

When the Sun Rises

Floor One

She was hiding in the living room, laying in the semi darkness for hours. Curled in the corner, her legs cramping and her stomach growling. The scotch she poured herself had long since vanished, leaving only a slight film of amber liquid on the bottom of the glass. She wished she had thought to bring a sandwich, her cigarettes. Her only solace was that when the neighborhood children peeped through her bedroom window, hoping to catch a glimpse of her changing, she would not be there. The room would be blissfully empty.

Glancing at the clock, she saw that it was past 5:30. That meant the kids had already come and gone, and she could move freely again. But she still did not leave her place of refuge. She had a fear as sharp as a needle in her abdomen: what if she couldn't get back up? The horror of it kept her rooted to the spot. What if she had to lay, like a turtle on its back, for all eternity? Until her son came to pick her up on Monday for her doctor's appointment? She couldn't bear the thought of it. She must get up. She must.

Readying herself, she got on her hands and knees. Crawling from her corner to the couch, she gripped the cloth arm. As she was pulling herself up, she heard laughing. The cursed laughing. The kids, failing to see her in the bedroom, had come around to the living room window. How they howled with laughter, seeing her struggle to get back to her feet. They pointed at her, nudged one another, tears in their eyes for the joy of it.

"Damn kids," she whispered, running into the bathroom for cover. There are no windows in there. Tears were in her eyes, too, for the desperateness of it.

She caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror, and turned away again. Was no place safe from torment? She couldn't remember the last time she had looked at her reflection for more

than one awful split second. She couldn't bear to look. So she looked away, avoided windows, curled in corners.

Floor Two

Camilla saw the kids from her balcony. "Get away from here!" She shouted at them. "Leave Mrs. Broderick alone!"

They ran, tripping over themselves and stifling their laughter between small fingers. She sighed at the back of their retreating heads. Poor Mrs. Broderick.

Camilla stomped out her cigarette and went inside. The living room was cold and dark. Her mother hasn't been well enough to pay the bills, and her father was away again.

She began rifling through the mail, hoping to see a phone number she could call to get the damn heat back on. It was only March. Her mother might consider that summer, but it was only forty degrees out there. Blood red stamps loomed out at her from the sea of white and yellow – envelopes screaming the words OVERDUE, and URGENT, DO NOT IGNORE, ACTION REQUIRED. Her stomach turned over with each bleeding letter. It wasn't until the bottom of the pile that she saw a thicker envelope with black letters, a soothing color. It was addressed to Janice Evans, her mother, from the Psychiatric Institute of New York. As she was reading it, certain words jumped out at her: mania, depression, mood swings. Phrases came in waves: departures from reality, persistent lethargy. A prescription for anti-depressants. Camilla sighed. They had been down this road before. Janice refused to take them. No, she preferred to self-medicate. Getting high was a different kind of numb, a better kind.

She peeked into her mother's room. There was a human shaped lump under the blankets. She had been there since Wednesday, and it was now Saturday. The peanut butter and jelly sandwich Camilla had brought her yesterday lay half eaten on the floor.

Camilla went and sat down where she assumed her mother's feet to be. "How are you feeling?"

She did not respond.

Camilla touched the spot sticking up a few inches away from her fingers, the heel of her mother's foot. It drew further away from her at the touch.

"Are you hungry?"

Again, no response.

"Do you need an Advil?"

"Valium." Came the hoarse voice at last.

"You took the rest of it yesterday."

"Xanax."

That's all she could say. Names of the pills she wanted to take.

Camilla sighed. There were three left. She hoped her mother would snap out of it soon, or she would be sent out for more valium. OxyContin. Anything that made her forget.

"Ok," she said.

She hoped that if she walked slowly enough, her mother would bound out of bed, get dressed. Kiss Camilla on the cheek and make lunch. Pay the bills. Sometimes it happened like that. One second paralyzed, the next running a marathon. But not this time. Camilla took five minutes to get the Xanax and a glass of water, and her mother was still motionless under the bed sheets. Immobile and mute as ever.

Floor Three

The old man wished it was night already. He sat restlessly with a newspaper, only pretending to read it. The paper quivered slightly. His hands are always shaking, now. They are

never still. Never calm. He abandoned the paper, dropping it carelessly on the floor. He heard the laughter of the kids drifting in through his open window. Kids these days have no respect. He wished they would laugh at *him*. Give him a reason to smack them upside the head. But these days something as simple as teaching a brat a lesson could result in a lawsuit, or something preposterous like that.

