

# *The Keeper of Dreams*

By Matthew Keefer

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Words are flint to the soul, and the flesh its timber.

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## Why Evil Roams

Two brothers, Good and Evil, came before the Judge on their last year training together. They had grown up hunting animals, knowing wild mountain streams, and had built their homes in the forest. The Judge spoke to the brothers.

“You must decide how to divide the lands,” she said.  
“You both have the courage to govern these.”

“But,” said Good, “my brother shall rip the trees from their roots! He will leave his lands rotted and barren.”

“He,” Evil pointed, “has always been jealous of my ambition! Ever since our birth, he has been aching to rid himself of me.”

“Then,” the Judge said, “I shall offer these lands to the one victorious in battle. The slain cannot rule.” She placed two swords before the brothers.

“Dear brother,” said the weaker to Good, “surely we do not need these weapons. We should rule jointly, and no one

shall be hurt.”

The older brother, knowing this to be a lie, hefted the sword before him. In it he saw the sky, the same color as the fishing stream, the birds overhead, and his own reflection, similar to his brother's. He saw the two of them learning to clean fish, his brother's joy in scaling both catches, in building fires and stalking deer together. Evil trembled before him.

“We cannot divide the migration trails, nor a single fox's den. One must rule them all.” The sword felt heavy in Good's grip. “Should my own strength tire in time, it is only just the strongest hand should rule the lands.”

“Then it is settled,” the judge received his sword from him, “and each brother's reign shall be preceded and followed by the other.” She tossed the other sword deep into the ocean. “And should the seas boil...”

Evil could not contain his grin, and Good offered his hand first.

## The Keeper of Dreams

“Here you go, honey.” My mom graciously licked her coffee breath onto a napkin and rubbed it on my cheek. I must've grumped at her all bratty, something like:

“Please, on god's green earth, don't ever do that again.”

Yeah, that sounds like me.

“Force of habit.” She shrugged. “I'll be off in a bit, are you ready yet?”

“Yep.” I stuffed down some more mashed Choco-Crisps.

“Don't forget to brush, pick up your poster, put on deodorant, and change those pants one of these days.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled, and somehow she picked up I wasn't planning on doing any of those things. She's got a way with translating grumbles.

Mom scooted off and I slurped the last of the slushy mud water. Dad stopped bothering with breakfast way



before the divorce, probably when he started seeing Lena, and mom keeps that one thing still going. He left her the house, too, which is to say not much: it looks like a shitheap since he stopped fixing the place up, and she's still paying for it all the same. Skipping out runs in the family a bit, and that morning I was ready to skip out of school again and chill. I laid my head down and planned out all the nothing I would be doing later that day, though I guess my mom looked at me and wrongly guessed I was trying to sleep again. She rapped her knuckles right next to my ear, you know, that way angry moms do.

“Okay, well I don't care, because I'm going to be late. Get your ass moving!”

Her voice practically threw me in the car by itself, and I made like it didn't, doing that “don't mess with me either” gut-grumble. I had my life all planned out: in another month, I would be out of school, looking for some kind of job that a high school near-drop-out could perform, and I'd still (and probably always) get an earful from my mom about how I skipped out on my life, how I would have to struggle just to get my feet under me. Things, she kept telling me, were going to get tough. But sometimes fate fucks things up for you.

I'm Travis Helms, a senior at Holyoke High. In less than twenty minutes, I'm going to have my conscious life crushed from me by a two-ton Mazda sedan.

“Did you bring your poster?”

“Yessummm...” I lied. I didn't even manage to finish it last night. I counted one point for me.

“Okaaaay.” But she probably saw right though. She's a mom every now and then, so that love stuff probably gets in the way of rubbing it in. “Any plans this weekend?”

I rested my elbow on the car door and stared out. I guess this is me being brilliant, hoping that she would see how engrossed I am with staring out the window. She's really trying to get me to fess up to my other homework. I catch on pretty quick.

“You know Elisa,” she switched gears onto the ever-successful cousin, “just started her second year of violin at Virginia State. I think it'd be nice to hear your old trumpet again.”

I grumbled a non-response to her. I hadn't picked up the trumpet since I put it down in seventh grade.

“Some guys and I were going to check this band out.”

“When's that?”

“Dunno.”

“Well, it'd be nice to know.”

“It's not like I'm going to play with them.”

“No, but if you're going to see them, you should probably know when they're...”

“Jeesh,” I shifted my head. “I was just saying.”

