

Short Story Portfolio

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We Chucked Rocks at the Woodland Haunts

We were tempted by the woods' mysteries and the abandoned shacks up the road, artifacts of the neighboring families who used to live there among the weeds. But, we were forbidden to explore those places. We were restricted to the confines of our mother's yard: half an acre of beat up grass surrounded by the woods, the fields, and a country dirt road.

Our mother warned about the many dangers waiting poised in the long grasses around the shacks. She told us the shacks were rickety and were sure to collapse on top of curious children. If the thought of broken bones or death could not stop us, the threat of a good beating would. We'd have to go to the edge of the woods to break off a green switch if we disobeyed, and none of us wanted that.

Summers were heavy damp, green and wood musk, punctuated by the kicked up dust of passing cars and combines. We could feel it in our throats. It pushed down on us, and we were sticky with the weight of it. We drooped until we could cool ourselves with the hose and breathe again. We sprayed each other with the hose for as long as we could stand it, and until the horse flies caught on that we were children with skin soaked and tender. Then, we'd swat and run around the yard away from them, squealing in high tones.

We knew that folks from the shacks were closer to the mysteries of the woods that we wanted to know for ourselves. My brother and I could only watch the woods from the safety of our mother's yard. We crept down towards the road sometimes, getting as close as the beginnings of the cooled tree shadows and the line of summer corn. But Mom would call out to us to get back from the road.

We knew that the children who lived in the roadside shacks ducked in and out of the woods to hide from each other and to see what they could find. They made games in the cornfields, their dogs trailing behind and barking, and they popped in and out of tree branch shadows, unafraid. The bats and the fireflies, the muskrat we heard the neighbors ate sometimes, the field mice, mosquitoes, tree snakes and the wild blackberries that grew alongside the road were facets of the woods more in their blood than could ever be in ours.

Their parents let them chase frogs and feral cats back into the trees with whooshing sticks and rowdy yells. They could even take their toys with them to play. We could only ever catch whatever creatures left the woods and entered into our yard. But only if Mom didn't catch us. She said wood creatures were dirty and could make us sick. We had to leave our toys inside the house.

It was strange when the families left. They took their many children and music with them, but the voices of their dogs, left behind, haunted the woods. We heard our mother talk about the neighbors' dogs. They chased the deer in and out of the woods. They chased the bats, and ate whatever they could find. They chased mice and flies and sniffed at the body of trees and at holes shaped out of the earth. I wondered if they ever feasted on a doe or a buck. I wondered what they thought of little children. Mom said they were probably all rabid now.

My brother and I saw them one afternoon; the pack of wild dogs congregated at the head of our driveway, their presence emphasized by a white Great Dane that used to be someone's pride. The dogs just stood there and stared at us. My brother and I were pinned in that pause.

We were two children with skin soaked and tender. We could not see whether the dogs' mouths frothed.

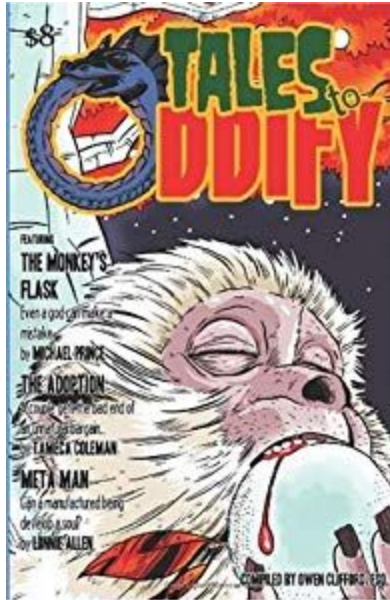
I was the big sister. I knew that it was not wise to run, and I knew that we would have to run if the dogs started rushing towards us. I reached for driveway stones, chucked them in the direction of the dogs to make them leave the head of the driveway. The dogs just stood and stared.

I crouched for more stones, screamed through the heaviness in my chest at the pack. I started hurling rocks so hard I could feel an ache in my arm sockets and in my elbows. I could not throw them far enough. The rocks landed with a dull clack, and the dogs did not budge.

My younger brother started throwing stones then. He was to the right and a little behind me. I could hear him begin to scream at the dogs. Our voices together became hopeless cacophony. We screamed a burn into our throats. We kept throwing stones and the dogs kept staring back at us with a blankness.