He looked around his living room, and had a sudden urge to rip off the foul, faded, rose petal wallpaper. It was his wife's choice. They had pasted it together sixty years ago this coming Tuesday. She was dead, now, though, so she couldn't be offended if he took a hatchet to it. Small mercies.

He went up to it, searching for a seam among the long stemmed roses, the disembodied petals floating in the yellowing cream. He found the seam, cutting a petal cruelly in half. His shaking finger found the tip that was sticking away from the wall. He gripped it as well as he could between his thick yellow fingernails, and pulled. A long, thin strip came off in a rush of excitement and overwhelming guilt. How Vanessa had loved this wallpaper. He remembered her at twenty, when her body was so tight and fresh and perky. When her hair was shoulder length and auburn.

“Oh Joseph, its perfect, isn't it?” She had said. “Can't you just look at it forever?”

He thought he could have looked at *her* forever, so he said yes. The wallpaper was just perfect. To die for. And now he was destroying it. He supposed sixty years is as close to forever as he was ever going to get.

Floor One

She had left the bathroom a few hours ago, now. Poured herself another scotch, a generous one, and the relief was fierce. She lay on the couch, flipping through her high school

yearbook. It was worn with age and obsessive use. Constant flipping of pages, caressing of names, burn marks from accidentally flicking cigarette ash on someone's face, made it a sad looking shrine. The most worn page of all was that of her senior picture. She was so beautiful. She hadn't realized it, then. She had worried about the length of her nose and the tiny bit of hair clustered around her upper lip. But there was none of that in this picture.

She traced the lines of her face, the one that no longer felt like her own. Had she really been this person? So perfect; such smooth, milky skin and pink lips. Blue eyes so round and bright. Arms so thin and unblemished.

She heard screaming from the floor above. That crazy woman who lived above her must be having some sort of fit again. Sometimes she wouldn't see the woman for days and days, and suddenly she would see her going in and out at all hours of the day and night, drinking and smoking God knows what and inviting unseemly men into her house. And her poor daughter, having to deal with all that. She heard something smash against the wall.

Forcefully it made her think of Sam, and the fights they used to have before he died. There would be screaming, and smashing, and then violent sex, even if they hadn't made up. She was never really angry at something he had done that day, or anything in particular. It was their whole lives together that made her seethe with furious anger and a horrible, sinking resentment. He had seen in her what she had not, and the bastard got her pregnant before they even got their high school diploma. There went her dreams of world travel, of volunteering with the elephants in Thailand, of teaching kids English in Africa. Her whole world seemed to shrink when she had Don. That's when it all started. When Sam got a job as a janitor – a janitor! Her face burned at the thought of it – and she didn't get a job at all.

Sam got fat first, as if that was any comfort to her. And then there was the accident. The

memory came back in flashes, in bright lights, of screams, of shattering bone and pieces of glass stuck into her flesh.

Sam was drunk and they were arguing. Driving on the highway, he kept swerving. “Pull over!” she screamed at him. “For God’s sake, pull over!”

He tried. He told her time and time again that he had tried to pull over. It wasn’t all his fault, he said to her. That other car wasn’t supposed to be there, after all. What was it doing there?

Her collarbone had broken. Her window had smashed and glass rained down onto the entire right side of her body, and stuck there. The wounds never healed, turned to scars. Incidences of disaster, memories of pain, laid out for the world to see. The jagged lines are now spread from forehead to fingertips, rippling with folds of fat. And she was repulsed by it, of her own reflection.

She wasn’t able to move properly after the accident. She had gotten bigger and bigger, surpassing even Sam in her hugeness. He died just two years ago. Some sort of embolism. Apart from doctor’s appointments, Sam’s funeral was the last time she left the house. She loved him, really, and felt unbearably lonely without him. And yet she cursed him; refused to forgive him for all he took from her.

She couldn’t take the remembering. Rummaging through her bathroom cabinet, she found her bottle of Advil PM. She took a small handful, only four. She only wanted to sleep, after all. Until Monday, maybe, when her son came. She swallowed them in a single gulp, and she could feel them fighting their way down her esophagus.

