded after work that day not only for wasting the charge, but also for exploding a level four asteroid and half of a level two, leaving most of the ore at their cores uncollectable. If it wasn't damaged beyond use, it was dispersed enough to make recovery impossible. He was reminded to stick to the code and not let it happen again.

“Don’t you talk to my Daddy that way,” Cal shouted at the screen. The manager couldn’t hear him, but the minders in the room shushed him.

“You’ll embarrass your father. Be a good little man and be quiet.”

Young Cal seethed but did as he was told, standing up to his full height and fixing the monitor with a hot-teared glare. His father was a hero.

Sali left before their dad reached the final stage of his cancer. The cure was available, but far out of the reach of their budget. They had applied to the government for financial assistance since he was the only one with a job in the family besides Cal, who couldn’t support the four of them as a cabbie. The government responded that since there were three employable adults in the house, there was no need for government assistance.

Sali argued that once Dad died, there wouldn’t be anyone to buy food or pay the rent. She didn’t want to live on the street. Hell, she didn’t even want to live in a shitty apartment with a hole in the wall but she’d done that for her love of family. She argued that she wasn’t abandoning the family; she was just lightening their burden by removing one of the mouths to feed. Why shouldn’t she go? It wasn’t like they’d never see each other again.

“If you leave now, you’d better not come back,” Cal warned sternly, his chest hot with concealed anger.

She hooked a ride with a group of well-to-do Venusians who had come to Earth to go slumming amongst the trash that lived there. She impressed them with her smile, laugh, and short skirt. Cal stood on the front porch and watched her go, her boots clicking

against the cracked pavement as their mother cried inside that her entire family was disintegrating. He watched them fly away until all that was left was an exhaust trail through the sky.

“It’ll be okay, Ma. I’m not leaving,” he said, opening the tarp and walking back inside.

Sali never called, though Cal got word through some of his clients about her. Apparently she was a mistress to some rich important Venusian. He took her out and showed her off, his new pretty little earth toy. Cal tried not to think about it and instead preferred to remember her from before their dad got sick. Cal, Sali, and March would all play War in the living room, shoes becoming battleships and teetering piles of books serving as the tall towers of Chicago. Usually they played as the Venusians because no one really wants to pretend to be the loser in War.

Sali would always be a Venusian princess. She would tie her hair back with pieces of ribbon in it and put on one of their mother’s nicer dresses. March was the unwilling prince, bossed around by a domineering princess, when really all he wanted was to be a battleship gunner and shoot down Cal’s shoe-ships from a turret made of rubber bands. Eventually Sali would cry that the boys weren’t playing with her when really they just weren’t playing the way she wanted to. One of their parents would interfere and playtime would be over. The boys would be sent outside and Sali would be enveloped in the warm embrace of their mother and soothed. Cal never got that. He was a man; he didn’t need soothing.

Once a week, Cal drove his mother to church. She liked to go to one of those old-fashioned churches where a bunch of people met in person in an old brick building with only one floor. It used to have a pointed thing on the roof, called a steeple or something, but a cargo craft knocked it off the year before and the patrons didn't have enough money to repair it. Cal swore that if he ever hit the SSLottery he would buy that church a steeple.

His mom had Cal's orbit phone on speed dial. She would call about nothing at all, just to check up on him. He was always at work when she called. She didn't like calling when he was off because she felt like she was intruding on his life. At least when he was at work she knew that talking to her was better than what he could be doing, listening to his rich customers blabber on about their own horrible shiny lives. He always answered no matter who was in the cab, even if it lost him his tip from an expensive trip.

Cal's mother had never acknowledged Sali's leaving as permanent. She always asked when they were going to go visit her or if Cal had talked to her recently. She already knew the answer to both were no. Cal hadn't talked to Sali since the day she left and didn't know where she was, whether Venus, Mars, or some other identical shithole on Earth. But that's not what Cal would say. He would tell his mom that Sali had called a couple weeks ago and that she was really happy and they would visit real soon.

One night a couple months after his dad died, Cal and March decided to just fuck the world and get wasted. They started out at bars, but as they got drunk, they got angrier.

They were thrown out of even the scummy shithole, Long Dave's, that served the staggering heroin whores who were as likely to puke on the floor as they were to buy a drink. The two wandered to an abandoned park that had seen the ravages of angry teenagers and neglectful city councils. The swings squeaked as they shivered to rusty life in the wind.

March took a swig of his souvenir beer from Long Dave's and drunkenly slurred, "Hey, man. If you could change one thing, just one, what would it be?" He sat down heavily on a dented park bench that looked like it had been set on fire in one of the protests that the Earth-dwellers threw to try to draw attention to the poor, polluted shithole.

Cal thought for a second, staring at the moon colonies. "I'd bring my dad back and never let him go to those mines in the first place. Then he'd still be here and Sali'd still be here and Mom wouldn't cry as much."

March nodded and gulped the last of his bottle, falling over in the process and looking up at the sky. He chucked the bottle at the set of swings and set them swaying harder. "I'd make Dilly better." He looked at Cal with teary eyes. "You know, man? Think of how much better life would be if Dilly was better. We, Ma and I and him, we could move to Mars or even Venus or hell I'd settle for the moon. I could get a real job and live to an old age. We wouldn't have to buy those stupid pills and Ma could go to rehab and I could stop bumming off you." March gazed off. He was quiet for a while then rolled over and fell asleep right there on the park bench.

Cal watched him and looked at the moon colonies, imagining all the little people in their little world while shit was falling apart all over Earth. He screamed and threw his beer at the moon.

Nobody heard him and he missed.

Apanthropy

Yely knew what the noises from her husband's bedroom meant. She was rather familiar with his specific brand of moan-grunt and could hear his girlfriend's higher pitched accompaniments through the thin walls of the apartment. She sat at their kitchen table clutching a rag in her folded hands. She looked at the door down the hall sadly, waiting for the noises to stop; for them to be done. She was supposed to be Olli's wife. She was twenty-four Venusian days old, almost sixteen in Earth years. She was his partner through life, his true other half. That didn't mean, though, that she was his only partner. Venusians had developed a culture of child marriage and acceptable adultery long before the War and their official separation from Earth. Before, though, there hadn't been much adultery because all the women were married and women weren't allowed to cheat on their husbands. Female infidelity was against the law. Instead unhappily married men would search out Unmarrieds, women whose families couldn't find them a suitable husband, or try to find a woman willing to take the risk. When the borders opened up to immigrants, Earthlings, Mercurians, and even the stray Martian, overwhelmed their delicate family structure and filled the cloud cities with more than enough mistresses for everyone.

The woman in the bedroom, Sali, was Olli's fifth mistress. She was twenty in Earth years. He would bring them home and introduce them to Yely, calling her his sister instead of his wife. Then they would disappear into his bedroom, separate from her own

so as to conceal their marriage from his unaware mistresses, and the noises would start. Sali was especially strange, her light hair cut short around her face and arranged in spiky layers. She had glowing green eyes that made Yely wonder if they were real or some cosmetic trick. Yely's own dark hair reached her waist but was always pulled up in a bun properly; to wear your hair down was a scandal. When she was alone, or wanted Olli's attention especially bad, she would take it down in the living room and brush it out slowly and carefully, making the black shine on her olive skin. Olli would usually not notice, or only notice enough to pat her head in a patriarchal manner before leaving the house to go out with his friends or mistress.

Yely picked at some dirt under her fingernail, idle with boredom. Suddenly, the noises changed in the bedroom. What had been moaning turned into yelling. The woman, Sali, was yelling at her Olli. At first, she felt indignant, but then remembered Olli saying that she was the best so far and that he liked her attitude and boldness. Sali made him happy.

A moment later, a half-dressed Sali, tugging on her pants and carrying a duffel bag, stormed out of the room, the bedroom door crashing into the wall behind her and knocking pictures off the wall. She walked straight up to Yely, her lips puckered in anger.

"Are you and Olli married?" her eyes flamed and she put her hands on her hips.

Yely's confusion was evident on her face. Didn't this girl know how things worked? "Yes, of course. How else could we live together?"

"He introduced you as his sister. I just assumed it was true. You know he and I slept together?"

Yely nodded, unsure of where this line of questioning was going. “Olli has had many lovers. You made him the happiest. Don’t leave.”

Sali shook her head and forced Yely, who was trying to pull the duffle off of her shoulder, to look at her. “Do you love him?”

“He is my brother and husband, I...”

“No,” Sali interrupted. “Do you love him? Do you want to be his lover? His *only* lover?”

Yely bit her lip, thinking about what it would be like for her husband, the love of her life, to finally love her back. She had been raised in his household by his parents after the marriage and had never thought of any other life. She nodded her head slowly, almost solemnly.

Sali nodded too. “I thought so.” She pulled her in for a hug. “I’ll be seeing you.” Yely watched her walk out into the air-bubbled corridor of the cloud city.

“Wait!”

Sali turned to see Yely running down the path behind her, feet slapping the hot rubber floor. “Where will you go?” Yely looked behind her and saw Olli standing at the door to their apartment looking sad but decidedly not chasing after Sali like Yely had done. Yely begged her not to go, to stay with Olli and Yely. Sali refused saying good self-respecting girls don’t sleep with married men. Yely teared up, less at Sali’s leaving, and more at the fact that this girl she barely knew cared more about her emotions than her own husband.

Sali tipped her head back so that the rising sun could shine off her beautiful features. The high cheekbones, long eyelashes, and plump lips would have won any heart she had wanted on Earth. Instead, she had fallen in love with the one man on her planet that seemed incapable of loving her: her own husband.

“You don’t have to stay here. You can come with me. To Earth. To anywhere. You don’t have to stay.” Sali took a deep breath and dove right in to the deep end of the girl’s emotions. “Look at him. Look at that man standing there.” She pointed over Yely’s shoulder to where Olli stood, watching disinterestedly. “He doesn’t love you. You know he doesn’t. He even said he loved me but he has done nothing to stop me from leaving. He doesn’t need you. No, he doesn’t *deserve* you. You could do so much better. You could find a man out there somewhere in our universe that will appreciate what he has when he has you, instead of bringing in lower class girls from the slums.” Sali gestured to herself the grabbed Yely’s hands in both of hers. “Come with me. We could go explore the solar system together. My brother is a driver and he’ll give us free rides wherever we want to go. All you have to do is leave.”

Yely looked back at Olli, leaning against the door frame with his arms crossed. He looked upset, but it was true that he had done nothing to stop Sali, or any of his other girls, from leaving, and he had never made Yely feel like anything more than hired help. His dark, handsome features, the ones she had grown up with and was so familiar with, contorted before her eyes, forming something far uglier than she had ever seen on him before. He gestured to her, noticing her long stare, as if calling her back to him, like some pet dog. She imagined his hands, wide and strong, on her bare skin, touching her body

like they had so many other girls. Then she imagined their family, the beautiful bouncing babies with her black hair and his dark eyes. Then she realized it was all just imagination. He would never love her past her potential for motherhood, not like he had loved Sali, not like Yely had loved him. She shook her head at him and turned back to Sali.

“When do we leave?”

