

Proof:

A Collection

by

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**This thesis is dedicated to my parents,
Kirk and Kathy Dudek,
without whom none of my accomplishments
would have been possible.**

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APPROVED BY:



Advisor

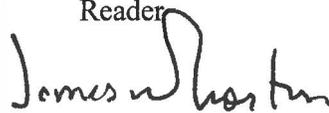
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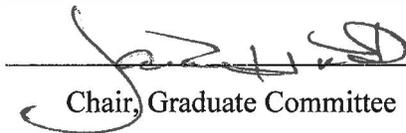
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Abstract

In my thesis, Proof, I have included a critical introduction exploring my development as a writer and the people and classes and life events that have shaped my writing thus far. Also, I have included three short stories, “The Lombard,” “Proof” and “Persephone.” In these stories, I have attempted to write modern works using some of the classic tropes of American Gothic literature. The most prominent of these tropes perhaps are the perverse and the “return of the repressed.” “The Lombard” explores suspense, the sentience of non-living things, particularly an old building, perversity, the return of the repressed, the creation of an overall mood, and an overall questioning of reason. “Proof” explores a more dialogue driven narrative, and while it does contain perversity and repression, it is slightly more influenced by the absurdist writers of the mid-twentieth century in that it carries an overall air of futility, and thus, it, in its own way, also questions reason. Finally, “Persephone,” examines the ways in which addiction, emotional or substance based, erode reason and overcome it. While “Persephone” still highlights the perverse and the “return of the repressed,” its primary focus is the effects of these tropes upon reason.

Critical Introduction

I.

At the onset, my three stories, “Proof,” “Persephone” and “The Lombard,” might seem eclectic as a collection of short stories, but, upon closer examination, I believe common elements become clear. The strongest commonality is that the three stories are preoccupied with mood. “Proof,” a story about the loneliness of standing behind one’s beliefs amidst doubt, is set in a quiet, empty winter woods. “Persephone,” a retelling of the Greek myth, focuses largely on color, texture and even temperature, to create a fantastical, cold and melancholy atmosphere for the Underworld in which the story takes place. Finally, “The Lombard,” a mystery with a twist of the supernatural, is set partially in an enormous highrise and is deliberately told by revealing necessary information bit by bit, in an attempt to help the reader identify with being confused and afraid.

Although a vast authorship inspired me, my primary inspiration was, and has long been, the works of Edgar Allan Poe. His idea that the short story should be able to be read in a single sitting and that it should create a single mood and, therefore, have a single effect, are, to me, the twin guidelines by which I write. In his statement, his reason for this can be clearly understood. “If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed” (Edgar Allan Poe). Though these three stories vary in length, they can all easily be read in a single sitting,

which is important if they are to have a “totality” of effect upon the reader. The only story in which the restriction of length gave me difficulty in the telling of it was “The Lombard.” As a mystery, it required enough information so that, without being directly told, the reader could draw some unnerving conclusions at its end. The eerie mood would have been shattered with the blunt reveal necessary for extreme brevity. I, therefore, attempted to place clues in the narrator’s emotions, commentary and perspective as well as in the setting of the piece, making the story dense with subliminal information.

Of most interest to me, however, was the creation of a single mood as described by Poe: “I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect...I say to myself, in the first place, ‘Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?’” I have always admired his stories for their ability to deliver a strong sense of the uncanny, the disturbing and the eerie and often slightly supernatural. Certainly, the supernatural is strongly present in “Persephone,” as it set in the Underworld with Greek gods and the active dead. However, my focus was to build an eerie and melancholy mood throughout. I am fascinated with the idea that particular colors illicit particular moods, and I attempted to use many references to colors, very often blues, in an effort to heighten, specifically, the sense of melancholy. I, however, wanted to create a very specific variety of melancholy, a desperate, defeated melancholy which, I feel, haunts persons struggling with addictions. In this case, drug addiction is mirrored. There is a sort of repressed, crushed, blue spirit in an addict that, I hope, reveals itself in “Persephone.”

Originally, “The Lombard,” too, was to reflect in some way upon drug addiction, but instead it reflects the addictive, irrational and blinding qualities of attraction. “The Lombard,” however, relied more on setting and first person narration to accomplish its uncanny, disturbing, eerie and slightly supernatural overall mood, a sort of “Fall of the House of Usher” meets “The Telltale Heart.” I’ve always admired the way in which an old mansion or estate, for example, would become a character, would take on sentience, in the work of Poe as well as that of Nathaniel Hawthorne and other writers of the American Gothic. In “The Lombard,” I wanted to see if I could bring this trope of Gothic fiction to the twenty-first century. I have always found that old, large, abandoned and run-down buildings in urban areas have a particularly eerie and uncanny sense about them. Therefore, I chose an old highrise as the primary setting for this short story.

Another element of Gothic literature that fascinates me and, therefore, became a creative influence, is the “return of the repressed,” a term coined by Freud, in which feelings, ideas, and, by extension, people, events, etc., that are repressed return in even stronger, often more perverse and powerful ways. In Joseph W. Childers’ article entitled, “Return of the Repressed,” Childers gives an excellent summary of this term in his abstract: “A definition of the term ‘return of the repressed’ is presented. The term is the name given by psychologist Sigmund Freud to the process whereby an instinctual representative that has been repressed from the conscious mind goes back from the unconscious in a distorted form, which is the result of a compromise between the forces of repression and what has been repressed.” In “Proof,” the owner of the tree is

actively repressing his doubts as to the tree's reality until they overwhelm him, and he destroys the tree in desperation. In "Persephone," her true feelings regarding her captivity and her captor are repressed, not only by her captor but also by the strange attraction she, herself, feels towards him. She is driven to feed her addiction in which her intense longing for home can completely unleash itself, thereby, causing her to perversely consume a substance that is killing her. Finally, "The Lombard," through which I did attempt to create a modern American Gothic short story, also contains a few figures of repression. There is Christine's repression of her fear due to the attraction she feels towards Jacob, the repression Jacob practices as a form of deception, the repression of Christine herself and her account of events and so on that all culminate in a return of the repressed for a perversely eerie and possibly deadly finish. It seems, in the American Gothic, that the longer a thing is repressed, the more perverse, powerful and dangerous it becomes.

Charles Brockden Brown's, *Edgar Huntly: Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker*, influenced me strongly, as well. In using sleep-walking to subvert reason in this novel, Brown caused me to ask myself what other things might subvert reason and allow for the perverse to take over. I thought my answer was drug addiction, and perhaps it can be, but in my stories, especially, "Persephone" and "Lombard," attraction showed itself as strongly subversive to reason. This surprised me, but a story should always surprise its author, at least a little. However, the subversion was successful. Persephone went to her pills, and Christine placed herself in ever growing danger. The repressed and the perverse both found interplay in these pieces due to attraction.

I believe there is repression and perversity in “Proof,” as well, but not for reasons of attraction. In the case of “Proof,” doubt subverts reason. “Proof” is perhaps the more philosophical and didactic of the three pieces here. However, it does not seek to offer a solution as it explores both the dangers of doubt itself and of the repression of doubt. I hope to explore the subversive effects of doubt on reason more extensively in my future works. All three pieces can be seen as an exploration of ways in which tropes of the American Gothic can be brought to the modern era in new ways, which is also something I hope to explore further in the future.

II.

I have been a book lover for as long as I can remember, but it wasn’t until sometime in middle school when I thought, “Hey, I can do that!” So I began writing, just little stories I shared with my family. I was inspired by the way in which a well-told story can touch people’s hearts and even change their minds. I learned that Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* changed lives for the better in England because it appeared to be a simple story, but it was written to touch the reader’s conscience. I wanted to be able to reach people in that way.

My early writings were full of teenage enthusiasm and sentimentalism; they lacked finesse. They were clumsy as I worked my way through developing plot and character, paying little attention to anything else and with practically no setting whatsoever. I tried my hand at “chick lit,” historical fiction, fairy tale, nonfiction, poetry and the (intentionally) short story.

These stories were short, simple and flat, lacking complexity, but complexity comes with time and, I believe, with more experience of life itself.

Even though such was my writing in those early years, my mother praised my efforts generously. I cannot express how essential this was to my perseverance as a writer. I was a homeschooled student from K-12. My mother was also my teacher, and, as such, her praise and encouragement were invaluable, and she was lavish with both. She used to tell me I was going to grow up to be a famous author, and I believed her then as I do now. Those words gave me the heart to continue even when I felt like I would never write a single thing worth reading. In many ways, she made me the writer I am today, but the journey was long.

