

2. A Mirror for the Dead

"That's all I'm saying."

"How would you know?"

"I know. I was there."

"Where?"

"New York."

"How?"

"How? I live there. Or. Lived."

"That's in a week"

"Eight days actually."

"In New York."

"New York."

"What am I going to be doing in New York?"

"Why, probably chasing after that big silent guy."

"Bertrand?"

"Yes, him. Chasing after him. He'll be chasing after the immaculate Katherine Shore. You'll be chasing after him. Miff and Charles will be chasing you. But not quite in the sense that—"

"How do you know this?"

"Because it's already happened, at least, to me it has."

"What has?"

"I told you."

"But how does that effect me?"

"You'll be in New York that day silly."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing. I'm just saying s'all."

"But how are you here?"

"I died."

"And me?"

"You're just a mirror for the dead."

A knock came on my door.

"Oh! Gotta go now. But one more thing?"

"Yes?"

"Find my boots will you?"

Charles slowly opened the door in my room, where I stood staring at myself dimly in the mirror. Behind me, the man was gone, slipped through some invisible crack in the wall as if he were just vapor, leaving behind a stunned figure, staring.

"Who were you talking to?" Charles asked.

Good question, I thought.

"No one."

Charles shrugged and his hands picked up a book on my desk. The hands flipped through the pages, which made a comfortable whisking sound, filling the air with the smell of musky academia, as if the pages could be sewn together into a comforter for the mind against some storm. He put down the book again, and bounced once or twice on his toes.

"Bertrand is gone again. He left a note."

I jumped up and hurdled over my bare furnishings to stand next to Charles.

"Where?"

He shrugged and led into the hallway, around the corner to Bertrand's room, through discarded boxes of candy and junk food. His room was lit, and Miff was standing awkwardly against the wall, tapping his foot nervously. Even if Bertrand was gone, he didn't look like he wanted to enter the big guy's room. I went in, whisking past him and looked around. Bertrand's room had absolutely nothing in it past the things that they had given us to begin with. A bottle of water was on a desk next to an alarm clock. I assumed some clothing was somewhere, as well as toiletries, but at the time I saw nothing but a crisp note on his bed.

Dear friends,

My meeting with Katherine went well, if you were wondering. She is very nice, and. However, one of her friends told me this morning that Katherine ran away somewhere. We guess New York, though we can't be sure. She didn't leave a note, so I thought I would follow her and make sure that she's alright. She's been going through some tough times. ~~I'm sure you'll all do fi.~~ I just wanted to let you guys know where I'll be. I took the 11:04AM to Grand Central.

Bertrand

I dropped the note carelessly on the bed and stumbled back into the common room where I collapsed into one of the white metal chairs. I put my palms against the legs of the chair, feeling in them a warm vibration that had to have been from me. Charles was looking at me strangely.

"What do you think?"

"We have to go after him," I croaked. My thoughts were filled with what the man in my room had said. Miff, at this, burst like a balloon with chatter, which had been stored up indeterminably.

"After him? Are you mad? We all have work to do, or at least, variable amounts of work to do. New York? Can we get away to New York? Do you have some kind of plan? Bertrand has a three hour head start. None of us know New York, and even if we did, we don't know where Bertrand is or will be. We don't even know if Katherine Shore is in New York!"

Miff had obviously read the note, or at least, I thought so. I didn't know what to think of his reply. Charles, however, did.

"I agree. It is madness to think we could find Bertrand in a city the size of New York."

Something in the back of my mind agreed with the two, who, in these circumstances, were just as perfectly reasonable as everyone else in this screwed up world. New York was enormous, and there was no way of knowing where Bertrand would be. Discounting Bertrand, there was still no way of knowing where Katherine Shore would be. She could be in Boston by now—hell she could be hurtling around at 30,000 feet aboard a giant soda can with wings on her way to anywhere.

But something else in the back of my mind was scratching at an itch, a voice that spoke in rushed whispers and raspy prose. That something told me to find Bertrand and Kathy and bring them back to Elmwood.

"Come on, we went through Z."

They stared at me blankly. I had the strange feeling they had no idea what I was talking about.

