

THE CLOUD NINE DREAM
An Extension of “On What It Means When A Blind Girl Draws Trees”

By Ethan Fox

****A note****

All text in square brackets represent
text characters want to say, but don't.

III

The vintage phonographe unraveled its static-ridden notes, mixing with the lulling white noise of the shower water. The water switched off, and after a brief pause, the shower curtain retracted right, as Peter stepped onto the bath mat. He ripped the large towel from the side rack, allowing it fluctuate freely in the steamy air before rigging it straight, across his body. Drying himself off, Peter walked into the spacious bedroom and dressed himself in a black-tie suit with the grace of an animatronic. About halfway done buttoning up his shirt, Ella fluttered through the door, and engaged with Peter in a delicate twirl, before raising her arms in a militant ballet pose.

“Dance with me,” she said, as the phonographe picked up Ella Fitzgerald’s rendition of *La Vie En Rose*.

And they danced together across the room in a lazy, albeit grandiloquent foxtrot. As the last notes came on, Peter swept Ella into a gentle pretzel, holding her comfortably close in his arms, while swaying for a few seconds, before unwrapping in a wide swingout, and returning to a low (tenderly-endearing) dip. And they stared into each other’s eyes for a comfortable period of time, allowing their imaginations to transport them into an old, black-and-white romance.

“Oh don’t, let’s just stay like this until we die,” Ella tugged, sensing Peter start to stand up.

“I have to dress.”

“Don’t. Hold me until we die. Hold me in this timeless trance.”

“Beauty comes in passing moments, dear,” Peter bent down and gave Ella a kiss.

“Yet heaven is said to be beautiful. And if heaven is pure beauty, then it’s for sure a thing of the past.” And with that, they stood up, Ella straightening her dress as Peter adjusted his belt.

“If I didn’t know you, I’d have assumed you were a hopeless romantic,” Peter started to finish buttoning his shirt.

Ella tilted her head to the side, raising her shoulder slightly with a slight, lopsided smile. She held her posture in the slightly-sarcastic, endearing manner while she went to help Peter tie his bowtie. “Never assume anything. People assume things that actually have no correlation. And it’s the silliest of things too, like: ‘oh she’s looking out the window, she must be bored’ when really...[they’re just starrng at a handsome, young fellow lift a keg of beer].”

“All that coming from a nihilist.”

“All this coming from a well-lived life,” Ella picked up Peter’s jacket and started dusting it off. “Wishing you’d taken me up on that eternity offer?”

“Spend the day with me,” Peter gripped Ella’s shoulders, and they shared a glance.

Ella looked away ashamedly. “You can wait another two hours. Just two hours too, not staying for the farewell party. Go enjoy lunch with Nora for me. I’ll see you at the theatre. There.” Ella finished dusting Peter’s jacket of the minute specks of dust invisible to the faraway eye. “Don’t you just love dressing up li[ke the old films]?”

Peter leaned over and kissed her before she could finish. “You’ll be late.”

“And you’ll be early. And yet, we’ll both be fashionable,” she gave him a large grin, the one he’d fallen in love with, and exited to the living space. Peter looked at himself in the mirror to make sure everything was orderly.

“What’s the show called?!” He yelled into the doorway.

“Cloud Nine Dream! You’ll love it: no intermission!” She called out.

Peter grabbed his wallet and went out to see Ella looking at their wedding announcement. “I always say an intermission breaks an audience’s concentration.”

“Yes I know how you feel about intermissions,” she mused. And just then, the sun caught Ella in an integral of its warm light, illuminating her beauty through the milling motes. Peter watched her for a moment before she re-entered in the conversation. “You should take one of these to Nora. You know, she told me that she hasn’t received one yet.”

“Really? We’ve sent her like... twenty.”

“Two. We’ve sent her two, and I think it’s just her change of address. Take one to her though,” Ella handed over the heavy-set cardstock that read: *Save the Date: September 9, 2076. The marriage of Drs. Peter Christiansen and Ella Chapman.* “I’ll see you this afternoon.”

Ella gave Peter a quick kiss before exiting the room, leaving him alone.

“Here, put this on,” Quinn handed Claudia a mask. “It may be a bit large, but if you use these handkerchiefs, then you can make it fit.”

Claudia pulled the mask over her face, muting her intake of oxygen. “Fits alright,” she told the other ghoulish mask.

“Stick close, we’ve got a ways to walk,” and he opened the door to the dusty, red winds.

They walked along in silence for a ways, fighting against the oncoming blust of particles. All that could be seen were the eroding ground shifting with the storm’s grain. A mile along, the wind died down enough, and the air widened, allowing the dust to fall to the ground where it snaked along in winding curves.

“If you want some fresh air, get it now,” Quinn pulled off his mask. “Winds’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Claudia followed suit, and squinted a bit at the brightness her mask had dampened. “But the thing that I’m not getting is why? Why would they try and stamp out people like you?”

“We weren’t useful,” Quinn explained bitterly. “Society only wanted things that were utilitarian, and that went beyond technology. If you weren’t producing a child when you had sex, then that wasn’t what they deemed utilitarian. You could be the smartest person in the world, but have one impractical trait: gay, depressed, crippled... so much as a disappointing child... and that’s it: you’d be gone.”

“A lot of creative people are useless then.”

“Creative people? There were loads of creative people here who helped develop some great technology. They weren’t useless.”

“Yes, but I mean things like art. Paintings and landscape artists.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Art. Like, don’t you decorate your house with art?” And Claudia became confused because she couldn’t remember if Quinn’s house was furnished with art or not.