The drop station was crowded with vehicles; hired cars, venuports, and shuttles all jostled for position. The Ion M cars, the most expensive and fastest, purred as their drivers waited for their charges contrasting the Ion Ls and Ks whose drivers were impatient as their cars hiccoughed. Sali and Yely boarded the shuttle, the slowest but cheapest form of transportation, to the nearest station twelve hours away, about a quarter of the way to Earth. They took two seats near the middle and Sali immediately began talking to their seat neighbors as if she had known them her whole life. Many of them were Venusian businessmen on their way to the other planets on job trips or to check on investments. One of the women was a Martian and Yely, from her window seat, craned her neck to see her. She didn't look much different than Sali, just a little darker and more dusty looking, and sadder, which made sense since Mars was practically wiped clean during the War.

Yely didn't talk to anyone; in fact, she barely dared to breathe in the intoxicating aroma of the other travelers. They all smelled so strange to her untuned nose: like smoke and dust and vacancy. She realized at the second or third stop off of the planet's surface that was what space must smell like. She wondered what it sounded like and looked out

her window for some small clue. The stars twinkled at her, their unbending light rays interrupted by the solar wind from the nearby sun and the motion of their bus. She touched one of the tiny dots of light with her finger, blotting it from existence if only for a little while. She had just destroyed a star by choosing not to see something, not to acknowledge its existence, and it stopped existing in her world. She could go back to Olli, she reasoned, with this same thought process. Just cover up the fact that he didn't love her, that he would never love her, and ignore that he feels differently about anyone else. She could pretend that there was nothing else out there for her, nothing better to go to or to be. She removed her finger from the window with a sigh. The star was waiting on the other side, still shining just like it had been a moment before. Olli would never change; she could never pretend that he would.

They had been lucky to board a bus to Earth during one of the rare windows when Earth was closest to Venus before their different orbital velocities separated them, so the trip was only going to take two and a half days. The girls were assigned bunk beds to sleep in during the trip that folded out from the wall above their seats, blocking the window. Sali had no trouble climbing into the bottom bunk and fell asleep immediately, snoring lightly. Yely laid on the top bunk listening to the breathing of the other passengers, some of them whispering softly to one another. She heard a creak and looked over to see two forms in one of the bunks, obviously kissing. She rolled over to give them some privacy and let her tears silently soak her pillow. She didn't want to wake anyone or be a bother, but she had just left everyone and everything she had ever known with a

woman she had just met who was more familiar with her husband's bed than she was. She cried until the automatic lights in the bus told her it was dawn.

The next day was much longer. The bus stopped at mid-orbit stations three times for meals, once every twelve hours, and Sali bought Yely strange foods that she claimed were Earth favorites. Ravioli and ramen and rice; Yely began to think all Earth foods began with r. Sali had struck up a friendship with the two men that sat behind them and initiated a game of poker using a deck of cards with scantily clad Unmarried women on them. Yely was invited to join but refused both because she didn't know how to play cards but also because of the indecency of degrading the women on the cards. Instead, she stared out the window, watching the depots come and go and listening to one of the bus-provided radio stations playing Earth classics from a thousand years earlier. She was especially fond of Beethoven; his harmonies and dissonances resonated with her in a way Venusian spirituals, the only music allowed on Venus, never had. Yely fell asleep that night to "Ode to Joy."

When they arrived at the depot on Earth's surface, Yely was nervous that they wouldn't be able to find Sali's brother. The station was crowded with so many cars and drivers and so many people, how would they ever find just one? But Sali seemed to have some sort of guidance system because she wove through the lanes of cars waiting for their patrons to a lot on the other side of the depot where her brother stood, smoking an old-time cigarette. Yely wondered where he had gotten it. Most of the tobacco companies

went out of business after the War and everyone who still wanted to smoke switched to vapor. He had Sali's blonde hair but his was longer and fell onto his face in a messy, disheveled way. Yely felt herself wanting to push the hair back and look into his clear green eyes she imagined were like Sali's. Instead, she climbed into the back seat.

The car was an older model and smelled like old smoke, sweat, and mildew. Sali and Cal exchanged formalities, but he didn't seem interested in further conversation and so the cab fell strangely quiet as they lifted off and headed into the dead air of space. The slight rocking of the car and the gentle hum of its Ion M motor, one of the best in the solar system, lulled Yely, and she realized that she hadn't slept well since Venus. She leaned her head against the door and watched the lane markers passing, passing, passing.

"Yely. Yely, wake up." Yely was being shaken awake and opened her eyes to the roof of the cab and Sali's face smiling down at her. "We're here."

Yely sat up groggily, her hair a tangled mess since she hadn't thought to bring anything from the apartment, like a hairbrush, before she left. She looked out the window at a bleak city. The skyscrapers she had read about stood around her but what she had always imagined as majestic and grandiose seemed more broken and dead. The wall of the building nearest her had a jagged tear in its metal side, exposing three floors of what looked like offices to the elements, hollowing them out and turning everything a dreary sort of gray.

"Welcome to Chicago." Sali smiled and held her arms open as if hugging her home city.

Yely got out of the car carefully, making sure the cracked pavement under her feet would hold her. She wasn't used to being on solid ground; Venusians lived in colonies above the clouds to avoid the sulfuric acid in the atmosphere below. She jumped and felt the unmoving Earth beneath her and almost missed the hard rubber walkways of the cloud colonies. Cal and Sali had already started walking away towards a tarped-up hole in a nearby brick building. Yely hurried after them, not wanting to be left alone on the decrepit streets of an unfamiliar city on an unfamiliar planet.

Through the tarp was a small living room with a worn and bowed couch on one side with a low coffee table sitting in front of it. A woman was smiling from ear to ear standing in the doorway to what looked to be a small hall. She ran forward as Yely came through the door and began hugging Sali with all the force her small frame could muster. Tears ran down her face and Yely felt very awkward watching this spectacle of human emotion. Suddenly, the woman's face, which had been buried in Sali's shoulder, popped up and her watery blue eyes found Yely's. She released Sali and advanced on Yely with open arms. Yely let her hug her but did so stiffly without really hugging back.

"Welcome home, my dears. You can call me Ceraline," she said to Yely in a quiet, whispery voice. "The moment Cal told me you were coming, I could barely believe it." She bustled into the kitchen and set a large plate of what looked like yellow worms in red mud on a table next to the refrigerator which hummed noisily. "I made your favorite," she said to Sali. "Spaghetti." She got smaller plates and began scooping portions of the food onto each dish. Yely, who still hadn't said anything, sat down in one of the chairs

and picked up her fork gingerly, poking at the food in front of her half expecting it to move.

“Mom, you really didn’t have to do this for them,” Cal said, hanging up his coat on a rack near the tarp and sitting down across from his mother, putting Sali across from Yely. She was silently grateful because she didn’t want to spend the entire meal staring at a stranger. The three began twirling their forks in the food and shoveling huge bitefuls into their mouths. Yely attempted to do the same thing, her stomach turning at the thought of eating worms, but the technique seemed to be harder than it looked and everything kept slipping off her fork.

“Having problems with your pasta?” Sali said around a mouthful of spaghetti.

“Pasta?”

“Yes.” Sali laughed and wiped her mouth. It’s made out of flour and water and stuff. You boil it and eat it. The sauce is tomatoes.”

Their mother stared on in wonder. “Don’t you have spaghetti on Venus?”

Yely looked down at the plate and shook her head. “They aren’t worms then?” That caused the whole table to laugh and Yely’s cheeks reddened with embarrassment. She managed to twirl a noodle onto her fork and gingerly lifted it to her mouth. Flavor exploded on her tongue like nothing she had ever had out of the hydroponic gardens at home. Garlic and tomatoes and peppers fought for control of her palate and Yely desperately swirled her fork for more, causing more laughter at the table. In the end, Sali gave her a knife and she cut the noodles into smaller pieces that she could scoop into her mouth instead of twirling it.

“This was delicious,” Yely wiped her mouth with a paper napkin. “Thank you.”

Sali’s mother smiled and held out a hand to Yely. “Call me Ceraline, dear, Ceraline Thill.”

Yely took the hand and shook it like she had seen videos of Earthlings doing. “Thank you, Mrs. Thill.”

“Tomorrow I’ll teach you how to make ravioli the way my grandmother taught me.” She smiled and took away the red-stained plates.

That night Yely slept on the beat-down couch she had encountered when she first arrived. Mrs. Thill and Sali had both offered her their own beds, but Yely didn’t want to be a burden and chose to sleep on the couch, anxious staring at the tarp every time the wind made it move even the slightest bit. She was terrified that someone was going to walk right through and snatch her away while she was sleeping. The couch smelled like beer and bodies, a lingering smell that she couldn’t seem to get out of her sinuses even after she ducked her nose into her shirt. Eventually she fell asleep out of sheer exhaustion, thinking about how nice it would be to have her bed back with her soft Venusian cotton sheets.

Sali and Cal didn’t get along. Yely figured that out fast and began hiding in the kitchen with their mother while they yelled on the other side of the tarp, Cal’s arms thrown up in anger and Sali’s voice ringing throughout the tiny apartment as she argued back at him. Sometimes they fought about nothing at all, things like whether or not meat was necessary for that night’s dinner. Sometimes they fought about important things, like

whether or not Sali should get a job to help support the four of them. Sometimes they fought about Yely.

The first time it happened, Yely didn't know what to do. The two siblings stormed outside, their rage barely suppressed. They refused to fight inside, which Yely was a little grateful for. Cal began by asking why Sali had brought home a Venusian housewife who probably had a home and a family to go back to. Sali not-so-calmly replied that Yely's husband didn't love her and her marriage was falling apart.

Admitting it to herself and hearing the words spoken were two entirely different things. Yely's eyes welled with tears and she turned away from Ceraline apologizing. She shushed her and hugged the young girl, folding her into her arms in a way Olli's mother never had during Yely's childhood.

"Hush, child. It'll be okay. You don't have to leave, just hush." Ceraline stroked Yely's long black hair. Sali and Cal were still shouting but Yely was listening to the sound of Ceraline's heartbeat, slow and steady.

"Do you want to learn how to make some pasta?" Ceraline asked. Yely smiled in reply.

She learned to make all sorts of Earth foods during her stay there. Her favorite was ravioli and she found that the ones Ceraline taught her to make were better than what Sali had bought for her on the way there. Sometimes they couldn't afford meat to fill them so they just used mashed beans with a little bacon grease or beef fat which had been carefully saved since the last time they had the luxury of eating bacon or beef. The pasta they got was from the radioactive sunflower fields. The least radioactive plants were

harvested and converted into cheap, though unethical, food for the hungry population of Earth.

Sali frequently left for hours at a time and Ceraline usually took a nap in the middle of the day while Cal was at work, so that left Yely sitting alone on the couch. She would have gone for a walk, but this city didn't have a navigation system to safely return you home if you got lost like the cloud colonies did. Everything that had once been wonderful about Earth had been crushed during the War. Yely couldn't help feeling partially responsible for the destruction here, even if no one else was blaming her. The Venusians had wanted their independence from Earth and had taken it violently, leaving Earth broken and Mars empty. Destruction had followed where the Venusians went until there was nothing worth living in between Venus and Jupiter. Yely looked at her hands, their soft skin marred now with small patches of dry scaly red. The dirt under her nails had been accumulating and she hadn't taken the time to get it out. She picked at the dirt, scraping it out while thinking about the family she was intruding upon.

Cal had told Sali that he couldn't afford them for much longer. He didn't get paid enough as a hired driver to feed four adults, even though Yely was only sixteen in Earth years. He had told Sali that either they needed to get jobs or they needed to leave. Yely stood and stared out the small gap between the tarp and the wall. The street in front of her had years of debris covering the pavement. The old non-flying cars were parked at strange angles with most of their windows broken out. They had long ago been looted for their valuables and wiring. The sun was shining on the broken glass in the street making

it sparkle and hurt Yely's eyes. She stepped out of the tarp and stood in front of the apartment looking up at the polluted sky and thinking about her own home in the clouds.

