



1

b u r n i n g w h a t e v e r

The fire upstairs cracked and popped. The heat dried my face and eyes as if I were leaning in too close to a campfire.

"911, what's your emergency?"

I screamed into the phone and rattled off the address of the burning laundromat. I let them know my sister and I were barricaded inside and we needed help now.

"I understand. Please miss, stay on the line. A firetruck and ambulance are en route. Look around what can you--"

I coughed into the receiver and ripped the cord out of the wall. Fucking chumps.

I vaulted up on a drying machine and perched like a hawk. The hollow metal clanked thunderously like a dropped sheet of tin. I flicked my lighter and rolled my fingers through the flame one by one before lighting my smoke.

"Nikki, I can't breathe." Firefly muffled her coughs with the over-sized sleeve of her army jacket. The fire crackled from the second floor of the laundromat. We waited on the back wall opposite to the barricaded entrance on the first floor. The dark room

flickered a faint red. Smoke seeped through the ceiling and down the narrow staircase on the far left side of the room. The air was still breathable and everything. She was being a fucking baby about it. A firetruck would wheel up to the door at any minute.

Firefly turned twelve at the end of summer and I turned sixteen this winter. We're runaway girls from different cities and we met up a little over two years ago, more or less accidentally. She ran away because her home was a terrible place. I ran away because it seemed like a good time.

The room was all kinds of fucked up. A stack of heavy laundry machines clogged the glass entrance and an overworked rickety hand truck sat off to the side. Chairs were strewn about and stray leafy drier sheets glided around on the floor, carried by some undetectable draft.

"Quit worryin and shit," I said.

"I don't know what you're thinking, but it's a dumb idea," she said and cuffed her sleeve over her mouth again. "I just know."

"Shut up, you don't even know what it is yet. Just wait." I pushed up my hoodie sleeves.

"Are you sure?" She dropped her hands and sighed. Her worried face appeared golden and fluttering. The fire light danced around the lean smile lines on the corners of her mouth. I'd never noticed those lines before. It made her seem older. Her brownish blonde dreads and braids draped in her squinting eyes. She combed the ropey mess back and it fell freely again.

Ever since last year we dreaded one another's hair. It's sloppy and wild on both of us—probably even worse on my black mop, but I don't check it much. It's the fault of her weird love of reggae. I don't get that shit...people all smiling like idiots, happy to be dicking around in the sand and patting on drums or whatever. I tried to explain that we're pasty bitches who have no rhythm, but once she got it in her head that she wanted dreads, she whined at me for about a month until I gave in.

A thick gust of smoke puffed down into the room. The railing on the staircase ignited suddenly like a trick candle. I hopped down from the drier and stood between Firefly and the flames, peeking upstairs and breathing in the tarry blackness.

"How can you breathe?" Firefly said into her sleeve.

"Didn't anybody tell you?" I looked back at her over my shoulder. "I'm a motherfucking dragon." I blew a stream of smoke into the air with a half smile and she grinned. Her face suddenly drooped and she teared up as if someone had socked her in the gut. She turned away and coughed. A rolled-up comic book was stashed in her back pocket, just barely visible under her heavy coat. I smiled like a jackal.

"I really think we need to go soon." Her wet lips quivered and

she scrunched her brow.

"You said like four weeks ago you were going to stop reading that shit. Fucking busted." I licked my teeth. Her eyes went wide.

"No, cut it out! It's mine!"

I flicked my smoke onto the floor and reached for her back pocket and she pulled the book away from me and held it an arm's length behind her. I spun her around and snatched it from her hands. I held her back with one arm and flipped through the pages with the other.

"Really? What the fuck do you see in this crap? It's going to rot that mouse brain even more than it is already."

"Just lemme have it! Stop messing around. I haven't even finished it yet!" She flailed her arms.

"You're gonna start reading real books--like those ones made up of words and shit."

"Nikki, I can't read like you. It's boring! I bought that with my own money. Give it!"

"Your own money? So you're holding out on me?"

She looked away, struggling for an answer. She took a deep breath and raised her brow like she was about to say something but then she coughed. She held her hand over her mouth to stop herself, but she coughed again and again. I let her go and she collapsed. I reached down to touch her shoulder but I stopped short.

I tossed the comic in her lap. It really was her money. She was a much better pick pocket than me. Sometimes I just give her a hard time. I don't even know why I do it. I'm not somebody who apologizes.

She stashed the book in her inside pocket and looked up at me. Her chest spasmed as if she were a regurgitating bird. She swallowed, took a composed breath and then started another coughing fit. I held her, planting her face in the crook of my arm to shield her from the smoke.

Really though, her pained hacking had nothing to do with the smoke. The fits had been with her at least as long as I had. They had always been bad, but had grown much worse over the last couple months. She was sleeping more than ever--she slept long into the day and was very slow to wake. Her normally tanned complexion had become pale and she shook with thick, full-body coughs that surfaced veins over her face and neck. Sometimes there was blood. I stole cough drops from a Rite Aid a couple of weeks ago, but those worthless fuckers didn't do shit for her. I ended up eating most of those delicious little cherry bastards myself.

Something upstairs collapsed and made a thud like a falling tree and bright ashes rained down from the ceiling. I climbed up onto the barricade and stared into the space between the machines and watched the street for the fire truck I knew had to come soon. A thin misty rain floated down outside.

All day a storm had been gathering over the city. In the morning it crept in from the sea. It was one of those rumbling gray days that smells like rain and even sometimes convinces you that it has rained already. Dark clouds as thick as snow drifts had been bulging on the horizon. Clouds that make you think of Armageddon. Throughout the day low thunder drummed in the distance.

The thin vapor drifted side to side and the wind carried swooping gusts of it seemingly back upward. A distant rain pattered slowly at first and came down in galloping concussions like falling shrapnel. I climbed back out.

"When do you think they'll be here?" Firefly said with desperate eyes.

"Really soon."

"What if they don't come?"

"It's fine. They'll be here."

"But I don't want you to get hurt."

"Me? What the fuck ever." I Scoffed at her.

"But..." Sirens echoed in the distance and she pursed her lips.

There are all sorts of sirens in the city. Different ones depending on where you are and in some cases what time it is. I like those drawn out ones that make it sound like there's an incoming bomb raid. I saw one of those sirens up close before. It's just a box with a handle. When you spin the handle the sound starts, slow at first then it picks up. I really never heard the spinning before I saw the thing but now the spinning is all I hear. The longer it drags on the more it makes me think of a bomb raid and the entire city crumbling to ash all around me. The city's fire trucks have pretty stupid sirens. Those ridiculous fuckers sound like retarded elephants huffing on giant kazoos.