It was early in my college career that I realized I would not be able to take many workshops during my undergraduate years, but I continued to write always, in my precious little free time, at work, during classes in the margins of my notebooks. It was something that was and is a part of me. I was discouraged, however, that I could not pursue my passion full-time. I promised myself that one day, I would do so. This was about the time that I started the first novel of what I hope will become a series of fantasy novels for young adults. The beginning and end are clear to me, but I have much work to do on them even now.

The power of my mother's encouragement and the power of the written word motivated me to continue to write. However, I had already decided to study English as well as education in order to receive my teaching certification. Doing so is comparable to having a major and a minor or even a double major, so it unfortunately left me very little time to take creative writing

courses. All of my courses influenced my writing though. I remember one literature course in particular in which the professor often shouted a line by Vladimir Nabokov: “Caress the details!” This has echoed down through my writing and reverberates in my writer’s spirit even today. Nevertheless, I was disappointed I could take so few creative writing courses. In fact, I only was able to take one.

It was a large class for creative writing, and feedback abounded but was not as in depth as it is able to be in smaller groups. However, the professor was very encouraging. She pointed out strengths in my work, and this encouraged me to continue writing even though I was unable to take other creative writing courses. She gave us useful books with writing exercises, and she had us mimic a poem which I thoroughly enjoyed. I know it is hardly a new idea for an exercise; however, it reinforced my belief that reading and mimicking excellent authors is the way for a writer to become highly skilled. During this time, I would keep slips of paper at hand to jot down ideas during any down time, especially where I worked as a cashier because the general repetitive nature of the job itself gave my imagination room to breathe. With these scraps of paper, my creative writing continued.

There was one other undergraduate class, a Irish absurdist literature class, that particularly influenced my writing style. I admired and enjoyed the various ways in which the writing could seem to be nonsense, often humorous and yet be so dark and poignant at the same time. Things were often not as they appeared, and they stretched, if not outright ignored, the borders of reality. A few specific works that come to mind are *Waiting for Godot*, a play by

Samuel Beckett, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, a philosophical essay by Albert Camus and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, a play by Tom Stoppard.

The two plays provide examples of works that do not give the reader all the answers, even at the end. That fascinated me, and it still does. Both plays are complete in and of themselves, but somehow, there are so many things we don't know. The lines of reality are blurred, and the reader is left to question what was "real" and what was not. They allow for so many interesting possibilities. The essay mentioned above by Camus suggested to me that this ambiguity was not pointless but, rather, was part of the art, part of the overall meaning. At the end of my story, "The Lombard," I have attempted to create some ambiguity of my own. It is a technique that I am still acquiring.

Finally, upon graduating with my BA in English and my teaching certification, I was able, and in fact, required, to enter a Master's program. This, to me, was like icing on my academic cake. I am so grateful that SUNY Brockport offers its MA in English with both a literature and a creative writing track. I enrolled in the English MA program, creative writing track, and I have enjoyed every moment of it since. I have learned so much from both the literature and the creative writing courses I have been blessed to take here at SUNY Brockport and would not change the decisions I made to get here, even though it has been a long and difficult journey. Although all of my classes influenced me, some influenced me in ways I have already begun to recognize.

Of particular influence upon my writing was a course on American Gothic Literature. In that class, I developed the theory that the roots of American Gothic Literature lay in the Age of Reason and not coincidentally. I believe that, to some extent, the American Gothic developed as a reaction to the Age of Reason, perhaps even questioning it. American Gothic seems to ask the reader to consider what happens when reason is undermined by a myriad of things: insanity, doing things in one's sleep, delusion, schizophrenia and so on. It was at this point that I became interested in working to create a modern American Gothic literary work. I also became increasingly conscious of and interested in the ways in which detailed settings and the sentience of objects, particularly old buildings, are used in developing and enhancing the mood of a story to the point that they often could be considered their own character.

Due to life experiences, I had originally thought that drug abuse would be my tool to subvert reason. I still do think that this is possible, and I explore that concept to some extent in "Persephone." However, I was surprised to find that, in "Persephone" and "The Lombard," attraction played a much greater role in subverting reason than drug use. Although I do still want to explore emphasizing drug addiction as the primary antagonist to reason in future stories, I think it is interesting that it was part of human nature itself that came out the strongest in undermining reason.

Also, in "The Lombard," which was intended to be my modern American Gothic piece, I substituted a run-down highrise for the country estate or mansion that is typical of American Gothic literature. It was key for me that the building have a sense of history, of importance,

within a single family. Certainly, the mansions in the American Gothic are typically much older, but I find that even fifty-year-old, dilapidated buildings in our ever reconstructed cities feel old to readers in our current culture. Additionally, it was important to me to develop a mood using this highrise as the primary setting. In order to accomplish this, I used personification and a baroque interior. I do not feel as though I have attained Edgar Allan Poe's mastery of this craft element, but I will continue to improve myself in this area. I do, however, feel that my descriptive language has improved significantly in large part due to the workshop experiences I have had at SUNY Brockport.

There was one workshop, a prose workshop, in which I learned about writing "outside the box." That is, I learned to be free of prescribed ideas about how things are to be described, imagined boundaries and about what things can be said or cannot be said. I am grateful to this workshop for their feedback and especially to my professor for her feedback. My story, "Persephone," included here in my thesis, was greatly improved. I was encouraged to further develop my characters and my plot. As I have mentioned, I had been focusing on sensory language, mood, sentience, setting and other such literary devices to such an extent that I needed to be reminded not to neglect character and plot in the meanwhile. This workshop was truly inspiring; it electrified the creativity inside of me, freeing me to take more risks in my writing. The required reading for this class caused me to view creative writing in whole new ways. I am very grateful for the influence of that workshop.

There were other classes I took that have inspired me. Even now, I am finishing a poetry workshop in which I am being encouraged to break self-imposed boundaries in my writing, to defy conventionalism, to stretch the limits of logic. I appreciate courses such as this one because I feel they lead me to greater originality in my own work. I also took a course in Old English, which I very much enjoyed, but it was the world in which Old English was spoken that has captivated my imagination. I have yet to pursue this, but I look forward to it. Additionally, I took a young adult literature class which greatly improved my understanding of the basic components of the current young adult novel. I have high hopes that this will help me in one of my goals which is writing a young adult novel series. I also would like to write some historical creative nonfiction, but I still have a lot of research to do in that regard.

In many ways, I wish I was not graduating. I have enjoyed my experiences in workshops and have developed so much as a writer that I wish I was able to continue to participate in them. I have so many techniques to learn and ideas to try, and I credit the excellent professors at SUNY Brockport as being inspirational, encouraging and liberating to me in my writing. I plan to continue writing and always be improving my craft. I will never forget my experiences here at SUNY Brockport, and I will ever be grateful for all they have taught me.

The Lombard

“It creaked.”

“Don’t say that, Christine.”

“Seriously, Jake. It’s the Lombard. It’s an old building, and old buildings make settling noises.”

“Don’t use that word around her.”

“Her? It’s a *she* now? Ok then, *she* needs to be torn down.”

“Shut up!” He was shaking.

“You know what, Jake? I am done!”

“Christine, wait. It’s not like that. Christine!”

I kept walking. I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t want to hear anymore. I’d heard enough this time and many times before.

“You will come back here, Christine. You will.”

I didn’t even pause. That was one of our first dates. I was upset, but I’ve learned so much since then.

Christine Dewitt, News Writer, July 12th, 1982

I have decided to start all of my journal entries like that from now on. I am about to enter college in the fall, and if I want to be taken seriously, I have to act like I already have the skills. Heck, if I keep calling myself a news writer, maybe someone will believe it and give me a job!

December 15th, 1982

Anyways, it has been over a month since I met Jake Trent at the Lombard Building. So far, I haven't gone back, but tonight, I must. This may be my last entry. Jake has always been a little different. He is sweet and kind, mysterious and sometimes distant. I guess that is why he loved the things he did. He said it made everything quiet in his mind for a while. I don't know. I always chalked it up to another one of his eccentricities.

I'd met Jake over a year ago, watching a local band at karaoke bar. Even in a crowd, he stood out. I noticed him right away. Tall and lean with thick, dark hair that curled up at the edges, he was beautiful, but it was his eyes, slate blue like the sky just before twilight, that held me when he asked my name. Usually, I answered with, "Get lost" or "Do yourself a favor and find a new friend," or something equally dismissive, but this time, I simply said, "Christine." His smile was sweet, almost shy, as he introduced himself. We sat, ate and talked all night. It was the phases of the moon. It was all the planets aligned. It was magnetism.