It had taken her a couple hours to find the consulate. She actually had to go into a shop selling day old food and ask the attendant if he had a sat-phone that she could use. Luckily, Venusian girls were made to memorize the consulate contact number so they could easily get help if they were ever kidnapped. It was a paranoid practice, but Yely was a little grateful for it then. The Venusian office had linked her to the Earth consulate which gave her directions to them. She had only been two streets away on Balmoral from where they sat on Bryn Mawr. Yely had to write down the name to keep from forgetting the strange Earth words. When she arrived, the Unmarried secretary at the counter shook her head at Yely in disgust. Embarrassment washed over her as she wondered what this other Venusian woman was thinking about her. At least she was trying to return to her husband and be a good wife, Yely thought. She wasn't staying here on Earth and eating meatless ravioli.

The consulate had called Olli and told him that they had his wife. Olli immediately hired an Ion M car to drive her back to Venus. The orbits weren't perfectly aligned anymore, but the planets hadn't moved much and the driver, who was thankfully not Cal, told Yely that she would be home in a little under three hours. Yely smiled demurely in reply and stared out the window.

"What have I done?" she whispered.

Olli picked her up from the car's drop point in a new Ion M of her own. He had it painted lavender, her favorite color, as a gift of repentance. He said he realized that she needed more freedom, but she knew he expected the car to sit in the garage unused. As he drove them back home, he kept glancing over at her. Yely supposed that now that she had seen more than just the cloud colonies of Venus she was more interesting to him. She knew her hair and clothes carried the scents of her explorations: cold, dust, vancancy, decay.

"I am quite capable, thank you." Yely said when Olli tried to open her door for her. She walked into their apartment and straight to her bedroom, putting away the few things she had gathered on her short absence quietly and meticulously. When she was finished, she came back out to the living room, where Olli stood awkwardly, unsure how to proceed with this new, foreign woman.

"Have you eaten?" she asked, gesturing to the kitchen. He shook his head no. She bustled about a little, making quick and simple ravioli like Ceraline had shown her with cheese on top. She served the dish silently, still holding herself erect. She ate at the table with delicate movements, making Olli even more curious about where his wife had gone. Where was the girl who blundered through life, fretting about the tiniest detail, scared to set foot outside their door without him? He didn't know whether he should miss her or rejoice at what she had become. He reached his hand out and took one of hers, stroking the back of it with his thumb. She looked at it a moment before withdrawing her hand and continuing her meal.

After dinner she retired to her bedroom early, lying down on top of the sheets and staring out the window. Where was Sali right now? Was she okay? Had she made a mistake coming back? A knock on her bedroom door snapped her to attention.

Olli pushed open the door hesitantly. "Can I come in?"

"Of course." She nodded.

He smiled and slipped into the room, shutting the door behind him. He sat on the edge of her bed and she sat up, looking at him.

"Yely, you've changed. I don't know what it is, but going out there with Sali has made you different." He touched her chin, gently turning her head this way and that, admiring her face in the pale afterglow of the sunset. "You seem so much older now even though you haven't aged a day. I don't understand it."

Yely tried to see Olli. She knew this man. This man was the man she had grown up with, loved, and lost over and over again to woman after woman. "Thank you," she replied.

Olli took Yely's hand in both of his and looked at it, feeling its soft skin and delicate bones but also the secret strength there. "Yely, I don't think I will be bringing home anymore women."

Yely was startled but masked it by touching his shoulder gently. She knew what this meant. He was saying he loved her. He looked up at her with his large, dark eyes and she gazed into them. There was a time when she would have gotten lost in that gaze. She would have given anything for him to look at her the way he looked at the other women he brought home.

She didn't say anything and he leaned forward, wrapping his arms around her and kissing her shoulder and neck. She looked out the window as they lay down on the bed and Olli tugged at the button on her pants. A single star struggled through the sunset haze as her pants began their journey down her legs. Olli pushed up her shirt, kissing her stomach and ribs and Yely shivered. The star winked knowingly at her.

She held up one finger to blot it out.

Radiate

March woke to Dilly's screams tearing through the air. He jumped from his bed and ran to his little brother. Dilly thrashed in his bed covered in sweat, eyes squeezed shut, legs tangled in the old solar system sheets.

"Dilly," March said, trying to liberate him from the sheets. "Dilly what's wrong?" March threw the sheets off the bed and picked his six year old brother up. He smelled like urine and sweat.

"I'm so hot, March," Dilly whined wrapping his arms around his big brother's neck. "My skin is on fire."

March carried him into the bathroom and turned on the light with his elbow. Sure enough, Dilly's skin was a frightening shade of magenta. March set him down and started a cool bath. He peeled Dilly's pajamas off as Dilly plucked uselessly at the fabric. As March helped him into the tub, their mom appeared at the bathroom door.

"I heard him screaming," she said, leaning against the door frame with crossed arms.

March shouldered past her with Dilly's soiled pajamas. She followed him to the laundry room. March threw the clothes in the washing machine and closed the washer door. For a moment, his mother stared at her son's back: the muscles underneath clenched as he gripped the washer with his large hands. She noticed how much larger he

was since he started working on the Martian mines. She thought about how she had never left the city since the War, and her son was off working on another planet.

“Did you sell Dilly’s medicine?” March’s accusation stunned her out of her reverie.

She shrugged. “We needed the money.”

March slammed his fist into the top of the washer and spun around, staring down his mother. “God damn it, Mom! Dilly needs that medicine.”

“We needed the money for food. There’s no point in him getting better if he’s just going to starve.”

March eyed his mother suspiciously.

“I earned enough money for food. I always make enough for food.”

“We needed more,” was his mother’s simple answer.

“Let me see your arms,” March demanded, gritting his teeth.

“What?”

“Let me see your arms.” He held out his hand and his mom reluctantly put hers in it. His large hands dwarfed her slender ones as he turned her arm over and pushed up her sleeve. The small red sores followed the blue vein across her elbow. He threw her arm down in disgust.

“Well, what do you expect me to do?” She cried, voice suddenly changed to a high, desperate whine. “I can’t handle this. We live in this shithole and you’re gone working all the time and I’m stuck here with my dying son! What do you want me to do?”

“Yes, Dilly’s dying,” March yelled, pointing his finger in her face, “and you sold his medicine for drugs so you could get high instead of dealing with it. I didn’t take the promotion because it would mean working on Mars and leaving him here with you. You’re killing him!”

His mom looked shocked and muttered, “How could you say that?”

March pushed past her, knocking her into the wall. He grabbed a pot off the counter and began heating up soup. A small cry came from the bathroom. “Just watch Dilly and try not to drown him.” March fixed her with a penetrating gaze and she felt her insides curl with shame. She nodded and went to the bathroom. He thought of how he had been thankful when Cal’s family fell apart that his was still together. Now he wondered if that was better or not. Now he wondered if it was worth the trouble.

“Mommy,” Dilly said when she entered, “am I going to get better?”

She laid her cold forehead against her son’s hot one.

“Yes, honey. We’re both going to get better.”

When March was young, he remembered, his father used to go out and fly for miles to bring home donuts on Sundays. They were just old-world, run-of-the-mill donuts, but they would always be there when March woke up. He would bounce into the kitchen and snag his favorite, the one with chocolate icing, before anyone else could. His father would laugh and ruffle his hair while March wiped bits of icing off of the sides of his mouth.

He hadn't known what they were talking about when they said radiation poisoning, just that Dilly was sick. He also didn't know what his dad meant when he said he was fed up with this. He did know, however, that when the donuts stopped, it meant he wasn't coming back. March had waited all day, sitting on the floor staring at the door, waiting for Sunday morning donuts, hoping his dad was just late, but his gut told him otherwise. His dad had stopped visiting Dilly at the hospital and he could hear his parents fighting when he was in his room at night. He blamed the problem on the damn Venusians coming and mucking up a planet that wasn't theirs to mess with.

His mom had cried, at first secretly, alone in her room, but gradually more and more openly, moving to the couch, the kitchen table. One day, she moved completely out the door. She laid out a sandwich on the table and told March she was going to go see Dilly at the hospital. He had been born with radiation poisoning from the Venusians' targeted attack on the nuclear power plants. March begged to go with her—he loved his new baby brother—but his mother ignored his pleas. She was gone all day and March waited. He had nothing to do in the apartment so he ended up over at Cal's place, playing war with him and his little sister. When darkness fell, March crept back home and snuck in. His mom still wasn't home.

March woke that night to a crash and a curse. His mom stumbled past his door and into her room, knocking into the walls and shuffling her feet the whole way. When he crawled out of bed, she spun around and gave him a wide-eyed, surprised look. He saw the red marks on her arms and asked what they were.

“Mosquito bites,” his mom had said, pulling down her sleeves. “Now go to sleep, why don’t you?”

Just after March found the missing medicine, his mom began acting strangely, always scratching her arms and pulling her sleeves all the way down.

“It’s nothing,” she said, pulling her already stretched sleeves down a little further and wiping her strained, tired eyes. She had been running laundry out on a precarious line March had run between their window and the opposite building thirty feet above the ground.

“Show me your arms,” March said, feeling apprehensive and passing her the next pair of pants to hang

“March, I haven’t been,” she started, putting her hands on her hips.

“Please?” March asked, a child again asking his mother to do him a favor. Her eyes were bloodshot and her hands were shaking. He stood taller, setting down the laundry. “Please.” This time it wasn’t a question.

His mother’s arms were an ugly bruised purple with raised red bumps up and down the prominent veins. She slid the sleeve down silently and turned back to the laundry. March turned his back on her and shook with anger.

The next day when he came home from work, she was gone.

She ended up in the addiction center of the local hospital, Sain Cabrini. The addicts occupied a small hall on the floor of the psych ward. She had been brought in by

a pair of overworked cops with the rest of the inhabitants of a local heroin house during a raid. The doctors and nurses that worked there were amazed that the drug she had been taking, a Venusian version of heroin specific to their metabolism and body structures, hadn't destroyed hers a long time ago.

"In a body like ours, a human body, it metabolizes differently, slowly. It creates the same high, is injected the same way, but lasts much, much longer. It is usually mixed with Earth heroin so it doesn't have as harsh of an effect, but the strain she was using, the strain that was in her blood, was almost pure Venusian" the doctor told March. They stood over his sleeping mother as the doctor closed his clipboard and patted March on the back, leaving them to decide what to do. Dilly didn't realize what was going on and delighted in the small teddy bear one of the nurses had given him. March frowned, gripping the railing of her bed and willing the addiction out. Of course, that did no good.

His mother would have been charged with possession, but the cops weren't worried as much about harmless addicts like her as they were the dealers and homicidal ones. The cops were all but impotent now, when drugs and thievery were ways of life, not the recreational hobbies they were before the War. His mother's eyes had sunken and her face was covered in red spots like acne. March regretted bringing Dilly here; he'd rather his little brother remember her as the happy, bright-faced mother of their childhoods, not this withered, wilted shell.

Her eyes fluttered open and rested on a spot just above the light switch for a moment before focusing in on her sons.

“March,” she began, trying to sit up. Her voice was raspy and harsh. March put a hand on her shoulder to put her back into bed. She looked around him to where Dilly was playing with his bear but March blocked her view, ushering Dilly towards the sparsely populated nurses station where the overworked nurses cooed over the adorable boy.