Masked firemen stormed the building. They hurled the washers and driers out of the way.

"What if they find out you set the fire?" Firefly whispered and clenched her teeth.

I winked at her all calm and bold like an astronaut or some shit. She grinned. Everything would be okay. They'd take her to the hospital and fix whatever was wrong with her. Then maybe I could get some sleep.

I held her close and then a fireman snatched her from my arms. Moments later another man lifted and cradled me. I instinctively threw my arms around his neck.

The man carrying Firefly turned her lengthways through the door and for a moment I looked her in the eye. It couldn't have been for very long but it seemed like the moment kept going like we hit just the right combination of events to glue the world in place. Heavy boots crunched through glass like dry bones. The dinged shininess of fire axes reflected like mirrors that made the room bigger within a

dark prism.

Firefly smiled at me. Her eyes were drowsy and resigned. It felt like I'd locked eyes with a stranger before a car crash. Glossy blood coated her lips. There was a fondness in her sad and wide pixie grin. Something about the look made me imagine her staring up as she was lowered into a deep black well. Her nearly closed eyes lingered on me until she was carried out of sight.

My fireman carried me outside--I suppose he became mine when he picked me up. The rain swooped around the bronze streetlights and bled down upon rubberized fire suits and the grim unshaven faces of men loitering on the fire truck. All the firemen were smeared gray and they had lethargic expressions as though they had been doing this very thing every night for the last hundred years. They seemed more like a chain gang, telling inside jokes that were lost on me, forcing their cigarettes to burn in the rain as they cupped them one handed and held them low by their sides.

A police officer wearing a long raincoat took notes and glared right at me. I faked a cough and looked away. I tilted my head back and closed my eyes in the cool showering rain.

"Where's my sister?" I said to the man carrying me. I swallowed the rain from my lips and it tasted like ash.

He lifted his mask like in some lame fucking romance novel. Handsome fucker. I cleared my throat.

"Everybody leaves in an ambulance. Just a precaution. Everything will be fine." His voice was calm and smooth.

"Right."

The other fireman walked up holding something.

"Your friend dropped this. Didn't know if she'd want to keep it." He held out the comic book. It was wet but I put it under my hoodie anyway.

The ambulance drove away with the siren going and the lights spinning and everything. Supposedly Firefly was inside but it's one of those things that I had to take their word for. For all I knew it was filled with tires and soda cans.

2

q u a r t e r s

The hospital check-in guy or whatever was maybe twenty, dark black and handsome with blinding white teeth. He was all lean and lanky. He pushed a Chinese history textbook towards a phone on the desk and covered it with some napkins. His name tag read 'Maurice.' I gave him a line about my parent's insurance and he seemed to buy it. I threw out fake phone numbers like it was my fucking job and he ate it up.

This doctor shined a light in my eyes and said they were keeping me overnight and that I could leave with my parents in the morning. Right.

The hospital was like an airport purgatory where everyone coughs invisible spores up into the cool air, smelling like hand soap, staring all sick and sad back and forth. The halls were nice though. They seemed more like hotel hallways with lacquer walls and fancy ceilings. Long rows of calm dark doors stood fixed with bronze lamps so tiny, it's like the doors were reading late into the night and they didn't want to disturb anyone.

It was a strange and sorry place. All sorts of everyday things you normally do for yourself, people insist on doing for you. This fat motherly woman who smelled like dog food and had hands as cushy as soaked sponges led me around. She disinfected my cuts and jack hammered me with small talk about her lame kids and how they were doing in college. She commented on how muscled and slashed up I was and waited dumbly for a response that never came. Some shattered glass from the laundromat window fell from my pockets. She took my cigarettes and let me know what she thought about my smoking--because that's what pig-fucking whores do. I played along and pretended to care. Then she monitored me while I bathed.

It had been a week and a half since the last rain and otherwise I didn't get the chance to shower much. People who shower all the time are pathetic uppity bitches. It makes me want to clog their drains with their intestines.

Once a person understands their body's hygiene they can smell normal and stay pretty clean with minimal effort. Other than that, I think dirt and soot helps. You need it. Unnecessary cleaning softens you. It's the same as over brushing teeth. Everything is weakened once the enamel is scraped away.

They insisted that I change into a gown. I clenched my lighter in one hand and my fold-out box cutter in the other--it wasn't a big secret, but I don't go anywhere without either one. The cigarette-stealing, dog food reeking bitch led me to a bed and stuck me with an IV. I felt good, probably better than normal after an orange-skinned librarian looking chick brought me a tray of food. A soft Salisbury steak, green beans, mashed potatoes and two Hawaiian rolls.

Firefly was probably racked out, snoring with her eyes half open

and drooling like a mutt. The beds weren't bad at all. The nurse said they were doing my laundry, which was pretty cool of them, but it kept me from stealing anything for a lack of a place to stow my booty. I planned to take a washcloth, a bar of soap, a toothbrush and a pocketful of Q-tips. I'd gather up the stash before leaving.

As a serious scavenger I often notice things others don't, and instinctively relocate useful items to hidden spots. It's like when large litters of kittens eat and fight each other and take the biggest possible mouthful of grub and then escape to some dark corner. I have the lurking sense that whenever I see something I want, someone else is also locking onto it and they'll take more than they need, just to make sure they'll have enough. It's what I would do.

I cleaned my ears, wrapped some Q-tips up in a small towel and stashed them under the bed. I grabbed some baby wipes and cleaned between my toes. I knew Firefly would pocket the surgical tubing in her room. She's all into elastic and stringy stuff. It helps her build makeshift things like little tied together place mats that are almost like those Japanese ones, rebar-slingshots and some other useless decorative stuff.

I wiped the last of the gravy from the tray with my fingers. The nurse asked me if I wanted seconds. You're fucking right, bitch, I thought. I didn't care if it would make me sick. I just lightly nodded, giving the impression I might paw at it if she happened to bring it by. Didn't want to seem too desperate. I don't turn down food. I'd store that shit in my cheeks if I had to. Sometimes people give us food, sometimes we scavenge and sometimes we pickpocket. Every meal is a victory.

We had a pickpocketing night last December and we stopped by the arcade on Puller and 17th. It doesn't have a cool name, the sign just reads ARCADE in big neon letters. The place scrunched on both sides by other stores but if you walk up close you see a stairwell leading down, lit by somber fluorescents. Music plays inside but it's hardly noticeable and is mostly drowned out by beeping and repetitive sound bites. The place serves expensive bowling alley food, like huge sodas, chili cheese fries and nachos with chemically engineered bio-cheese. I rip on it, but the salty smells still make my mouth water because I'm usually hungry as fuck when we resort to that place—it's about a fifteen mile hike from where we sleep.

