

## Some Terrible Beauty

Spencer thinks that there is nothing worse than the happy stars winking through the darkness of a night spent in the unsheltered streets of Cambridge, Ohio. Foot-weary and bone-tired, he walks the solitary and lightless alleys of his hometown. His hair sticks to the back of his head and gives him a crazy kind of look—Einstein or Don King—but unlike these two, somewhere under the clumps of creek dirt and head grease lurk real and urgent problems; problems which keep Spencer's lids from closing, of wanting each and every person encountered on his nightly jaunts to slip away into nothing. These good citizens, gainfully employed and secure in their homes, want nothing more than to see him gone. He's a rumor, a story used to keep teenagers off the street after dark, a man molded from hazardous waste, stored, forgotten, and extremely toxic.

Without money or the will to work for it, Spencer hunches behind the dumpsters in the back of Louie's pub most nights collecting remnants of food. He feels much older than his twenty-five years, has lived too much ugly already. Drawn back to this place, this town, he can't escape the empty store fronts and muddy alleys, hidden paths for a boy cultivated for a singular violent purpose. A man has returned to finish what a boy started seven years ago. He's back to put an end to his memories, his guilt. He thinks he's back to murder his mother.

At 3:00 a.m., one of the three cops in town patrols the bridge above him. Spencer stuffs himself into a small space, the bridge abutment, a mere crevice in concrete, the only place he can find to lie down. When he sees the spotlight used to survey the creek-bed in the dark, his legs itch like ants have found a way under his jeans. He hides from the light like a specter, a shadow moving within shadows. Inside the confines of his secret place, he waits for his courage to mount

as he watches that house, Mother's house. Days turn into weeks, and weeks into months as he squats alone, unwanted and unmissed by anyone or anything.

On the first Tuesday in September, a yellow school bus drops the children on the corner and rouses him from his daylight slumber. Happy faces laugh with after-school freedom while teasing a small girl with thick glasses. Rachel Longstockings, they chant, probably due to the striped tights and pigtails dancing alongside the child's face. He smiles until the teasing hurts in a familiar way. Something moves within him.

When he was little older than this child, this Rachel, Spencer's mother hit him with the belt of her polyester work suit, a leather belt so thin and whip-like that it had branded sharp welts into his hide. His blood seeping through thin cotton pajama bottoms often condemned him to yet another beating, this time prompted by the offending liquid that messed up her furniture. He hurt then too, more inside than out, and the proof of this was revealed some years later when he set the couch aflame and the skin seared from his mother's drunken face. She had molded him into what he became, and it was fitting that it would end here, in this little town of secret horrors that smeared him neatly within its cracks like mildew in damp grout.

Rachel's deflated frame picks along the sidewalk burdened with weeds and long-legged daylilies, and Spencer thinks she's another of his kind. He watches her from within his dark envelope until she reaches number 229, Mother's house, and when Mother opens the door, his spirit sieves through the soles of his feet.

Mother made it through the fire, and now she's managed to get hold of another child, his replacement. The pulled and stretched pig-skinned face peeks through the doorframe to greet this child, and what Spencer thought he'd come home to do morphs into something else, something more urgent and complicated in a way that twists him up. He watches Rachel Longstockings

peek through the crack, the familiar closed blinds, like a trapped little turtle in a tank full of slime. He feels something more than curiosity, more than concern; he's bewildered beyond what he thinks he can bear.

Mother looks older than before he went away. Gray tufts of hair have sprouted on her head like new grass in the spring. But Spencer knows that the skin on her face is no longer her own. It shines in the light like a plastic mask, her beauty, lost long ago to a terrifying demeanor. Now, her back bends under the years she's lived poorly, and her outside matches her inside, a rancid soul obvious to anyone bold enough to look. It feels like a sigh after a good meal, his satisfaction. Now everyone knows what he alone always knew. He taps dirt-lined fingernails against the cool concrete and contemplates his next turn.

Long hours pass before he's convinced that this small girl is running out of time. He will save her from it, and after his mother is gone, the authorities will dutifully take over. They will end up in the right places, he and Rachel; they will both end up where they belong. Rachel Longstockings will not live any more of what he'd endured as a child.