Tears filled her eyes as March said seriously, “We need to talk about this.”

“It’s not a problem,” his mom stated, tears turning to steel against her oldest son.

“Mom, you’re in the hospital because of it.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. They brought everyone here. I’m not the worst addict in that house. Did you see them? They’re crazy, shaking all the time and muttering to themselves.”

“You are just like them.” March’s calm statement echoed in the room and she narrowed his eyes at her.

“I am nothing like them.”

“Then get better, damn it. Let them treat you with whatever. Just get better. Do you know what it’s like to live alone, to take care of Dilly alone? You can’t just abandon us for that stupid high. Dilly needs you. I,” he stopped and turned around, running his hands through his hair in frustration. He couldn’t admit he needed her, no matter how true it was. Turning back to her, he gripped the bed rail suddenly and forcefully, scaring his mother and making her jump away from him.

“Listen to me. If you get better, great. Come on home. But if you don’t, if you start doing this shit again, don’t you dare bring that home to Dilly. Do you hear me? This is done. If you want this life, this thing instead of us, that’s your choice but I am not

having it anymore. Is that clear?” His blue eyes were sharp and dangerous, full of anger. His mother trembled slightly and nodded.

He released the railing and strode towards the door.

“March?” His mother’s voice was small and childlike. He turned back to her, one hand on the doorknob.

She held the blanket in both of her hands, covering the bottom of her pockmarked chin. “You don’t know what you’re asking. It’s hard. It’s so hard.” She started crying. “I can’t just give it up.”

“You have to, Mom, or you won’t be a mother anymore.”

She widened her eyes, their wet ocean blue matching March’s hard sapphire. “Maybe I just should never have been a mother to begin with.” March didn’t know if she meant for him to hear it or not, but it was enough for him.

“Goodbye, Alis.” His mother jumped at her name, unused to hearing it from someone so much like her lost husband. “I hope you end up happy.”

One of the nones contacted March later that week to inform him that his mother had checked out. She didn’t come home.

The apartment was empty, waiting, expecting her return, a return it would never get. March sighed and helped Dilly take his jacket off. There wasn’t anything to do; Cal’s mom had made them a casserole to get through a few days without having to cook. March suddenly realized that his mom had always done the cooking and that he had no idea how to cook. He looked in the cabinet and found boxed macaroni and cheese and a

few sleeves of crackers. They couldn't live on that. March realized he hadn't bought groceries the entire time his mom had been missing.

March had always thought that maybe he and Dilly would be better off without her, but now, he wasn't so sure. He wanted her to come back. He felt the tears in his eyes and angrily wiped them away, grabbing some bowls from the cabinet.

He scooped some casserole into a couple of dishes and went to get Dilly for dinner. He was crying in his room and looked up when March walked in.

"What's wrong?"

"Mom isn't going to get better," he sobbed, hugging the tiny hospital teddy bear.

March sat down beside him on the bed and tried to think of something to comfort him. "She is very sick. She might get better but it will take a long time."

"But she said that WE would get better. Both of us," he clung to March, wrapping his arms around the bulky frame of his brother. "But now we can't."

"She knew that you both couldn't get better so she gave you all her better." March could hear the ridiculousness coming out of his mouth and couldn't believe he was actually saying it. His brother's eyes shone, though, and he knew it was the right thing to say. "That's how she's going to help you get better. She's taking care of you."

March stroked his brother's hair and looked at a small snapshot hanging on the wall of the three of them. It had been taken when Dilly was a baby and still fat and rosy cheeked. March was waving and his mom was smiling, holding her new son. His dad had taken the picture a few weeks before he left.

March wondered if he'd ever feel that whole again.

He turned off the light and left the room, fighting the urge to just leave him as a ward of the state and take off to anywhere, maybe Venus. The women there were so famous for slumming with Earthlings that he was sure he could convince one to let him shack up with her. He imagined having a tiny Earth-Venusian baby and how cute it would be, his wild hair on top of their olive skin tone. His blue eyes in the signature diamond shaped face. He laid down on the couch and imagined pushing the baby through one of the elevated parks where you could look down on the planet's surface, miles below, and feel the heat radiating up. As he dozed off, the baby ran in front of him, a red balloon tied to his wrist as he and its mother followed behind with the stroller prepared for when it got tired. He imagined wearing a suit and going to an office job, pictured his large hands gripping a ballpoint pen for a living and him selling stocks or running a construction empire or, God forbid, advising people on finances. He saw his baby playing in the living room on a bright red carpet, stacking blocks and building precarious towers.

"March," the baby said. "March." The baby's diamond face began to change, filling out in the cheeks and gaining a pink hue. Its hair shrunk back into its skull and lost its radiance, instead becoming a dull brown. The blue eyes remained, sparkling with life. He recognized his brother and started away, nearly falling off the couch.

He stood up and walked back to Dilly's room, scratching his eyes with one hand as he pushed open the door quietly. He looked at the prone form of Dilly and watched his steady breathing.

Shadow Dances

Sali heard conversation outside the living room. She had been napping on the couch before the intrusive high-pitched voice interrupted. She squinted blearily at the corner of the room where a large tarp was backlit by sunlight. A figure stood silhouetted against the tarp. Sali stood up grumpily, her short blonde hair standing on her head in spikes. She ripped the tarp aside, glaring at the person who had awaken her.

“Yely!” She screamed, recognizing the other girl immediately. Yely almost fell over but was quickly pulled inside and pushed down on a couch. Sali’s nap was immediately forgotten as in her excitement. She quickly explained everything that had happened to her in the year since Yely left.

“Mom got a job washing clothes but it doesn’t really pay much and I waitress but the men there look at me like a piece of meat so I might as well be prostituting again. Don’t look so surprised, it pays well. Anyway we all have jobs now so you can stay as long as you like but we don’t have a bed for you still so I hope the couch works again. Cal should be home later and Mom gets off in a couple of hours so we have a little bit of time to ourselves before anyone gets here. What do you want to do? We could go to the park and watch the children play or we have a little bread. We could go feed the birds at the lake. What do you want to do?” Sali was nearly bouncing she was so happy to see her ex-lover’s young wife.

Yely smiled at the older girl's exuberance but offered no immediate answer. Instead they just looked at each other for a moment. Sali's smile dropped and she raised her eyebrows in question. Yely nodded solemnly, frowning.

"So you left him. You really left him?"

"Yes. It's just me now."

"Just you? Just you are the most wonderful person in the world. You should be proud to be just you. Why the hell did you come here with your newfound freedom out of all places?"

Yely laughed. "I wanted to see you. I don't know what to do or where to go, but I couldn't stay there, I'd just end up back at Olli's. We could go anywhere, Sali, anywhere in the solar system."

"I've done the traveling thing. We could go anywhere you want to. I've seen it all, well, all of it this side of the asteroid belt. Never could afford a ticket on the ferry." Sali smiled at the adventure shining in the other girl's eyes. She looked so much more alive than she had the last time Sali saw her. She looked like before she had been covered with a film and now she was clear and clean, purely herself. "First, maybe something to eat?" Sali offered. Yely's stomach growled in response.

*

Yely hadn't actually known how to get to Earth. Last time Sali had made all the decisions. Before, Yely had thought about the man she was leaving and the family she was being denied all the way to the next planet, a two day trip. This time, Yely didn't want to take the bus and have to traverse all of the foreign depots for food and converse

with strange people in a guise of friendship. Instead, she played the good wife, doing Olli's laundry and organizing his things. Olli smiled, showing off his bright white teeth in his dark olive face as he watched her carefully fold his clothes and put them in the wardrobe sorter. She knew he liked watching her do things like these, wifely things that made her look feminine and matronly. What he didn't know was that being this close to his stuff gave her access to things like his EID card which let her order a Ion M car to take her to Earth and a guide to get her to Sally's.

She left while Olli was at work, standing in front of the door and looking back at the only home she had ever really known. The Venusians sold their daughters for marriage as toddlers. She had been raised by her husband's parents in her husband's family to be her husband's ideal wife. She grew up knowing that she belonged by his side in his household. She had left it once before in haste, trying to follow the Earth girl her husband had cheated with. The first time she was rash, leaving with little thought and much emotion. She had returned when the emotion wore off, thinking that she could be happy, despite the fact that she had no power, no identity, and no love here. This time she left with full intention of never coming back. The fish Olli had bought her as an apology when she returned swam listlessly in their floating orb tank. Their bubbled eyes watched her stand with one hand on the door. She sighed, picking up her lightly packed bag which held everything she had any right to take.

"Goodbye," she whispered to the empty house.

*

As an apology for cheating, Yely's husband had bought her a car, an expensive Ion M. He had assumed she would use it to go to the groceries or the park if she used it at all, staying safely within the confines of the cloud colony's bubbled streets. Yely didn't know how to drive, but slowly, a day at a time, she learned how to fly the small purple car. She wasn't very good at first and frequently had to stop on the side of the road to calm herself down before she could get where she was going, but she learned.

When she got in the car to leave, it felt different. This car was no longer about her husband's affairs but rather her own freedom from him. There was a sound system in the car, but she didn't turn it on. She wanted to spend the three hour trip in silence, listening only to the music of her heart beat and breathing, the sounds of a Venutian woman finally free for the first time. She imagined, not without pleasure, the look on Olli's face when he returned to find not only no dinner, but no wife. He had treated her better after her return, but he quickly slipped back into his old habits. He had been true to his word and not brought any other women home, but he wasn't interested in her for any more than her mothering possibilities. He didn't touch her or stroke her hair; he didn't stare longingly at her; he didn't come home with flowers or imported Mercurian chocolates. He simply looked at her flushed cheeks and observed without any sentimentality that she was ovulating, which was usually followed by a tender moment in her bed later.

Yely almost wished that the car could go faster, but she knew that Olli, her husband, had bought her the fastest model available. She tapped her fingers on the console in front of her, tap taptaptap.

She entered the Earth's atmosphere at one of the crowded depots, the only place that vehicles were allowed to enter the atmosphere. Yely didn't know how to get to her friend's house from here so she had arranged to meet a guide. The air was hazy with smoke and pollution. Yely wove her way through to a man in a neon green vest, an obnoxious flamboyant color that stood out in the sea of brown faces crowding the station.

"Hello," he said, his voice high pitched and lilting. "Are you Yelyzaveta from Venus?"

"Yes, I am," Yely said regally, opening the door and holding out her money. "Tell me how to get to the Thills'."

The Thills, the family of her husband's ex-lover Sali, lived on Foster in what used to be a nice part of Chicago. Now everything was a wasteland, the city ragged and deformed from the War when the Venusians attacked for their independence. The man took her all the way up to the tarp covering the Thills' front wall. He said it wasn't safe for someone as pretty as her to walk the streets alone. Yely thought this ironic since she seemed more likely to fit in than her neon-clad counterpart. He helped her find a suitable parking space in an alley behind the building where vandals and thieves were less likely to find it.

"I hope you find what you are looking for, my friend," he said to Yely in front of the tarp, holding up a hand.

Yely didn't know how the proper response and he laughed.

"Usually people reply with, 'And you as well.' And put their hands like this." He took her hand in his, crossing their forearms and pressing the backs of their hands

together. “You seem a nice girl. Don’t lose it,” he warned before skipping away, humming loudly to himself and looking up at the sky wistfully.