The arcade is a reliable choice in a pinch because kids are loose with their quarters. Still, it takes more finesse to walk away with pocketsful of coins than you would think. All it takes is one "hey man, that girl stole your quarters!" and we're out of there. If nobody is used to seeing us around, it's a solid way to pick up quick money for eats.

The darker the place, the better. The sudden lights strobing in the darkness and the jarring sounds make for great distractions. Some kids are so deeply immersed in some flashing screen that I can literally put my hands in their pockets and take what I want. The ones to watch out for are the ones bouncing from game to game. That night was freezing and we trekked long miles to reach the Arcade.

"How much are we trying to get?" Firefly said.

"Enough."

"Okay...but, how much is enough?"

"This much." I held out my hands to cup an imaginary softball-sized glob of quarters.

She focused on the size, actually taking me seriously. Then she ran her fingers along the lining of her coat and kicked out her sleeves and gazed downward at the crowded room. It's hard to tell what's going on in her head sometimes but I imagine she thinks she's some kind of cool comic book character on a mission.

Admittedly, she's a way better pickpocket than me. She can glide her slender little fingers into a pocket with such swift subtlety that people often apologize if they notice her at all, feeling that they must have been crowding the poor skinny thing unknowingly.

She's about my height, but I can wrap my thumb and pinky around her tiny wrists with room to spare. The wiry meat of her upper forearm looks like a Chihuahua leg when she ties her shoes. It's like I can almost literally see which muscles are moving which fingers. More than once, I've seen her reach in somebody's pocket from the front, literally standing face to face with them. She's never been caught. I've been caught plenty of times.

I do the big stealing--anything that may require a getaway. I'm more like a sledgehammer. I bumper car into people dumbly and use some cheese line like 'oh, I'm sorry. Wasn't looking where I was going.' And I run my hands along their pockets and dust them off. I'm not even good at it, as it's hard to tell where the entry points to some pockets are. And I'm not about to unzip or unbutton a damn thing. Last time, my hand got stuck in a pocket like a cookie jar and then me and this man just stared at one another dumbly before I bolted.

Watching Firefly, I felt bulky. I'm only five feet and a little over a hundred pounds or so but next to her I'm a damn monster. I was a great gymnast once. Lots of power and a grip like an ape. I wasn't the most graceful, but I made up for it with explosiveness. The coach was always on me for smoking because that nosey fuck lived in my neighborhood.

It was a strange sport for me because everyone cheers like damn fools for no reason, and I could never just lose myself in the vibe like everyone else seemed to. I enjoyed the chalk and the injuries and the moments when I was alone competing with myself.

Bars were my game. I swung the highest and hit everything like I meant it. It didn't matter if I was good, if I nailed the techniques or missed, I just wanted to go for it like I was trying to break my bones. So even when my routine was off, everyone would think "fuck, she really went for it hard." It was an expensive gym, and my mom loved to watch me. She was an embarrassing glossy eyed fool who jumped up and down and sometimes shouted for me during tense competitions. One night I told her to never come to my competitions again and she cried. I got kicked out of classes before I ran away. I never heard of someone getting kicked out of a class like that—I was told I was the first.

I make Firefly work out with me sometimes. She isn't terribly strong but she's enthusiastic. We exercise together in the morning but she is just one of those who is built small and stays small. She has no appetite and when she does she just wants little chocolate candies and stuff. Whenever we score a meal, I make sure she gets the fattier and meatier portions, even when I really want them. If there's leftover cheese or meat or something, I make her finish it. But for the purpose of reaching into pockets, she's just about the perfect size.

She slipped through the crowd of the arcade like an eel. Each time I saw her I knew she had more coins as her coat pockets drooped lower and lower. As usual, she worked nonstop. Her flushed face sweated and hairs loose from her dreads clung wet around her ears. She would only take so much from one person—whatever amount she felt they'd never notice. Sometimes while playing, kids can't believe they've run through so many quarters so quickly, and few would expect that they're actually right.

Even with Firefly's skill it took about an hour before we had enough for a decent meal. On the way out she pulled lightly at my sleeve.

"Yeah?" I yawned.

"I was thinking...do you want to play something?"

"Like what?"

"You know, a game." She stared down with blank curiosity.

"We've got food to buy."

"I know. It's stupid." She ran her fingers back through her dreads and trudged behind me.

Half a block down the street she zipped up her coat. Her sweaty face misted up in the freezing air.

"We'll see what's left over. If we have enough we'll come back and play something."

"Okay." She smiled and hugged me around my side.

We never went back. I should have taken her back. It was her money.

3

a r r e s t

I thought my stomach would feel bloated and upset but I stuffed my face a second time with no problems. The rain picked up and tapped on the window like hail.

The lights dimmed down. It seemed kind of childish, like they were telling me it was my nappy time or something. I was restless. It was the first time in a couple of years of trying to sleep without Firefly. I stood up and stared out the window. It was a long way down, my room was at least on the fifth or sixth floor. Curtains of sideways rain rolled over streetlights like a slow whipping towel and fell into a directionless mist down in the parking lot. I looked down into the blackness of the pavement and imagined it was the ocean and it felt like the hospital was a giant wooden ship rocking back and forth and dipping over slow mountainous waves. We dunked down and mist sprayed over the ship's bow like whale breath. My belly wound up with the rising and falling and I held my IV stand like a mast and swayed to keep balance.

I lay back on my bed and turned on my side. I picked up Firefly's comic book. On the front was a dark haired girl decapitating someone with a great sword and she was surrounded by skeleton birds. Her face had a skull painted on it. She was wearing some skimpy shorts and top. I never understood the appeal of comics. I flipped through, checking the cheesy dialog. 'Now I've come for you' and 'prepare yourself' type of stuff. I rolled my eyes. I stopped on the last page. The girl stood on top of a building in one of those common hero poses. Firefly had written 'Nikki' down her leg. Fucking cheesy moron. I tossed the book aside.

Outside of my room a doctor met with my nurse. They talked and then motioned towards me. An overweight, Aryan-looking guy sat reading a newspaper about twenty feet away from the them. He sipped a coffee in a way showed his apparent skill for enduring long stretches of boredom. He wore khakis, a shoulder harnessed gun and a black shirt. He shifted towards me and white letters on his shirt read: POLICE. A detective. He looked up and I looked down. Was he waiting

for me? It wasn't so unlikely. My stomach knotted up.