The doctors, unaware of his arson, were convinced that the episode snapped some kind of important nerve in his head; the refusal to speak signaled trauma to those-in-the-know. The fire, the beacon that bolstered good intentions, prompted the hospital staff to run gloved fingers along his legs and back. The staff prodded him to reveal something with water colors and writing paper. What the professionals missed was that the fire wasn't his problem; it was the answer to his problem. Spencer thought that his misery was over and done and not worth the pain of dwelling, but he remembers the caring brown eyes of a therapist, a woman he'd almost talked to once, but he busied himself with painting landscapes and flowers instead. He lived a separate life within his mind, went places he only read about in books, places he wanted to go when he got

out of there, remote places like Alaska or South America. They gave him pills that he was sure he didn't need, but he took them with the expectation that if he complied, release would come. Three months in, the white coats did just that, and Spencer, deemed harmless, was sent packing on his eighteenth birthday with fifty bucks in his pocket and good wishes from the staff. That was seven years ago. He threw the pills in the trash on his way out.

Never looking back, he's been on the run, sometimes working a few weeks washing dishes or cars to pay for an occasional stay in some fleabag motel, then roaming the back streets and alleys of what seemed an endless array of small towns, each the same as the one before, filthy, backward, stagnated. He spent seven years alone, seven years to this very day, the day he sees Rachel exit the bus. The number of days that it took God to create the whole earth is the number of years he's felt totally fucked in it.

He wonders how no one noticed the condition of the house after the fire, the week-old take-out from Happy Wok and Taco Bell rotting on the floor. How did they miss the cat urine and feces stuck to the carpets? The house wasn't fit for the cat, never mind a child. He regrets not telling what he knew. He runs his tongue over his teeth and tastes the filth of it.

Spencer buries his head in his arms and rests. Tonight is the night he will pay Mother a visit. Tonight he will hike out to the truckstop and take a shower. Tonight he will return to 229 Main Street and see what can be done about it.

He lies down in the cool shade to wait until dark, the troll living under the bridge. A restless sleep devours him and brings visions of pinkish new flesh chasing him through the dark corners of his brain. He will face her for Rachel, the bandy-legged girl he'd vowed to protect as soon as he'd spotted her, a helpless and innocent lamb locked in that woman's arms. He sleeps a

fitful sleep as the afternoon passes away. He lifts his head now and then to insure that he is alone.

It's well after midnight when Spencer creeps from hiding and slinks along the back of Dave's Pharmacy, avoiding any streetlights and the occasional vehicle that ventures through the alley. The highway in the distance hums, a quiet and lonely sound made by the occasional rush of wheels on hard pavement. Crickets sing in the tall grass surrounding abandoned buildings and lots. The sounds call him to walk on, away from this place, down the road and onto what's next. A parched scrub of trees lifts branches toward a dark and empty sky and remind him of Jesus on the Cross asking why his Father had forsaken him. He shakes his head and wills his weird thoughts silent.

The truckstop is deserted. The large glass doors are smudged with greasy prints, old men wanting coffee, kids in need of rubbers or rolling papers. The clerk, Dora, he knows from school. He thinks the love affair they shared in high school has enough memory in it to keep her from turning him away. How many times has he sucked hope from their time together these last years? How many times has he dreamed about the one night when he'd allowed Dora to know him? Still bookish and meek, Dora has already allowed him to use the showers once.

She starts at the sound of the bell hanging above the door and hurries to stand when she sees him there. She lifts a bar of soap saved from before, luring him inside as if he were a feral dog as she grabs a worn maroon towel from under the counter.

"Spencer," she says, her words laced with sweetness, a lonely girl.

He nods and takes the items, a bit surprised that she doesn't recoil. Her eyes are great brown wet pools.

“How come you haven’t come for so long?” She presses him, closing the space between them with one look. She’s a flighty bird with no place to land but with him in the dirt. He feels sorry for her, stuck here in this rotten space, and he wonders why she hasn’t found a way out. He remembers how smart she was in school, how she helped him get through his homework, her patience while he fumbled to focus on the work instead of her lips and tiny ears.