She made her way into the kitchen, pouring herself another scotch. This she filled to the brim, and made her way sloppily to the couch, leaving droplets like a trail of breadcrumbs behind

her. She fell hard onto the couch, spilling even more of the scotch onto her front and couch cushions. I'll clean it up later, she thought, dismissively; when I wake up. She drank mouthfuls of it, feeling light headed. She lit a cigarette, waiting for the pills to work. She picked up the yearbook again. With her finger she traced the thumbnail image of her face on the worn-out page.

Floor Two

Janice was screaming. "They're not strong enough," she shouted at Camilla, her voice hoarse.

"Here," Camilla began, picking up the xanax from the floor. "Just take the three of them. I'm sure it'll be strong enough if you take all three." There was a plea in her voice. She wanted desperately to not have to go out and meet Jonathan.

"Do you think I'm stupid? I said, they're not good enough!" She stormed from the bedroom into the kitchen. She picked up a dirty plate. There was ferocity in her eyes that told Camilla she should get out the way. "Look at this! You don't do anything around here. You're useless! Look at all these dirty dishes! How am I supposed to deal with this mess if I don't have my medication?" She threw the dish against the wall, and it shattered.

Camilla knew she had to do something drastic to calm her mother down, or else it would only escalate. "Ok." She said, resigned. "Ok. I'll get the pills for you."

"Good," her mother said, deflating a little. "At least there's one thing you're good for." And she went back to bed, slamming the door behind her.

Camilla shivered slightly as she stepped outside, and breathed fog like flame. All she had to do was walk two blocks, and she could get in the warmth of Jonathan's car. As she walked away, she glanced back at the building, and saw the man from the apartment above her. He was standing on the balcony, his face shrouded in darkness, an amber light from a cigar illuminating only the tip of his nose. She turned back around and kept walking, but she felt his eyes on her. She glanced back again, and he waved. Slightly unnerved, she walked a little faster down the road.

Turning the corner, she saw it. The lowered, modded Honda Civic was parked just a few yards away. As she drew closer, the car came into even clearer view. She saw his bumper sticker,

“Ass, Gas, or Grass, No One Rides for Free” and rolled her eyes, already dreading having to talk to him. She knocked on his window and slid into the car.

“Hey, baby,” he said, smiling an uneven smile.

“I’m not your baby,” Camilla said, frowning. “You got that oxy for me?”

“Sure do, sweetheart. That’ll be 200 bucks.”

Camilla slid the money towards him. Her mother had showed her where to find it. The emergency cash. “And I’m not a sweetheart. Yours or anyone else’s.”

“Whatever.” He said, counting the bills. “Those pills for you or mommy?”

She glared at him at the word “mommy”; at the implication; at the fact that he knew too much about her, and nothing at all.

“I gotta go,” she said, ignoring him. “My mom is waiting for me.” She had almost given herself away. She had almost said “these” instead of “me”.

His face contorted slightly with annoyance. “Ok,” he said. “See you next time.”

“Can’t wait.” She said, slamming the door.

Floor Three

He had ripped away a big portion of the wallpaper by now. He had pulled in random places, and the wall looked as if it had been slashed by a bear claw. It wasn’t until he sat, out of breath, that he realized it was nearly midnight. That was when the moon was brightest, and his fingers tingled with excitement. His favorite hour of the twenty-four. There was something about the moon...

Joseph ignored his shaking calves as he walked onto the balcony. He sat, readying the cigar he saved just for this time of day. When he was young, he would wait for the moon by pulling his knees up to his chest and resting his chin there. He doesn’t have such a limber luxury now, so he settled for palm against cheek and waited for the moon to break the clouds. When it did, he drew his rattling breath. The smoke from the cigar was cracking his lips to the breaking point, and he licked his lips for the pain of it.

He heard shouting from the floor below him. He heard vaguely a woman’s raised voice,

saying something wasn't good enough. What a surprise, he thought. Is it ever? He turned his attention back to the moon; it was almost a relief to see it. He raked his eyes over it, soaking in every detail, bemoaning every angle he could not see from where he sat.

For a moment, the pale flesh of the planetary body reminded him of his wife. Of her breasts, and thighs, as they were when the wallpaper was picked.

More shouting from downstairs. Something like glass breaking. His thoughts drifted away from Vanessa. The craters in the moon made him think of his mother's body, of the stretch marks – the lines of flesh sunk down and jagged, stretching from breast to naval, naval to pelvis, and further. Her cries, “this ugliness is because of you” and how she locked herself away.