“Hold on,” she said. “Sounds like a siren.”

And sure enough it was. She stopped over by the side and a cruiser slashed by us. It's cool how it sounds when it goes by.

“I hope everything's okay.”

“Nothing ever happens around here.”

“Well,” she stiffened, “my aunt always said to say a quick prayer when ambulances and cops go by. It's serious stuff, maybe someone could be hurt...”

“Uhhuh.”

“...and you never really know what's going on. I just hope everything's okay. I'm glad I don't have to deal with it.”

“Maybe someone's mangled.”

She bit sharply. Yeah I'm a brat sometimes. “Watch your mouth,” she said.

Most of the ride was spent in silence. She pulled by

Coffee Central and ordered a dozen donuts for the office (eleven, actually; I opted for the usual chocolate donut), and took a sip of her coffee mug to relax a bit. We were pulling into the intersection and I think the last thing she said to me was:

“I just wish I could see you all set in life. You’re only given one chance to-”

I was turned toward her so I didn't see it coming. The car came around a hedge and battered into the right side. Our car folded easily: it bent the door inwards and wrinkled the metal like cheap tin; the airbag rushed out like a vast cloud, but when it sank again, my face felt bloated and my arms were numb and kinked weird. My ears felt warm and I could see my mother struggling against her door, trying to get it open. It was a little funny because she flustered a bit and then unlocked it. She turned to pull me out through her side but blood was getting in my eyes and I think I heard that siren and that's about all I remember.

When I woke, I wasn't in a hospital bed, or in my own bed, or even anywhere I knew. I was just sitting by the side of the road, some grassy road I didn't recognize, on some gritty rock I'd never seen, just looking about. I watched a squirrel climb up some tree (it was a willow; I hadn't seen a

willow in Holyoke since ever), and then I saw the grass swaying in the wind. It's funny, I mean, I'd always stared out the window on my way to school, avoiding my mom every day for the last four years, and I probably couldn't even remember how the damned frosted donut looked. But this time, I think I could tell you about every little blade of grass, the way each one bent its own way in the wind, some of them stiff and jutted against a few gray pieces of rock tossed in someone's yard. Even the colors of the asphalt, the small pebbles, the speckles of crystals in the pebbles. I guess, for the first time, I just sat there and saw.

A truck passed by, a big darkish one, and he was there. Just a man, standing tall and warmly dressed.

“Hello Travis,” he said. “We have work to do.”

We stopped by some other donut place, Crazy fer Donuts, some chain that I'd never heard of. The back door was open and we just went in; shelves stocked with boxes and boring stuff. Junk on the floor. I guess I was just out of it, because I looked around for an apron with my nametag for some reason, thinking that somehow I worked there.

“Girl Suzie,” the man said. “Sweet kid.”

“Is she cute?”

“Hard worker, a tough one. Can't afford much better. Be nice to her.”

“Is she cute?”

The man stared at me, calm as the sky. “Get to work.”

I looked in the back, and there she was, cuddling a shelf. Red curls pouring out from under her hat, pale face and freckles, coffee stains and frosting pasted on her apron and shirt. She was cute, all right, I'm guessing in her twenties, but she was also asleep.

“So, you want me to do what now?”

He stared. I guess I was supposed to talk to her.

“Umm, I think I'll try later,” I said.

“Try now.”

“She could probably use the sleep. Maybe another time.”

He didn't say anything again, but he's got that silence that talks.

“Okay...?” And then the car crash started coming to me. There was my mom, and some cops, and I think I was there, too...

The stare still.

“So you know, I'm starting to feel a bit freaked out...” I

looked at the door, which was now closed. “Look, you seem like a cool guy, but I think I’m going to scam on this one.” Still nothing from him. “Well, you have fun now, hopefully you won’t get caught, or maybe you will, but peace be with you, man.” I waved to him and backed away, kind of smiling to him. But this time the damn door was closed and locked.

Here’s the thing, it wasn’t even locked. It was just solid.

“Fucking thing, all this damn security for a stupid little donut...”

“You can’t move it. The girl, now.”

I tried again and he was right; the door was as solid as a rock. He wasn’t looking at me anymore, but I felt looked at anyway. I sidled next to the redhead, who scratched at her nose.

“Hey you,” I kept my eyes on the man; he didn’t budge once. “Suzie, right? You probably shouldn’t panic, but you’d better wake up.”

“Don’ wanna...” she mumbled, and shifted about again.

“There’s this guy, and he’s a bit freaky, and I’m not too sure what he wants. So just be calm and...”