*

“What do you mean you’re leaving?” Cal yelled. The two had gone outside but the tarp did little to silence their shouts. Their shadows played on the tarp like a puppet show, two larger-than-life figures pantomiming anger.

“I mean Yely and I are leaving tomorrow to go travel the solar system. She wants to see the worlds and I want to help show them to her.” Sali wasn’t angry, but she didn’t understand how her brother couldn’t see the logic of this solution.

“You just got back. Do you know what this will do to our mother?” He hissed at her, leaning his face in close.

“Do I know what this will do to our mother? Do I know what this will do to our mother, you ask? Of course I know what this will do to our damned mother. You never quit telling me what I’ve done to our mother. Ever since I got back you tell me how all I’ve done is hurt her and how I’m a horrible daughter and that nothing I ever do will fix it. Well guess fucking what. If I can’t fix it why should I stay? If I’m not good enough for this family, why should I even try?” Hot tears filled her eyes and her face reddened from rage.

Cal stared coldly at his sister. He had said those things, but was hoping that they would have the opposite effect. She hadn’t had to watch their mother cry over Sali’s baby pictures like he had. She hadn’t had to lie about when she would be coming back like he

had. She hadn't had to see their beautiful family fall apart. Instead she had run. And now she was running again.

Yely sat on the couch trying to pretend she couldn't hear them outside the tarp. Sali threw it aside and stormed inside, stomping past Yely and down the short hall. She returned with a bag of miscellaneous items, little more than what she had when she left Olli's a year earlier. Sali didn't speak but grabbed Yely's hand and dragged her off the couch. She let go long enough to let Yely grab her own bag placed strategically by the tarp for an easy exit.

They walked past Cal who was still standing outside, anger etched on his face. Sali didn't look at him but instead began walking down the street. Yely looked at the man she had spoken to only rarely and smiled weakly. He wiped hastily at his eyes and she noticed he was crying. He nodded at her and she returned it with an incline of her head. She turned to walk away but he reached out and grabbed her arm.

"Wait. Wait," he repeated louder, causing Sali to stop and look at them. "If you guys are really going to do this I can drive you somewhere. Just," he paused with a sigh and ran his fingers through his hair. It was the same color as Sali's though longer and shaggier. "Just this time promise me you'll call. Mom misses you Sali. We both do."

Sali looked at her feet and Yely put a hand on Cal's arm in a grateful gesture. "Thank you, Cal, but I have my own car."

Embarrassment reddened his features and he looked away. Yely looked between the two siblings who were both avoiding eye contact. How couldn't they see how perfectly alike they were?

“I will make her call, though,” Yely said, making Cal look up. “We shouldn’t both lose our families.”

*

Two women arrived on Mars driving an expensive Ion M car. They parked near a dive bar and get out. One was a tall, beautiful woman, obviously Venusian by her dark olive skin tone and sharp cheekbones that accentuated her distinctly diamond-shaped face. She wore her hair down in long waves and had on a pair of old-fashioned sunglasses that covered the upper half of her face. The other girl was shorter with spiky blonde hair and a loud laugh. Her face was rather normal but her smile could make others smile. Both girls were wearing cut off jean shorts and tank tops, despite the cold of the Martian atmosphere.

Sali lead them into the bar and waved the bartender over. Yely looked uncomfortable as she sat down on a sticky barstool, her bare thighs squeaking against the plastic seat. The room was dimly lit and miners shared the bar and the few booths available, laughing coarsely at a game of virtual billiards or staring pitifully into their booze.

“Two of your cheapest beer,” Sali ordered, holding up two of her fingers. The bartender placed two half-liters of fizzy amber liquid in front of the girls. Sali took a large drink of hers and turned her back to the bar, looking out at the miners around them. She smiled and a couple of the less grim patrons smiled back. Yely sniffed her beer and placed it back on the counter in front of her. It smelled like old socks.

“Do you know of a good place to stay,” Sali asked the bartender, turning back around.

The bartender, a middle aged man in a dirty t-shirt and jeans, leaned forward on the counter. “There ain’t nowhere near here that a couple of girls like you two won’t get hurt.” He gestured to the bar vaguely. “Men around here get a little starved, you know?”

Sali nodded and took another drink. Yely nervously rolled the glass between her hands, collecting the condensation on her fingertips. “Anywhere would help. We can take care of ourselves.” A certain ferocity filled her voice as she replied.

“Well,” he said, leaning back and wiping a glass with a rag, “there is one place I can think of. Just meet me back here at sunset and I’ll take you to them.”

Sali beamed. “Thank you so much!”

“For a small fee, of course.” Sali’s smile went away and she pulled out fifty units, enough to cover the drinks and bribe.

The planet was bathed in orange light as the girls waited for the bartender to finish locking up. Yely stared into the distance, Martian mountains made of red dirt blending in with the orange sunset sky. She had never seen anything so barren before. On Earth everything was destroyed, but there were still buildings and cars and life. Mars had been wiped clean of all of its agricultural fields and farming colonies. Only the mines were left, the planet dotted with them and a few sparse buildings to service their workers.

The bartender silently beckoned that they follow him. Warily, they shadowed him to an archway in the side of one of the mountains. The inside was lit dimly with an ever-burning torch and Sali made sure she knew where her electrode taser was before she went

in. Their footsteps echoed on the hollowed walls as they approached a stone spiral staircase that descended into the darkness below them. Yely didn't want to go, but Sali forced her, following closely behind.

At the bottom they found a hotel of sorts. Beds were stacked three high and covered the walls of each room. The rooms themselves weren't very large, maybe three meters by three meters, but a dozen men slept in each. When they entered, a woman the men called Mama shuffled up to greet them.

"Hello, Trivel. Who have you brought me this evening?"

The bartender moved aside to gesture to the two girls. "Just two travelers looking for a place to stay tonight."

Mama looked at the girls and waved Trivel away, he went back to the stairs, not even sparing them a second glance. "One night will cost 25 units. 50 if you want a bed. Each." She looked at them expectantly. Sali sighed and pulled another 50 units out of her purse. If they kept spending money like this, they'd be broke before they even got across the asteroid belt. Mama smiled and led them to their room.

"You get the floor here," she said, pointing to a rug on the cold stone floor.

After Mama left, a man threw his bag at the spot she had just pointed out. He pushed through the girls and laid down on the rug.

"Hey!" Sali put her hands on her hips. "We paid for that."

The man didn't even look up, just pointed behind them and said gruffly, "Ladies shouldn't sleep on the floor. Take my bed."

Yely looked behind them at the empty bed he was pointing to. "Thank you, sir."

The man grunted, covered himself with a blanket and rolled over to face away from them. Sali and Yely made themselves comfortable on the bed, sharing the single pillow and blanket offered.

When they woke in the morning, Sali's body was curled protectively around Yely's smaller frame. The man on the rug had already left.

*

The girls found their car vandalized but not looted. The paint was scratched and a window broken, but nothing had been taken and their bags were still in the trunk. Sali offered to try to find a mechanic to fix the window and make it flyable, but Yely didn't care.

"I really just want to get rid of the thing. It's Olli's, not mine."

The two decided to sell the car and pocket the cash; Sali was an experienced hitchhiker. Trivel, the bartender, offered to buy the car from them for three thousand units saying his cousin owned a junkyard on the other side of Mars. The offer was a modest amount, if a bit low, and the girls took the offer.

They hitched a ride off the planet with a carload of immigrant workers that had stayed at Mama's the night before also. The group had been hired as miners when a vein of chromium was discovered but once that vein was exhausted, they were let go to find other work. They were heading to the asteroid belt to hopefully work on the asteroid bombing mines there. The car they were taking, an old Ion J van, was already full when the girls asked so they didn't get seats. Instead, they were stowed away in the cold

luggage compartment. They had to crack a door for air and sit snuggled up next to the bags of clothes and blankets. Yely fell asleep curled up in an old Earth-style afghan, but Sali spent the trip doodling in the frost that formed on the walls of the van.

She drew anything her imagination could create, starting with crude penises and vaginas, laughing to herself, but slowly moving onto more intricate, delicate drawings of her favorite place on Venus: a park just below the city where you could see the movement of the clouds and the way the sun glinted off the surface on clear days, the Earth emporium between Venus and Earth that housed the best her planet had to offer and had an entire section just for shoes, the skyline of Chicago, the view of her street from the tarp in the living room.

Her fingers trembled and she took out her phone. It only rang once. “Hey, Mom,” Sali said softly.

*

Yely had no experience with prostitutes, but Sali didn’t seem nervous at all. They were dropped off outside of a brothel just outside the asteroid mining company’s borders. The women wore too much makeup and fake smiles, but were friendly. The girls met a girl named Leela who was two years younger than Yely. She boasted that she was only there to save money for a trip across the asteroid belt to Jupiter where she was certain she would become an actress at one of the great holostudios there.

“I’m going to be a star,” she said, tossing a silk scarf over her shoulder and smiling a blue-painted smile at the girls. She poured them each a glass of clean water.

“People tell me that I look just like a young Scarlet Johanson, and you know that look is coming back in style, that sort of vintage thing.”

She had just finished with a patron and was walking them out when she noticed the two women standing near the brothel not looking like they belonged. Her shift was over for the night so she had invited them up to her room. When they explained that they just wanted a place to sleep, she offered to house them for a night. Having someone around that was even remotely close to her in age and didn't berate her for her life decisions was refreshing.

The bed was rather large to make the guests more comfortable and all three women fit in it without having to touch. Yely slept in the middle and had a better night's rest than since before she left Olli the first time.

In the morning, the brothel's owner heard word of unpaid visitors spending the night and wasn't happy. Apparently, one of the other women had seen them entering the room. Lesbians were fine, but not in the sex trade business, and she had told. The owner promptly kicked them out. They offered to bring Leela with them to Jupiter, but she just laughed and waved them off, promising that she would earn her own way eventually.

*

Sali didn't want to spend any more money but the only way off the station with the brothel on it was a sleazy taxi service. When they walked in the front door, an antique bell jangling as the door slammed shut behind them. The man behind the counter had on a tank top that probably used to be white but was now a sweat stained yellow. He looked up when they walked in and a greasy smile spread across his face.

“Um, Yely, why don’t you go back outside? I’ll get us a good price.”

“But, I—” Yely started.

“Don’t worry about it.” Sali pushed her back out the door as the man came around the front of his small counter and looked her up and down.

“I need a ride to the ferry station,” Sali said in a strong voice.

The man chuckled. “What are you willing to do for it.”

Sali rolled her eyes. The mattress in the backroom had no sheets and smelled like urine.

*

The ferry across the asteroid belt was only active for passengers once per Jupiter anum, when the planet was closest to the path of the ferry. Usually the ferry was used as an industrial vessel to transport the ore from Uranus and Neptune to the other planets. It was converted into a commercial passenger ferry by adding seats on the upper level and loading the luggage into the bottom. Due to the amount of modifications it took to convert the ferry, tickets weren’t cheap. Even with the money from the car, there wasn’t enough to afford two tickets.

Sneaking onto the ferry wasn’t too difficult. They just had to forgo the comfort of the passenger cabin and opt for a space in the unpopulated luggage bay. They nestled themselves between a load of thankfully well-secured iron beams, an assortment of luggage labeled with the name Trasi, and directly above the engines, which caused the metal around them to grow to a scorching heat. Sweat poured down their faces as they

tried not to imagine spending half a day this way. They fried eggs on the ground for lunch. Why hadn't they just saved their money for tickets in the passenger cabin?