He watches a desperate pulse beating within her delicate neck. Her small beak of a nose, muddy brown hair, and flat chest remind him of an unfair universe, a wisp of nothing going nowhere. She is a good soul that is much too trusting, a quiet girl that he thought he loved once, exactly the kind of girl that he’d choose if things were different and he were normal. He smiles when she adds a toothbrush and comb to the pile in his hands, and he thinks such kindness shouldn’t exist in this world. He doesn’t trust it; he needs to know what she wants from him.

“Why are you so good to me?” He’s surprised with the deep sound of his voice bouncing up from the tiled floor.

Her eyes light when he speaks. “I knew it. I just knew you were still in there.” She points to her head and taps a forefinger to her temple.

He thinks that she knows where he’s been and wonders if she suspects what he did to his mother. He can’t look at her any longer, and he stares at his boot intensely aware that the sole of the right has separated from the body. The space between the hard sole and the soft leather yawns like a carved pumpkin’s mouth a month after Halloween, a fitting accessory, a good example of what he’s earned, what he deserves in this life.

Dora squeezes his arm and pulls him toward the back of the station, down the long aisles filled with food, umbrellas, and t-shirts. “Come on, Spence. We don’t have all night.” His arm tingles where she touches.

The shower stall is cold and lined with the small aqua blue tiles found in a gym room or swimming pool shower. Mildew seeps into the grout, the room, a musty hole. He places the toiletries on the hard seat outside the stall and starts the water before stripping the thin layers of fabric from his body. He allows each item to drop to the floor and steps inside.

Spencer stands a good while in the stream of hot water and allows it to soak into his skin. He washes his hair first, lathering the rich soap generously behind his ears and neck before working his way down. His chest is pale next to his hands, his legs wobbling under his tall frame as he works. He lathers each and every crevice to a fault, eager to become some shade of human. When finished, he sweeps the curtain aside to find a stack of fresh clothing.

Dora has gathered new jeans, white t-shirt, denim jacket, and black socks. A razor and a trial-sized can of Barbasol sit adjacent to the clothing. He shakes his head, unable to bend his mind around her kindness, moved, ashamed because of what he's become and how he uses her. He remembers a night they had talked until five in the morning, the way she listened, really listened, when he told her how he felt about things, and for a moment he forgets the rest. How he's longed for this connection. He holds himself there as a knot forms in the back of his throat. He swallows the hardness deep, buries it in the pit along with the rest of his weaknesses.

He dresses quickly, observing the crisp twenty-dollar bill stuffed into the front pocket of his new jeans before placing it inside the chest pocket of the coat. The scrubbing increased the tangling in his hair; it takes a long while to get the comb through. The scruff is gone from his face when he peers into the mirror.

His eyes are set deep into his face. Wise green irises hover above stark cheekbones, all housed within a slim, but mildly handsome frame. He brushes his teeth. Unable to lift all of the stains, he welcomes the mint taste on his tongue.

Dora is back at the counter when he emerges. She's turned the radio up loud, oblivious to him in this moment, a young soul, he thinks, when compared to him. On the counter, the telephone looms like a monstrous black snake. He knows that she's been talking to someone, and worries that she's called the authorities this time. She's picking her cuticles, biting her nails. He studies her face for some sign, a twitch, some quiver of deceit, before deciding that he shouldn't push his luck any further. Dora brushes her hair from her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Boy, you clean up good," she says, a trembling smile lighting her skin.

If he were a normal guy, he would wrap his arms around her thin waist and kiss her, wrap her up tight and long like he remembered doing when they were seventeen.

"You hungry, Spencer?"

Heat creeps up his neck and flushes his bare face. He shakes his head.

"You always were a handsome one."

He remembers a tattoo on her thigh, a tiny strawberry that he licked once, and for this moment, he wishes he could take it all back: the fire, the hospital, the seven years spent in guilt-ridden silence. He can't look at her; her voice, a siren beckoning him to forget his plan. He shuffles his feet, unsure of where he should go from here.

"You plan on going on home this time?"

He speaks slowly, relishing the words as they tumble from his lips. "That's exactly what I'm going to do. I'm going home."

A shadow drops across her face. The skin across her chin pulls tight. She bites her lip and stares hard at the phone. Her voice becomes small as she peers through wispy brown bangs.

"Well, I guess it's about time, Spencer."