“Marty?” Her head shuffled about. “Ah, heck with Marty,” she whispered loudly.

“Please, I think you should wake up right now.” I tried my best to hide my panic.

“Mmmm...” She slunked down more comfortably.

The man seemed to sigh. I think it was a sigh. Whatever it was, it made me a bit more scared.

“Hey Suzie?”

“Hmmm...”

“I know it's been a rough night and all, but I hope you wake up and I promise that if you do, you can have all the donuts you want.”

She chuckled to herself. “Yer silly... okay...” The girl relaxed and deepened in her rest. Then she coughed and sputtered and scrambled up.

“Suzie, get up here and assist these customers!” The manager yelled from the front, not too pleased.

“Oh god!” she said. “Right here, Marty!”

“Then hurry up already,” the boss said. “I don't run a motel!”

Suzie stood up and straightened herself. “What a weird dream,” she muttered and walked toward the front of the store, passing by my warmly-dressed guide as if he were the most natural thing in the world. “Sorry about that, it won't ever...”



The man walked up to me. “She works almost every day. Stomach pains, and a bit malnourished. Didn't look like the time.” He pointed toward the back door, which was now open again. “Let's go.”

We walked far from the donut shop. It was this time I started to ask the guy some questions.

“I've noticed,” I said, “that I'm not making any sounds.”

“I hear you.”

“No, but look at this.” I kicked the ground and nothing came of it; he kept going and I had to chase after him to keep up. “I think I'm dead.”

“You are not.”

“Well yesterday or something I was hit by a car. There was blood and everything; that would fuckwell do it. Where's God?”

He stopped and turned. He looked at me. “You're not dead.” Then he returned to his pace. “We have work here.”

“Here where? Another donut place? And what about my arm, it looked pretty fuckin' gnawed-on last I remember.”

We walked to an old folks' home. Sprinklers, bushes, the whole nine yards. It was a bit nicer than the one my

grandmother was in back home, before she died; didn't look like a concrete block. "So I guess this is the place," I said sarcastically, somehow.

The man knew where to be, because he didn't have to dodge through all the wheelchairs and nurses and caretakers. I got bumped around a few times; it felt like a solid breeze. It would be kinda fun, if things weren't so weird.

We got to this exercise room. Most of the seniors were seated, and about half of them were able to reach up when the nurse reached up, stretch left when she stretched left. The man pointed to some guys sleeping in the exercise room, and I brushed up to them and they talked to me. Their lips chopped about and I didn't much hear anything but a few whispers, but I think I was getting it.

"So," I said as we left the room, "I guess sleeping people can hear me."

"Yes."

"And I'm not a ghost or anything."

"No."

"Then what's going on? What am I supposed to do?"

We slipped into a separate room, and there was another old person but hooked up to a machine this time. He (or maybe she, I honestly couldn't tell) was wrinkled and

smelled weird and stale or something. Just lying there, too, not even breathing for all I knew.

“Hello, I'm Travis.”

The person didn't make a move.

I tried again. “Well, it's nice to meet you, I hope you're enjoying your stay at the Ritz. It's nice out from what I can tell, maybe seventy, sunny and nice. How've things been?”

Again, just nothing from the old coot.

“Well, it was nice meeting you, hope you have a good day.” I turned to go, but the man was blocking my way.

“We're not done.”

“I can't talk to him, he's not saying anything.”

“Listen to her again.”

“Her, fine, but nothing's going to happen.” I turned to the old woman. “Hey you, me again, just wondering how things are since I last spoke to you. Which I'm guessing was about two minutes ago.” I turned to the warmly dressed man and shrugged, but he stayed there. “So, how's the weather over there? You enjoying your sleep?” Her lip seemed to tremble a little. “Did you say something, or was that just a bit of spit?” I laughed and joked it up. “Well, I'll promise to come closer just as long as you don't bite.” I walked a little bit closer to her. Her wrinkled right hand still had a wedding

ring on, the old flesh of her knuckles wrapping around it, and it felt different near her. I felt a bit of a breeze.

The window was closed, and besides, it was the kind of breeze that chilled you to your bones. Like when you stand up after sitting on your leg, and you feel numb, you poke yourself to make sure you're still there. When I got closer to her, I just got more and more of that feeling, that I wasn't there, that I was going numb. And now her lip trembled.

“Shshshshshshh...” came from her. I rubbed my arms hard, I guess just a natural reflex from the cold. Not like I could actually feel cold.