He heard a door slam, and it brought him back to the hard, plastic chair he was sitting on, to the here and now. Tearing his eyes away from the moon, he looked down at the street. He saw the young woman who lives in the apartment downstairs. Camille, was it?

Almost as if she could feel him watching her, she whipped her head around to face him. Even a hundred feet away and in the feeble light of the street lamp he could see the fierce blue in her eyes. Her thick black hair came down to the small of her back, and it rippled almost dangerously as she walked down the road. She cast him one more glance, and he waved. What a beautiful girl, he thought, like the moon.

He went back to his cigar, breathing in smoke sharply, painfully. His lips broke and bled. The blood seeped onto his calloused fingers. He ignored it. Closed his eyes and thought about his mother.

Floor One

She had fallen asleep. The pills had worked fast, and she was snoring before her cigarette had been even half smoked. The sleep was dreamless. Blissful blackness. Beautiful

unconsciousness. Her lit cigarette tipped dangerously out of her mouth, an unbalanced seesaw. And then it fell into her scotch-soaked t-shirt, like a knife into her chest. Immediately the fabric became a flame.

If only she hadn't taken so many pills. If only someone was there to shout, wake her up, pour water on the figure who was still and silent amid the fire. And the treacherous flame spread, following the trail of scotch, reaching the curtains and climbing, climbing, spreading.

All the while Mrs. Broderick slept. Slept as her home became a furnace. Slept until there was no more flesh. Slept until sleep turned to death.

Floor Two

Camilla began to walk home in the freezing air. She hugged her coat more tightly around her body, and shoved the bottle of oxy further into her pocket. She knew it seemed sketchy, a teenage girl walking alone in the middle of the night. Of course the police would think she was buying drugs, wouldn't they?

She heard sirens and her paranoia increased. They got louder and louder and when she turned her head she could even see the lights in the distance. But they weren't that distant. In a matter of seconds, they were right beside her, and in a few more they were turning the corner.

Camilla released the breath she'd been holding, relieved. The relief was short lived, however, and disappeared as she turned the corner and saw where the police's true destination was.

The apartment building was ablaze. Flames roared toward the sky as if trying to touch the stars. Forgetting about the oxy, she ran towards the building – her home, where her mother lay sleeping. She had to get inside, get her out of there. She tried to rush through the gap of firemen, but a police man grabbed her arm.

“You can’t go in there!” He said. “It’s too dangerous.”

“But my mom is in there,” she said, choking on smoke and tears. “She’s sleeping... she...”

And someone one else was grabbing her arm. “Oh, Camilla,” said the hoarse but excited voice. “Isn’t it beautiful?” It was her mother. She was staring at the burning house in amazement. A man stood behind her, hopelessly trying to get her back on the oxygen tank.

Another wave of relief spread over her, and she gave her a mother a swift hug.

“Yes, beautiful.” Camilla said, trying to lead her mother back to the ambulance. “Why don’t we sit here together until we can figure out what to do?”

“Sit?” her mother repeated, almost shouting. “But I feel so alive, don’t you? Don’t you want to just run, or dance?”

“No. I want to sit. Please, come sit with me.”

But her mother only laughed. A high pitched, manic laughter.

“Doesn’t it, doesn’t it look like the sun?” She was staring into Camilla’s eyes. Camilla could see the fire reflected there, and yet it seemed as if the fire was coming from within, and not without.

Suddenly the firemen were bringing someone down from a balcony, the old man that had waved to Camilla earlier. He seemed calm, too calm, as he allowed himself to be rescued from the fire. They brought him to the ambulance, too, and strapped an oxygen mask onto his face.

As he passed them, he started at Camilla’s mother as if he’d seen a ghost. Wide eyed and speechless, he let his eyes rake over her, shameless.

“Haven’t you ever wondered what it’d be like to touch the sun?” Janice asked Camilla.

“You would burn before you even got close to it.”

Her mother's legs began to jiggle restlessly. Anxiety began to bubble in Camilla's stomach. She held her mother's arm tighter.

"But it would be so brilliant, Cam. To touch the sun. Like art."

Camilla didn't know what to say. And then, as she had feared, her mother ripped her arm away from Camilla's grip and ran towards the burning house.

"Stop her!" Camilla screamed. "Get her away from there!"

The firefighter's attention had momentarily been pulled by the old man; now, abandoning him, they tore after Camilla's mother. She was laughing, shouting about touching the sun.