*

There was nowhere to go when the ferry landed. They didn't have a ride to Marius, the capital city of Jupiter, and they desperately needed to sleep. They crawled out of their hiding spot and looked down the platform to where the ferry workers were unloading the other luggage. Behind a tall crate of what looked like rolls of carpet stood a man and woman.

"Look, more stowaways," Sali pointed to where the woman was helping a child and a teenager off the ferry. The workers were glaring at them but saying nothing. The family, once successfully unloaded looked around before making a beeline for a three foot crack in the concrete wall.

"Where are they going?" Yely asked, hoisting her half-empty bag a little higher on her shoulder. Sali didn't answer and instead nailed her eyes to the spot on the wall where they had disappeared. Yely had to jog to follow her as she darted through the crowd of workers and cargo that littered the platform. The crack in the wall looked like a service entrance to maybe work on the plumbing, but if that family had gone in here maybe there was something else.

Piles of rags lined the service tunnel. Sali kicked one and it groaned. Out of the rags came a homeless man who hadn't shaved in what looked like his entire life. "I'm so sorry," she gushed. The man just waved her off and resituated himself as a pile of rags, pointing down the hall as if that would answer their questions.

The tunnel continued on until the people who constituted the piles of rags actually became people standing and milling about. They were drinking water from a burst pipe in the wall that gushed beautifully clean water in an arc to the drain in the center of the floor. The family the girls had seen were standing by the small pool of water splashing their faces and washing their hands. The child was playing in the water like it was a tiny swimming pool. The parents eyes were tired but the children seemed to be sparkling with life.

“Excuse me,” Sali said, ducking into the line of sight of the parents and waving. “Hi. We were on the ferry with you guys in the cargo bay. What is this place?”

The parents sighed at her and Yely. “This is a refuge for the homeless. Clean water, food, blankets. It’s not great but it is safe and that’s something.” They gestured to where they had placed their bags. There was a rack of day-old discarded food fifty feet away and a pile of stolen blankets next to that.

The family’s skin was red and raw from the Martian wind and the heat in the cargo bay. They invited Sali and Yely to join them and together the six of them feasted on free food and slept in a nest of threadbare blankets.

*

Sali and Yely stood on the top deck of the ferry station for a couple hours before a fellow passenger picked them up. He thought that it was funny that they were using the traditional Earth sign for hitchhikers, a bent thumb, since they were two planets away.

“I just got back from a business meeting on Venus,” he told the girls while he helped them load their bags into the trunk. “Everything is so gorgeous there, even the

people.” He looked at Yely who blushed. “Anyway, now I’m heading back to Marius to my wife and son. Where are you guys heading?” He climbed in the driver’s seat. The girls followed suit and Sali climbed in the passenger seat; Yely claimed the back seat.

“Marius sounds great,” Sali said gleefully. The man smiled and adjusted the window screen shade so that more sunlight entered the car.

*

“Thanks!” Sali waved at the leaving car before turning to Yely. “Okay, let’s find somewhere to sleep.” She headed towards the elevator that would take them into the first of Jupiter’s gas layers and towards the heart of the floating city of Marius, named after one of the men to first spot the planet’s moons.

“I can help you, miss.” A woman approached from under the shadow of the platform’s awning, her clothes dirty and her hair unkempt. “I have somewhere to stay.”

Yely was hesitant but Sali seemed to be impervious to all senses of danger. If their options were sleeping on the ground or following a ragged, shoeless woman, Sali was willing to take her chances.

The elevator down to the city was slow and played obnoxiously tinny muzak. Sali tried to make conversation, but Yely was sulking and the other woman kept her head down and her hands in her sleeves. When the doors finally opened, Sali breathed a sigh of relief and nearly ran off the elevator. Beyond the doors was a world of neon and music.

“It’s like New York City!” Sali exclaimed, spinning in a circle trying to take it all in. The roof of this level of the city was a giant mirror miles above their heads that

reflected all the signs and lights back down to them so that it was bright as daylight even though it was way past sunset.

“You’ve never been to New York City. You’re too young,” the ragged woman said. “It was destroyed before you were born, when I was just a girl.” She led the way through the labyrinthian streets until Sali was fairly sure she would never find her way back out. They arrived at a splendid hotel whose walls were reflective bronze with yellow lights set along its edges.

Sali went to go in the front door, but the woman pulled on her hand. “Not that way, dear, this way.”

They walked around to the back of the building and entered into a small brown door set into a recess off of the alley. After carefully locking the door, the woman turned to them.

“My husband and I are the superintendents here at the hotel. We take care of the maintenance and upkeep; fixing the plumbing, keeping the floor buffer running, that kind of thing.” She opened another door and gestured for them to enter. They found a modest living room that was significantly cleaner than what they had expected from the woman. “Let me go clean up.” She hustled out leaving them sitting alone in the living room.

The couch squeaked as they sat down, but they made no noise otherwise. Yely was obviously terrified, her large eyes taking in every detail of the place. Sali was less wary, instead working on their cover story as to why a Venusian sixteen year old was traveling with an Earthling twenty-two year old. When they heard a door open down the hall, they both turned to look and were amazed by what they saw.

The ragged woman had transformed herself quite completely. She was no longer stooped over in a servile way, but stood tall, wearing a chic blue dress with her hair up in a bun. She could easily be the owner of the place instead of simply the superintendent.

“You look amazing!” Sali gasped, surprised.

The woman looked down demurely and smiled. “Thank you. I usually dress like that while getting patrons because we don’t want to get anyone that the hotel would recognize and the type of people that would stay here,” she gestured around her, “wouldn’t follow a woman in rags.”

“Why would you want to do that?” Yely asked, her first words to someone other than Sali in months.

“Because,” she sat down on the sofa arm beside Sali, “this hotel, the Capra, is a menace. Don’t be fooled by the shiny exterior and the beautiful artwork. The owners’ are horrible and use this hotel to fund their political alliances. The Chevres are trying to take apart everything that we have been working for, everything the entire planet has been working for. They want to privatize entry to the city so that only the rich can enter, and banish all those who cannot pay into the outer colonies where they wouldn’t even be able to find food properly.”

“What does that have to do with us? I mean, it’s horrible, but we’re just tourists,” Sali asked.

“Exactly. There are tons of empty rooms in this hotel every night. You said it yourself, you’re homeless. What would be better revenge on someone trying to ruin our city than by filling up their precious hotel with the exact kind of people they’re trying to

keep out? I want every homeless person, every person who is down on their luck, every person who has nowhere to sleep, to find refuge here, in the eye of the storm.”

“So we’re pawns in your political rebellion against a capitalist system?” Yely questioned. Sali gave her a look that she shouldn’t meddle.

“Yes, is that a problem?”

“Actually,” Yely smiled, “I like you a lot better that way.”

*

The girls found themselves in a hallway on the fourteenth floor with a beautiful view of the city lights. Their neighbors were a homeless couple from Mars and two female activists from Earth that had come to help fight the expulsion of the poor. In the beginning, they planned on only staying for a night, but then one night became two, then a week, then Sali met a computer scientist in the bar. She got him drunk and brought him back to their room, explaining the delicate political predicament they were in and he expertly hacked the hotel’s computer, making it look like the Chevres had booked the entire hallway for an undetermined amount of time. He also made sure to mark them all as “Do Not Disturb” in the system so the maids would not be up to discover them.

The computer scientist, Geofri, after sobering up, became a regular feature in their room, talking politics and strategy with Yely while Sali worked on the people end of the organization. Sali was in charge of who should be where when and regulating how many homeless were in each location so that they didn’t draw attention. The Capra ended up having about 40% of its rooms given to homeless with the help of Geofri. Other hotels had more, depending on how noticeable they were compared to the usual patrons.

*

The ballroom of the Capra was lit with glowing orbs that floated above the heads of the guests, bumping into each other softly and subtly changing colors from red to yellow to blue to purple. People mulled beneath them holding flutes of champagne though not really drinking any. The talk was amiable but quiet. Yely stood in the center wearing an orange dress lined with fiber optic strands that fluoresced red and yellow. The technology was a little outdated but so well-made that no one would notice unless they looked closely. Her hair was piled on top of her head and curled down around her as she smiled at the other guests.

“Anything interesting yet?” Geofri asked, a slightly buzzing voice in her. He was just trying to make conversation. Yely had been sent down to scope out the opposition, the wealthy and well-to-do of Marius who wanted to eliminate the homeless crisis by simply sending them away. As a beautiful Venusian, Yely was admitted into the upper class with no questions asked. Many believed, not inaccurately, that she was the wife of a rich businessman, though they also assumed that she was there with her husband.

A woman approached her, champagne sloshing around in the other woman’s glass, showing her over indulgence. “How wonderful is this champagne?” she asked, smiling at Yely.

“I don’t really drink,” Yely answered politely. “I just felt bad telling the attendant no.”

“Oh,” the woman was speaking too loudly and Yely looked around, feeling conspicuous. “So where’s your husband? Venusian girls always have husbands.”

“He’s downtown arranging a business merger,” Yely lied. “He gave me leave to come enjoy myself.” The role of submissive house wife was familiar and Yely was uncomfortable with how easily she donned it. She was really there to distract the owners and keep them in the ballroom should they try to leave. Sali and Geofri were sneaking in as many people as possible tonight, reveling in the rush of sneaking them in right under the Chevres’ noses.

“We’ve reached a critical mass of homeless,” Geofri said through her earpiece. “We have literally every homeless person in the city off of the streets. The only thing to do now, is to start the downward spiral. Get all of them located in one central area. We have enough people sympathetic with our cause that it should be easy. All we need to do is take down this place.”

*

The night before the election, Yely and Geofri stood over a computer. Every room had been rented out to illegitimate patrons; the poor and lonely all taking refuge in luxury for a night. Each of them had been giving a small white box to set next to the wireless electrode for the room.

“I’ve rigged them all to communicate with our mother computer, here. When the Chevres are about halfway through their speech, which we can watch on this screen,” he pointed his mouse-ring at a screen to their left, “we will activate the codes and the surge of information will scramble the system. The computer matrices of the hotel will be fried and it’ll take them months, maybe even a year to rebuild and reformat it.” His eyes grew wide with child-like wonder. “Do you know how wonderfully intricate their computer

matrices are? I mean the Capra was the first to use such a complicated system. They've made the human operators practically useless. The hotel cannot function without the computer system, which is bad for them, but good for us."

Yely placed a hand on his leg. "Please shut up." She smiled.

"Okay, okay, now we wait."

They settled down in front of the screen Geofri had said would be showing the screen. All it showed now was an two dimensional view of a podium set up at the end of the ballroom. People milled about, chatting and drinking from long stemmed champagne flutes that fluoresced slightly, changing colors slowly and making the bubbles sparkle. Sali marveled at the technology that had been so long missing from Earth. The War hadn't extended past the asteroid belt, so Jupiter had remained mostly untouched by the massive destruction felt on Earth and Mars. Instead, it stood as a technological reminder of what used to be.

Sali could feel the tension in the room as they watched Mr. Chevre move to the podium, his wife at his shoulder. He cleared his throat and began to speak.

"Hello. Hello and welcome. I'd like to invite you all to take your seat and join me in this first annual Capra gala. We are here to discuss the planned plutocracy of Marius." Applause erupted.

"Just jangle your jewelry; it's loud enough," Geofri quipped.