“Hey you, are you okay? I think it's chilly in here.” I thought I heard something from her, but couldn't make it out. I crept closer to the old woman.

“It's... it's...”

I had to creep up all the way to her mouth. There was a soft, sweet smell emanating from her pale, shriveled lips. I could hear her, but she wasn't talking; the only breath from her was the soft, fading odor of stale air passing through her grayed teeth.

“Sorry, but I'm not all that comfortable with...”

A whispery voice came from her. “Save your breath,” she said, “and run. He's here. He's come here again, and this

time it's going to happen.”

I wanted to ask, but I felt the warmly dressed man close in behind me. “I'm not sure what to do. Is this guy your husband?”

“He is nobody's husband,” there was a whimper, “and yet everyone's. Please save me from Him...”

He was moving closer. “Ask about her husband.”

I didn't want to stay, but I was afraid of what would happen if I left. “Listen grandma, it's going to be okay...”

“Don't 'grandma' me, you little punk. If Larry were here, he would know what to do, but He took him, too...”

He put his hand on my shoulder; I felt nothing from him. “How was your husband,” he said to me.

“How was your husband?” I repeated, trembling.

“Larry? He's been gone, almost ten years now. I remember him like yesterday; strong and able, a good man, hardly ever a drinker...”

“What did he do?” I asked.

“He's a bridge-builder, an engineer; even built a shed for us, I think back in 1973, if I recall correctly. Then in '84, he slipped off a ladder, just fixing the wind-vane. The cruel bastard took him; a splinter from his knee, they said, but I knew it was him. It wasn't his time yet. That was almost nine

and a half years ago, and still every day I miss him..."

I wanted to correct her, to tell her that it wasn't 1994, that I was practically born in 1994, but something in me seized and I couldn't.

The man slowly crept past her shoulder. "What was the shed like," he said.

"What was the shed like?" I said to her.

"It was gorgeous," I heard a childish glee in her other-voice. "After Marion left, we had all her old things: posters, college books, even her old cradle. I told Larry, 'No, we are not throwing a darn thing away!' And you know what he did? He just said, 'I guess I'm going to have to build a shed for all this!' That's the kind of man he was. But, you know, I think he wanted to hold onto that old stuff, too. I think he still liked thinking of Marion as his little girl."

"What does Marion do?" I think I was ready to cry, and the man was by her cheek.

"Oh, she's some sort of lawyer. She went away to New York to this law firm. I don't much like cities, they're so dangerous, but then again, Marion's a tough one. She'd play with the boys, played on the softball team, even help out around the house. When Larry first passed her to me, just a baby, he said to me, 'Caroline, this is our daughter,' and that

day, with tears in his eyes, I just remembered thinking...”

The man touched his lips to hers, something of a kiss almost, and under her two or three blankets, I could see the old woman relaxing just slightly, those blankets sinking down just a bit, and she stopped speaking. He brusquely left the room. I was cold. I stayed there, not hearing the dead tone from the life-support machine, just standing in the corner: first a doctor feeling her wrist and jotting something, then the plump nurse humming her way in, pulling those same blankets over her, and carting the old woman out of the room.

The warmly dressed man waited for me outside. I was shivering.

“We have work to do,” he said again.

I nauseously staggered out of the parking lot.

“A young boy,” he said. “We have little time.”

I shuffled behind him. He kept his smooth, glacial pace.

“Wait,” I said.

He kept going.

“I’m not doing this.”

He turned. “You will.”

“I can't,” I said. I was shivering even harder; no, it was more like spasming. “I can't fucking do it!”

“You will,” he said, and left.

Maybe I cried. I just remember walking around after that.

I didn't do much of anything, just hung around outside. I didn't want to hear anymore, no more hopes and thoughts, no more dreams. But after a few days, that passed, and I realized I was getting old and grumpy and caveman-ish. So I started hanging out with kids my own age.

We high-schoolers are a strange bunch, you know, and I guess I never noticed how loud and obnoxious we really are (though am I still a teenager?); we move in packs, talk in groups, think as a bunch. And I know it sounds weird, but I started to follow some of them home. I'd wait for them to finish their work, they'd eat and brush and all that, and I'd just wait until they fell asleep. I'd curl my ear near them and try to remember what it was like to dream like a teenager. There was some sex, some drinking, cheating too, but generally it wasn't as bad as you'd think. Sometimes I'd hear the river's loud roar from a rafting trip, or cutting through



the wind on a fleet-footed horse, or the tinkling of piano notes like snow might sound. I usually wouldn't have to watch over them or anything.