The escape routes were limited. Out in the hallway I'd either have to run left or right. I'd have to rip my IV out and hurl the stand in his way. I could probably outrun that chunky bastard. The nurse shook her head and put her hands up. Her short brunette ponytail bounced aggressively every time she moved her head. Her fake orangish tan was ompaloompaish and she looked soft to the touch.

She walked into my room with this firm expressionless grin. The doctor stood at the door with his hands on his hips. He turned his back and walked away. He was young for a doctor and seemed nervous. The detective looked over at me and then he looked away. Under the blanket I pulled the IV needle out slowly and then I sat up, gripping the stand. The nurse huffed nervously.

"Nikki, please. Lie back down."

"Oh, I'm fine where I am." I propped one foot back on the bed ready to bolt down the hallway. I glared into her eyes, trying to read her. I'd have to do without my stash. I bet someone would find the sushi wrap of Q-tips eventually and stare at it, all wondering what the fuck was going on in here.

"Nikki, you and the other girl. Gabby."

"Firefly."

"Firefly?"

"Yeah, nobody calls her that. She's my sister." I knew if I said anything else they wouldn't let me leave with her. The woman blinked a few times and swallowed.

"We haven't been able to reach your parents. There's something I have to tell you."

"Who cares, get on with it."

"There was a lot of smoke in the building, and that exposure...your sister had a condition. What I'm... There were complications and she passed away." Her voice cracked.

I laughed in her fucking face.

"You have the wrong person. She has sorta brownish blonde dreads. Army jacket. Wears rubber bands around her wrist. She's a little shorter than me. Lean and all skinny like."

She looked at me all confused like I was some kind of pilotless plane she was trying to fly.

"Nikki. The doctors couldn't get her enough oxygen. She wasn't...I'm sorry, they couldn't do anything."

"Just go check again." I half grinned at her.

She coughed and looked at me with her brow all scrunched up.

"Nikki."

"Don't look at me like that. You're just straight up fuckin' wrong. And stop calling me by name like we're BFFs or some shit."

"There were only two girls brought in tonight and you're the other."

"And you're a fucking idiot. You stupid bitch, I told you to go check again cause you're wrong."

Her expression made her seem like some kind of fish. Not even a particularly bright fish. Her glasses couldn't hide how stupid she looked with her wide empty eyes--eyes disgustingly caked with full lashes. I imagined the inside of her head as a dark movie theater with a reel projector sitting on some wobbly desk, spinning and clicking long after the film had stopped, with a crowd of mouth breathing morons all drooling and glaring up at a big blank screen.

She was wrong.

"Nikki..." She reached out to me.

I kicked off the bed and slapped her like I was trying to end her life. It cracked like a goddamn lion whip. A slap so loud and solid I was surprised she was still standing. She fell back against the wall with a look of shock so empty and so confused that it was obvious she'd never been hit before. Blood dripped down from her nose. I hate people who have never been hit. I've been hit every way you can get hit and then some creative ways people have never even heard of before.

My hand throbbed. She held her cheek and tears ran down her face. Maybe her eyes were just watering but I hoped it was tears. Her knees buckled a bit. She looked up at me searching for pity or maybe giving it. She reached for something in a drawer and held one side of her face. I gritted my teeth and slapped her southpaw on the other side. I've never slapped anybody southpaw before. It felt great.

I threw wild punches. She leaned against the wall and screamed. I clawed her face wanting to disfigure her. She tried to push me away and she yelled something about how she was sorry. She turned her back and hunched over, cupping her hands over her ears and drooling blood. I grabbed her hair, arced my fist from down low and uppercutted her in the jaw. Her teeth clacked together like two rocks. I hoped she could taste blood and the bitter grittiness of chipped bone.

The doctor lifted me up. I didn't even hear him come in. All I heard and saw was that stupid bitch. I wrapped my hand up in her hair like some people do with spaghetti and when the doctor pulled me away I dragged her along with me. She gripped my hand with both of her soft hands and I screamed something about fucking killing her. I ripped at her hair again and again like I was trying to start a lawnmower. Most of it came out along with a small chunk of her bloody scalp. She stumbled out of the room and slipped to the floor like a newborn calf. The fat detective handcuffed me to the bed. I didn't see him come in either. I reached for their eyes with my free hand. They stuck me with something to make me sleepy. I tried to fight it and sit up. The doctor put his hand on my chest and in slurred words I accused him of trying to cop a feel. He seemed embarrassed and jerked his hand away.

A group gathered around the collapsed nurse to help her. She wasn't moving. She didn't know I was motherfucking King Kong. She sure as fuck knew now. I got that lying cunt good.

4

o u r l o n g w a l k
i n t o t h e s u n

We don't have a home in the traditional sense--like a place where you sit down and pay bills or heal up after faking the day away, but we do have our own little spot carved out in the city. We named our home The Shack but it doesn't much resemble a shack. If you wanted to pick bones about it, it's more of a cave.

Our place is located in a large industrial district on a harbor--which is good because it keeps us away from people, but sometimes bad because shops and food are always a long hike away. The ocean air is nice but sometimes smells like whatever the fuck is being dumped into it. We have a clear view of a lighthouse maybe a mile off shore that Firefly calls The Floating Castle--because it looks like it's floating...and I guess if you think like her, it looks like a small castle.

As far as I can tell, the area surrounding our place is an abandoned construction site. Maybe the funding for whatever project dried up or maybe the process of plowing through the city and erecting giant concrete structures was just a jobs program with no real goal in mind. It doesn't matter. It belongs to us now.

A wide drainage ditch runs through the site. I've seen similar half-tunnels in other places around the city as well, as if some huge worm ate a path through the streets and after it had its fill it burrowed back underground. The ditch slopes slightly downhill and ends at a sheer wall with giant grates. The grates funnel runoff and rain water towards the reservoir.

So, if everything is quiet, our cave whistles like a seashell in the wind and the water gushing towards the reservoir makes it sound like you're on some raft drifting towards a powerful waterfall. Sometimes I close my eyes and my stomach tenses up for just a moment as I feel myself sailing off the edge into some misty canyon.

A train track runs over the ditch, suspended by a thick bridge. The Shack is in the crook underneath the bridge. I'm not sure what our cave was initially intended for. It's almost perfectly cylindrical, or it was after we emptied out all the cinder and concrete and rebar.