"The impoverished are fundamentally different from us. They are rapists, drug dealers, and criminals, and some, I assume, are good people as well, but they are trapped in their own downward spirals. And they hate us. They hate us because we are not

nosediving with them. That hatred is beyond comprehension. These people have a pathological hatred of us. You can't cure that. You can't cure pathological problems like child molesters. There is no cure; they are just pathological."

Sali turned to look at Yely, sitting behind her with Geofri. "Did he just call us child molesters?" Yely laughed and nodded.

"The other cities, Gali and the rest, they're like poverty factories, and that's horrible, but what can we do? We need to make Marius better and let the others deal with themselves. The poor, those not like us, they have nothing. They are dishonest, absolute scum, and one of the biggest problems of them is that good people don't let themselves fall that far. They are a disgrace and we should make Marius better by expelling them to their own cities. Let Gali and Oelilag have them and house them in their socialist little utopias. We have enough heaven here without them." Cheers erupted again and a woman in the front row spilled her champagne. Sali winced at the careless waste of expensive alcohol.

"I think that's quite enough of that," Geofri said, kicking his chair backwards and holding his finger over the keyboard. "You ready?"

"Wait, wait," Yely scrambled up and ran to the window where she could see the hotel's reflection in the ceiling.

"Go."

Geofri pressed the button as Chevre began to talk about the virtues of wealth and reinstating the gospel of wealth, a doctrine he thought wise from a thousand years earlier. Suddenly the lights flashed bright and vanished. The entire room dissolved into darkness.

All of their screens were blank and Yely watched as the brass lost its luster and the lights turned off, running down the building like water. A flicker caught her attention as below her a small building burned bright for a moment before also fading away.

“Guys, come look. You’ve got to see this.”

Geofri and Sali hurried to the window to see what was happening. Radiating out from the Capra, buildings were slowly glowing and turning off. The wave quickened, moving from one building at a time to couples, then tens. Slowly, the entire city faded into darkness.

“The feedback from the media holocams and the personal gadgetry of the audience must have created an energetic sink hole,” Geofri said, his eyes shining like a child’s. “This is more than I had hoped for.”

Yely took his hand in hers. “Geofri? Shut up.”

Sali stepped forward and stood on her other side and the three of them watched as the last light of Marius blinked out. Everything was dark.

Cygnet Song

March paced in the hallway outside his little brother's room, much too familiar with the look of Sain Cabrini Hospital, the sterile white walls, the clean tile floors. He was used to being on the ground floor where the free clinic was housed. When his little brother started vomiting blood, however, he didn't want to take the time to wait in line and instead sold everything valuable he owned and used the extra money from his new job as a foreman on Mars to get a room with real doctors that would focus on making his brother better. Dilly slept fitfully in the bed, calling out every once in a while for his dog moM, an ugly square-headed beast that had followed him home from school one day. March had said that the dog couldn't stay, but the next morning when they opened the door, there she lay, and the next and the next, until March had no choice but to let the damn dog in.

moM was asleep at March's and worriedly jumped up to greet him every time he came home, her sweet eyes imploring him where her owner was and if he was okay. March had wanted to name her something much more appropriate for a dog like Dori or Pitta, but Dilly was adamant that the dog should be called moM.

"It's like Mom in reverse," he exclaimed, hugging the smiling dog around its neck. "And we need a mom around." How could March argue with that logic?

Dilly woke up to a woman talking on the television, his stomach turning underneath the hospital gown dotted with forget-me-nots. He had always loved forget-

me-nots. He thought the tiny blue flowers looked like miniature versions of the sky and in the middle as another world with another Dilly and March and more forget-me-nots holding their own little worlds. Somewhere out there, a larger version of himself was looking down at his universe and calling it a forget-me-not.

“March,” Dilly said, trying to sit up in his stiff hospital bed. The sheets crinkled as he moved. “March.”

His big brother came through the door, putting on a brave face and a smile that even Dilly could tell was fake. “What do you need, kid?”

“Can you get me some water? The one in the green bottle?”

“Dill, you know you’re not supposed to have that. It’s carbonated and the doctor said no carbonated drinks until you’re feeling better.”

“I feel fine. See?” Dilly threw the blankets off and tried to get out of bed. His stomach growled, louder than the creaking bed beneath him.

“Yeah, maybe tomorrow, kid. You should get back in bed.”

“Can I see moM today?” Dilly said, putting his skinny white legs back underneath the itchy blanket.

“Cal’s watching her while I’m at work, but I’ll tell you what, kid. Just as soon as the doctor says you can go outside, we’ll take her to that park you love, the one with the swings, and we’ll all have a great day, okay?”

Dilly smiled, a piece of chocolate from his cake the night before still stuck in his teeth. “Okay.”

After a week, Dilly couldn't stay in his bed anymore. His legs were restless and there were no more shows on the three channels the television offered. Besides, the TV made his eyes hurt. He stood up slowly, trying not to make too much noise. He found the pants that he had worn when March had taken him to the hospital. He knew there had to be something fun to do here, something that wasn't watching television which was okay, but not what he wanted to be doing for the rest of his life. He left on the forget-me-nots, thinking that it would be a nice touch for anyone that he met to know he wouldn't forget them. If he really was dying, he would remember anyone he met for the rest of his life.

He wanted to find the fabled cafeteria, where the wonderful chocolate cake came from, but instead found himself wandering through an area of the hospital where the walls were painted bright primary red and there were significantly more happy posters and the nurses wore scrubs with cartoons on them. Finally, he found an open door.

"Hello?" He leaned his head in. "Hello? Is there anyone in here?"

A girl about Dilly's age sat up in her bed. Her skin was pale to the point of translucency and her eyes sat deep within her skull. Her hair was gone and she seemed tiny within her small hospital gown.

"Oh! I didn't even see you there. Were you just laying down staring at the ceiling?"

The girl laid back down. "Yes, I was."

"Can I come in?"

The girl let out a sigh. "I suppose so."

Dilly walked in and lied down on the floor beside her bed. “Why were you staring at the ceiling?”

“Do you see those dots?” The girl pointed out a collection of dots that was especially close together. “I was imagining that they were stars and they would start expanding towards all the other stars. Because the universe is expanding, you see. This guy on the TV was talking about it. The universe is expanding and the galaxies are moving farther apart, but things are growing in the space in between, and some things, the things that aren’t wanted, those things are called a cancer. I have a cancer. So I was thinking that if those dots could grow and spread apart without growing a cancer then maybe my body will take the hint and stop growing cancer. Do you see what I mean?” She leaned over the edge of the bed and looked down at Dilly lying on the floor.

“Do you have cancer? This is the children’s cancer ward. We all have cancer. That’s why none of us have hair. But then again you have hair so you can’t have cancer, can you?”

Dilly smiled up at her. “No, I don’t have cancer. I was born when all the nuclear reactors were rupturing and got radiation poisoning. I’ve always been dying, but recently I’ve been dying more.”

“Oh,” the girl frowned and lay back down. “I don’t want to die. I don’t want you to die. I’m Lizabel, by the way, but all of my friends call me Zaba.”

“Hello, Zaba. I’m Dilly.” He pointed up at the ceiling. “Do you see the reddish dot beside the yellowish one?”

“Yes.”

“Imagine that is the eye of a cat. The yellow is its tooth, the blue on towards the window is the tip of the ear. Do you see it?”

“I think it looks more like a dog than a cat.”

“No, it’s definitely a cat.”

“You know what? You do have cancer. Cancer of the eye if you don’t see that is definitely a dog.”

Dilly rolled his eyes. “Sure. A dog.”

“What are you doing here?” A nurse bustled in the room and shooed Dilly up off the floor. “We’ve been looking everywhere for you. Come on now, up you get. It’s time you were back in your own room not laying on this cold floor.”

“I’ll be back,” Dilly whispered to Zaba as he stood up.

The nurse led him back to his own room and noticed that the floor tiles were colored like the walls. His own room was in the white hallway, Zaba’s in the red. There were four other colors, red, blue, green, and orange, and Dilly swore to himself that he would figure out what each color stood for. When he got back to his room, he took the coloring book they gave him and found the blankest page. He pulled out the crayons and wrote the five colors on the page. Next to red he put Children’s Cancer and Zaba.

The next morning, the nurse was barely out of Dilly’s room before he was out of bed and into his pants again. He followed the yellow line straight to the lemonade hall and checked each room until he found Zaba, this time sitting by the window looking out over the parking lot and the half-demolished parking garage across the way.

“What took you so long?” She said accusingly, standing up and pulling her IV with her on its rolling stand.

“I came straight here. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She made a face at him, but followed him as he waved her out into the hallway. They paused at the door and looked out to see if a nurse was around. Dilly pointed at the floor. “Choose a color.”

“Purple,” Zaba said.

“There isn’t a purple. Why’d you say purple?”

“Purple’s my favorite color. I thought there’d be a purple.”

Dilly rolled his eyes at her. “Mine is green.”

“Well then, let’s follow green.” She ducked around him out the door and headed down the hallway. She had slid on an oversized sweater over her hospital gown so that the little yellow daisies were just visible under its red hem.

“You coming?” She turned back to look at him, her pale skin shining in the fluorescent lights. The one over her head flickered and she looked up. Dilly laughed and followed her and the green line down the hall.

The first floor held the free clinic, a place of half-dressed, ragged people clutching babies to their chests or otherwise clutching parts of themselves that they hoped could be fixed, an e.coli infected stomach here, a broken leg there, a ruptured spleen or appendix, a child who swallowed something he shouldn’t have.

Dilly and Zaba blended into the wallpaper, two skinny children in a hospital of rushing doctors and distracted nurses. People’s eyes pleaded for mercy from a higher

power they couldn't prove existed, but Dilly only saw the sadness in Zaba's eyes at the poor families who were being torn apart by things that they had no control over, rotten food and contaminated water or broken homes letting cold air into lungs already pained with the dirty, dusty air.

Behind a door the emergency care center bustled, an area full of blood and bandages and nurses rushing around talking to overworked doctors. Zaba and Dilly weren't allowed inside and instead stood outside the double door and watched the chaos inside. People were crying and every few minutes or so someone would run in or out with expressions of horror on their faces. One man was rolled in on a gurney moaning and holding his stomach. The blood seeped out from the bandages he held there and stained his shirt. Zaba had to turn away and Dilly's stomach tried to forcefully eject his lunch.

"I don't think we should stay here," Dilly said, a hand over his mouth as he fixed the wall opposite the emergency care center with a very fixed gaze and tried to get interested with the pattern of the wall to convince his stomach it didn't need to come out his mouth.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, well I mean, as fine as I can be here, you know?"

"Yeah, I know."

When March showed up for his visit a two weeks later, Dilly told him about the small girl in the red hallway. He laughed.

“Look at you.” He rubbed Dilly’s hair and pushed his brother’s shoulder. “Chatting up all the girls, are you?”

“March, please.” Dilly pushed his big brother’s arm away with two hands. “She’s not my girlfriend or anything. I don’t even like her like that. She’s just nice.”

March smiled. “Mhmm, sure. Whatever you say, kid.” He picked up an apple off of Dilly’s dinner tray and tossed it in the air before taking a large bite out of it. “So what’s she look like, this girl?” Little pieces of apple fell from his bottom lip as he spoke, causing Dilly to laugh.

“Her name is Zaba and she has cancer. She looks like—like,” he glanced around the room to try to find a comparable thing to Zaba’s firecracker personality. “She looks like a wild cat trapped in a person with fire for eyes and starlight for breath,” he spoke in a rush, his words all running together.