We kept throwing rocks. We kept throwing them, and the dogs kept standing until the white Great Dane turned its head towards the pack, barked one time and then trotted with the others back into the woods.

My brother and I looked at one another. We stood in the driveway for what seemed a long time, waiting to see if the dogs would come back. We let the rocks in our hands fall back into the driveway. We went back to the house, looking over both shoulders and all around us. The dogs did not return.



The Adoption
by Tameca L Coleman
Originally published in [Tales to Oddify](#) (2009)

Mark fiddles with the bottom of his jacket zipper so the metal jangles. He grasps the zipper, slides it up, down, up...

“Stop that,” Marianne says as she taps a manicured finger on the baby stroller. “You’re making me nervous.” She lightly swats her hand at Mark’s fingers, just as he begins to move the zipper downwards again. Mark puts his fists into his pockets and leaves the zipper midway down his chest.

They walk slowly down the street, searching for that place they both like so much.

“What is it called again?” asks Mark.

“I don’t know. It’s that Cajun place. We’ll know it when we get to it,” says Marianne, “I’m sure the restaurant is just up this way.”

“I think we should turn this way,” Mark points abruptly to the left alley.

“We don’t have time take a scenic route. I’m almost positive it’s just ahead on the left.”

Mark sighs, pushes his fists deeper into his coat pockets so the knuckles show as they press from the other side of the leather. His arms become poles from the shoulders down. His chest concaves like a sail between two masts. He begins to whistle breathlessly.

“Is something the matter?” Marianne dips her head to her left shoulder as she turns to look at him. Her silver earrings dangle and reflect what little daylight is left.

“No, no,” he stares forward, squinting to see something in front of him, “I’m just a little nervous about having dinner with one of the senior associates and his wife, is all.”

“You’ve never took issue before. We’ve been to plenty of work parties.”

“This is a little different. I want to make a good impression. I want to make a bonafide connection. It’s good for the career.”

“But, you see Doug every day at the firm.”

“Well, sure, but we’re just working then. Different roles.”

“I see...”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s just something in the air. Maybe it’s just the day. I’m a bit hungry. Tired too. The mood will pass.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Mark squints again. This time Marianne notices and asks him what he’s trying to look at. He catches his breath and holds it, half looking at her, half looking in the direction of the clock tower, a couple of blocks away. There are people milling around on the street, but at the clock tower, there is some commotion. At the intersection, two people in drab clothing speak aggressively with three others. The couple’s arms move towards the others in long, almost

embracing arcs. Their voices trail off into the street. When the group of people they are harassing cross to the other side, they are followed half way across. The small group picks up their pace, all the while looking behind them to be sure where the couple is.

Mark touches Marianne's elbow with his palm, "I was just thinking about something I had forgotten. Don't worry about it. It's work stuff."

Marianne glances at Mark, perplexed. The man's voice shakes. She watches him turn his head to the city's buildings. The edifices are stark and grey in the darkening light, though the windows glimmer with the reflection of the setting sun. Marianne takes cue to her husband's silence, checks the baby in the stroller, and walks forward without saying a word.

"It's starting to get chilly," Mark says.

The baby begins to coo.

Marianne looks over to him again, questioningly after some strides. She notices Mark's skin blanching, but she doesn't say a word. She stares intensely, worried. She moves her hand to Mark's shoulder, but he flinches. He feels the weight of her stare, but he does not turn away from the buildings. His eyes move along in rows. His lips shape small numbers under his breath.

"Got some change, sir?"

It's the couple that sits kitty-corner from Mark's law office and begs for money on the street all day long. He sees them every day from the third story window. They panhandle. They chase people across the street. They demand ATM visits from passers by who claim they haven't any change. He knows them.

Marianne sniffs, crinkles her nose. The couple smells of cigarettes, sweat, city grit and concrete. Their smell is like a second presence. It wafts before them and often meets their

prospects many strides before their bodies do. The man has opened his hand directly in line with Mark's elbow. He is tall, and gangly. His cheeks are slightly sunken into the bone. The man waits patiently, smiling. He waits and he stares directly into Mark's eyes.

"I'm sorry," Mark jumps, "I haven't..."

Marianne reaches for her purse from the back of the stroller.

"Oh, she's a sweet lady, then," the woman laughs, "I'll take your money."