"Where would we stay?" Charles said, a hint of curiosity on his voice. My goal was to find that string of hope and tug it—hopefully the rest of the plan will come tumbling out after it.

“A hotel maybe? I know it’s a lot of money, but if we split it, it won’t be that bad, right?” I responded, eyeing Miff carefully, but he was silent.

There was an uncomfortable silence while we all weighed the plan. Charles sat down on Bertrand’s bed, carefully looking over Bertrand’s note. I could see that they were all thinking very hard about it, mental gears turning. This, for me, was unexpected. I expected something quick, a quick denial or an eager acceptance, but both of them were murmuring below the surface. I scratched my chin and looked at both of them.

“We could go, I suppose, maybe just take a look around. Bertrand may have left more clues around New York—it may be a good mystery to solve,” Charles said, unconvincingly. There was that rare glimmer in his eyes, that slight look that gave evidence that he was going to go along with my plan for now, and abandon it as soon as it was convenient for his own good.

“Yes, I suppose we could. Actually, I think I have a discount card somewhere around here for a hotel or something, somewhere near Grand Central where we can just look around, or something like that—and I’m pretty sure I have an old Metro Card with a lot of money on it, we could take a break. It’d be a good break. Let me go see if I can find those things—“

Miff, with nervous glances that skirted between me and Charles, skittered off into his room.

“What do you really think?” I asked Charles.

Charles smiled at me, a lazy, brilliant smile, the kind that breaks like a galloping sun. He looked away shyly as if he were an embarrassed schoolgirl who has just met a celebrity—and then, without another word, he disappeared into his dark and gloomy room, shutting door behind him, leaving only the echoing smell of old books.

They emerged about half an hour later. I had my things packed, a bare minimum construction of a few changes of clothing and a few small bottles of vodka. I bounced a few times, feeling the security of heaviness in the bag, and moved outside, trailed by

Charles and Miff, both holding onto their bags, filled with who-knows-what.

“And where are you guys going?” one of the Bosses asked.

“Just for a little backpacking trip outside.”

I brushed past him. And moved out of the door. He moved in front of Miff, but two imposing stares later, he backed into his own room and disappeared.

We moved outside and snuck past the perimeter of Z, and onto the side of the street, where we hailed a cab. Stuffing ourselves into the cabs, we clung hopelessly to our backpacks as the driver, gifted of gab, chatted incessantly as we watched the streets going by. Autumn was almost there, a mottled gray ready at any time to break into the festive burnt fall.

We moved through the nearly empty train station, where we purchased round-trip tickets to Grand Central and moved through the strong steel tunnels that moved into the cold golden air around the trains, humming with untapped but empty power. The trains were mostly empty, and those onboard were tired and trying to complete half-completed crossword puzzles that were days old and themselves tired of being pored over by bored travelers. I sat down in a slightly worn leather seat that smelled worn and as weary as the wind. Charles settled down for a nap in front of me, and Miff sat across us in his own seat, studying the outside of the train station.

The train pulled out slowly, the announcer announcing in perfect deadpan the availability of tickets for the return journey, the upcoming stops, etc. The Metro-North pulled out of the station on its way to Stratford, and I watched as Elmwood slowly rolled by.

The city was named appropriately enough; the nearby elms bowed in reverence to the steel tracks on their way out of the city. Before autumn dawned, the trees were stuck in a non-festive state, unable to produce the lush greenery of summer or the fire of October. The trees only groaned and drooled a constant gray of leaves and twigs to the ground, a process so slow that it was possible to watch the trees fidget as the train passed them by. The trees seemed to be aware of the uncolored sky, the drab dressings of the singular continuous depression that was the smog cloud around the city. The trees breathed this and coughed quietly in

place, occasionally producing a light puff of drying leaves that died before their time and place.

The city itself passed us by, the outskirts mostly, a primitive and unsuccessful battle against nature that had become a guerilla war of small roads and power lines against the powerful elms that tried to swat them down. No one seemed to be winning, though the battle seemed to churn out gray skies at an unprecedented rate and concentration, until travelers always thought that it was about to rain, only to discover that you could only know rain when it was burning through the top of your shoes. Rain in Elmwood was a thoroughly depressing affair, mostly a light sprinkle that felt more like a wet blanket thrown across the vast expanses of green parks and squares or tied and wrapped around the steeples of the local churches, slowly soaking away at white paint and brick alike.