Unbidden, thoughts of Jake flooded my mind as I planned my first visit in over a month to the dilapidated Lombard Building. In spite of my desire to understand Jake, to value what he loved, the building still made me uneasy. It was the last place several people had been seen before they were found in the nearby river or elsewhere. That footage, photographs plastered all over the fronts of newspapers from time to time, was always in the back of my mind. Their eyes were dark, hollowed underneath. I tried to put these thoughts from my mind. I supposed it was because it was the first time I would enter the house in the growing shadows of evening. It was intimidating enough in daylight.

After that night, he had called me, asked to see me, taken me to dinner. I'd smiled for a week straight. After that, it was like I couldn't get enough of him. I was addicted. Little did I then imagine that he was no harmless elixir. We spoke every day, and I thought about him throughout each one. I never felt more connected to anyone before, and that scared and at the same time excited me. Everything was happening so quickly, but the fact that it was also effortless made it seem right. By that autumn, we were already planning our future.

The chiming of my cell phone interrupted my reverie. I didn't recognize the number.

"Hello?"

"Christine Dewitt?"

"Who is this?"

"Julie Arnett, *Daily Sun*. I..."

“How did you get this number? Never mind. I don’t care. No statement, and don’t call this number again!”

Like bloodhounds. Unbelievable how newsy people can find you. Ever since the word had somehow spread that I was being allowed into the Lombard by the family, my phone had been busy. My scowl abruptly turned to a wry smile. I would have relished the attention of newspapers before. I had long hoped my articles would garner the notice of a paper or magazine. I focused on human interest stories mostly, never thought I would be in one myself. I was never able to raise an eyebrow before. I stood up, struggled briefly to catch my balance and put a few things into my satchel. It would be a long night, but I had to know the truth. There were still several hours before nightfall. It was more than enough time to go over my notes from the past few months. I’ve kept a journal since childhood, and now the practice of it serves me well. I will look over some earlier entries. Maybe that will give me some idea of what to say to him at the Lombard

September 4th

Met Jake again today. I don’t know if he gets more handsome every time I see him or if that is the love talking. Yes, I said love. Today, Jake told me he loves me. He said he wished he had a ring for me, but he is a freelancer, so money is in short supply.

I shook my head at how naive I had been. It had been the perfect romantic situation: young student, poor and in love, dedicated to his work. It was worse than a fairy tale.

I don't care how much money he has, or doesn't have. He has been wonderful. Today, we talked about what kind of house we would want. He always listens to whatever I have to say. It feels good to be understood without having to spell it out. It is like he knows what's inside me, what I want, what I need. I hope it stays like this forever.

September 9th

I am furious! Jake told me he had a "special" place he just had to show me. I got all dressed up, heels three inches high, and I met him at the cafe. We walked several blocks and stopped in front of this worn out, run down old brick tenement building. I thought there must be some mistake, but he said, "Here we are." I nearly laughed, but his face was absolutely serious. I flew into a stiletto-kicking fit, and we fought for several minutes. He insisted it was the most special place in the world to him. It was so dingy and run down. I was so humiliated at being brought down there, in all my finery no less, that I did not let him continue. I turned my back on him, and I took the bus home.

Now that I've calmed down a little, I think it was more than being dragged to some dilapidated old building on what I thought was going to be a very special date that upset me. There was something more. I can't quite put my finger on it. The atmosphere around that building just wasn't right. Something...I don't know...in the air.

September 20th

Jake didn't speak to me for days. I thought it was odd for him to carry on when I was the one who was rightfully offended. I resolved not to call him, to force him to call first and apologize, but two days later, I found myself begging his forgiveness. I thought he would apologize at once since the blame was his, but he didn't. He said it was important to him, and if I really cared about him, I would understand that and make it important to me, too. Imagine! It wasn't me walking off on him he really cared about. It was the fact that I did not care about that stupid old building! Still, I love him, and it looks as though I will have to go and see this building for myself before he will really forgive me. I will go tomorrow. I might as well get it over with. He says it is his family's property and his family's building, so I can visit any time I'd like. Still, it does feel a bit wrong, even sacrilegious, as if the building itself does not want me there.

September 21st,

I went to the Lombard anyways this afternoon, when the sun was at its height. I hesitated on the sidewalk before the enormity of the structure's expanse. Ivy climbed dark over all walls

and windows both broken and boarded alike. There were crumbled walls, brick rubble and gouged walkways. The roofing no longer looked at all safe, but I wanted to be able to call Jake and talk to him about this place so maybe he would forgive me for my disparaging comments about his beloved building. After all, all relationships have compromise, right? I walked very slowly and stopped only a moment before pushing in the heavy oak double doors that were its stately entryway. They had thick, rust-encrusted bands of ironwork across them, but they were not locked. I had not considered what I would have done if they had been. The two stone columns on either side of these doors were each topped with a fearsome griffin, and I believe I felt them turn from their usual front facing stance to glare at me as I entered. A strong sense of foreboding sank coldly into my bones as I walked into the vestibule. As many buildings constructed in the 1920's era of glitz and glamour, the interior had originally been decorated in a gaudy baroque style, although it was clear much of it had not survived the almost half century of lying empty and dormant. It was well-known locally that the Lombard had been closed down not fifteen years after it was built and had stood like a gilded pharaoh's tomb in decaying splendor ever since. No one knew exactly why old man Lombard had shut the building down, at least, no one who was talking. The Lombards had been a very powerful family.

Wide banisters and unusually tall wainscoting greeted me. Garishly patterned wallpaper, yellowed and tattered, still clung to the walls, but it had peeled down in long, crooked fingers, most pointing toward the decorative marble floors, almost as tastelessly overdone with their dark crimson streaks. The way before me became increasingly dim as I moved forward into the

structure, all that thick foliage overtaking the place from the outside in. I thought maybe if I could gain some height, somewhere higher up in the highrise tenement, then maybe there would be some light. The wide staircases flanked the open room at either side. The one to my left looked more steady, but as soon as I climbed the third stair, I knew I had made a mistake. They were not granite or steel, but wooden stairs creaking and groaning loudly beneath my weight. When I stepped to the third stair, I heard a loud splintering noise as it broke away beneath me, and in the split second I fell, I could have sworn the creak of the rotting floorboards had become a dark laughter.

When I awoke, I found myself in the basement, limbs splayed among cobwebs, thick and grasping. My heart began to pound in the darkness. My eyes became accustomed enough to see many boxes, odds and ends and rubbish, but there were other shapes, ones I could not identify, or would not identify. I felt, rather than saw, movement, and the atmosphere began to get so thick, weighing pounds instead of ounces. I tried to scream, but no sound came. There was a presence, a very real presence, and it was watching me. I saw the outline of a door, and I fled towards it and up the stairs, barely noticing the bits that fell away as I climbed. I was running faster than I ever have in my life when I reached the front door, which I did not recall closing, flung the door open and ran for at least six blocks before I calmed down enough to slow and at last sit at a bus stop and eventually make my way home. It was the most horrible thing I have ever experienced. I can't explain it. It scares me sick. I am so upset, and I don't want him to

think I am a stupid, hysterical girl. I don't want him to know what I think of his "very special place."

September 30th

Why do I always have to go too far? Jake was thrilled that I went to visit his family building. When I heard the delight in his voice, I got carried away. I just could not say enough about how fascinating it was and how much I was enthralled by it. Jake was so pleased he immediately forgave me for my previous lack of enthusiasm and insisted we visit there often, said he wanted to restore it. I reminded him it had already been condemned last month. His reaction surprised me. He was quiet for a full minute before he said, "Never say that again." I promised. I was just so happy we had made up. I don't understand why that Lombard is so important to him. I know he is the last surviving member of his family. I suppose he clings to it for them, but I would not. It was a noteworthy achievement in 1928, but now, in 1982, its 113 stories are not all that impressive. Besides, there is an aura about the place. I don't know how to explain it; it defies the feeble attempts of words. Jake says we will visit soon. Perhaps it was just that I was alone. I am a woman of facts, a news writer. I can't allow silly nerves to influence me.

October 9th

It has been two days since Jake and I went to the Lombard, and it is just now that I am able to begin to write about it. It was very strange. Jake says I am crazy, but I am not crazy. We met for lunch, and we took a deliberately long walk to the Lombard Building. I did not want to

go, but Jake looked so happy, almost elated, that I said nothing and walked along. When we reached the doors, his elation took on a tinge of hysteria. I hesitated, in spite of myself.

“What is it, Christine?”