He nods, wilting, ashamed of himself and the microscopic way she studies him, but in love with the sound of his name from her mouth. "I'll pay you back when I get some work." He shuffles his feet. His boots leave black marks on the tile, and he tries to wipe them away but only succeeds in making more. "I gotta go, now."

He hurries toward the door and the comfort that darkness brings. His hand on the door, he stares into the night and he soars above the trees toward Main Street in his head, a way to disconnect from here and now, regain structure, remember his purpose. "I really mean that, Dora. I won't forget what you've done for me." He chances one glance, and she's looking back at him in that way that she has. She reaches into his soul when she does this, and it disturbs him in a way that he can't explain.

"Spencer...." She drops her eyes to the floor. "There's something we need to talk over."

Her body is taut; her shoulders hold some kind of strain between the blades. He looks into big brown eyes, tearing like a kid's, a sweet little kid's, and it hits his gut that he hates himself for noticing. He doesn't want to hurt her this way; he never meant to care.

"I gotta go, now."

Spencer explodes through the doors like the thief he's become. He'd held onto it, their memories, fed from them time and again through the years like a pathetic parasite, but the thought of Dora pining for him after all this time makes him weak. He feels guilty for involving her in his mess, a predator, a low-life that takes more than he gives. He doesn't want to lose control; he doesn't want to do something stupid. Girls, a mystery he's never solved, make him feel disjointed.

He looks back through the glass, and he sees her punching numbers into the phone. She's holding the counter like she needs to hold on tight to something, and she lets go only to pinch the

bridge of her nose, scrunch the hair on the crown of her head. Spencer knows he won't be back this way again.

The night air is cool and tickles the small hairs drying on the back of his neck. He fights for control of his rolling stomach and the twitching in his left eye. He walks toward the distant lights of town and calms.

He feels naked, as if seen for the first time when he walks openly down the main drag of town. Rushing past the shops, eyes look into him, bore into his freshly washed skin and clean face. Exposed for who he once was, he feels their eyes following him. Cecil Struthers, his best friend in high school, calls, "Spence?" Spencer makes a line in his head, and he walks it while looking down at his boots, scrambling along the crumbling concrete past Barker's Bowling Alley.

Cool air stings his face as he stands across the street in plain sight of the house. He's not far from his bridge, and he thinks about crawling back under there where it's safe. He watches the house, the view perfect from this angle.

White light hits the drywall above a blue couch. The light, cast by the television set, dances like fairy wings across Rachel's face as she sits with her legs folded under her body. Mother drapes a thin arm loosely across her shoulders. They huddle close, snacking on popcorn from a large red plastic bowl. Canned laughter wafts through a crack in an open window to reach Spencer's straining ears.

It smells like September; the crisp night air and the warmth collected within the pavement collide to form a hardened smell in his nose. But September is a sad month for a kid. Shortened daylight and teasing warmth moves summer into memory, and this feels like saying goodbye to something precious every day. A new school year wearing last year's tight clothes is always

miserable, and so are fistfights and recesses spent lined up against the wall, a form of punishment since paddling went out of style.

Summer was best. Summer meant Dora and the drive-in. There was a night before his life turned, a night talking with Dora on the swing-set in front of the big screen. That night, the light cast fairy wings across Dora's face, and Spencer was so completely taken with her that he spent the entire evening watching her instead of the film. There, in front of everyone, he felt alone with her, close with her.

He spits on the sidewalk. He could walk away. He could melt away into the darkness and never return to this place. But Rachel's crooked grin compels him to cross the street, makes him need to know what happens inside that house. He wants to know why his mother never tried to find him, and if she knew what he did to her, that he was to blame for her present condition. He needs to know why he wants to know these things.

Seven long years he's waited, seven years wasted trying to figure out what Mother thinks. He knows he shouldn't care, had no right to care, but it was there in his chest like a millstone sliding under his skin, crushing him while holding him still for the crushing. What Spencer really wants, what he needs in his core, is to be free of thinking that his mother's life holds a future worth allowing her to continue to breathe. He's wise enough to know that choices will be made tonight. One way, or another, this night will end life as he and his mother have been living it.

A cat mews as he pulls himself toward the porch stoop leading up to the door. A crumpled candy wrapper blows across the concrete and catches in the bushes under the bay window. A dog barks somewhere close. The air grows still; this frozen moment is a bleached and mind-numbing thing. He reaches for the bell. His stomach churns as the lock turns, metal sliding

against mettle, nerves grinding against bone. He thinks about joining the candy wrapper in the bushes.