Afternoon was upon us, and as the train reached Westport a slight sprinkling rain was breezing past the train. The station at Westport was badly in need of a cleaning, and broken bits of trash struggled around in the rain. Charles was asleep, his light snoring and half-closed eyes the only witnesses to the train doors opening and closing. No one boarded at Westport. The rain continued.

The state line passed with almost no fanfare, and the rest of the way seemed but a pressed line against a soft map—a passage, if not exactly half-way over, too late to turn back upon. I wondered at this point quietly what exactly we were doing, with nothing to guide us but Miff's intuition and my bad navigation skills. Miff was a New Yorker, though he didn't live in the city. He knew his way around better than both me and Charles though, and at the very least he could get us back to Grand Central—which to him was a subway away, though to us it was a cab hail away.

The rain was beginning to pick up when the man behind me asked me where I was headed. I turned around slowly. Miff was slumped over asleep, and Charles had not stirred. I recognized the man behind me as the man I thought had been in my room earlier that morning.

"New York."

"You're chasing your friend."

"Yes."

"It's raining."

"I know," I responded.

"I'm sorry, I forgot that it rained," the man said, smiling. The smile wilted at the corners and turned sad.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I miss the rain, already. I thought it was pretty disgusting, but now, I guess I miss the rain."

"What are you doing here?" I asked again, emphatically.

"I think your friend may be in Central Park," he said.

"How would you know?"

"I really hope it's raining there. If it is, just tilt your head to the sky and take in a few drops for me ok?"

"Who are you!" I said, loudly.

"I think you woke your friend up," he said.

I turned around. Charles was getting up slowly, still a little groggy. When I turned again, the man was gone.

"I am Batman," Charles said wickedly, the sharp edge of a smile cutting through his sleepiness.

"Charles, why are you here? Why did you come with me?" I asked, realizing barely after that I had implied that I alone had set off, and Charles had followed me. I realized that was exactly what the man had told me earlier this morning. The train clanked and began to slow down, until all we could hear was the slow dripping that was the remnants of the rain.

"I'm not sure. It is nice to get out of that crazy place. I have never been to New York either."

He was as unconvincing as ever as he moved out of his seat and out the train door, himself dripping a half-sarcasm that I could never decode. Miff was up, a little dimwitted from sleep, and stumbled out the door after Charles, and I followed up the rear. We climbed the steps and found ourselves in a tunnel on Track 3 headed towards the enormous cavernous Grand Central Station in New York City.

We entered the magnificent main corridor, which, despite many very bright lights, was a failed attempt at luminescence. The lights were less like lamps and more like frozen fireworks caught in a private mid-flare, sparkles chipping away at the gloom, leaving

echoes of pale yellow all over the place. The main chamber arched above our heads as we moved past the dwarfed information desk and to the stairs that led downstairs. I led them downstairs and into a crowded food court, and we split up. I found my way to a pretzel stand, where a grisly man grunted out questions like “You want cheese on that?” It was quite beautiful.

We returned to the main hall, where I could see a sudden dazzling display of lights in my head, a stretching supernova in my eyes. This golden ribbon of sparklers froze into the lights, and I sat down, suddenly dizzy, with a faint pulse in my head. I looked up. Charles was eating a hotdog ferociously, while Miff was dialing someone on a cellphone while halfway through a hamburger.

“Who’s he calling?” I asked Charles.

“Girlfriend—who apparently lives here.”

I smiled at Miff, but his frown beat down that smile into a dissolved curl of the lip. A dazzling light display was still going on inside my head, and I could feel a slight headache pulling inside me.

I hadn’t known Miff’s girlfriend lived here. No wonder he had been so anxious to come to New York. Why wasn’t he happy then? I had known Miff for only a few months, but normally such a thing would make him jubilant, not glum.