“It’s nothing, Jake. I mean, it’s just...well there is something intimidating about this place, isn’t there?” I thought I saw a look, very unpleasant, flit across his face, but it was gone so quickly, I could not be sure. His face was very placid and gentle when he answered.

“Don’t be afraid. It’s my building, and if I love you, it loves you, too.” He smiled at me then, and I felt like I could face anything for that smile. We walked in together then. It was just the same as before, but I never noticed how the hallways around the staircases scurried off in every direction. As we walked forward, I asked him about it.

“My great grandfather didn’t want to build just another mighty structure. He wanted it to be creative, a testament to his ingenuity after he was gone, a monument to him.”

“It just seems silly to me.” Again the look, and again, it passed very quickly.

“Is it foolish to want something to speak to your genius, something for the world to remember you by?”

“No, no, of course not. I’m sorry.”

“Never mind, Sweetheart. Let’s ride the elevator all the way to the top.”

“Does it still work?” I asked.

“It is a complex system of levers and pulleys and all that sort of thing. It works without electricity, so yes, it runs perfectly, better than modern elevators.”

We entered a very ornately decorated elevator with a gold entry gate. There were mirrored walls all inside it and a mirrored ceiling. The gold framing made a sort of halo of golden light around us. It was so beautiful. I was so enthralled that it took me a full moment to notice there were only 112 buttons on the panel. I was certain the Lombard Building had been known for having 113 floors, and the 113th floor was rumored to be an absolutely gorgeous penthouse suite. It had been in all the papers of its day, and still we locals will say of a place, "Well, it isn't the 113." It's a local legend. I was very disappointed not to see it marked, so I asked Jake about it.

"There is a 113th floor, and yes, it is a heavenly, golden suite, where all the beautiful ladies live."

"Then why isn't it listed here?" Jake was quiet for a moment. Then he moved in close to me and took my face in his hand tenderly.

"Would you like to see it?" he asked, gently.

"Yes, yes, I would, very much."

Conflicting emotions shown in his eyes, before he finally whispered an answer.

"Not yet, no. You're not quite ready, not yet, not quite ready."

Then I felt it again, so strongly I nearly choked. It was as if the air had become water, and I was drowning in it. I fell against the mirror at the back of elevator. I felt Jake's hand on my arm. At first, I thought he was going to help me, but when I looked into his eyes, I saw an anger, no, more like outrage, that stopped my heart much as the water had stopped my lungs. He

roughly pulled me forward, but he didn't say a word. It was then I saw that I had fractured one of the mirrors.

"Jake, I am so sorry," I gasped, just regaining my breath. He already had the elevator going down, and when we reached the ground floor, he half carried me out, and turned from me when we reached the sidewalk.

"Jake, please..." He turned to me then, and his expression was completely calm.

"Christine," he said, with a half smile almost more frightening than his anger had been, "don't worry. It was an accident, hmmm?" he crooned, caressing my cheek. "You'll be more careful next time."

Then he walked me to a nearby cafe, called a cab and sent me home without a word. I have been so shaken, both by the unmistakable malignant presence in the elevator and by Jake's abrupt and changing manner, that I have not written of it for two days, and I have not spoken again to Jake either. I know I will though. I already miss him, in spite of everything. He makes me feel more alive than I ever have before, excited, like a rabbit zigzagging full speed from a great gray wolf. And when he looks at me with pleasure, my heart feels like it's going to melt right there in my chest and go flowing out my toes. But I am afraid. I am ashamed to admit it, but I am afraid to make him angry again.

October 20th

It has been days since I broke that mirror at the Lombard, and I haven't heard a single word from Jake. I don't know what to do! I feel like I am going to lose my mind. I have been calling Jake for days, and all I get is his answering machine. Why won't he answer? I know I upset him at the building, but he was so calm when we left. He seemed almost happy even. What did I do? It can't just be the mirror, can it? I just...I need to speak with him, to hear his voice, to be with him. I know, I know it's not rational. Maybe he will call tonight. I hope so. I realized I have never been to his home. I wish I had. I have been by the Lombard Building five times, but no luck. I couldn't bear it if I lost him. I'll go to his stupid building. I'll do whatever he wants. Please, please, oh God, just let him call me.

October 29th

Jake finally called today. He said he had been upset by our last date, but that he missed me too much to stay away! I knew he really did love me. We talked, and I feel so much better. Our connection is stronger than ever. He asked me out this Saturday. I can't wait to see him again. I need him like I need air in my lungs and blood in my veins. When I am with him, it's like no one else matters, like the rest of the world fades away, and it's just us. I don't care if he is crazy about some old stupid building. I don't care even if he wants us to live there as long as we are together, as long as I have him, too.

November 1st

Jake and I went to the most amazing restaurant last night. We didn't go to the Lombard, and I thought we would because the restaurant was so close to it. I thought it was really nice, and I told him so. He looked at me steadily and said, "You're not ready, not yet. You're not ready." I didn't understand, so I asked him if he didn't really want to be with me.

"You are mine, Christine," he said.

I wanted to press him further, but he had been in such a good mood all evening, and I didn't want to spoil it. We're going out again next week. I can hardly wait. I am almost afraid to call him. We were so happy last night. He is really mine, forever.

December 6th

This has been the best month of my life. Things have been so good with Jake, I am walking on clouds. He hasn't even mentioned his old building in weeks. We've been going on real dates, nice ones, too. He has started giving me things, nice things, necklaces, bracelets, earrings, all antiques. There is only one piece of jewelry I haven't gotten yet, and I don't think it will be too long now. Not that he said anything, but a girl always knows, right? I'm sure that's what he's up to.

December 8th

I am afraid I spoke too soon. Jake called me, asked me to meet him for dinner last night, said it was for a very special occasion. I was so excited, I changed my dress seven times before I chose a dark green velvet with a deep V. Jake took me to a restaurant that is all but impossible to get into. I was so sure this was it. The crystal shimmered. The fine china glistened among the silver tableware. It was so perfect. I was all but waiting for him to get down on one knee, when he took my head and said, "Christine, I believe you know why I brought you here tonight." My breath caught, and my heart was in my throat when I answered.

"I believe I do."

"My beautiful Christine, you are finally ready. You wanted to see the penthouse. You wanted to see Floor 113, and you are finally ready, ready and perfect."

I worked hard to keep emotion from my face as tears of disappointment sprung to my eyes. Thank god Jake read these as tears of joy. I couldn't find any words.

"Don't cry, my Christine. We will go soon, very soon." After a few moments, I had regained my composure. I was able to act happy, excited even, about our upcoming visit to the legendary penthouse suite, but the night could not end soon enough. I am so disappointed, but if this is what he would like me to do, then I will do it. I want to make him happy.

December 15th

I am about to go meet Jake. I hope this will finally prove to him how much I love him. I am nervous about going to that immense building in the dark of night, but Jake will be with me. It's almost exciting really.



December 11th, 2002

Anna Junn, reporter for the *Herald*, clicked her pen a few times as she waited for the asylum director to return. Her research for her article on the upcoming 75th anniversary of the Lombard had been far more complicated than she'd imagined, and Christine Dewitt, her final piece in the puzzle, had led her here to Waverlywood Asylum, a mental hospital. This had been Christine's last known address, and there were no longer any living relatives. Anna hoped that here she would find some information that would shed some light on the Lombard's final days.

At last, the asylum director returned with a small cardboard box.

“There are Ms. Dewitt’s final effects. She had very few things the entire time she was with us. If she had lived a few months longer, this Friday would have been her twenty year anniversary here at Waverlywood.” The director placed the small box in my hands. “As Ms. Dewitt had no family, her effects remained here. You may take them with you if you like.”

“Thank you, sir, that should be very helpful. I have a few more questions regarding her stay here, if you could help me with them.”

“I am afraid I do not spend much time with each individual patient, Ms. Junn. Allow me to get the matron who oversaw Ms. Dewitt. She should be able to answer what questions we legally can.”

“I would appreciate that. Thank you.” The director walked briskly through the door and disappeared down a fluorescent hallway. Anna set the cardboard box down on the small coffee table and began rummaging through its contents. There were a few items of clothing and some striking pieces of jewelry, a few pictures, a stuffed bear, but on the outset, nothing very interesting. Anna hoped she was missing something, or this trip would essentially be a waste of time. In desperation, Anna dumped the box contents on the table and heard a quiet thud as a small book fell out. Anna opened it. It was a journal. Anna eagerly flipped to the first entry.