The entrance of The Shack is about twenty feet away from the ditch bed and can hardly be seen unless you stare directly at it. Even then, unless a person knows what they're seeing, the entrance is a sight they pass by without the slightest acknowledgement. There are lots of places like that in the city--in every city really, and probably even out in the country. I have keener vision than the average person who holds a job and who struggles to keep track of their viral obligations.

I could walk down the street right now and discover any number of runaways, and those who've given up their former lives, or those who've lost everything and burrowed into the earth only to find out that's where they should have been in the first place.

People have walked by our place before and glanced at the nearly reflective tin sheet door of The Shack--they just keep going like it's not even there. The thought that something is behind it probably never registers. The tin came from a mechanic shop halfway across the damn city. It's layered and heavy as hell. I found it a couple years ago soon after I met Firefly.

The days were muggy and the nights were just cold enough that it was difficult to situate myself in any comfortable way, or fall asleep with just my jeans and hoodie to keep me warm. I'd grown hungry over the last few days. I'd sold all the last of my stuff--even the school backpack I'd held onto. I didn't have any money left. I wandered the streets following the smells of foods that streamed warmly on cold downwinds. I mostly just breathed it all in, and let my mouth water as I swallowed over and over.

A dark burly man with a fat belly, hairy arms and a stained shirt trudged up the stairs of some underground bar wearing an apron and talking to himself. He gripped two garbage bags in his hands. The aroma of deep fried food saturated the street--you could smell it from miles away. I was having a hard time suppressing my appetite. My stomach was coaxing me to beg, but that just wouldn't happen.

At the time I had no scavenging skills. I was green, weak and accustomed to walking into a kitchen and deciding what I wanted to eat. When introduced to real hunger you think differently about food.

It scrambles your brain. I take pleasure in watching people who've never been really hungry go hungry. Especially those haughty religious lecturing types. They find out their ethics are a luxury-dependent fantasy.

The man flung the bags into a back alley dumpster and slammed down the lid. He kicked the metal housing and the entire dumpster rolled a bit on its wheels. He was probably pissed from dealing with drunks and feeling smothered by the need for a paycheck. I didn't get it. There wasn't anything physically keeping him there. Why not just throw down the apron and walk off? It didn't strike me that he was weak, but maybe he and I were operating on different wavelengths. If I could get him to tune into my station maybe he would change. He probably felt the same about someone like me.

He wiped the sweat from his nose with an annoyed snort. His sandpapered face and deep carved wrinkles made him look tough and sad. It wasn't a unique look. I'd seen it before on subway trains and in war documentaries. His anger seemed to shield some hard kernel of dignity and self worth. I bet he hoped there would be something to come along to make him so angry that he would take some drastic action and change something--anything, about his life. He trudged back down the stairs with his shoulders slumped as if he were carrying sandbags. Smoke and fried foods again wafted up to the street. I closed my eyes and sniffed in the oily air like the foggy-warm night breath of a sewer grate.

I flung open the dumpster. Four trash bags rested at the bottom like fat and slouching little piglets. I jumped up and landed with my belly on the dumpster's edge. I teetered back and forth, grasping for the bags. They were still about half a foot out of reach. I rocked forward a little bit, extending my fingers. I tumbled over inside with a dull thud.

It was my first time inside a dumpster. I lay there and thought about what a jackass I was. I chucked the bags out and crawled back outside. During all my fucking about, I'd managed to scoot the dumpster a few feet crooked.

I clawed open a bag. I scowled and rummaged quickly through it, discarding clearly inedible items. There were cigarette butts and beer cans, some plastic plates and crumbled remains of deep fried foods. I ate the chicken skins and gnawed at a few bones. There was a half-full beer can. I drank from it and quickly spat it back up along with a cigarette butt. One plate had fries long since ketchup-logged. I ate them in a hurry, licking the vinegary sweet grime from my fingers.

I'd been homeless for about a month and a half. I'd left a note at my folks home saying to never look for me. I had survived until then on the hundred and seventy dollars I scored when I pawned all my stuff. I'd been out on the streets for a while but the last few days

seemed to be the first time I was actually alone, as I had no money and nowhere to go. Recently, I had been worrying about what I would do and what would happen to my resolve through the morbid stages of starvation and bodily decay.

The scavenger food was gross at first, but there was a special triumph in eating it. A sense that I needed no one on the planet. If the cities fell and we were all left out in the woods, I could gnaw at squirrel bones, pine straw and roots. Then after everyone else didn't make it, I would eat them too.

I ripped open another bag and found a cardboard chicken basket with an entire breast and two hardly touched drumsticks. I went at a drumstick like a mangy three-legged wolf. In the flurry I bit my finger and dropped the food to the ground.

I froze. There was someone watching me from about twenty feet away in the alley. A girl dirty like she'd been changing out carburetors, staring at me with these pixie eyes and a slightly open mouth. I'd seen plenty of other runaways in the city, but she was younger than most of us. She was scrawny and looked even hungrier than me. I looked away from her and kept eating. I swallowed the mush in my dried mouth and the sound seemed to echo in the alley silence. I held still for a moment and waited to see what she would do.

"Quit givin me the bug eyes." I shot her a what the fuck look.

She opened her mouth to say something, but she didn't speak. Her sunken eyes were glazed. The dark gunk on her face had clean stream lines running from her eyes down her chin. "I said stop fucking looking at me." I threw a can at her and she scurried back.

I ate. With her staring at me I couldn't even tell if the chicken was good or not. I just didn't want to be hungry. I felt her eyeballing me as if every movement I made was being recorded. I turned my back to her and crouched over. After a while I looked over my shoulder.

"Jesus fucking Christ, what! Fuck off." I jumped up with a bag in hand and I hurled it at her. The bag hit her and she doubled over. I sat back down and ate angrily.

She slowly got up and then she started to pull at the skin of the bag. The plastic stretched thin but stayed together. She clenched her teeth and pulled harder. It finally broke open and she dug inside. Her scrawny arms disappeared into the trash. She pulled up small scraps and ate them quickly. Her hands trembled. The wind blew by and her teeth chattered.

I found myself motionless with the chicken in my hands as I watched her. She couldn't find any real food. She turned over cans and pulled out cigarette butts. Even small items shook in her tiny hands as if she were lifting heavy rocks. Her jeans and once-white tee shirt were rotten and gray.

She was ruining everything. My pulse beat in the back of my

throat. I didn't know what I was thinking. I huffed and placed my chicken back inside my bag and held the plastic shut over it. I walked over to the girl and snatched her bag away from her as if I would hit her and she raised her hands to protect her face.