Miff gave us a quick glance, gulped the last of his hamburger, and jaunted off around to the other side of the information desk to talk to his girlfriend. A few minutes later he emerged around the pillar and motioned to us.

“We can stay at her place.”

Charles shrugged at me with a smile on his shoulders, and we began walking away. My headache was getting worse, and encapsulated within the pain was a little whisper, the sound of that strange man’s voice in my head. I shook off the voice, but when we exited the doors of Grand Central the sunlight shook me like a hammer’s blow, and sent shivers of pain rippling through my head. I brought one hand up to block the sun while another gripped for something to hold on to.

Immediately Charles took my arm and held onto me as I fell. I was on my knees, the right side of my brain being wrung like a sponge. It felt like someone was trying to tear out my eye from the

back of my head. I hated the pain, I hated myself for bearing the pain, and at the same time, I hated myself for thinking the pain to be unbearable.

“Headache,” I whispered weakly to Charles, who groped in his bag and, after what seemed an eternity, fished out a few tea leaves, which he instructed me to chew. I chewed them softly, until suddenly I felt a wave of something totally wrong pushing up from inside of me. I stumbled to a trashcan and threw up those nice pretzels from Grand Central.

“Oh jeez, we better get him to a hospital. He doesn’t look to good. I mean, what if it’s something worse. It could be much worse. It could be an aneurysm or a brain tumor or something. I’ve heard of people who’ve, who’ve—“

Miff was trailing off, or I was losing my hearing, I wasn’t sure which, because my body was telling itself to shut down and wake up when there was less pain. I remember then telling Charles to knock me out. He looked at me with delicate pity and dug around for more tea, which he made me eat. That’s all I remember.

“Who are you anyways?”

“My name is Peter Ignatius. I’m just a regular guy.”

“With psychic powers, apparently. Why are you bothering me?”

The man shrugged. He was the only lit item in my field of vision, which was otherwise a foggy black.

“I’m sorry if I’m bothering you. I just wanted to talk to someone before I run out of time. What day is it?”

“The third. Still. I think. I’m not sure.”

“I think it rained tomorrow.”

“What?” I exclaimed.

“Sorry, I keep getting my tenses mixed up. It’s hard being dead.”

I stared at him, and he smiled at me. Then I felt a sharp jab on my left hand and the bare world around me fell apart.

I awoke somewhere cool, though a thin and warm blanket clung to me. I was in a hospital gown, lying on a bed. A curtain blocked my view, though at a chair to my side I could see my clothes. The floor was a waxed green, shiny and brilliant. The pain in my head was gone, and as my eyes circumnavigated my body I saw why—a complex looking IV was feeding into the back of my left hand. I dimly remembered the needle's pain. A saline IV bag was nearly empty, hooked up above me to a complicated looking device.

Apparently someone had heard my stirring, because a doctor came in. Crisp golden hair flowed in long locks around her head, and a pair of glasses dangled from her neck.

"Awake are we? I'm surprised you didn't wake up when we put the IV in. You're in Metropolitan Hospital, if you're curious. It's getting towards 6PM on the 3rd, and you've been out for, oh, say two hours."

"What's wrong with me?"

"Migraine attack, probably," she said, ambling closer to stab me with light from a flashlight. "Look into the light."

"Oh jeez that hurts."

"Hmmm, yeah. Tell me, have you ever had headaches before?"

"Yes, but nothing like this."

She gave another long hmmm and checked my ears. She instructed me to follow her fingers as she drew letters in the air. Then I touched my own nose, then her finger, repeating as she doodled above me. She tickled my feet, tapped my knee, and took my temperature. I heard the ripping of Velcro as she wrapped a blood-pressure gauge around my left forearm. The complicated device my IV was hanging above suddenly clicked into action, squeezing my arm without discern, then relaxing later. The doctor didn't really say much, except for blurting out my blood pressure.

"You vomited before you came here?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Ok. Well, no surprise that you were vomiting when you came here. But you were barely conscious. We gave you some Reglan, an anti-nausea drug, through your IV. It also made you a

little drowsy, probably. We gave you a mild painkiller as well. How do you feel?"

"Alright."