Their parents' dreams weren't much different, just a bit louder and more pronounced. Maybe some woman thinks her husband's cheating on her, and he's just remembering the old days of fishing; or the guy's thinking about leaving for the umpteenth time, and even I'm afraid that he means it; or sometimes it's just some old memory, some stupid boy who was an asshole way back when, made his best friend look stupid, and these dreams I try to soothe, because sometimes it makes me feel guilty from when I was alive.

It's different to see a person die. I don't know how to explain it.

But I do know living people are weird. Standing a couple feet from someone, you feel a warmth that I'd never gotten from my friends at school. Charlie, who's half-psycho most of the time. Dan, who just mumbles to himself and draws all day. There's this miserable bald guy I started following, just generally cranky and mean to his kid and wife. He'd have a bit of that warmth about him just as he got home, but then he'd shut it off. I didn't know people could do that.

“I tell you, I think he's cheating with someone at work,”  
I heard his wife over the phone.

Which is what I assumed, too. But it didn't matter because it was warm mostly, and when you're cold, you naturally grab a coat. I followed him, I guess like a moth and a flame, and then I saw her again, her hair seeming to burn a bit more.

“I guess the wig's still in the mail,” Suzie greeted him.

It was the girl from the donut place, and apparently this bald guy was her boss. He attempted some sort of stumbling comeback, which Suzie pushed aside. Even as she made fun of him, I felt heat rolling from her.

“Well, my cousin does hunt.” She shrugged. “He could probably send you a couple coon-skins.” Suzie took off her cap and rubbed her red, hat-flattened curls. “It'd be an improvement.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it, Suze.” He waved his hand and went on managing.

I think the thing that surprised me most about Suzie was how she lived. A sweet person like that you'd figure lived in some nice place, a place with less than three staircases

leading up to it, a place that didn't have cups and dishes stacked up even under the table. It was filthy, worse than my old room, and fairly obvious why she kept clothing and mail and random wrappers thrown everywhere: two jobs, school, and no mother-slash-housekeeper. Simply put, she was exhausted. As soon as Suzie placed her shoes at the door, she'd grab a couple aspirin, set something on the stove (every now and then the harsh odor of burnt food wafted about), and attempt to learn about finance and markets, something she'd dreamt she'd be able to control not too many years from now. After eating what remained of her meal, she'd write in a journal full of sketches and poems. A lot of nights the book was her pillow.

I watched this for six tireless days.

We had good conversations. I got back from the zoo one time and talked to her about the animals.

“The lions were lazy. I could barely see them.”

“Oh, that stinks.”

“Yeah, kind of a gyp. Still, you should go.”

She moved about on her bed, still asleep. She left a little room for me and I hopped on. Not like... you know. “So tell

me about you. Where are you from?"

"Jersey. I hate it."

"Oh, this is New Jersey. Didn't you know?"

I shrugged. "No. I'd just been hanging out mostly."

"Are you a ghost?"

"I think so."

"Are you supposed to haunt people?"

She snored loudly. She did that little jerk people do before they get into sleep. It seemed funny to me.

"I don't think so. I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"Maybe you're just a working stiff. Where did you work?"

"Ummm..."

"Unemployed?"

"Well, no," I shifted stiffly, "about to graduate."

"What college?"

"Oh, um... Holyoke College. It's not that-"

"Haven't heard of it."

"I'm going to be a car mechanic, I think. It pays pretty good."

"Good. Good for you, ghost." She laughed. "Will you fix undead cars?"

I went to a mechanic the next day. It was interesting, I guess, just really... technical, really involved, just not my thing.

I went to a few things. The rest of that day I shadowed an office recep, rode with a bus driver, watched a pizza chef, and even caught a movie. There's so much in the world, you know! I think parents would get off a lot better telling their kids about how much shit there is to do in the world, instead of the end-of-days speech. That movie, it was just like four people in there reviewing it, with notepads and all. I never knew that's what they do; see what I mean? The movie was boring, something about the war of 1812, but there's always something new in the world. Something that I didn't know.

I followed a cop, too. They're not all that bad, actually. Seems like a good life: telling jokes, getting pizza on Fridays, doing a bit of paperwork. I followed one of them to some miserable place, where the boyfriend was a bastard and beat his girl; there was also some accident I went to, though thankfully no one was hurt. I said a prayer this time.

“Okay,” said my cop, “let's move it out.”