Marianne pulls her hand out of the purse slowly as she glares at the woman. She wags a dollar bill. The street woman ignores it, spits on the walk, and then crouches beside the stroller to look in.

"What a beautiful baby!" she says, sticking her dingy fingers next to the sleeping child's face.

"Why, thank you," Marianne shifts. She rummages inside of her purse for another bill, but stops, "Ma'am...please. Could you..."

"If I had a baby, I bet it would look just like that!" she leans in closer to the stroller, after taking a side-glance to Mark.

The baby giggles and kicks so hard that the stroller lightly bounces against Marianne's hip.

Marianne snaps, "Get away, Miss. Get away from the stroller."

The woman turns to the man, and he too crouches down to look. The two of them exchange glances with a certain intensity. They giggle and coo at the baby and say something under their breath. They lean in closer. The baby makes happy sounds.

"If you please," Marianne starts.

“What did you name her,” asks the woman, turning her sunburned face towards Mark.

“Here,” Mark moves forward, nearly pushing the man and woman on top of each other,

“Take this.”

It is a hundred. Marianne scowls as the couple gets up from their knees. They smile brightly.

“Thank you, sir. May your deeds not go unrewarded,” says the woman.

“Yeah, thanks,” the man adds. He stares at Mark solidly for a length before turning.

“A hundred?” Marianne puts one hand to her hip and stands squarely to Mark.

“A hundred.”

“You don’t think that’s a bit much?”

“Hey, I don’t know what they’ve been through.”

“But a hundred?”

“They’ll have food and a place to stay for tonight. Maybe two nights. Let it go. It’s done now and can’t be taken back.”

Marianne clasps the handle of the stroller and begins to walk quickly forward.

“There it is,” she says, and crosses the street, without waiting for Mark to catch up.

Inside the restaurant, Mark and Marianne are disappointed. The Burnhams have left a message at the hostess desk that they had to cancel because of an emergency with the babysitter.

“So much for a bonafide connection,” Marianne says, “What do you want to do?”

“Let’s eat something anyway. I’ll call them later”

The hostess sits them at a table. It's a window seat. Marianne positions the stroller to her side, unsnaps the cradle and places it between herself and the window. The baby kicks and looks to Marianne expectantly.

"Aw, sweetie. You like the window?" she smiles.

"Guh!" the baby girl replies, "Guh. Guh!"

Marianne takes out the bottle she prepared before she had left the house. She balances it on the edge of the seat and the baby's little hand so she can look out of the window as she drinks. The baby sucks the nib happily while kicking her feet towards the table. She makes little baby moans and tilts her head to the right so she can see the moving shapes behind the windowpane.

The sound of Mark tapping a coin on the underside of the table makes Marianne turn towards him.

"That couple..." she begins, grimacing and looking through the table to Mark's tapping coin, "They were very strange."

"Yes. I'm sorry about that."

"Why are you sorry? I mean, weren't you scared?"

"Yes."

"I noticed you blanching earlier. You feeling alright?"

"Yeah, just fine."

"You're a ball of nerves. You're clicking the table, for Chrissakes."

"I'm just fine." Mark stops tapping the coin.

The waiter comes, and they order the pan sautéed grouper with the shrimp etouffee for Mark, and catfish yoli for Marianne. They decide to get a glass of red wine for Mark, and the house white for Marianne.

The two of them sit silently for a while, staring into the table, and intermittently through the window. Outside, the streetlights begin to burn. Mark notices the light reflecting off Marianne's diamond. He watches the water in the glass sparkle with the reflected light from the street.

She leans forward, "I can't believe you gave them so much. I usually have to watch you when it's time to tip."

"Maybe I am turning a new leaf."

"Five, would have been fine and if you were hard pressed to give more, maybe even ten."

"Marianne, let it go."

The waiter brings the food and lays it on the table. Marianne picks up her fork to begin eating. Mark stares at his plate. He takes up the glass of wine, and gulps half of it.

"I thought they were going to run off with little Amanda," Marianne looks at the baby, who is beginning to drowse, and then at Mark, "We should have done something."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Aren't there bike cops around or something?"

"They wouldn't have been able to help us."

"What is wrong with you?" Marianne rings her fork against her plate.