Blinded as the porch is bathed in light from a lamp above the mailbox, he can see he standing there, squinting beyond the screen, a wrinkled brow adding a comical twist to her warped face.

“Spencer?”

She fumbles to unlock the screen door.

“My God,” she says. “It is you.” She doesn’t seem too surprised to see him there, and he shudders to think about what surprise would look like on her face. Her voice rasps like the buzz of cicada in the trees.

He doesn’t know what to say, or what to do with his hands. He is aghast when he looks at the damage to her face, known but immeasurable from a distance, it is now monstrously close. Captured by the grotesque and absurd way she speaks, tongue sliding across exposed teeth on one side of her face, he gawks.

Mother’s hair, once full and dark, is absent entirely from one side of her head and exposes an ear, melted like the toy Army guy he burned with a lighter in the backyard when he was ten. But the eyes, her eyes, now soft and warm, remind him of a time when he was young and she read to him before he slept, a time before his father left and she started to drink. Her eyes bring him back to the reason he’s come here.

“I know, I know,” she says, “it looks bad.” She brings her hand to her cheek. “A blessing, a curse.” She turns her hand flip-side up as she says this. She looks his way again, the warmth in her eyes, a certain fake that he’s surprised to wish genuine.

“Come on in, Spencer.” She moves aside, bowing her head, he suspects, to make him more comfortable.

Rachel hugs a purple blanket, and a white bunny slipper hangs from her toe on one foot. She removes her glasses and wipes a lens on the silken corner of the blanket, quick little circular swipes. Spencer finds her open face fascinating, perfect, a six-year-old Dora.

“Who are you?” Rachel asks.

“Rachel, this is my son, Spencer,” Mother says, but her eyes never leave Spencer’s face. “This is Rachel.” Mother pats his arm and leads him inside. “Let me get her to bed, and then we can visit.”

“Ahhhhh, man ...,” Rachel says.

Spencer finds himself smiling, a little hell-raiser there. He watches Mother walk toward the girl, and he doesn’t want her to touch her. He holds himself where he stands; arms wrapped around ribs, he grabs the back of his jacket in his fists tight enough to stretch the seam. He imagines it ripping and forces himself to let go of the fabric.

“Make yourself at home. Get something to drink.” Mother points with her elbow toward the kitchen.

He’s nauseated, sick of this game she’s playing. No way is she like this; no way is she sober on a Friday night. She’s heading down the hall; a limp makes her slow. She turns left, into his old room, into his old life, and he’s watching her take Rachel back there.

Alone in the room where the fire happened, the air feels lighter than it did back then. New carpet and celery green paint warm the floor and walls. He runs a finger along the wooden end table, no dust, no food stuck on the surface. An overstuffed leather recliner is in the corner, and he can see small scuffs in the footrest. Across the beige carpet, no evidence of mice, no

clutter, no piles of old newspapers, clothes, or unopened bills he needs to find a way to pay. But he thinks he can smell it, the smoke, lingering in the room.

He walks to the kitchen to check the cupboards for booze. She's behind him; he feels her there watching with those eyes of hers. He stops rummaging and turns to face her. She pulls a kettle from the stove and fills it with water, making tea like nothing has ever happened, like she makes tea all the time. He can't look at her, a fragment of the woman she was because of what he's done. His head hurts; the lights are too bright in the small space. He needs to sit down.

"We've got a lot to catch up on," she says.

A joke of some kind, he thinks, she's playing a joke. He watches her dip the tea bags into the mugs. Any minute she'll add some; she'll fill her cup with vodka and give him the tea.

"There are things that have happened while you were away." She adds sugar and cream to her cup and offers him some of the same.

He shakes his head. A pit has opened between them now, a dark pit he thought sealed and out of reach.

"The hospital called when you were released. I was still very sick and didn't think you wanted me there anyway."

He nods, rippling waves of searing pain in his head. He follows her back to the living room. She places the tea on the table by the recliner. He sits; a rush of air escapes from the cushion.