"You can't have that bag. It's mine. You can have this one, I'm done with it." And I tossed it down in front of her. She didn't move for a moment and she then looked up at me. I walked back over to my spot and sat cross legged. I broke into another bag but there wasn't much inside. I pawed through the sorry contents and glanced up.

She shyly opened the bag and her eyes opened wide. She held the chicken breast up and it seemed large in her hands, blocking out most of her face. She ate and coughed. She lowered her hands. Her cheeks were full and she swallowed with some effort and then looked at me and grinned. I quickly looked down and kept rummaging. I picked at some other things occasionally glancing back at the girl. A bottle crashed on the wall behind me in a glassy pulse.

"What the hell! Fucking rats!" The man threw another bottle and it clanked off my knee, shooting a throbbing through my bones like kicking the edge of a bench with a pinky toe. I yelled and picked up the bottle and hurled it back at the man. He ducked the whishing bottle and stormed towards me. I limped back into the alley. As I passed the girl, she followed behind me. I reached into her bag and produced another bottle. I held it by the nozzle and smacked it against the wall. It clanked loudly but didn't break. I smashed it again and it just bounced back in my hand. I hit the wall like I fucking meant it and the bottle broke into pieces. I picked up the broken nozzle and ran back into the alley.

The alley was a dead end with a single light shining down over a metal handleless door. The man ran around the corner. I pushed the girl behind me. I held up the broken nozzle and stood there heaving breaths. The man looked at me, the jagged nozzle and then at the girl and he furrowed his brow. He shook his head, shoed us away with a lazy hand and walked back down into the bar.

I thought he would call the police right away. I wasn't about to be taken anywhere I didn't choose to go on my own. I winced and rubbed my knee. The girl's scrawny arms wrapped around my waist from behind. I like to feel cold and everything but I'm not stone, I let her finish her hug so she'd get it out of her system. Maybe she was just like me, only not physically strong enough to make it. I was small, but muscled and durable. I could fall into dumpsters, tumble down a few flights of stairs, bang my head in doorways and then just brush myself off. I think it's nature's apology for making me thick headed. I felt like an old car door that had to be slammed shut sometimes. She seemed fetal and glassy, like if you picked her up the wrong way something would break.

"Anyway. I'll see ya. He's probably calling the police. So if

you're looking to go home or something..." I said.

"I can't. I'm not going back." She tensed her jaw and stared at me with a little fire.

I considered it for a second and half grinned.

"Well, you'd better get outta here then."

"Can I go with you?" She lightly gripped my sleeve.

"Oh, fuck no! What're you, stupid?" I shucked her off and rolled my eyes.

The man again trudged up the stairs and we backed up into the alley. He held two styrofoam boxes in one hand and a square drink holder in the other, with two straws stuck into a pair of giant cups.

"Hey honey, I shouldn't of thrown that bottle at you."

"Two bottles, you fucker." I stepped forward and the girl tugged at my sleeve. The man sighed.

"You should get back home. This isn't some tree house or dollhouse."

"Dollhouse! Fuck you, I didn't ask for your advice. For all you know we'd be going home to fucked up, abusive drug addicts who touch us in bad places. But that's okay. Whatever. You know, so long as you don't have to see it."

The man squinted in the streetlight as if he were staring into the sun. His sweat dripped from his forehead and I could smell his musky body odor across the alley like popcorn and piss.

"Maybe. For all I know you're right. And for all I know you're also lying through your teeth...I ran away when I was sixteen." He sighed and set the boxes and drinks down. "Take it. It's cold but it's good. Listen, don't come back. Don't be like some sorry mutt and come back for food, because you sure as hell won't get any. It's not a nice place. You should know better."

He turned and walked off. The girl looked down at the food and ran down the alley a bit.

"Thank you!" She waved and smiled. The man waved and gave a half smile over his shoulder. She opened one of the boxes. "Look at all the food!" she said, her voice cracking gleefully. The man lingered for a moment and smiled at her. I watched him walk down the stairs and he threw me a quick pilot's wave.

In the boxes were hamburgers, large piles of fries and pickles. Huge sodas sat on the side. I liked the idea of the survival food, and at first I thought I should refuse this charity meal out of some pride in my own newfound self-reliance, but I quickly decided refusing free food wouldn't be in keeping with any sort of scavenger code.

We sat and ate. I couldn't remember anything ever tasting so good. The girl stopped about a third of the way through her giant hamburger and held her belly and sipped at her soda. She had been drinking it for a while, but the massive cup was still almost full as

if it would take her a week to choke down.

"Eat your food. It won't keep." I nodded to her.

"I'm so stuffed."

"You're scrawny as hell. Eat it already."

She picked up the hamburger and took a few more labored bites. I finished my meal and coaxed her along. We sat there listlessly sighing every now and then.

I stood and said goodbye. She looked at me longingly and I walked away. I followed the street that would eventually lead down towards the ocean. There was a dock I'd been sleeping at. A warm breeze blew in from the ocean for a few hours each night.

The night sky was mostly clear and glowed orangishly from the city lights. A handful of the brightest stars shone dimly through the fiery veil and I eyed them as I made my way. I felt pretty good. Full belly. A slight headwind blew comfortably in my face. I squinted like a satisfied dog hanging its head out of a car window.

A light cough echoed off the buildings behind me. I looked back and the girl was there, holding her huge soda. She stopped when I looked at her. I turned forward and kept going. I thought about setting her straight, but decided instead I would make her give up on following me. I had at least a seven mile trek ahead, and I knew she wouldn't make it. I picked up the pace, marching aggressively forward. I built up a light sweat.

For at least a mile I kept a solid pace that was just short of a jog. I didn't hear anything for a few minutes. Then her coughs carried on the wind behind me.

"What the fuck." I walked faster. One of those walks that's like running for some people. I even lost my breath for a second. I slowed down and enjoyed the wind.

She would have to stop somewhere and pass out for the night. It would be good for her--a big meal and exercise. I imagined that tomorrow she would wake up in some alley feeling stronger and full of life. Far better off. I'd already done a great deed by helping her. I convinced myself it would be better for her to lose track of me quickly with no further thought.

The coughing returned. Worse this time. Loud, sharp and phlegmy sounding. I looked back at the girl. She propped her arm against a building and puked all over the sidewalk. What a fucking waste. I shook my head. She walked towards me again with glazed eyes, breathing heavy and holding her belly. I licked the salty sweat from my lips, said fuck it and broke out into a run.

"Wait!" she cried out in the distance.