There is a harsh knock at the window, then. They jump. Mark splutters his next drink of wine onto the tablecloth and over his down turned hand. The baby flinches, stretches, chokes on

her voice and begins to grunt. Mark raises his arm as if to protect himself, and he turns to look at the window. The couple stands there, grinning, waiting.

“Jeezus,” cries Marianne, and she leaves the table, shaking all the plates and glasses. She walks quickly towards their waiter.

Mark stares through the window at the couple. They stare back and smile, take glances at the baby who is now gulping for air and rubbing her little eyes with her tiny fists. The woman lifts up her palms and begins rubbing her thumbs with her first and middle fingers. Mark pounds the window with his fist. He can hear the woman’s laughter through the window.

“Is there a problem sir?” the waiter rushes to the table with Marianne trailing behind.

“There is a homeless couple on the patio,” Mark points, “They’re pounding on the window and pestering us.” When Mark turns to point at the window, the couple has already gone.

“Are they following us?” Marianne asks, “What do they want? Where did they go?”

“I’m sorry, sir, should I do something? Should I call the police?”

“They’re gone now...” Mark’s face turns colors.

“He’s right. There was a couple outside. We saw them earlier. They harassed us for money. Now they’re here...or were.”

“I can call the cops, if you want?”

“They’re gone now,” Mark repeats “Let’s eat, Marianne. I’m sorry about the disturbance. I don’t think it will happen again.”

The waiter leaves after exchanging a look with the couple. Mark and Marianne stare at their food, unable to eat it.

The baby begins to yowl. Marianne picks her up, coos, calls her name, bounces her, cradles. The baby cannot be consoled. They'll have to leave.

Mark hails the waiter and motions for the check. He leaves a very handsome tip.

“At least it was a good walk home,” Marianne says, as she takes off her jacket and hangs it by the door. She motions for Mark's with a wagging palm.

“Yeah. A bit cold, though, on the way back” Mark hands his jacket to Marianne and peeks in at the baby who is sleeping again.

“She always falls asleep within moments of any stroller ride.”

He unstraps her, picks her up, lifts her towards the ceiling. He seems to be examining her in the light. He grimaces.

“You're going to wake her, doing that!”

“I'll put her to bed,” Mark holds the baby who now softly grunts. He begins to move towards the stairs. He watches the baby's little arms and legs paddle intermittently as she half sleeps.

“No, let me do it. I'll be right back”

Mark gives Marianne the baby, and then commences to pace the entrance hall. He worries. When Marianne begins to come back from the upstairs baby room, she sees Mark just as he pounds his fists into his thighs.

“Keep pacing like that, you'll pace a hole into the floor.”

Mark stops and looks up towards her on the stairs.

“What are you thinking about?” she asks.

“I don’t get it. I just don’t get it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just stop asking so many questions! Let me think!”

“I’m worried about you. It’s part of my role as your wife.”

“You think you’ve made a deal, sealed it, gotten some closure...”

“You have been talking so strangely! What...”

“Nevermind.”

“Mark, why do they seem to know you? What’s going on?”

“They’ve just seen me. I told you...”

“They really seem to know you. The way that woman looked through you. The way she was too comfortable and too close to our baby! You didn’t...”

“They’ve chased me across the street for my money. They bother everyone for money. Nothing is enough.”

“It can’t just be the money, Mark. Have you said anything to them? Done anything?”

“They sit across the street from my firm. I watch them sometimes. I watch them take from everyone.”

“But, why were they so interested in us? In Amanda?”

“They are relentless, but they are harmless.”

“The way she asked what we named her...”

“It’s nothing. You’re talking crazy.”

“We have to do something.”

“Like what?”

“Call the police!”

“We’re not calling the police, and you know why.”

Marianne comes down the stairs and stands squarely in front of her husband. She looks at him with that questioning look she has. Her look bores into him.

“Mark...”

Someone is knocking at the door. Mark and Marianne exchange glances, wondering who it could be at this hour. It’s nearly ten.

They look at one another again, but they do not move. Mark holds his breath. Marianne looks to Mark for an answer.

The knock comes again.

“I’ll get it,” Mark says. Marianne trails behind him, her hands on his shoulders when he has met the door.

“Who is it?” he asks.

“Some old friends,” comes the answer.

Mark looks through the peephole in the door. All he sees is dark. Whoever is on the other side has covered the hole with their hand. He then moves to the front window and tries to see who waits on the steps, but the overgrown juniper bush obscures his view.