December 17th, 1982

The doctor has asked me to write about the last thing I remember. He said I may not be able to remember everything. I wish that were true. I remember it all. Two days ago, I left my house to meet Jake. I made my way to the Lombard. I was dressed in a long, flowing blue dress, the color of sapphires, my diamond studs in my ears, golden bracelet and gold necklace hung with a large sapphire to match, all gifts from Jake. When I arrived, there was no one in front of the building, but there was a faint glimmer of light inside. I knew he was here.

The doors opened soundlessly as I entered. I stopped and gasped at the array of candles and Jake standing in the middle of the room. His tall, lean frame stood out strikingly in a black suit among the candlelight. I was drawn to him by a power that was felt rather than seen. Before I knew what was happening, I was in his arms.

"Christine, I am so glad you are here. You are so beautiful tonight, and you are finally ready." He offered me his arm and led me to the elevator. He opened the gate with a flourish, and I flashed him an adoring smile.

"I am happy to finally show you what you have so long wanted to see." The elevator started to move, but it was moving downwards.

"Jake, why are we going down?" He did not answer.

“Jake? Jake?” I began to panic as the elevator grew dark, but it grew darker from the corners then inward to the center, not as if the light were being pushed out but more as if it were being consumed.

“Jake, where are you taking me?” The elevator had gone two floors down, and it stopped. Jake turned to me then, and his eyes were like fire. His smile was seductive.

“Floor 113,” he answered. “Where all the pretty ladies live,” he added, as he flung open the gold elevator gate. Where there had only been cobwebs and decay when I had fallen into it, luxury, un-aged, blanketed the basement. Lights sprung from all over the room as they entered. There were velvet chairs and crystal chandeliers and an enormous, satin-covered bed. Mirrors reflected off all of the walls and even the ceiling. There were all kinds of handcuffs and metal implements that I did not recognize, but they made my blood run cold. Even as I tried to pull away, Jake’s grip tightened around my torso.

“Jake, please! I don’t understand. What is this?”

“This is my crown jewel, floor 113. Christine, I want you to meet all of my beautiful ladies.” My eyes widened with horror as luxuriously dressed young women appeared through the floor and surrounded me. Realization struck me as I saw on these women the jewelry that had been gifted to me by Jake. The beautiful women, luminous, were slowly gliding around me, reaching towards me. I saw on their arms and necks the unmistakable bruising of extreme violence, and I knew what had happened to them. Their eyes burned intensely. They were beckoning me to join them. Frantically, my eyes darted around the room, looking for some escape

or defense. I saw no way out, but there was a piece of metal almost concealed by a nearby bureau.

“Do not worry, my love,” Jake whispered in my ear. “Now, you never have to leave. We will be together always. All of us.”

Desperately, I wrenched away, grabbed what was actually a metal pipe, and, when Jake lunged at me, I started swinging. I did not open my eyes until the only screams I could hear were my own. There was blood everywhere, but it was much darker. The luxury had gone, and the decay had returned. There was no one in sight but Jake, his body still at my feet and covered in blood. I made my way out of the Lombard and ran screaming into the night.

There the entry ended. Anna heard footsteps in the hallway, and presently the matron entered. She was tall, striking woman, but her face was not unkind. She reached to shake Anna’s hand as she introduced herself.

“Hello, I’m Matron Wells. I worked closely with Ms. Dewitt while she was with us. I understand you have some questions about her, Miss...?”

“Junn. Thank you. Yes, I’ve read the journal Ms. Dewitt left with her family. It details the events leading up to her last visit to the Lombard, and I have just read her account of that night in this journal. It all seems so fantastic. Can you shed any light on what happened to her?” Anna asked.

“It’s a sad case. Christine Dewitt was brought to us twenty years ago today on December 15th, 1982. She was found covered in blood, rusty iron bar in hand, but a body was never found. When she was questioned, she said she murdered, meaning Jacob Lombard Trent. They brought her here.”

“Why?” Anna asked.

“Jacob Lombard Trent was the last surviving heir of the Lombard fortune. He died an old man in 1946. In a way, the investigation that followed was fortuitous. Thirteen bodies, all young women, and Trent’s journal, were found buried under the cement floor of the basement. The women all showed signs of violence, confirming the journals stories of rape and torture. Jacob Lombard Trent was a serial killer, and in some ways, thanks to Miss Dewitt here, those women can finally rest in peace.”

As Matron Wells finished her explanation, Anna felt a sense of clarity, but only for that moment, for it was then she noticed the metal pipe, crusted with blood, on the coffee table before her.

Proof

It was one of the strangest cases ever heard of in Wains County. Many people knew him. Many more respected him. It had taken three men and a toboggan sled to remove him from the woods when they arrived. The phone call had stated he might be a danger to himself and others, but he was only unresponsive, lost. It was nearly a week before the story came out.

It was the kind of winter day that made the snow sparkle so brilliantly you had to shade your eyes as you looked across the giant, frozen scoops and sweeps of snow, all that now remained of a rustic landscape. On this bright but frigid day, Thomas asked his neighbor, Jarvis, to walk with him to see, in a stand of firs, a tree of which he was quite proud. Thomas poked and prodded, cajoled and begged until, at last, Jarvis agreed to go. He was very unwilling to head out into the cold and away from his armchair and television. It had finally stopped snowing for several days, and the snow was now about to his knees. Even though the snow had stopped, the temperatures had dropped, and it was frigid.

It wasn't far to Thomas' stand of evergreens, about a mile, but in the deep snow, their progress was slow, taking much longer than it normally would. Starting from the moment they headed out of doors, Thomas' incessant babbling about his tree was bordering on tedious. He would not stop going on about this small tree. Even when Jarvis attempted to turn the

conversation to other topics, Thomas had a way of bringing everything back to his tree. After nearly a half hour, Jarvis became desperate to change the subject to something at least a little more entertaining. He had planned to distract Thomas at a break in his speech, but as none seemed likely, he decided to interrupt.

“...A beautiful blue spruce crossed with Greenland fir and coming up so well. The shaping, of course, becomes a question of taste. While blues usually...” Thomas had been going on in this way for several minutes.

“I have heard we're expected to take a hit this spring. The economy is said to be driving up the price of seed,” Jarvis interrupted. He thought surely Thomas, a fellow farmer, would have some interest, even if just some complaint, on the price of seed. He thought it was sad that he was finding even seed pricing interesting at this moment.

“True, true,” he agreed ruefully. “Seed is to go up at least fifty percent from last spring. I do not know how I and my family are going to manage it, for, as they say, 'Money doesn't grow on trees!' Speaking of trees...”

Thomas was right back to talking about his tree again, and Jarvis was disappointed at how short the change had been. He was also becoming irritated with his neighbor. So he tried again.

“I heard little Jade Peters is about to get married. It seems like yesterday she was just a little girl playing with my Ashley,” Jarvis interrupted again, hopeful this turn might be more successful.

“Yes, Jackson is one of the most surly young men I have ever met,” Thomas chuckled.

“But Jade certainly seems to have that bear up a tree. Ah trees...”

This went on for the entire duration of the trek through the countryside with Jarvis, not only irritated by being outwitted at his every attempt to turn the conversation from Thomas' tree, but also agitated by the combined tediousness of the slow plodding through over two feet of snow and Thomas' everlasting preoccupation with the minutiae of caring for this tree. This was hardly the first time. Thomas was known to go on at length about various subjects, but previously, Jarvis had always been able to make his escape. Jarvis thought it was cruel of Thomas to practically make him a captive audience. So it was that when they were in view of Thomas' stately stand of firs, Jarvis' exasperated brain hatched a humorous little revenge for Thomas.

The two neighbors walked into the stand of firs which were actually very pleasantly situated. The scent from all of the fir trees was very strong, but not unpleasant, and nearing the center, they came upon a small blue green spruce with the fullness of a fir. Around its base, wood chips had been packed in a circle for a full foot in diameter. Twine ties on either side of the tree tethered it to the ground, and the small tree was filling in very full. It was clear that Thomas spent a great deal of time carefully shaping and pruning this object of his affection

“Here it is,” Thomas said, gesturing to his tree as he stood beside it, beaming.

Jarvis was silent for a moment. He almost didn't try his prank. Suppose Thomas simply laughed at him? Thomas was still looking at him, and it was that look, that deplorable look, that

suggested that not only did Thomas expect Jarvis to converse on the topic of this mundane little tree, he actually expected Jarvis to be interested, to enjoy the conversation. That was too much.

“Well, what do you think?” Thomas asked.

Jarvis screwed up his face as if about to solve a difficult problem. He appeared to peruse the tree from several angles, moving in and out as if inspecting a work of art. Finally, with the ghost of a smile playing about his lips, he stepped back and announced decidedly, “This is a plastic tree.”