The car was total junk, an SUV that looked so cheap and flimsy, and they were towing it away. Instead of following

the cop back, I had this crazy idea: that I would ride it like a surfboard. It's the crazy ideas that the world needs, right? It was dripping chemicals everywhere.

After the garage, the tow truck tipped it into a car graveyard. I'd never seen one before! Chemicals on the dirt, cars stacked on top of each other; it was on the scary side. There were some kids there I'd seen at the mall:

“That car smells like someone crapped in it,” Dan said.

“Go take a shit in it, and we'll be sure,” Stan said.

“You take a shit in it.”

“You hear that,” Stan turned to some girl, “Dan wants you to shit in a car.”

She kept her arms crossed. “Fuck off, idiot.”

They kept huffing about, and I went to explore. So much I never knew! There was this big pile of tires, all with water in them, smelling all rubbery; big stacks of cars, some of them paintballed on (which looks like an awesome place for it); this shed with an old ugly guy in it, which the trio made no attempt to hide from; and yeah, the aroma of dirt and car guts. I'd never been to a junkyard, even when my dad got the “new” radio for the car, which was a piece of shit by the way. It was a neat experience, anyway. Until I saw it.

It was our gold-ish Nissan, my side crumpled in, sitting

next to a wheel-less SUV. I looked in. There was dried blood everywhere.

“What the fuck?”

I waited for night and tried to follow the junkyard guy back – you have to, you know? For a fat, sweat-smelling, grizzly-bearding gent, he sure gets out in a huff; I was too slow and got caught on the damned fence. Eventually I climbed a stack of cars and jumped out, but it was too late.

I was tired for once. And without the warmly-dressed man to explain all this weirdness, I admit I was freaking a little bit. On top of that, I came back late, and got locked out from getting into Suzie's place, which seemed the only normal place within sight. So I hung outside her apartment building.

I don't know why I stuck so close to her. I mean, yeah, she was definitely kinda a little bit cute, and maybe because I didn't have anything to worry about, all that extra worry focused on Suzie. And then I got to thinking: who'd worry about the adults, you know, all the people like my mom; who would worry about them? Watching them hold their kids' hands at the checkout after work. That's what I was

turning around in my head, pacing in front of Suzie's place.

I waited out there and some scrungy-looking drug dealer came out, handling and mishandling all kinds of, um, rather unsavory and unbathed characters. It was getting bad so I went to the houses a few steps from Suzie's place. There was a family in this dingy little house with a mom, dad, and twin girls, and it was nice just like looking in. The kids were asleep, they had their toys scattered around the room, and the mom and dad just... I don't know. They made me sad; he was watching TV, she was reading some magazine in the kitchen. It's what my parents started doing, and I don't know how to explain it, how to put in words all the stuff I was just figuring out, and then seeing this. Seeing people... I guess seeing them bored. It's sad, is all, like I just said.

This part of town is different. It's more rundown. I should feel lucky. It's not like I had tons of rats running around me when I was alive, but watching these parents sit and do nothing, it just made me realize something. Maybe people don't let themselves be lucky. Maybe you gotta find it. Maybe I spent all my time complaining about my bad luck, bad teachers and bad this and the other, that I never had a chance to get the kind I wanted.



This is how the next day at the donut shop went:

“You know, Mark,” Suzie said, “why don't you invest in some bonds? They're a pretty safe investment.”

Mark is the cleaner who's out by five. He was still mopping at some stain with a broom. “Safe. Really,” he said. “Considering how everything's going...”

“Bonds are better than stocks,” she said, plowing a few heavy boxes of coffee onto a shelf, “and a little investment now could help you retire.”

He laughed. “I pay bills. I'm not going to retire, Suzie, just not in the cards. You've got a good head for it, though.”

“Gosh, Mark,” she said, “I slave away, just like you. You probably make more than me.”

“Then you should get yourself a good boyfriend and retire on him. But I guess you'd have to get out once in a while...”

“I do.”

“Do what?”

“Have a boyfriend. We've been going out a couple weeks.”

“Huh.” He grinned “What's he like?”

“Well, he's sweet, maybe sounds young, and fairly

polite. He makes my nights wild.”

Mark balanced on the broom. “What is he, some kind of dream? That's the only guy who would ever date a nut like you.” She nodded. “So wait, you mean you dreamed up a...?”

“Well,” she counted off on her fingers, “no fights, no messes, he doesn't hog the blankets, and by four he's gone. It's perfect.”