“Some old friends is hardly answer enough,” Mark replies.

“You know us. You know our names. You have something of ours. We want it back.”

Marianne turns, gasping. Mark grabs her wrist tightly.

“Don’t,” he says.

“You’re hurting me, Mark.”

“Don’t do whatever you were about to.” He doesn’t let her go. He unlocks the door, and opens it a crack.

Marianne struggles, “Let go!”

“Well, thanks for acknowledging our existence. How about some hospitality? It’s cold as a witch’s tit out here,” comes a woman’s voice from the other side of the door. It’s the homeless couple. Marianne’s quick intake of air startles Mark enough, that he loosens his grip around her wrist. She flees.

“No!” Mark cries, and he forgets about the door. He runs after her, tackles her into the floor, “We can’t call the police. You know this. We just can’t.”

Marianne sobs, “Mark! Let me go! Let me go.”

The couple walks in. They leave the door open; let the cold follow them inside. They take off their coats and drop them onto the floor. They make their way to the living room couch. They sit and snuggle close, pick up the TV changer and begin to push the buttons. The TV comes on. The woman snatches the remote and turns the volume up, full blast.

“Where is she?” asks the woman from over the couch and over the noise. Mark is still on top of his wife. Marianne cries hysterically. Her mascara streaks her cheeks as she sobs and sobs. Her eyes are wide and bewildered and though she struggles, the weight of her husband is inescapable.

“What do you want from us?” Marianne screams, “Get off of me, Mark! Get off!”

Mark doesn’t move. The woman climbs over the couch and crouches close to Mark and Marianne.

“Where is she? Where is my little baby?”

“A deal is a deal,” Mark shakes.

“We never signed anything.”

“You can’t do this!”

“I can and I will.”

“We have an agreement!”

“Not anymore.”

Down the staircase, the baby’s wail comes. The woman looks up. She smiles brightly. She straightens and moves towards the baby’s voice.

Mark acts. He grabs at the woman’s ankles to stop her. She falls onto the end table on the other side of the couch. She is unconscious and bleeding. Marianne struggles free. She runs to the kitchen, screaming.

The man on the couch turns, moves. He catches Mark with his glare. Mark looks around the room. He starts at the sight of his wife running towards the kitchen, but before he can move, the man with the sunken cheeks, jumps over the couch, slaps Mark in the head and pins him to the floor.

“You bastard,” he seethes.

“She won’t do it,” Mark promises, “I have more money. Just let me go.”

Mark and the man struggle while Marianne makes it to the kitchen. She picks up the house phone receiver. She dials 911. She blubbers into the phone. The operator tells her to slow down.

“Help!” she screams into the receiver, “Please!”

Through the kitchen's archway, she can see the man run up the stairs. She stops. Her arms become limp. She drops the phone receiver, which cracks into the wall.

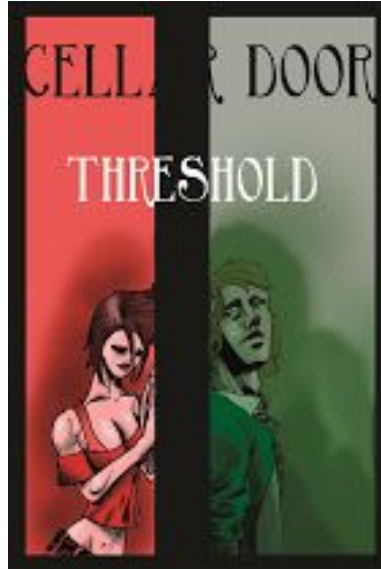
The operator's voice continues, "Hello? Are you there? Is anyone there?"

Marianne collapses slumps into a pile on the floor.

"Hello?"

Marianne screams, sobs, chokes.

"Hello? Hello? We're sending someone. Are you there?"



Attention
by Tameca L Coleman
Originally published in *Cellar Door: Threshold* (2012)

“See, that’s the problem,” Olivia says, glaring disapprovingly through the deli’s window.

Her friend, Bloom, turns to see what she sees. A pre-teen walks with her tired looking family toward the deli door. Her face is constructed. Her high eyebrows are shaven and replaced with a carefully drawn-in line. Thick sweeps of dark rouge line the underside of her cheekbones. Her lips glisten like drenched dirt. The young girl’s clothes stretch tightly around her rounded abdomen, thick thighs and buttocks, which hang just below her taut, purple mini. Her clothes seem a bit like meat packaging.