By the time I reached the harbor I was nauseous and sweating all over. I tied my hoodie around my waist and rested my hands on my hips. I peered out into the ocean. The city lights rafted calmly on the surfaces of dreary waves. I paced back and forth. I'd been

sleeping outside of a hut on the harbor. It had rotten wood walls and a tin roof, and was probably some kind of storage for boat parts and oil and fishing poles or whatever the fuck idiots who like to go out on the water keep around.

Once I'd cooled down I sat on the corner of the small hut and crossed my arms. The water beneath the dock sloshed around. My skin felt sticky and I fantasized about a shower.

The more I listened to the ocean, the more I imagined hopping in for a quick swim. It would never happen--I'm deathly afraid of water that I can't see through. I wouldn't tell anyone that, but my fear of sharks is vivid, mostly ridiculous I know, but every time I dip into dark water I picture myself being eaten in horrible detail starting with my feet, feeling my ankles crunch and pop from the force of the bite pressure. The dock dropped off into deep boating waters, so there would be no knee high wading. I convinced myself I was too sleepy to take a dip. I crossed my arms and closed my eyes.

At least an hour passed. Clouds swept in from over the ocean. Big thick clouds that blocked out the orangish tint of the sky. The wind picked up and cawed over the water as if some flurry of dark birds was headed my way to peck the flesh from my bones. I grinned and closed my eyes again, content with the sensation that I lived alone like some cursed creature that lurked only on haunted nights.

A cough carried in the wind. Full on hacking and gasping for air.

"No fuckin way." I glanced around the corner of the hut and saw the girl as she limped her way down towards the dock. I hid quietly in the dark shadow of the hut. I couldn't tell if she saw me or not. She paced for a long while and then sat next to me.

"Hi, again." She sucked hyperventilating breaths and smiled.

"How did you find me?"

"I...looked everywhere. I started over...by the shops and then went through...the alleys and then..." She pointed with her eyes mostly closed and huffed. "This was the only place left. I thought that I'd would come here...to rest too. So I thought it was a good idea to check."

"Why're you following me? You know I don't know where I'm going any better than you do, right?"

"That's okay. I just wanted to come with you."

"Why me? You can't come with me. I wander around. Trying to keep up with me just one time almost killed you. You'd never make it."

"I can keep up."

"You wouldn't want to."

"But can I just stay with you this one night?"

I thought it over and clearly imagined myself sneaking away before she ever woke.

"All right, but only if you leave tomorrow. I'm sure as fuck not

taking care of you. I got enough problems."

"Okay, I'll go tomorrow. If you really want me to."

"I do."

"Okay."

I closed my eyes and slumped over. A few moments later she leaned against me. I almost shoved her off but just sighed instead. The wind grew cold. Colder than all the other nights I'd been through so far. Soon the girl was shivering, and I put my hoodie back on. She sort of balled up into my side like she was trying to sneak into my pocket. Then it rained. Lightly at first and it picked up to a ferocious downpour like some sort of tropical island bullshit.

I kicked in the rotten door of the hut, but there was an inch of rainbow surfaced water on the ground and it smelled like gasoline. I painted a miserable mental picture of me and the girl standing in a puddle all night shivering and I slammed the door in frustration.

We marched down the street. It seemed no matter which way we turned the wind caught us headlong, as if it were trying to lift us up like kites. She took my hand and we pushed forward, leaning into the wind.

Then I saw the long drainage ditch and the bridge of the abandoned construction site. Lightning struck damn near on top of us. The girl yelped and grabbed me. We made our way under the bridge and walked towards the crook. A streetlight shone faintly close by and illuminated the small inlet. We crawled inside. It was mostly dry, but one stream of water dripped down from the bridge, directly into the small cave.

"We're so lucky that we found this spot." She shivered and smiled.

"Are you stupid? It's cold as shit and we're soaked." My jaw shook. Still she smiled. She held my hand for a moment.

I took off my hoodie and wrung it out. Then I wrung out my jeans and socks. The girl did the same. I couldn't stomach putting the freezing wet clothes back on, so I just crossed my arms and sat there naked and slumped. She hugged me, her shivering wiry torso pressing up against my side. Soon she felt warm and I put my arm around her. Things started to feel okay. The storm howled under the bridge and horizontal rain blasted outside but it was calm enough in the cave.

The girl didn't move for a while and I thought she was asleep. I kept still so I wouldn't wake her. She shook and cried silently for a long while. I couldn't think of anything in the world worth being so sad over. She held onto me.

She fell asleep in my arms. The bronze streetlight shining into the inlet cut off. A moment later it came back on again. It flickered off and on, again and again. The bulb was dying.

The murk had washed from the girl's pixie face. She glowed celestial in the pulsing light. Her mouth moved and she mumbled

incoherently. The light cut off and beamed again. Her partially opened eyes darted about, shining with an opal glint through her lids like the razor edge of a waning eclipse.

I watched her through the night and each time it occurred to me to leave before she woke, I held off and stayed just a little longer. She woke and shivered in the morning. The wind whistled by the door but the rain had stopped.

"If we don't put our clothes on they'll never dry out." I forced myself back into my freezing clothes and she did the same. My socks weren't as bad as I imagined they would be.

The inlet was almost a perfect place to sleep. I surveyed the angle of the bridge and considered why water had leaked directly into the cave all night, but nothing came to mind. Just an unlucky placement. A tarp over the entrance would work great, I thought.

"It's cold." She bounced up and down under the bridge.

"I know. If there was a roof, that spot would have worked really well." I stared at the entrance, wringing out my hoodie a little more, though no drops fell from it. It was just wet enough to be perfectly miserable. "Help me find something to put over the entrance."

"Okay!" she said and smiled with a little too much enthusiasm.

"You don't have to. You can go already if you want. You're still leaving today."

Her expectant look faded and she nodded.

"Oh, I know. I know that."

We wandered a long way into the city. She kept trying to hold my hand and I kept slapping it away. I hoped to tire her out so much that she'd never make it back. The sun broke through the clouds and shone brightly. The air became moist and swampy.

There was a mechanic shop and junkyard area with slabs of tin strewn alongside it. Cars were lined up everywhere, and in the distance the sounds of clanking and talking echoed from metal corridors. One of those pressurized air gun things that screws bolts on kept whizzing off and on.

I looked around and pulled a big square piece of tin from the wall. It was much thicker than I'd imagined--double plated with something inside. It was heavy, and I knew the girl would drop dead if she had to help carry it.

"This should work," I said.

"Really? Isn't it too big? And it looks like it belongs to somebody."

"Bullshit. Lets drag it away from here and then we can carry it back."