Thomas' jaw fell open. It took nearly a full minute for him to regain his faculty of speech.

“What!” he managed incredulously.

“This is a plastic tree,” Jarvis reiterated.

“That's ridiculous! You can reach right out and pull some of its needles from it!” Thomas argued, as he grabbed a branch just above his head and did so, breaking up the needles in his gloved fingers.

“Plastic molded pine needles, sturdy enough to cling to the tree yet flimsy enough to be broken, so it is clear that this is a plastic tree,” Jarvis said

“That is insane! Look, look at its bark! The tone, the texture! Why, you can even chip pieces off!” Thomas said.

“It really is impressive, the design and all. It must have taken hours to get that mold just right, so it can be plainly seen that this is a plastic tree,” Jarvis said.

He could not believe Thomas was actually arguing over the tree's reality with him. Because of Thomas' long-winded speeches, there were those among their neighbors that considered him rather clever. Something within Jarvis was unable to resist such a wonderful opportunity to prove otherwise.

Agitation was beginning to show clearly on Thomas' face as Jarvis continued to support his claims. Jarvis was beginning to feel some small recompense for Thomas' lecture during their walk over to this place.

"Look," Thomas began again, calming himself. "This a real tree. I crossbred it myself. I watered it, shaped it, watched it grow from a sprout. Now, how do you explain that?"

"What they can't do these days!" said Jarvis. This was turning out to be even easier than he had thought. He was more amused than ever.

"That is the most preposterous thing I ever heard! You can smell the scent of pine right on it!" Thomas said.

"Scented plastic is nothing new," Jarvis said. Although he was enjoying watching Thomas get so flustered and although it was entertaining to see how easily he could be unsettled, Jarvis began to grow apprehensive at Thomas' growing anger.

"Why that's...! I can't...! How could anyone believe...? Of all the idiotic, harebrained lunatics!" Thomas spit and sputtered and grew more and more enraged as he spoke. Jarvis was amused as he watched his neighbor fume and begin poking and tearing at his favorite tree. Indeed, Thomas pulled needles, peeled bark, snapped branches, but at every turn, he was clearly

dissatisfied with the evidence of his tree's reality. Jarvis let him stomp and curse and strip branches and had just begun to think that maybe he should stop his friend as he was getting a bit hysterical, when Thomas pulled large pruning shears from his belt.

“No!” Jarvis cried, moving to stop his friend, but it was too late. In several quick and angry slices, Thomas had cut through the heart of his small tree. It lay bleeding dark sap on the ground at his feet.

“Thomas,” Jarvis said after a moment, his gaze fixed on the dying tree. “I am so sorry.” He had only begun this as a hoax. Trees as beautiful as this small beloved tree took time and a great deal of care to grow. He had never meant to be the cause of its destruction. “Thomas?”

When Thomas finally looked up, Jarvis was surprised to find his face exultant, victorious.

“You see? You see!” he said. “It is a real tree. See? It bleeds! You see? You see?”

But the tree was dead, and the woods were silent.

Persephone

“Finally, in desperate hunger, Persephone ate six pomegranate seeds.”

“Persephone and Demeter”

“...he secretly put in my mouth sweet food, a pomegranate seed, and forced me to taste against my will.” “Rape of Persephone”

Consciousness inked its way down from the corners of my mind, permeating and falling, realization after memory, until it cleared the lingering mists. I was back, back from a dreamworld of green and gold and sunny splendor. I stirred then and groaned audibly. I remembered now, as my eyes grew accustomed to the dimmer, unearthly light, my real world of iron and stone, caverns and decay. Maybe today I would learn the secret of the vast labyrinth to the River Styx and the charm to stow away on a ride to the shore of the living. Footsteps sounded in the hallways outside my chamber. *No, not now.* My will was just returning, and whenever Hades came, it melted away like wax before a flame.

The footsteps were drawing nearer. I writhed but still could not rise. The effort only caused more groans to escape my tightened lips. *Be still. No use.* My breathing came in heaves. As I steeled myself and focused to control it, my gaze fell upon my upturned palms. They were even more translucent than I remembered. I could trace the veins easily now, and I watched the

yellow in its measured retreat to my heart, leaving only the darkest purple behind. With each heartbeat, my warmth returned, what remained of it.

Hades came through the door then, skin ashen, raven-haired. Even so, he was so beautiful, so beautiful it made you catch your breath and forget to release it. My eyes never left his face, his firm jaw, his Grecian nose. Everything about him captivated me. His broad shoulders lowered as he bent over me and took my hand. His grasp was gentle, but there was no warmth in it. At his frozen touch, I released the breath I hadn't realized I'd held.

“Are you all right?” His voice was deep, smooth, tender but ever grave. I could only groan in response. I wanted to speak, to struggle, to rage, but all I managed was a submissive whimper.

He took in my condition, my skin more pale than before, my darkened veins, my thinning frame, my hair a little less gold. He looked even more serious, which I had thought to be impossible.

“You ate the whole seed again, didn't you?” he asked, but it was a statement, not a question. I nodded, and two tears escaped my eyes. He had told me the seeds were very powerful and could be dangerous if eaten whole. I did not, do not, care. They allowed me, even if only for a few moments, to be home once again, far from these cold caverns of death. Surely I, the daughter of Zeus, the King of the Gods, deserved that happiness.

“You are the sunshine of my kingdom, the only warmth in the Underworld,” Hades said. “I know how much it means to you to see the sun. I should never have given you the seeds, but I

have told you to take only a very small piece at a time. They are more potent than you know.”

He lectured as if to a small child, but with his words came more tears, and he stopped then. He brushed my cheeks with two of his fingers. Hades meant it to be kind, but my tears turned to frozen trails at his touch. He sighed deeply and turned to go. He was right about one thing. It surely was his kingdom.

“Wait,” I whispered, barely grasping his hand. He paused. “Wait,” I said again, “Please...let me go home.” His shoulders fell, as he turned.

“What would I do without you, Persephone?” He placed his other hand on the inclined slab upon which I rested. Cold emanated from his touch and spread through it. “As the daughter of Demeter who brings bounty to the Overworld, you bring the sun to my Underworld, to me. I cannot go above to the sun, nor can I lie in the fields warmed by it. You bring all of that to me as my bride. Why would you take yourself from me?”

“You could come above, rule under the sun...” but even as I said it, I knew it was hopeless.

The lines of his mouth turned firm then. “Rule? Rule what?” he asked. “Will Zeus give up his kingdom above, or Poseidon give up his oceans? No! I am a king! This is my empire! My Underworld is your home now,” he said with finality as he mercifully removed his hand from my bed, turned and walked from the room. I turned my face to the wall as my tears began to thaw.

I don't know how long I cried. Time is infinite in the Underworld. I cannot tell when

night ends and day begins. The light never changes from the unearthly blue-white glow with which he has lit his lanterns. The shadows they cast only flicker, never move with the sway of the sun. How long I had been lying there, I do not know. How long I had been in the Underworld, I do not know, only that it feels like yesterday and an eternity at the same time. The day I was dragged into the Underworld is ever vivid in my mind, his hand outstretched, mine reaching for it, awestruck by his unusual features, so stunning and new, the sweet, solemn words falling from his lips, promises of undying love and a crown and a kingdom. When my hand touched his, my eyes flew wide with the shock of the cold, but it was too late, for suddenly, suddenly, suddenly, we were flying, spinning downwards. I felt as if the earth were thick water, and I a stone about to sink to the bottom of a watery grave. Just as suddenly, we emerged into his kingdom and stepped into the light of a night from which I can never wake. I hate him, and I love him, and I hate myself for loving him.

It was always cool in the Underworld, but I felt a little of my warmth returning. I sat up, my white robes falling around me in a cascade. Upset, I struggled to rise from the bed. His visits always left me despondent, and I wasted precious energy and time on tears. The little, finely-worked crown of gold still sat on my head, so light though covered with jewels, a symbol of my so-called authority as Queen. I had no such authority, in fact. I was merely a prisoner here. My lord, the god Hades, was ever the only master. Rising was a struggle, and I still felt dizzy. I put my head in my hand, and my gaze fell upon the inside of my arm, at its bend where the skin is

thinnest. I was becoming so pale and thin, and I gasped at the purple veins that stood out more and more with each passing dream. I covered my arms quickly. I would not think about it; my strength would return soon enough when I was back in the sun with the wind, earth and my mother. My heart panged; no one knew where I was. I had been alone when Hades stole me away. If I stayed much longer I feared I might lose my will to him completely. I had to find a way out.