“Well, it certainly doesn’t seem appropriate,” Bloom quickly glances and shrugs.

Olivia continues to stare.

“Don’t look at her like that. It’s rude, don’t you think?”

“It can’t be helped. Look at her! She’s a little hussy,” Olivia crosses her arms in front of her.

“Do you like to be stared at?”

“What do you mean? I don’t dress like that.”

“...or even to be called names like that?”

“I just can’t get over it.”

“I can’t get over you.”

“Girls like her are problems. They dress like that, and then, what do they expect?”

“Attention.”

“Yeah, the wrong kind.”

“But, nonetheless, that’s what it is, and besides what does it matter?”

Olivia gives Bloom a harsh, questioning look, and hisses, “I can’t believe you.”

“What’s there not to believe?”

“You know that little girl is asking for trouble!”

“Livvy!”

“What, Bloom? She should put some clothes on!”

The girl turns towards her family, and points towards the door of the deli. They all enter.

The girl trips over the doorway, and says something snippy behind her. The mother casts her eyes downward and grits her jaw. The others trail in behind.

“Do you honestly think she even knows what kind of attention she’s attracting? She can’t be more than thirteen years old,” Bloom’s voice shakes a little as she speaks.

“Her fucking ass cheeks are hanging out the bottom of that thing. Look!”

“She probably is copying her favorite pop star or something...” Bloom shifts, “Look. Let the girl alone. She’ll either learn, or not learn. Besides, if her mother let’s her dress that way,

what can you do?”

“Don’t be so naïve! Haven’t you seen Maury?”

“No, way!”

“There was a fourteen year old girl on there the other day who knew good and well what she was doing, and she started what she was doing, when she was eleven!”

“You watch that sensationalist trash?”

“Of course I watch it. It makes me feel better about myself.”

Bloom is silent for a length. She watches her friend shift in her seat. In her periphery, she watches the girl take a place in the ordering line, while her family searches for a table. The girl stands with her weight shifted to one leg, and folds her arms in front of herself as if she is waiting for an attack. The line moves slowly.

Bloom braces, “That stuff is staged.”

“I’ll bet a lot of it is true!”

“Just leave it alone! It’s none of your business anyway.”

“Isn’t it? This is a public place, and I swear that kid is indecently exposed. Isn’t there a law against that?”

“I don’t know about any law and I don’t know why you are so concerned about this. What do you have against her? I mean she’s minding her own business, right now, not bothering anybody.”

“I’m concerned, Bloom, because it’s ugly, it’s offensive, and it’s out right wrong.”

Olivia’s palm falls flat on the tabletop.

Bloom sighs and then turns towards the cashier who has called their ticket number. In a

huff, she slides her chair away so she can get the tray of food they have ordered from the counter. Olivia watches the pre-teen from the corner of her eye. She sucks her teeth and lightly shakes her head as the girl puts her hand to her hip. She is now at the counter ordering. She intermittently speaks to the cashier, and then shouts across the room to her family for the specific details of their orders.

Olivia returns and plunks the tray on the table, “Let’s eat and get out of here. I gotta get back to work.”

“Her mother should be ashamed,” Olivia says.

The girl turns towards them, clicks her gum, and rolls her eyes before returning to ordering.

Olivia whistles, “Kind of a bitch, as well as a hussy.”

Bloom quickly looks up at Olivia.

“She should put some clothes on...really.”

“Shut up and eat your damned sandwich,” Bloom rasps, “I can’t even believe we are friends, right now.”

Olivia turns to her meal, angrily. Bloom, in irked silence, chomps. Olivia takes side-glances at the girl, intermittently shakes her head, and Bloom gives Olivia glares to quit.

On the train ride home, after a long day in the office filing away pieces of paper in a dusty filing cabinet, after searching for this document and that document for this paralegal or that attorney, Bloom attempts to shut her eyes. She often takes naps on the train. The naps are her

reprieves from the work day. For some minutes she can sit and do nothing at all.

The normal sounds of people shuffling on and off at the train stops, as well as the trains beeps and informative messages which relay where they are and where they are going, become a drone. Even the handful of loud cell phone conversations, homogenize into the hollow noise the train makes when it moves along the rails. Each train sound is so familiar; her eyes begin to flutter just as if she were enveloped in a comforting lullaby.