Her good side faces him; the other creeps into the shadows cast by the lamp. She drinks. Head back, she tilts toward the good side, controlling the liquid in the right direction. A small slurping sound follows as she makes ready to swallow.

"I'm different now," she says.

He runs a hand through his hair before wrapping both hands around the sides of his head as if to hold his brain inside his skull.

“I can see that you’re upset.”

He doesn’t know if she knows what he’s done. He thinks he’s going to tell her; he thinks he should just do it and be done with it all.

“Did they give you some medicine to help you through?” she asks. “Do you still take it, the medicine, I mean?”

“I don’t need that crap.” He’s startled by the sound of his own voice.

She snaps her head toward him. “Well, now,” she says. “I can see that now. Yes.”

“I never needed that stuff.”

“Then why?” She sips her tea. “Why wouldn’t you speak?”

“Because I didn’t have anything to say.” He’s seventeen again, and he wants to hurt her the way she hurt him, confused him. He wants to make her take it all back, but he never meant to lose it, never wanted her to live this way. A clock ticks above his head.

“You are here to stay?” Her lips quiver, as if she wants him with her.

How could she possibly want him with her? It might be easier to lock it back in his head and just go down the highway until he found a new place, a new life. But Rachel’s tiny hands and feet, her thick glasses and long suffering walk back to this house each day call him back to it, his mission, and he knows that he must follow through for her sake. He knows he needs to finish it this time around.

“For now,” he says.

“I’m glad, Spencer.” She’s crying now, full wet tears drawing lines down her plastic face. “I know I was terrible to you.” A ragged whelp, she’s clutching her stomach; her trembling robe

amazes him. He studies her, a miserable lump of flesh that the two of them, Spencer and his mother, have crafted from hurt. An ache, a terrible yearning, pulls at him to believe her.

“That fire changed me, cleaned me up inside, Spencer. That fire caused me to start living again.” She pauses to slurp from her cup, a sickening sound caused by the shortened lump he’d seared away that now forms her gaping mouth. “I got help after that, worked it all through. I worked the twelve steps, all I could work without you, that is. I’m afraid to know the things I can’t remember.” She’s facing him, her cup trembling against the air as she speaks, her words surreal. “It’s my fault, all that misery after your father left, and I’m so sorry for what I put you through. It’s all on me, Spencer. Understand? I’m different now. We can be different now.”

It’s been too long since he’s felt anything but anger, and the hurt in this moment seems too much; he thinks it too raw to release into the world.

“Can you forgive me?” she asks.

*Forgive?* He dreamed of this once, even wanted it more than anything.

“You don’t have to answer.”

*Thank you, Mother, for your permission to keep my mouth shut.*

“Do you remember? Do you remember what happened?”

He doesn’t want to talk about that night, wants to know more before he spills what he’s done. “I want to know about the girl,” he says. “I want to know about how you managed to keep her here.”

“Rachel?” She looks down the hall.

“Who did you fuck, Mother? Who would have anything to do with you looking that way?”

“Oh, my God, Spencer...”



“God has nothing to do with this.”

“They didn’t tell you. Dora tried to tell you.” Her eyes look like wide green holes.

“What do you know about Dora?” He tries to fit these pieces together and watches, dumbstruck and twisted up, as she gathers herself and adjusts her robe tightly around her small frame. She holds the neck close against her chin. “She’s not mine. Rachel’s not my child.”

The air goes out of him. “Then who...?”

“She’s Dora’s,” she says. She fumbles, stroking the collar of her robe like she’s attending her last confessional. “And yours.”

Heavy legs, heavy heart, heavy. Knowing this thing pins him in place.

“Dora gave birth nearly nine months to the day after the fire. You were gone, and I was healing. We’ve helped one another since.”

*It’s too late to put me back together. It’s too late to try and make me live again.*

“She called me, Dora did. She called me to tell me you were coming.”

She’s fluttering, a fragile bird that he could crush.

“She must be so worried. I should call and let her know everything’s okay.”

Spencer doesn’t move, can feel her branding him as her own as she moves toward the phone. She wipes her nose with the sleeve of her robe. He bores a hole with his eyes through the carpet and under the house.