I could hear his footsteps again. They were easy to hear in the silence, only occasionally broken by the sighs and groans of the dead. The dead did not come to my chambers. They were kept away in many separate catacombs, upper and lower and lower still, divided as he judged each one. Even the groans of the tormented were quiet as departed souls have not much voice in the stone abyss. The slap of leather against rock grew louder as he approached. I sat even straighter then. I did not want him to think I was not still strong, that my resolve to leave this place, to leave him, was weakening. I turned my body just slightly, accenting my waist, and pulled my silken tresses over one shoulder. Carefully, I rearranged my robes over the bends in my arms.

He strode into the chamber, his muscled figure truly god-like. He stopped a little short at seeing me seated. The somber lines of his mouth turned upwards ever so slightly, and his onyx eyes shone. His gaze flowed over me as he crossed to take my hand.

“It is good to see you up,” he said. I caught my breath at his icy touch. I inclined my head in ascent. I didn’t trust myself to speak, afraid to sound weak.

“You will join me this evening for a feast. There have just arrived an unusually large number men from a battle in the Overworld. It is customary to give them welcome, for they died well.”

“I will not go.” I had no love for the macabre ceremonies of new and old corpses at various stages of decay all the way down to decomposing skeletons. His eyes, so dark, searched mine. His severe look softened.

“I know it is not what you are used to. I will have you beside me. Do you understand?”

The silence hung between us like a shroud as I hesitated. He was so beautiful; it was intoxicating. Every hard word and strong promise I had intended to give him fled away under his gaze.

“Yes.” It was a half-whisper. He was pleased by this, but I immediately regretted it.

“Good. I have many preparations to make. I will return for you.”

He would not return for at least a few hours. He would be busy, distracted. This was the time. I rose from the bed, more steady now, and threw a soft, gray cloak over my white dress, hood raised. I moved towards the doorway. He hardly ever locked my door now. I suppose he thought me too weak to go very far. I pushed the door open. It was thick and heavy, but it moved without a sound. The overwhelming odor of death assaulted me as soon as I moved through the doorway. But it was old death, distinctly more earthy and did not cause me nearly as much nausea as new death, rank and meaty. I moved swiftly and silently, as a phantom, floating down

rows and corridors.

The cavernous Underworld stretched on seemingly forever. Its borders were not known except the river Styx where Charon ferried the dead to the uppermost edge of the Underworld. Time was passing. I needed to make the river before many hours had passed, but the the caverns, corridors, cells and tunnels, crevices and catacombs were innumerable. I knew for certain that I had to head ever upwards. It was difficult, though, to tell which ways led upwards. Some dipped before rising steadily. Others rose only to fall to depths unseen. I had made it quite a ways before, but always, he caught me before I could even smell water.

As I fled, I thought of how none of this would even be happening if my mother knew what had happened to me. Surely, word had reached my father, Zeus, by now. I grimaced. He wouldn't do anything unless forced by Mother. Hades is his brother, and Zeus, a lover of many women, would not be inclined to interfere with his brother's pleasure otherwise. Even if she could be close enough to the Overworld to whisper a message to her mother, maybe it would be enough.

This time, it will be different. I have learned so much of the way. Faster, faster! I was frightened. I knew it was taking me too long, and if he found me here he would be very angry. I feared his anger. He became as stone. His eyes, so black, became flat, and his fine lips folded into a thin, unyielding line. Held still in his gaze, awed by him, I always felt my fear become palpable, knowing I should flee but utterly unable to move. This was terror. This was looking death in the face.

The catacombs were becoming fewer now. All down below, the walls resemble gray, limestone honeycombs, slathered in iron-gray clay filled with the decomposing dead. The further one travels towards the Overworld, the fewer and more earthy they become, more dirt and rock holes rather than innumerable slots. I was fairly flying now, my robes billowing like butterfly wings behind me. If I could get far enough, even close enough to the surface to whisper a message to the winding root of a plant, my mother would know. There was a turn ahead; then the road steadily angled upwards. I rounded the corner, flying into a chest as solid as stone and arms that closed about me like iron bars. Stunned and breathless, I raised my eyes. It was Hades.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I was walking...”

“Do not lie to me. You were leaving me.”

Silence. His hand brushed back my hood, pressing into my hair. I trembled.

“I have told you. The upper and lower halls are forbidden to you. The rest of my kingdom you can roam freely.”

When I choked back tears at the word, Hades eyes narrowed.

“Why do you try my patience? I have given you everything, and this is how you repay me?”

He was leading a pale horse behind him, and after a moment, he placed me on it and rose to sit behind me. This was the closest I had ever come to escape. I felt hope drain from me with every step his horse took down deeper and deeper into the Underworld. It was cold against his

chest, and I was shivering uncontrollably by the time we reached my chamber door.

“I am sorry to have to take away your freedom, but I do not trust you,” he said, as he walked towards the door. “Get ready to come with me to the feast. I will return for you very soon.” He closed the door, and I heard the lock clink into place behind him. I was trapped once again, and the little strength I had used to run was exhausted. In misery and tears, I began to dress for his return.

When he returned, I was ready. I had dried my tears, and my face, though pale, was calm. On his arm, he led me out into his great stone hall, and we sat on two enormous stone thrones, his the larger of the two and more commanding. Although I loathed the upcoming festivities, I must admit a small thrill when I thought of how we must have looked: I on my pale gray throne of flecked marble with my cobalt silks flowing around me and cascading down over the seat to pool around my feet, arms, fingers, ears, crown all covered in brilliant jewels and with him next to me, powerful, forbidding and regal on his black onyx throne in his finery of jet and crimson, himself ornamented in gold. There were no Overworld monarchs as stunning as we.

I started as the trumpets sounded, and the troops of warriors were led in by the older dead, some skeletal in their current remains. The soldiers were horrible in their various states. Some were missing eyes, ears or other facial bits, ribboned flesh hanging from their faces. Others carried their limbs in with them, arms or legs thrown carelessly over one shoulder, bone still protruding at all angles. Every one of them was bathed in blood and reeked of the gore indiscriminately spattered over flesh and armor.

Our king was pleased. His face softened nearly to a half smile. He commanded the first man to come and stand before him. A grisly looking soldier came forward. His hanging curls, once yellow, were so matted with blood and dirt, they were now ruddy. He was missing his left eye, its hollow full of the dried blood that also crusted the side of his face. Older scars marred his forehead and other cheek, and a spear head still lodged in his belly, opening his organs to the air, their gore falling out over the blade while dirt and blood covered his clothes and armor. As he stretched out his arms, palms upwards, and began his account of his heroic death, I had to look away before I became violently ill.

I returned to my chamber alone much later. I had stayed at the ceremony for what seemed like hours, giving audience to bloodied warriors in all states of dismemberment, splattered with gore, holding forth in their tattered rags and broken armor about their valiant deeds and the heroic nature of their deaths. Such displays pleased him, but I found them unpalatable. The stench of death and blood still hung richly about them, permeating the entire room and leaving an iron taste in my mouth as it flooded my nostrils. In time, the scent would diminish and give way to the close, mineral scent of the grave beyond decay, but now, fresh, it nauseated me.

More than that, however, I preferred the men as they had been, alive, full of vigor, lungs filled with air, eyes glinting sunlight. When several dozen men had passed, I begged leave of Hades to return to my room. He reluctantly agreed, realizing, I suppose, that I could not endure much more until I grew a little stronger, which he assured me I would. I knew better. Without sunlight and earth, wind and sky, I would fade with each passing day, though just how many, I

could not tell, nor how many I had already survived.

I crossed to the darkened mirror set like a gem in the slab of rock that served as a wall opposite my bed. Looking into it, I saw, not the person that used to run through woods and fields and splash in streams, but a mere ghost of myself, grown white and angled with bones. I was beautiful still, hair of spun gold in long waves down my back, dressed in flows of silken cobalt, ornamented with gold and jewels, surrounded by a cavern of rock. Horrified, I saw myself buried alive, the undead, captive Queen of the Underworld. Trembling, I lay again, not fully reclined on my bed of furs, another reminder that I was no longer where these animals had roamed majestic and free.

Reflexively, I glanced at a shelf near my bed. Immediately, I averted my gaze. *No, I do not need them.* I struggled to fix my mind on ways of escape. It had crossed my mind to seek the Fates, if I succeeded in nothing else. At least I could cut my own silver cord, end this undead madness. I did not know, however, if the immortal had cords, or if they were governed differently than pure mortals. Even if I died, I would remain in the Underworld, not as his queen but as his subject, and he would be very angry with me then, angry for dying.