She really knows how to make a tired ghost blush.

I left for the junkyard before nine. It made me feel sad to know that after this shift, Suzie would be going to her second job, stocking shelves at a grocery store; someone so nice like that, someone who throws in extra sweetness with your sugar and your coffee and all that. Sometimes you just want nice people to win, you know?

But I had to go back. I wanted to make sure I knew the owner's every move. I wasn't going to let him out of my sight. Which, in retrospect, was likely a bad idea: he drank. And drank. And drank. The guy vomited at least twice in the day. No idea what the hell was going on with him, other than he was a train wreck. A customer came in:

“Hey, do you have headlights for a Honda CRV, 2005?”

He snorted. “Check the yard.”

“You do have CRVs, right?”

“Check the yard.”

“Whereabouts should I look?”

“The yard.”

The guy sloshed through all kinds of anti-freeze and shit and still couldn't find his way to the foreign cars section.

You see? Just an asshole.

I followed the prick home. His place wasn't much nicer than the tin shack he worked in. He lived right next to the yard (idiot me).

“Pssst,” I told the sleeping bastard, “about that gold Nissan...”

“Check the yard.”

“There were two passengers, are they okay?”

“Check the yard.”

“Are you even paying attention?”

“Well, did you check the yard?”

I tried and I tried, but my mind was a blank and I couldn't come up with a good way to torture the bastard. At least I taught him to say something new. “How do I get to Holyoke?”

He thought for a moment. "I don't know."

"You're a real help, buddy."

"I just run the yard, kid," he said.

Thanks guy. Thanks.

I missed Suzie on the way back. The sky was dark, and the sun was just threatening to come up. I was frustrated.

I spent that day sulking, mostly. What a waste, now that I think about it! How many hours can a person spend being crabby and depressed and shit like that! I must've spent at least four years that way. Life is too precious, too changing and big for small thoughts like those. Eventually I went to the mall to catch the new Spiderman - Suzie wanted to see it and I was going to preview it for her - and hung at the food court. I hopped on top of a couple little kids at the Leaping Lily there – one of those big rubber band things – and bounced up with them, having a good time of it, considering I was no where nearer getting home. I had no plan, and sometimes having a not-plan is more useful at that point. Sometimes it's important just to be stupid, only for a while.

Then it came to me: I'd just ask Suzie, and she'd be happy to help me. More than anyone else, anyway. There

was only one flaw in the plan: she wouldn't live through the day.

The drug-dealer was out at night again. "I don't sell a half," he told some toothless guy. "It's always been an ounce or more. Now move on." He wore an old knit hat and a new cheap coat.

"C'mon," the toothless guy said, "you sold me half last week. C'mon, Dr. H., it's what I got."

"Go bother someone who don't appreciate their time. Get going."

"Why you gotta be that," the toothless guy asked.

The dealer dusted his hand away from him and told him to move along. They kept going at it until Suzie came by, carrying what must've been a few bags of groceries, really stacked up. The "doctor" was gracious enough to keep quiet while she went by, except the toothless guy didn't care.

I followed Suzie up the stairs. She was going up slow, and I wished I could help her a bit. Eventually she made it to her door at the top, and fussed about trying to find her keys in her handbag.

"Damned things," she said. There was an edge to her

voice.

She kept shuffling her groceries in her arms and finally got a free hand. She cursed more quietly and dug through her bag to finally get them. “Bastard,” she said.

The key scraped against the doorknob. Suzie sighed, it was the wrong one, and dropped the keys trying to flip to the next one. And when she bent down, something just gave.

It's just weird watching something like that. I'd only known her a few weeks, but something about that put this miserable feeling into my stomach; it was worse than the old woman. I watched this poor girl stumble down a few steps and hear the cans tumble after her. It was like watching a doll tumbling down, just limp-ish, and eventually Suzie slowed a flight down from her apartment. It was too much noise for anyone not to notice, but no one came out right away. I was the only one there.

“Hey Suzie, Suzie!” It's strange how things can change so quickly. It's like the world goes upside-down, that really is the best way to explain it. “Suzie, tell me you're alright!”

“I'm okay,” her other-voice said, “where am I?”

“Suzie,” I told her, “you took a bit of a tumble. Please, just get up.”

And he was there. Watching.

“Suzie, you have to get up now,” I said. “Please, I don't want to see you-”

She gurgled. I felt that weird, numb breeze. Her other-voice said, “This is weird. I don't know what's going on here.”