Forgiveness, something he doesn’t know how to ask for nor how to give, has always seemed like a fairytale. But the girl is his, he thinks. He loved her before he even knew her; he felt it when he watched the way she walked with her head down, the way she peeked up from under her brows; her gangly legs and long arms told the story in his heart. This much his mother told right.

Rachel sleeps in a white bed with a canopy on one side of the room. Dappled light from the street bathes her hair in surreal silver. Her small body curls around a stuffed unicorn, and Spencer can smell her newness, a clean scent that smells to him like the first winter wind blowing in the warmth of Indian summer. He can see himself in the way her little body forms a perfect “C” as she sleeps, his most comfortable position. He thinks about the kids from the bus, and he wants to beat them back for her, give her his strength. Spencer knows what it was like to be the kid of the drunken divorcee who lived on Main Street. He wants to teach Rachel what he’s learned about bearing up under the weight of this kind of shame.

Another single bed presses against the adjacent wall, and a white bureau sports a picture of him in his high school football uniform. He is smiling, kneeling, pretending to block the opposition with the football cupped in his wired and cut forearm. The room is ordered, clean, and every inch of what he wished for once.

He stands there a long while watching Rachel breathe while remembering the misery of his youth, but he marvels in the miracle he has made in this same instant. He understands the reason behind Dora’s special attention; he understands and feels sorry for leaving her in this alone. It was just the one time, a celebration after the game against Watkins. It was a week before the fire at best, just seven days before he’d struck that match.

That day, the day of the fire, his mother slapped him and sent all of the plates sailing from the cupboards. He picked up the shards, cleaning the mess as she made it, listening all the while to her calling him names, damning him for being alive. She said he was no good, said he was just like his bastard father, and he hated her more with each word that she spat at him.

Spencer watched his mother’s mind close down and fall into a deep nothing as she passed out that day. He waited for her breathing to grow regular, watched the vodka slip from her glass

and soak the pillow next to her head before he lit the cigarette and placed it between her sleeping fingers. Then, the pillow lit, and he simply walked away, left the rest to fate.

And now fate has come around to catch him up like a giant cog in a grinding gear. Fate is here to teach him something new, something so humbling that he isn't sure if he can bear up under the weight of it.

He retraces his steps, exploding into the front room to find his mother standing there, face buried in her hands. He needs to tell her, needs to cleanse his guilt before they go any further with this thing.

The wall clock stops ticking. The lack of noise closes around him; the moment hangs in the air like mist in a cloud.

"I have to tell you about the fire," he says.

She cuts her eyes to him; her mouth works like it's full of cotton. "I don't want to know." She wraps her thin arms around his neck and brings his ear to her mouth. "I don't care to know it."

He thinks she's known all along. He thinks she's known and wants to keep it safe and buried between them. She wants to forget, leave it untended, but he doesn't know if he can keep it quiet inside his head.

"That fire gave me back my real life," she says. "Don't forget that for an instant." She takes his face in her hands and brings him close, kisses his cheek. Honest tears, a wet and warm memory saturating his mind. "We won't talk like this again."

Her words are like nectar he'd craved while he waited for her in the hospital, an impossible turn that he gave up wishing for a long time ago. Her guilt birthed his guilt, and it weaves their lives together, a perfect and complete terrible beauty. It is up to them now, Spencer,

his mother and Dora. It is up to them, right in this moment, to try something new, to change the rest of their lives into something else, something better than it has been.

Spencer feels lighter now, taller, more of a man than he was just an hour before when he left the truckstop and Dora. He thinks he believes in his mother again; he wants to believe in her, wants to try to go on.

Lights from a car in the back alley bounce through the kitchen window and force them into their own spaces. He wonders how he missed it, Dora's car in the alley for so many months. Another kindness, her hiding the car in the back alley, or was it simply fear for her child? Spencer watches Dora through the small window in the kitchen as she moves through the yard. She turns her key in the lock. Mother puts a finger to her lips, shakes her head, and wipes her face with the arm of her robe.

Spencer stands erect, rigid. He pulls at the bottom of his shirt; a tic dances across his cheek and makes him blink. He thinks he can do it; he hopes that they can forgive each other good enough to make it work. He doesn't know if he can press himself into this new form, but he lifts his frame tall anyway, pulls at the waist of his new pants, and waits for the hope he feels to mass into something solid. He waits for his future to enter his mother's house.