“Does she now? And where did you hear that stuff?”

Dilly blushed a little. “I might have taken a book from the nurse. She was reading Lybov Wolanski. I’d never heard of it before but it had such beautiful words.”

March scratched his neck. “I think she’s a Venutian poet. They write lots of sappy love stuff.”

“I thought it was pretty,” Dilly replied indignantly.

March took another bite out of his apple and looked at his brother, eyes shining talking about a girl.

“How’s your new job?” Dilly patted the comforter in excitement. His brother was working on a different planet, wasn’t that awesome?

“It’s good. I don’t like having to stay on site for so long, but it’s fine as long as I can get away from your annoying butt.” He playfully punched Dilly with his non-apple hand.

“When do I get to see moM?” March had hoped he’d forgotten the dog; the nurse had told March his brother wouldn’t make it back home again.

“Soon, buddy, soon.”

A couple days later, Dilly woke up to Zaba’s face leaning over him, a plastic tube running from her nose to over her ears. He jumped up, shocked at her proximity. He hadn’t seen her since before his brother’s visit. While the nurses had given up on healing him and were just making his descent easier, she was in an active ward where they gave her medicine and hooked her up to machines. Her parents visited often, but seemed to come less and less as she grew smaller. She had been sick last week when he visited and had looked like a shrunken, dead version of herself.

“How did you get in here?”

Zaba, very much alive, gave him a look as though he were the dumbest person she knew. “It’s a hospital. There aren’t locks.”

“Oh. Well, I still need to put on pants. So can you, like, go over there or something?”

Zaba rolled her eyes and walked over to the window, looking out at a bird perched on the remnants of a nearby streetlamp. Dilly hurried to pull on his pants before she turned around.

“Where to now?” He asked when he was finished.

“Blue line is next.” Zaba said, leaving the room and rolling her IV cart down the hall. The line led to the middle floor of the hospital, a gray-blue carpet covered the lobby area and the halls were a chipper teal.

“I know this place,” Dilly said, his voice dropping its usual chipper tone. “This is where they took my mom when she died.” He didn’t tell her that his mom might still be here, but that he just didn’t know. For all intents and purposes, his mother was dead. It hurt more to believe that she was alive and didn’t want him.

Zaba didn’t know what to say. Most people said that they were sorry when they hear someone has died, but that never quite covered it, besides saying you’re sorry implies that you did something wrong. Instead Zaba just gazed down one of the hallways where a woman was trying to climb the wall and a man stood in the stairwell blowing smoke out an open window.

A man walked by them with scars covering his arms wearing no shoes and whispering to himself. They only caught a little of his mumbling, but it contained blood and death and pain.

“I don’t want you to worry,” Dilly began, looking at the man’s back instead of at Zaba, “but I’m not leaving the hospital. Not ever. March, my brother, doesn’t think I know, but I heard the nurses tell him that I’m not going to get better.” He looked at her face, her mouth open with something like shock or hurt. “I just thought you should know.”

“I’m dying too,” she whispered, looking at the ground.

Dilly began to say something but Zaba cut him off.

“I’m moving to the white hall tomorrow. The rest of the hospital calls that part the hall of the walking dead because you never know when one of them is going to die.” Her voice broke on the last word and tears ran down her face. If she had had any hair, it would have hid her grief, but she didn’t and her pain was plain on her small, slight features.

Dilly wrapped his arm around her shoulders and led her away from the blue.

Zaba didn’t want to explore anymore, but Dilly insisted that it would make them both feel better if they did.

“Besides,” he reasoned, “we’ve only got one color left.” He gently guided Zaba down the yellow path, linking arms as they went. The yellow floor was just below the psych ward and was the maternity and prenatal ward. Through every door they looked there was a tired looking woman holding a new human that looked vaguely like a pink potato. Dilly mentioned the starchy likeness and Zaba laughed, a ringing bell-like sound that echoed off of the empty walls and cold tiles. As they passed on of the rooms, a kid ran out and bumped into Dilly, almost knocking him over with surprise.

“Hey!” Zaba yelled, prepared to confront whoever had run into her friend.

“Sowwy,” the child said.

“Galic? What are you doing?” a voice called out from the room. The three went back inside to find a skinny young mother holding a squealing baby wrapped in a light blue threadbare blanket. “Who are you?”

Dilly held his hand out. “I’m Dilly, this is Zaba. We were just exploring the hospital when Galic ran into us.”

“Galic! What have I told you about running in the halls?”

“No, no,” Dilly held up his hands defensively. “It’s alright. He didn’t hurt anyone. We’re both fine.”

The woman didn’t look appeased but didn’t continue.

“This is Baby Brother,” Galic said, toddling over to his mother and climbing onto the bed. He peered into the baby’s tiny face and smiled.

“We haven’t named him yet,” the woman explained. “His name isn’t really Baby Brother.” She held him out slightly so that the two kids could see the baby. His face was red and wrinkled and he didn’t look at all like the fat, happy babies that decorated the diaper boxes Dilly’s mom had used to organize her stuff before she left.

Dilly kneeled and looked Galic in the face, “I think Baby Brother is an excellent name.”

Galic smiled as Zaba tugged on the back of Dilly’s shirt, signaling it was time for them to go. Galic scrambled off the bed to follow his new friends, but Dilly put a hand on his tiny shoulder.

“You need to stay here,” he said, pointing at his mother and brother. “They are going to need you now. You need to teach Baby Brother how to be a man.”

Galic smiled and ran back into his mother’s bed, holding out his little arms for his brother. Dilly watched and wondered if March had been that excited about his birth. He had to have been a baby here at some point, a resident of the yellow hall filled with pink

new babies. Now he lived in a hall bleached of color and life, a hall only waiting for its residents to abandon it for a world far different.

“What are you thinking about?” Zaba asked from the door as Dilly absentmindedly followed her out.

“We’re two ghosts living in a world of color,” he answered, pensively looking down the hall.

“What do you mean?” She asked with a laugh.

He looked at her, focusing in on her young angular face with its sunken eyes and sharp cheek bones. She was much too mature for her age, even in her face. “I don’t think I can explain it,” he answered quietly.

Dilly hadn’t wanted to let Zaba go for the night, but it was dinner time and she needed to eat if she was going to get better. They separated, promising to meet again next week after she moved rooms, though to do what they didn’t know.

Dilly picked at his food, pushing it around the tray instead of eating. He hadn’t felt like eating in days, but didn’t want March to worry. He spooned a large bite of mashed potatoes and shoved it down, barely tasting it. March had gone out to find him a “proper dessert,” saying that the yogurt they provided didn’t really count. Dilly took turns forcing down bites of unseasoned food and staring out the window at the dark night sky. Sometimes the smog cleared long enough that he thought he saw a star twinkling through the dark clouds.

“So I couldn’t find you any cake, but I did get chocolate pudding,” March said, coming in with a large bowl of jiggly gelatinous pudding. He set it down on the tray and brandished not one, but two spoons. “Hope you don’t mind if I share.”

Dilly ignored the pudding and looked at his older brother. “I have a favor to ask.”

“Wow,” he said, taking a large bite of pudding. “You sure are straight to the point tonight. Got an itch you can’t scratch because, kid, I don’t want to do it either.”

Dilly fixed him with a serious gaze. “March, stop. I’m dying. You know it, I know it, so let’s not pretend that it’s not going to happen, okay? I have something I want to do before I go and I need your help doing it.”

March set down his spoon and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. “Okay, kid. Shoot.”

“I need you to help me get up on the roof.”

“The roof? Why the heck would you want to go up on the roof?”

“I want to see the sky. Can you get me up there?”

March looked around and thought for a minute. He remembered the sassy nurse that had complimented him Dilly’s first week there. She might have been flirting, but March had been too distracted to notice.

“Sure,” he rubbed his chin. What had her name been? “I can do that” Anda? Amra?

March sauntered up to the nurse’s station to a woman a little younger than he frantically typing away on a computer. He leaned against the counter and snuck a look at the nametag hastily pinned to her scrub shirt.

“Hey.” He put on the smile that he wore on the rare occasion that he visited a bar.

“Hello.” The nurse glanced up distractedly before staring intently back at her work. “Wait, hey,” she said, stopping and looking at him. “You’re the guy with that brother down the hall. Sweetest kid.”

An hour later, March returned to Dilly’s room triumphantly waving a little white card around. “Look, she needs this back tomorrow night. It’s her spare, but it’ll get you onto the roof so don’t lose it, okay?”

Dilly bounced on the bed excitedly and held out his hands in a gimme expression. March slapped the heavy plastic card into his hand. “You just get on the elevator and insert the card in the reader above the call box and tell it you want to go to the roof. She said that they used to have voice recognition, but since the war they haven’t had time to scan in the new hires’ voices and so they just turned that off. It should work.”

Dilly smiled and held the card out in front of him like it was made of gold. When he looked at his brother, his grin grew lopsided and he started laughing.

“What?” Marched asked.

“I think you have lipstick on your face.” Dilly laughed and March’s face reddened as he shoved Dilly back into his pile of pillows.

The next day, Zaba met Dilly after dinner outside of her new room. Her parents had already left for the day and she was waiting in front of a small room off of the hallway on the other side of the nurse’s station from Dilly. She seemed to sag as she waited, relying on the pure strength of her bones to hold her up, like a melting statue.

When she saw Dilly, she straightened up and smiled, but she couldn't keep the sadness out of her eyes.

"Let's go," Dilly said, putting an arm around her shoulders. Zaba allowed him to steer her down the hallway and to an elevator. He brandished the shiny card and did exactly as March had told him and the doors shut with an inaudible rush of air. "I had my brother swipe it for me yesterday before he left for work," He explained as he told the elevator to take them to the roof.

"Why would we go to the roof?"

"Just wait. You'll see."

There was no music on the elevator and so the ride up was filled with them joking around and Zaba tickling Dilly with well-timed jabs to the ribs. They settled as the numbers climbed closer and closer to the stop floor.

"I don't think my parents want to watch me die," Zaba said sullenly. Dilly couldn't help but think that she was lucky to even have parents, but he didn't say anything. "They left today and didn't even seem excited to come back and see me tomorrow. I mean I know it sucks, but at least before they acted excited. Sometimes they'd stay the night and just watch me sleep. I think they're giving up on me."

Dilly didn't know what to say, but luckily for him, they reached the top right at that moment and he instructed Zaba to close her eyes. She groaned but did so and let Dilly guide her out of the elevator as the doors opened. They walked a little way out before he said, "Here. Open them."

Zaba cautiously opened her eyes to the most beautiful sight she'd seen in her short life. The sun was setting over the broken down city. What used to be the Sears Tower's shattered windows shining and reflecting the cloudless sky and Michigan Lake in sharp glass fractals. The city smiled up at them in all of its decrepit glory and even the light seemed to sing at them that they were alive, gloriously, happily alive, if only for the moment.

Below them, old car carapaces shined in the golden light like scarabs and a few people moved around, beautiful ants in a glass ant hill. Dilly could see a man walking a dog in a derelict park and imagined it to be March and moM. The dog stopped to scout a bush as a possible bathroom and the man put his hands on his hips and looked up at the sky.

"Doesn't it just make you feel like you could shatter and expand like the universe? Like the stardust in your bones is shining with all of the power of the sun?" Dilly looked over at Zaba. "Like dying isn't the end?"

"It makes me feel purple," she replied.