Just as the world becomes a wavering slit of light, Bloom notices a flash of purple cross the aisle in front of her after the train doors have opened at one of the stops. She whips open her eyes, and notices the girl from the deli. Startled, she averts her attention to the window to her right. She sees people with briefcases board, as well as a woman who pushes a stroller on to the train through the handicap dock in front of her. Out the window, she can see many more people who wait for their particular trains. They are from all walks of life. They are mostly alone and on their ways home. They stand and wait, clutching their bags. Many of them are tired looking. They stare ahead, or look for the next train and speak to no one.

Bloom looks again towards the purple flash of skirt, without staring directly at the girl. She notices that the girl has sat facing her, three seats down. The girl slouches into her seat and picks at her nails. Bloom thinks the girl is tired and worn looking, just as if the day was long for her too. The girl occasionally glances up from her nail picking as if she is looking for something or someone. She takes no notice of Bloom. For this Bloom is relieved.

The girl is wearing a jacket now, and though her clothing still seems inappropriate, it is not as offensive as it seemed earlier on. Bloom thinks she can understand the girl's dressing the way she does. Bloom, herself, was a rebellious preteen. She would do anything to get at her strict

mother. She cut her jeans thigh high and cut off her hair with the sewing scissors when she was twelve and a half. She pierced her ears, too, with a potato, an ice cube and earring studs she stole from her mother's jewelry case, and then, when the parents were away one evening, she stole her mother's makeup bag and traced her facial features in rouge, blue shadow and lipstick. All of these actions made her mother think the worse of her, then, and she was banned from ever leaving the house unsupervised.

Bloom examines the girl's face. It is just as drawn as before. The girl could be pretty, but Bloom can't tell. Bloom sees shadowed eyes, exaggerated lips, and layers of color that don't look good on anyone, let alone a girl so young.

The girl looks into Bloom's eyes, and Bloom quickly pulls her bag onto her lap from the side of her and rummages for something, anything. She pulls out a book she has been meaning to read. It is crumpled and the cover is torn.

The train passes two stops, and shifts of people move in and out. At the third stop, a man, whose jeans and red sports jersey are clean and pressed, sits in the seat across from the girl, three seats ahead. Bloom puts the book back in her bag. She is unable to read it. She's distracted by the girl, so she folds her palms over the bag's flap, and watches indirectly the scene before her. She assumes the two know each other because the man seems friendly enough, but she wonders about him, just the same. He is much older than the girl is. He is maybe in his late thirties. The man leans in like someone who is comfortable with another, someone who is familiar and who has built some kind of rapport. The girl seems happy and comfortable enough with the man's company. She speaks to him energetically.

The man points to the space beside the girl, apparently asking if he can sit there. She

nods, shrugs, says something. He moves. He leans in to her and as he does so, her expression changes. The man comes closer and speaks next to her ear. The girl shrinks and looks confused.

Bloom furrows her eyebrows at this. She waves her right palm slowly to try to get the girl's attention. The girl looks up, and catches Bloom's eye.

Bloom mouths, "Are you okay?"

The girl averts her stare to look at the man, and she scoots away from him towards the window. He speaks to her and she says nothing. Instead, she pulls her jacket close around her, and turns her eyes downwards over her bare knees. Her shoulders concave.

Bloom waves again, this time, with her left hand. She sits at the edge of her seat, and wonders what she should do. Bloom leans slightly into the aisle and waves yet again.

The girl looks, and Bloom mouths, "Do you need help?"

The man looks up this time. His eyes are daring.

The girl says nothing, mouths nothing back, and then she averts her eyes, again. She cringes when the man moves his arm to her shoulders. He turns his body toward her and speaks to her again.

Bloom looks to the other people on the train. They are reading or talking on their cell phones, or sleeping. They do not look to see the girl whose eyes are beginning to glisten.

The man slides closer. His leg is now touching the girl's leg. He pins her lightly against the side of the seat. She can go nowhere.

Bloom holds her breath, and then the train stops. The doors open. A young woman looks for a seat, and decides to sit in front of the girl. The woman is friendly. She leans in close. She talks to the girl and takes short glances at the man who has lifted himself straight, though he has

not removed his arm from around the girl's shoulders.