"On a scale of one to ten, describe your pain."

"Uh, two or three now."

"Alright then. You just rest, and I'll have a nurse come down to bring you to CT, just to make sure you don't have an aneurysm or brain tumor. It's very unlikely, but we just want to make sure. Can you tell me exactly how this began?"

"I had some—some vision distortions, like sparkles. And then, well, a really bad headache."

"Hmmm, well, sounds like classic migraine then. The sparkles you had, they were about, oh, fifteen minutes or so before the headache?"

"Something like that."

"Hmmm, yes," she said. I was exhausted, and her long *hmmm*'s were starting to tire me as well. She gave another short *hm* and smiled thinly and quite grimly, clipped on a new IV, then left without a word.

Beyond her I could see a bustling emergency room and doctors walking about. I sighed and looked at my IV. Fresh saline flowed in from the bag into my arm, and I could track the progress by a coldness that crept up my arm in a squiggly blood line. It was a disturbing coldness that distressed me as I felt its alien mercury snaking towards my heart. I turned my head away. Around the corner, I saw a swirl of white as a doctor's coat went around a corner into one of the rooms.

The man looked suspiciously like one who had been haunting the greater part of my imagination for the last week or so. I got up tenderly, avoiding my left hand where the IV was hooked up. I swung my feet gingerly over the left side of the bed and detached the IV from the blood pressure monitor and hooked it to a metal rack with wheels sitting in a corner. I began the lethargic process of sneaking around the corner of my curtain, as if a snail could ever sneak.

Around the corner I was intercepted by a jet-black head of hair. Two eyes acquired target-locks on me, two large and very

pretty black eyes which seemed to peel me open and look at my most personal presentable version. The eyes seemed to, within that first second, detect whatever weapons I had, and with the same obsidian gaze disarm everything in my arsenal. I was caught unaware, and she had me at gunpoint, black lasers scanning me at whim. Her short hair was tied up behind her, a jet plume that barely registered on my own radar, though it was impossible to ignore the darkness of her hair and the rawness of the shine. The lips were small and sealed tight, and her face was flawlessly beautiful, a testament of engineering and aesthetics, a stealth fighter that was deadly and gorgeous.

The nurse stared me down, and I could feel every adventurous bone in my body fracture under that glare. Her eyes were an unbelievable bright and dark, quietly surveying the insane man who was picking up his IV for a nice stroll around the ER. Her hands, small and thin, were on the hips of her perfect white coat. Though she was shorter than me, I suddenly felt very insecure in my transgressions of whatever boundary she had set up. Most of all, I felt like I wanted her to not be angry with me.

“—and where do you think you’re going pal?” she wrenched at me, one side of her lips posted in a smile, while the other one instinctively reached down for a frown. I stuttered madly, my lips tripping over their tango in an attempt for reason.

“That’s what I thought. Sit down.”

Her figure was small and thin, and her skin was a nice murky pale and barely glistened in the bright hospital. I cringed at the lights, the remnants of a migraine still hanging around upstairs. Her remarkably dark hair came down in whispers around her, and she brushed those incessant whispers back with her fingers, hushing the ebony trickles cascading down her cheek. When I sat back down on the bed, she returned my IV to its previous location.

“My name is Haley, and I’m supposed to be your nurse, though I rarely cater to runaway patients.”

“Sorry,” I managed.

She smiled, sunbreak on her imposed shadow. I felt a little easier. Her smile was small, just a bare improvement on her mirthful twist of lips. But it was nice, very nice. She shifted her weight on her

small hips, and I couldn’t help realize that this very beautiful nurse was looking down her thin nose at me, who was in a hospital gown.

“So, we’re supposed to get you down to CT. Just sit back and enjoy the ride hm?” she said with a wink and a sly seductive smile.

She glanced at the IV and unhooked it again, placing it above the pillow where my head lay. She took clipped in the metal side railings of my bed, smiling as if laughing at my imprisonment. I had to admit that I didn’t mind. When she had finished securing the railings she threw back the curtains and took grabbed my bed, wheeling it through hallways. I closed my eyes as the artificial sky above me brightened.