She clenched her jaw and nodded. I pushed the slab along the dirt and out to the empty street. We then proceeded to try to hoist it up. I lifted my side of the slab but she couldn't get under her

side. When she finally did, she couldn't lift it. In one burst of energy she lifted it up to her knees and the slab fell back down again. I stared at her expectantly while she tried to lift it over and over. She fell down. I smirked at her and she got back up and tried again.

The sun started to beat down with an overexposed brightness like a fucking atom bomb slowly exploding around the corner. Sweat dripped from her face. I pushed the slab up onto a trash can and then we were able to carry it together for about fifty feet. She collapsed under the weight and cried out.

"I can't," she cried into her sweat. She coughed and hyperventilated and tried to lift it with her trembling arms but it didn't budge.

It was just like I'd planned but when I turned away she latched onto my leg and pleaded for me not to go. For a while we didn't move.

"I'll do anything, just let me come with you." She closed her eyes.

"Yeah, anything except help me carry the roof I need. You're fucking worthless. Just go bother somebody else already."

I pried her from my leg and propped her against the wall. She stared down at the slab as if it were a gravestone and I walked away.

I didn't get very far. Something about her expression had me considering what it really was that I had wanted to say to her. I hadn't so much planned out what to say, I'd just imagined what it would look like, but this wasn't it. What I meant to say was something that would've sent her naturally flying off like a bird that I should've never handled in the first place. But I'd fucked it up. I'd fucked a lot of things up.

Fine, I thought. She stared up at me as I walked back. I tied my hoodie around my waist and wiped my hands on my shirt.

I dead lifted the slab and turtled my way under it. I clasped it with my hands behind my back and lunged up. I fell back to my knees and lunged up once more as explosively as I could, and then I stood there, slumped over with the thing upon my back like some ant trying to carry off an entire potato chip.

"Well? Don't just sit there. Come on," I said.

"You're so strong!" She jumped up and cheered. Her mouth hung open. She looked ecstatic and high with her wide eyes like she was witnessing some great feat, but I knew I was just some idiot with a slab of metal on my back. A tarp would have worked just fine.

I adjusted and the strain buckled my knees a little when I dipped down too low. It wasn't long before sweat dripped from my head. I stared down at my big square shadow and focused on not tripping.

Downhills were harder than uphill. On downhill I felt like I was in danger of smacking down face first. I knew if I fell, it would

be impossible to lift the hunk of metal again. The heaviness seemed to increase with every step. It felt like I was hauling the moon on my back.

My forearms burned. My forearms never burned. I could fall asleep while hanging on a bar. I could tighten lug nuts with my fingers and open those jars that you hand over to the biggest and dumbest guys. Of all things, my grip never gave out.

Soon I was sucking wind like a horse trudging through some vast desert. I looked over to the girl. She sweated in the sun. The trip was hard on her too, but every time she glanced at me there was this amazed look in her eyes and she smiled.

"You should take a break. Your face is red."

I shook my head and sweat flung to the ground over my seaweedish black hair. I knew it was a bad idea. Once the slab went down, it would stay down. I tried to walk in a straight line. Straight lines are the shortest distances, I thought.

I closed my eyes and when I opened them I had veered off course. Even when I stared directly where my next step would be I found myself careening to the left and right.

In the distance I saw the harbor and tried to calculate how long it would take to get there. It was like an island that seems much closer than it is, and I was stuck rowing against the current forever towards it. On the backdrop of the ocean the far portion of the dock seemed as though it was floating in the air along with the distant lighthouse.

I counted my steps first by the hundreds and then by the tens. We took a left turn once at the harbor and made it five blocks. I thought we found our area but we had taken a wrong turn by about a block. I screamed all sorts curses in my mind and held my head low as if I were plowing a field. Everything became dark for a moment and I widened my eyes and took deep breaths. We found the drainage ditch and the bridge. I walked up to the edge, looking down into the ditch. My legs would give out if I tried to walk down the slope. I turned around and let the slab fall. It slid about halfway down and stopped. I raised slowly upright as if I were a hundred years old.

My hands were still clenched mostly shut. I held them in front of me and I couldn't open them. Blood had dried over them and the imprint of the metal was etched in my skin.

"Let's cool off," I said. I nearly fell and then side stepped.

"Yeah." The girl squinted and followed me towards the dock. Her skin was sunburnt but it made her seem healthier. I knew she'd be hurting later.

I washed my hands in the ocean. They burned as if I'd dipped them in acid. I was too tired to think of sharks or being eaten even though it was probably more likely as I washed my own blood out to sea. I hurt so much all over that I could only hope a shark would

come by and bite my head clean off. I splashed water over my skin and then lay face down on the dock with my arms hanging over the side. I stared into the water's surface. My vision grew dark again and I widened my eyes.

I passed out. I'm not sure for how long, probably only a few moments, but it took me a while to realize where I was when I came to. My arms tingled. Every part of me shook as I stood up and my fingers were still curled and stiff as oak.

"Hey, over here!" the girl said. I followed her to a water hose wrapped on a building next to one of the boats. We drank about a gallon of water each from it and washed one another off. She laughed and sprayed me in the face. It felt good and I didn't say much. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, feeling like my brain had been cooking steadily at 350 degrees.

The sky was clear.

"We can put the door on tomorrow. The cool air feels good," I said. I couldn't have lifted the slab again if I wanted to.

"Okay." She smiled and she stared at me with adoring eyes. "I've never seen anybody so strong. That was a really long way."

It grew dark and we retreated to the cave. My belly was empty but I couldn't manage to move. My legs cramped up in excruciating surges and I stretched them silently with my eyes closed.

"Maybe tomorrow won't be so rough," I said.

"What's your name?"

"Nikki."

"Nikki?"

She considered my name for a moment, whispering it to herself over and over. Then she said nothing.

"Well..."

"Huh?"

"What the hell is your name, you idiot?"

"You really wanna know?" She smiled. "Everybody calls me Gabby." She trailed off and looked outside the cave into the night sky as if she could see the 'everybody' she was thinking of in the distance. Her hair blew gently in the wind as if she were sailing on calm waters. Moments later her eyes closed slowly, her head dropped down and then she snapped back awake.

She rested her head on my belly, threw her arm around me and closed her eyes. I yawned and balled up my hoodie for a pillow. The gray night gradually grew pitch black. I felt a thumping pulse upon my side. A whistling wind sent chills over my skin. Even with my adjusted eyes I couldn't see a thing. Then the streetlight hummed like the distant sound of twisting metal and it flickered on. The girl glowed for a moment and then all was dark again.