The girl has said nothing to the woman, but she looks at her dolefully, and blinks. She takes turns, staring at the man, and then again at the woman in front of her. She nods her head, emphatically. The man straightens again and frowns. He tries to say something.

At this, the woman laughs. She extends her hand to the girl's hand, and clasps it. She then guides the girl quickly away from the seat. The two of them move hand in hand to the back of the train, out of Bloom's eye view.

The man sits back hard into the seat, fuming. His eyes follow the young girl until he catches Bloom staring at him. Bloom does not avert her eyes. Her fingers grip into her bag, and she again holds her breath. The man glares and doesn't stop.

At the next train stop, the man quickly departs, but not without taking one last look at Bloom.

When Bloom finally reaches the park and ride where she catches her last connection, she rushes to the bus bench, throws herself into it and places her face in her palms to cry.

"How could I have done nothing? nothing at all!" she cries, "To sit there dumbly, like a stupid idiot!"

Bloom then realizes where she is. She can see other people waiting for buses, or going to their cars, or waiting for the train. She wipes her face with her shirtsleeve and places both her palms to her knees to brace herself.

"Get a grip," she tells herself, "The girl's going to be alright."

Just then her cell phone rings. She looks to see who it is. Olivia.

“Great.”

She clicks the thing on.

“I don’t really want to talk with you right now.”

“Then why did you answer the phone?”

“Pure reflex, I guess.”

“Ok...”

“What do you want?”

“I want to apologize.”

“For?”

“For being out of line. I was incredibly rude, earlier.”

“You were.”

“Look, I’m sorry. I just have a really hard time with people who do that to themselves.”

“I don’t even know what to say to that. Look, I have to go.”

“You know why I feel that way. You know what happened to me all that time ago.”

“What happened to you shouldn’t make you judge other people the way you do.”

“It’s just...”

“Look, I have to go.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound fine. Sounds like you’ve been crying.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow at work, okay?”

“Fine. See you then.”

Olivia clicks the end button on her cell phone as she walks to the grocery store. She picks up her phone and looks at its face. She punches in Bloom’s numbers and then decides against the call.

Two blocks away from the store, she spots a man who often walks down this street. He is in jeans and a red sports shirt. He smiles at her and says, “Hello.”

“Hello,” Olivia says tersely.

The man slows his pace and turns to walk with Olivia.

“Beautiful night,” he says.

“Sure is.”

“I didn’t know you walk this way.”

“What’s it to you?”

“Just curious. Where do you live?”

Olivia looks directly at the man, “I live where I live.”

“A beautiful woman like you shouldn’t be walking alone after dark,” the man says.

“I don’t mind walking alone, actually.”

“I’ve seen you before. You work downtown, don’t you?”

“I do. What do you do?”

The man laughs, “Nothing much.”

“What are you up to?” Olivia looks at him again.

“I was thinking of visiting my friend at the bar over there,” he points to the neighborhood

pub, which sits maybe twenty steps ahead.

The two of them walk in silence past it. They come to the end of the block where the pedestrian light blinks its warning to not cross.

“The pub is over there. Aren’t you going to go in?”

“Nah.”

“Isn’t your friend waiting for you?”

“I didn’t see him.”

“So what are you going to do now?”

“Walk with you.”

“And what if I want you to stop?”

“I won’t.”

Olivia continues to walk after the traffic stops moving in front of them. She picks up her pace, and doesn’t wait for the white pedestrian to flash on the light, nor does she wait for the man. The grocery store is just one block away now.

“Where are you going?” the man asks, trotting to keep up.

“I’m going to the store.”

“...and then?”

“Eventually home, but I’ll have to wait.”

“Then I’ll wait with you.”

The man continues to walk with Olivia and when they get to the store, she stops. He lingers.

“I am going in to the store now,” Olivia says.

“Do you mind...”

“I do. If you follow me any more...”

“Can’t I just accompany you and then walk you home?”

“I don’t need to be walked home.”

“Ah,” the man shifts and smiles, “I can take a hint.”

“Good. Now, please leave. Please leave, or I’ll have to call someone.”

The man puts his hands in his pockets and turns to leave. He walks very slowly. Olivia watches his back and she waits until he has turned the corner. When he has turned, she enters the grocery store, and she waits some more to be sure he does not return.