Suddenly, without warning, the old man got up and ran, with the speed of one much younger, into the house in front of the firefighters who were so bewildered they didn't move for an entire ten seconds. With looks of horrific realization they too plunged into the burning house.

Camilla stood on the sidewalk in horror. Fingers in her mouth, she chewed on them. She felt as if she was going to pass out, or throw up.

She saw the red and yellow jackets of the firemen. They were carrying two bodies, both limp in their arms.

Floor Three

At first, Joseph thought the fire alarm was because of the cigar. Hastily, he put it out. But then he noticed the alarm going off on all three floors. Back out on the balcony, he saw smoke issuing from Mrs. Broderick's apartment. That's when he realized the building was on fire.

There were no fire escapes. That was one of the reasons the building was so cheap. He and Vanessa had made their peace with it. They made plans, escape routes, just in case. But he couldn't remember them now.

He heard sirens and knew the firemen were coming. He'd just wait out on the balcony

until then, in the fresh air, where he could look at the moon. And if they can't get me down, he reasoned with himself, it's not so bad. It was nearly his time to go, anyway, and he knew it. He just hoped it wouldn't be too painful.

He saw the fire truck and the ambulance and the police cars congregate in the road. Then, of more interest to him, that girl who lives on the middle floor, who he waved to just a half hour before. He saw as her mouth dropped open in horror, as she ran, recklessly, towards the flames and cried for her mother. He watched as the two of them embraced.

Finally the firemen put the ladder to his balcony and brought him down. It all felt very anti-climactic to him. They insisted he be put on oxygen, even though he hadn't breathed in any smoke. He was perfectly fine, and told them so, but they sat him down and put on that wretched oxygen mask anyway.

As he passed the girl and her mother, he almost stopped dead in his tracks. For one second, a second of madness and terrible grief, he thought he was looking at Vanessa. Vanessa at thirty; more mature, more lined, but beautiful. The same auburn hair, the same blue eyes. It took the wind out of him, and for a moment he thought he really could use the oxygen.

He sat in a daze, watching the woman. She was a little strange, he thought. She didn't seem to be concerned by the fire, like a mother would be. Instead she seemed amazed by it. And it was the girl who was trying to calm the woman, get her to be still.

He watched as the woman ran towards the building. Joseph could hear laughter, and something about the sun. And all he could think of was Vanessa. Vanessa at twenty, at thirty, at fifty, at her death bed. Auburn hair turned grey. Blue eyes faded and bordered by wrinkles. Beautiful, still.

He had to save this woman who looked so like his love; he had to preserve the same red

tone of her hair, the same shade of blue in her eyes.

Somehow he felt sixty years younger. He ran after her, ignoring the firefighter's dumbfounded looks.

There she was, in the midst of the flames. A magical, ethereal being. He saw, above her head, a ceiling beam that was about to fall. He ran towards her, pushing her back towards the entrance. She looked at him, astonished. In the widening of her eyes he saw Vanessa again. He saw their wedding day as if it were a movie scene inside his head.

"Until death do us part," they had vowed.

"Until death brings us together again," he said aloud to the burning walls.

He heard the ceiling beam break, and made no move to avoid it. He felt it crash over him with a screaming pain, but then it was gone. Enveloped by wonderful nothingness, a smile on his ashen face. Happy, at last, that those blue eyes were the last thing he ever saw.

Camilla stood outside of the hospital room, her limbs shaking. She hadn't seen, she couldn't be sure. She paced the four squares outside the door relentlessly. The tip of her shoes scuffed in the same place every time, the repetition soothing her muscles. Then there he was, the doctor, standing in front of her, smiling.

"She's ok," he said. "She is waiting for you."

Janice was lying on the hospital bed, an I.V. in her arm and bandages down the right side of her body. The doctor had said something about second degree burns. Something about pain relievers and mood stabilizers. She was crying.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Janice cried to her daughter. An ugly cry, a shaking cry, a plea. "Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me."

The funeral took place on March 14, at dawn. Don had planned it this way; it was Mrs. Broderick's favorite time of day, when the sun rises. Only Don, her son, stood by her grave.

Camilla and Janice stood by the sidelines, there for both Mrs. Broderick and Joseph, who saved Janice's life. They stood still and silent as the priest recited words of peace, of love and heaven. Stood with their eyes on the ground as their caskets were lowered in to the dirt. And once the holes were filled, they placed a flower at each mound, and left. No one stayed to see the sun rise over Abigail Broderick's grave like a flame.