“Do the lights hurt you?” she asked, apparently noticing.

I nodded barely, and she wordlessly moved on. I heard the clicking and whirring of automatic doors. I felt movement, but mainly I was a sleeping passenger of a cruise liner making imperceptible turns.

“Are you working late Haley?” someone said.

“Nope, just on call today.”

Her voice was thin and quiet, and eerie but soothing, a blend of honey and herbs and just a hint of spices, an exotic hum skimming the surface of her softness. I was entranced. The lights above me became darker, and I opened my eyes. We were in a darkened room, where a slender hard bed was attached to an enormous circular device which I assumed was the CT. The door said Computerized Tomography, and I turned my head to see a row of computers behind a series of windows.

“Ok, I’m going to lower the bed and I’ll need you to hop over,” Haley said, releasing the side railings. She released a latch on the bed and let it lower in level until it matched the slender CT bed platform. I awkwardly slid over. She gave me a comforting smile and instructed me to place my head in the foam guides, which I did. Her hands moved me like a marionette. They guided my chin with care and precision until I was in position, and then she winked at me and told me to stay still. I closed my eyes, gritted my teeth slightly and did as she said.

I heard her footsteps, and then silence. Then I heard the sound of my slender bed sliding, and a slight breeze indicated movement, but I couldn't decide if it was the machine or me that was moving. And then there was a moment of silence, until there came a lion's roar of machinery. The sound was more like a loud wind than a machine, and I could imagine the large hollow cylinder rotating around my head, probing my gray matter for bleeding, cesspools of blood, weird growths and tumors, cancers and other strange things that bred only in my imagination. As my eyes were closed, images of Haley eclipsed my fearful imagination, and I hung on for dear life as the CT circled like a vulture, neck craned and eyes searching the desert for signs of carrion. My desert had a sole occupant, and she was probably operating the CT behind the glass windows.

And then, right there and then, I felt something within me I hadn't felt in a very long time—my heart. I was conscious of its beating, I was conscious of its life and its tug, its quiet consultation over matters small and large. I felt my heart come to life just as the CT machine died down.

I opened my eyes in time to see the cylinder pulling back, or my bed pulling forward, I couldn't tell. Soon the ceiling was visible, and even sooner Haley was visible, smiling at me. I grinned back stupidly.

"All done. The results should be back soon. The Dr. McEvitt will be back to talk to you."

I strained then to take a mental photograph, but as soon as I closed my eyes, her image began shifting away. I had drawn her in sand, and even the slightest breeze dissolved away features until only the vague longings of my heart remained. Until, of course, I opened my eyes and refreshed myself.

She hummed to herself as she wheeled me back to my little curtained area. I closed my eyes and thought of crazy schemes, involving phone numbers and last names, dinners in New York and coffee in San Francisco, Caribbean cruises, honeymoons in Cancun, and years of life, flipping by in the pages of my imagination, strummed by the thumb of hope, so real yet always lacking that certain scent that books have, which I realized now was the scent of reality.

But time flipped too fast in my imagination's novel, and already there was Haley, checking my IV bag one last time and looking down at me. I tried to extract longing from those eyes, something more, but I could only see a dark pool of chocolate staring back. The eyes were cold.

"Alright, I think you're pretty much ready to go Michael. Dr. McEvitt should be here any minute now."

"Oh ok? Is it pretty busy around here now?" I asked, stalling for time, giving my overworked imagination time to come up with something with more substance than "is it pretty busy around here now?"

She paused from her turnaround, those beautiful hips turned in pretty circles as she circled to face me. Then, as she sat down in chair, setting aside my clothes carefully, a glimmer of hope shined through my ridiculous shack of dreams.

"Actually, it's pretty quiet. Sometimes it's crowded, tonight, it's kinda eerie if you ask me." She paused, but I couldn't think of anything else to say. "Well, I should get going. I kinda want to get home if you don't mind." My head screamed *I mind, I mind!* but nothing came out and I just nodded dumbly under the supervision of her smile.

"It was nice meeting you Michael. Who knows, maybe we'll run into each other in sometime."