Time seemed to stretch on and on, and yet, I could still faintly hear the festivities continuing. I felt the walls grow more and more narrow, the orb of light grew increasingly dim. I was suffocating in the motionless air. *Perhaps only a taste.* My eyes darted back to the shelf where an alabaster box beckoned. I reached for it, my arm pausing, not fully extended. I drew it back as if bitten. *No, I must not. I must not eat anything in the Underworld. Again.* Such things

are forbidden. If anyone were transported to the Underworld alive and would have any hope of returning to the land of the living, they must never under any circumstances eat anything while in the Underworld, or they would be forever lost. Surely though, my father, Zeus, would not bind me to those rules. They were for mortals, and surely my mother would never stand for it in any case. Still, I was not sure. I knew I should not take that chance.

It was then I heard it. Silence. Finally, the feasting had ended. Maybe now, I would be able to sleep. I sat up a bit and began to unlatch my crown.

“No, leave it.”

I looked up, startled. How had he come in without me hearing? Hades stood, leaning against the doorway observing me, an almost smile playing about his lips. He was in a good mood. Too good. The ice cold trickle of fear ran down the back of my neck even as I obeyed. I wanted to run, but I could not even look away. He crossed slowly to the bed and sat beside me. For a moment, he only looked at me, so intently, his dark eyes searching my much lighter, cerulean ones.

“You are so beautiful,” he said at last.

I couldn't breathe. He sat so close, jet black robes flowing, lined in blood red. His black locks, curling, framed his face in dark flames. He reached out his hand then and trailed his fingers along my neck, caressing to the hollow and along my bared shoulder. Although his touch was frigid, I felt strangely warm. Gently, involuntarily, I stretched out my hand and touched his face. Pleased, he enveloped my hand in his, holding it to his cheek. I was frightened; I was eager.

I was petrified and euphoric, this time, every time.

He leaned forward on the bed, reclining me beneath him. His kisses fell like snowflakes on my face, neck and shoulders. Our lips met then, fire and ice, a volatile attraction that could not be stopped. I hardly noticed the cold when my silks fell away. There was no more Overworld or Underworld then, only him.

When I awoke, the room was empty. I was on my bed under many furs. Frost still tingled in my toes and fingertips as awareness returned to me. *How could I let him have me again? I swore he never would!* I hated him for all he made me feel! If I stayed here much longer, I knew I would be his in more ways than I wanted to imagine. I could not rise yet. My strength had already been drained by my last attempt to escape, and last night had emptied me of strength completely.

Despair settled on me as thick and impenetrable as the walls of stone. I would never escape, never see my mother again. My gaze fell on the small, white box once more.

How many have I already eaten? I was playing with fire, I knew, but I was only half mortal. Surely, I could not be trapped down here like a pure mortal. *I should look to see how many I've eaten.*

With this last justifying temptation, my resolve weakened. I snatched the alabaster box to myself and opened it. Three, smooth, red seeds shown up at me from their glossy exteriors. These were no earthly seeds though. They were angled like glass with facets all around their oval shape. They rounded out further in the middle, like oblong beads. The nectar they were filled

with... Just the thought of it made my head spin.

Strange, so strange. Such small, harmless looking things and yet their effect is transportive. There were six. I have eaten three already. Surely, I cannot be kept here. My mother will intervene when she finds where I have gone. What sparkle! It's almost as if the sun really were inside them. I really do need them if I am to survive. Just a taste is enough to make me remember the warmth of the sun, and a whole seed completely transports me to the Overworld. Yes, it is devastating to awake and realize I never truly left and that I was weakened by their strange powers, but for those few precious moments, I was home. The gods only knew how long I have been down here already. What if they do not find me for months, years?

My heart had begun beating faster then. A ringing rose in my ears. I was bringing the box to my mouth. It was nearly at my lips when I snapped the lid onto it with swift realization. Shaken, I lowered the box to my lap. I would not give in. I was panting now, but I could not breath. The air upon taking the seeds filled my mind. There, I had air. There, I had sunshine and earth. There, the grass hummed happily, and I could see my mother's face. There were no slabs of stone, not breath of crypts, no Underworld, no him.

How could it hurt to just touch one? The box on my lap was already open again. My fingers caressed a single seed tenderly. Euphoria shot from fingertips up my arm. My eyes shut. Moments passed.

What is that pressed against my lips? That smell...the seed, of course! After all, what harm could a little taste do? Just a taste wouldn't be eating it. Only to run my tongue over its

intoxicating ridges. He said I should have it a tiny bit at a time, and I am suffocating! And my body has grown very weak. A taste, a taste, and I will be myself again..Then, I will run and never look back.

Almost involuntarily, my tongue slid from between my lips to stroke the red seed. It was not enough; it pulled into my mouth. My tongue glided over the small seed, gently over its crystalline shell. It was sweet. It was heady, but it was only a promise of what lay inside, I knew. In moments, the air seemed less stale. The room around me had grown brighter, its edges blurred. Time did not linger, but felt suspended, as I rolled the seed around my tongue over and over again.

Take it out now.

Just a few moments more.

You have already eaten three. You promised never again.

I am still not eating it. Let me have it a bit longer.

That's what you said last...

By the gods, I'm suffocating! I am down here in this horrible, living death surrounded by the dead and decaying! I need this! Who knows how long it will be before I am found, before I can return to the Overworld? Do you know?

No.

Relenting, I will stop after this. I promise.

I crushed the pill against the roof of my mouth with my tongue. The spray of nectar filled

my mouth and ran down my throat. My body felt heavy, and I sank into the furs. Every muscle began to relax, and my head lolled towards my shoulder just in time to see the yellow in my veins as it crept outwards from my heart. Everything around me began to blur. Light, bright as dandelion down, shown high above me, and from my center, I was pulled towards it. I felt myself growing warmer and warmer, and all that surrounded me faded away as I soared upwards and upwards. Far above me as I rose towards the sun, the grass began to hum.

Grassy blades stretched their silken faces to the long, misty rays stretching down to them in a continuous embrace. I heard them, the pleasant hum of them, a murmur of nurturing light, so beckoning. I stretched out, long, slender arms raised and turned as a golden-bronze ring to halo the gold-glinting hair that radiated from my crown in waves stretching to curved calves before flowing to toes that rested on the finely woven meadow.

I felt the embrace then, and I smiled up at Helios, knowing he was behind the blinding light. Although I did not squint, I could not see him, just the blue then blue then blue in gradient hues and the brilliant globe he guided every day. My mother passed by then, flowers springing up under her footsteps, her golden-brown hair starred with blossoms. She glanced at me with a smile in her eyes as she passed. *There are yet gardens to bloom and fields and forests to tend.* I heard her without words. Her diaphanous, white robes trailed into the distance. I closed my eyes in the complete contentment of home.

Slowly, ever so slowly, I felt at first a tingle, as if of frost, in my fingertips. I dug my fingers further in little furrows of ground. Something was wrong. My fingers did not warm to its

touch. My eyes were open now. I raised my hands to my face. My skin, usually the gold of summer, had gone pale at the tips of my fingers. *No. No! I do not want to go back. Let me dream! Let me dream!* I rubbed my hands together to warm them, but instead, my actions only served to spread the chill to my palms. My heart beat a little faster. I still saw the sun; the flowers still waved, and the grass still hummed around me. My mother's robes were still an earth-bound cloud in the distance.

I tried to stand, to look about for answers. *No, not again!* They were growing shorter. I could not move. Rapid threads of blood beat from my heart in a steady rush, trying to stem the twin tides of fear and ice. The cold crept on, undaunted, up my arms to the shoulders, leaving them as pale as my fingertips, now white. I tried to cry for help, but no sound fled from my open mouth. Nothing escaped as the ice spread through my veins, making its way at last in a frozen circle to the very center of my being. It was as if I was being dragged from the center of my belly through my back, down, down through icy gray waters. I couldn't breath. *This must be what it is like...* but the final words were too terrible. A moment later, all was stillness and blackness.

The gloriously warm arms of sunshine that had held me, shrank into shriveled strands as they receded into the belly of a blue-white ball of gaseous flames. Far above me, it floated, remote, cold, within the gray-metal arms of its suspended cage. *It was over again, the dream, the tantalizing unreality.* I realized then that I was not underwater and gasped, flooding my lungs with empty air, cool and unstirred. I lay very still then, half-reclined on what I perceived to be fur. The slight smell of skins and granite permeated the room in which I lay. I knew then. I was

home.

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