“Suzie, just foc-”

“Who's that? You're a nice guy. What kinda donut do you want?”

“Suzie, focus!” I didn't know what else to do. I yelled even louder. “Just wake up already!”

“Don't be so silly, it's just a donut! No need to be pushy. Now do you want a jelly or a cream?”

The woman on the second floor opened the door a crack. She closed it quickly, and after a moment came out with her phone. “Ello, 'ello,” she said on it.

Death himself wouldn't have held him back. He came up. “Tell her she's alright.”

“I'm not going to lie to her,” I said. She looked bad, real bad. The eye that was open was rolled back. “She's got to get through this. Lying's not going to help.”

And he just stood there. The other woman kept half-shrieking on the phone. Suzie kept babbling to me.

“It's nothing, no, you don't have to give all your change

to little ole...”

“Suzie. Listen to me. You fell down a staircase. Please listen.”

“It's not the first time a staircase fell. Now let's get you your drinks,” she said.

I wasn't getting through to her, and the warmly-dressed bastard knelt down next to her. “Suzie, please! Get up!”

“Nope,” she said, brightly. “Gotta catch me first!”

I was ready to cry. Her eyes started fluttering, and the man drew closer. I felt a deeper cold rush through me, a kind I'd never known. It was more than just Death getting its way; I think it was how I'd feel if I lost someone I loved. And maybe I loved her a bit. Maybe my mom would feel that way about me, the world spinning out of control, all that nausea watching her son bleed to death crumpled in a car. I wouldn't know what to tell her, how to comfort her should I ever see her again, because there's just nothing to say that would undo it, even if my mom knew I was okay now. He was practically on her.

“Suzie. It's Travis.”

“Yes? You want to dance?”

“I need you to know something.”

“I know the moves, don't you worry.”



“It's going to be okay.”

She thought for a moment. “What are you talking about?”

“You're just a little dizzy. You're going to be fine.” I lied.

“You're sweet to say that. Do you love me or something?”

And I thought for a moment. Before I wasn't sure, and after I wouldn't be, but at that moment, I told her “yes” and it was the truth. I was ready to throw up.

“Then prove it, you jerk! Are you just going to stand around all day? Come kiss me already!”

I dodged in front of him and kissed her on the lips. Her lips were cool and moist, and it was the warmest feeling I'd ever felt. I understood her for that one moment, why she went through everything that I thought looked real shitty, why I shouldn't be afraid anymore. I understood why people make such a fuss about it, because it's one of those important things that you need, like air and water and saying you love someone. It's why we do what we do, it's how we can look forward to better things.

The other woman screamed. Suzie was dead now. The warmly-dressed man waited for me outside.

An ambulance came. The warmly-dressed man said one last thing to me.

“Your pocket.” That's all. And he left.

I thought he'd pay me for killing her. I hated him for making me do it, but you can't let someone go that way. Given the chance, I guess I would make that choice. That's something I never knew about myself.

In my pocket was a piece of paper. There was an address on it, and the letter “H” like a name, “H-.” If I killed my own sort-of-girlfriend, then he thought I probably wouldn't mind killing a drug dealer.

I sat under a tree the rest of the night. I looked at the stars. It didn't make a difference, I could've just stared at asphalt for all I cared.

And when the dawn came, I knew exactly what to tell him. I had every word in my mind planned out. I went to the address as if it were Doomsday itself; the world sickened me enough, and I was ready to deal with it one way or another. Past a certain point, there's nothing left to care about. You just have to do something big and hope it's something you want.

The place was my grandmother's old house. I remembered it from when I was a kid. But the yellow paint was peeling, and the garage was half-collapsed: it was a wreck. The windows were boarded up. I stood there for a moment, but I was on a mission, so I went straight for the front door, turning the knob, except this time it actually opened for me...

“Hey.”

I looked around. Blurs, beeps, and bandages. A thick-eyebrowed doctor shined a bright light, too.

“Hey, can you speak?”

I mumbled something that even I didn't know.

“Good to see you're back with the living, Travis. We'll let you rest before we call your mother. You were on the wrong side of a car. Do you remember?”

I moved my head side-to-side.

“Well, we can explain it all when you get your rest. If you need anything,” he placed something cold under my right hand, “just press this button.” He turned before he left. “Twenty-two days, kid. You're lucky to get out of it again. Most don't.”

He left the room. A few more doctors looked in briefly, but didn't say anything I had to respond to. The chirps of the hospital equipment kept me company until my mother arrived.