"Yeah. I'd like that," I said. She got up to go, and just for a nearly unbearable second, she hesitated, and I could feel her eyes longing to sit back down, but she just winked at me again and slid out of my life. My heart leaped after her, slamming against its cage of bone, ripping to follow. But it could not, and I did not have the courage to follow. My heart gasped and breathed in ragged breaths, spewing its hate for its cage and the cowardice of the body it inhabited. It was the master, yet it could not spur on its frightened steed in the hour of need. And just like that, Haley walked away, and I was left alone in my hospital bed, wondering where my friends went. I suddenly felt very alone and very quietly wanted to cry. I fidgeted against the tender bonds of my IV and bed, shifting uncomfortably and wanting to scream out one big *why* to the Wizard of Oz who was pushing all the buttons that screwed with my life.

I hated myself for being there, for not following Haley, for not finding Peter Ignatius, for not following Haley, for not listening to the most valuable scientific instrument available, listlessly churning in my breast. My face bloomed a horrified tomato color, and I lowered my head in shame.

Upon waking, I was struck with a feeling of uselessness, looking at the empty saline bag hung up above my bed, streaming nothing into my left arm. The line of cold was only a faint shiver left over on my left side, too much a vague cold damp fog then a blisteringly cold wind.

Soon I was aware of Miff, snoring softly, sitting in the chair where my clothes were. They were now piled neatly under my chair, and Miff was sitting in the chair, leaning back on the back of the chair, his head thrown in the midair, his hair looking like it was a liquid frozen in mid-spill. I listened to the sound of his snoring going through his nose, a high-pitched and sharp squeaking that sounded like a mouse caught inside scrunching bellows.

I carefully reached down and disconnected the IV tube from the needle in my left hand like I had seen. Then I took the IV bag, and with remarkable precision for a bedridden man, flung it at Miff's face. It landed with a wet-sounding plop and molded to his face for a few ridiculous seconds before he got up, waving his arms wildly and flinging off the bag. I smiled despite myself but soon discovered this leak in my bowl of hate that was keeping all the happiness in. I shut it off quickly and the smile dropped away, leaving only a grim man in a hospital gown staring precariously at Miff.

"Can we go Miff?" I asked.

He nodded, and though he was annoyed with me, went outside to get a nurse. This nurse was a fat, squat, and utterly repulsive woman with a warty face who asked me whether or not the doctor had seen me. I waved her off with a yes and she pulled out the IV needle. I watched its shiny metal surface retract from underneath my skin, and then, when everyone had left, I put my clothes on in quiet.

"Do you know a nurse named Haley, or a doctor named Ignatius?" I asked her. She grunted "no" back and left quickly. I walked tenderly after Miff, the faint pulse of a headache beating still in me, though the stars were no longer frozen in the aching sky. Miff paid for the emergency room bill, and we left. He wordlessly handed me a pair of sunglasses as we stepped outside, and I, as wordless, gratefully accepted and put them on, following him into a cab which smelled like burnt seafood and raw ginger.

My stomach was a log under the long-eyed stare of a hacksaw, and I could feel the rumbles of its teeth as it ran across my tummy. It growled like a fierce animal stuck in a cage.

"Are you hungry? Because I'm hungry as hell. Charles is with my girlfriend at her house—"

"Her house?"

"Yes," he replied, puzzled, "her house, though I guess you don't know about that yet. We're going to stay there for a while until we can find Bertrand. Charles is there now, and we'll take a cab over and meet them there. I talked to the doctor, who said you had migraines? I remember that my cousin got migraines once. He didn't throw up like you did, but he was in a lot of pain. He said caffeine helped, though I'm not sure there's anything medically speaking that could account for th—..."

Miff went on and on throughout the cab ride. The only things I could think of was the frozen stars that had been in my head, the frosty snake slithering up my arm, and Haley's shiny jet-black hair and wide curious eyes. I don't know why, but right then and there I began weeping softly, with barely any sound. Just delicate convulsions of agony, and the discomfort I was experiencing with myself.

Miff was quiet while I cried, my heads in my arms, my arms on my knees, and my knees trembling as the stench of Central Park filled the cab.