“We don’t have art. So yes, I suppose it must be useless.”

“Ok, but all societies have art. What about religion? Religions are based around art sometimes,” Claudia kicked at the ground in disbelief.

“The government deemed religion useless after the 1954 Catastrophe. That’s when a group of religion-followers decided to sabotage the launch of the internet.”

“But weren’t there rebellions? Or, something?”

“Yeah, there were a few, but they all died out in the 1950s. Anyone entering the country had to declare themselves atheists.”

“And is this what the rest of the world looks like?”

“Yes it does.”

Suddenly aware of how many questions she’d been asking, and realizing the weight of Quinn’s last affirmation, Claudia fell silent and focused on trying to make really heavy footsteps with her right foot, and softer ones with her left. And they continued on in the lopsided manner while the wind gradually picked up again, forcing them back into their masks.

“We’re about half way there!” Quinn shouted before stopping and holding out a hand to signal Claudia to stop.

Off to the right, the rigidly-crooked silhouette of an animal stood with one paw slightly raised, head held high and majestically alert. Slowly, it turned its glowing white eyes towards the pair, and a wide grin cracked itself up the face. Claudia’s body racked itself with chilling goosebumps, and her eyes began to water in fright. The beast waited, watching the two trekkers with the patient laziness of a hunter.

Quinn drew his sidearm and clicked the hammer back, aiming it at the grinning beast. It disappeared into the curtains of sand, and Quinn scanned around the horizon to make sure there weren’t any creatures following. “I need you to look behind us every few seconds!” He yelled to Claudia.

“What was that!?”

“A wolf!” Quinn screamed back through the raging winds. “We have to move. Now!” And they started to jog, Claudia looking behind her in panic every few seconds.

“And you’re all set to move out?” Nora looked at her brother with skepticism as the car pulled away from her new apartment.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“For a professor, you’re kinda dumb,” Nora noshed away at her brother’s dignity.

“Nora, not now please. Let’s just have a nice lunch, and enjoy a great play, and have a sportingly-good time,” a flustered Peter managed to say, in fractioned fragments.

“Aw well I’m just going to miss my brother. All demoted to a... is it a shack by the sea?”

“It’s not a demotion. It’s a very nice cabin with plenty of space and fresh air. Ella and I have been wanting to move out to the country, and this place was perfect. Excellent jobs for both of us at the college too.”

“Stay in New York.”

“Look,” Peter warned. “I know how you feel about Ella, but please, I love her. She is my everything.”

“I know,” Nora softened her witty tone, showing how much she did really approve of Peter’s happiness. “I’m just concerned. You know how it is West of the Mississippi.”

“How’s the new apartment?”

“Excellent. Plenty of space, and I get a nice view of the George Washington Bridge. I think I’d like a bit more décor, but I’ll pick something up somewhere for cheap. How are you going to survive without art over there?”

“It’s a different type of art,” Peter reminded her. “I’d like to see your place before I leave.”

“I’ll have it set up in no time,” Nora waved her hand. “I’d rather you see it all finished than with boxes and messy floors, and [half-constructed furniture, messy kitchen, and just a disorganized mess in general].” There was a pause while Nora and Peter looked out opposite windows, gazing at the bustling street. “Stop.”

“What?”

“Stop the cab, I think I saw a cool gallery I’d like to check out.”

The cab pulled to the side of the road.

“We can check it out later,” Peter grabbed Nora’s wrist as she stepped out onto the street. “Reservations at The Grand Bistro, remember?”

“Oh, well then why don’t you go on ahead. We’re what,” Nora looked at the street sign. “Two minutes away from the place? I’d get there faster walking.”

“You sure?”

“Absolutely. I’ll see you in a few,” and with that, she left the vehicle.

Peter settled back in and the cab drove off. At the restaurant, Peter checked in, and was seated at a table close to the middle. A waiter (named Grant) came out and poured water into his glass and Peter was left to look around the room. It was a rectangular box, modern-looking with brick walls and sleek lights. To his left, the tall panes of tinted glass that looked out into the street shed plaid shadows with its warmly-yellow light. Waiters – carrying cool, clear chattel matching the décor of the table settings – walked around in white uniforms, offering service to tables at regular intervals.

With nothing to do, Peter regarded his iPhone clock as the minutes plodded away wearily, his brain merging one minute with the next. This was not exactly what he had wanted, and he made a mental note to make sure he stayed with his sister the next time she got sidetracked. A shadow of his waiter slid over the table, breaking his daze.

“Can I interest you in a glass of wine while you wait? Perhaps an aperitif?” Grant asked.

“Thanks, but I’ll wait just a few more.”

Grant nodded in consoling acknowledgment and headed off. It occurred to Peter, that to Grant, he looked like a hopeful suitor of some girl who decided to ditch at the last moment leaving him alone with nothing but melancholy numbness and expensive wine to console himself. He looked at the door bitterly, and then brightened.

There stood Ella, in her beautiful dress, looking dazzlingly-perfect in the slanted light emitting from the windows. They caught each other’s eyes, and Peter grinned, standing up while tilting his head slightly to the right, raising his arms in surprise.

But she just stood there, looking at him in a trance. It was as if she were somewhere else, yet very much present for she gazed knowingly into Peter’s eyes. They stood there for nine seconds, just a bit longer than eternity, before she started walking forward in a lopsided gait. Peter watched intently now, wondering if this was some act he was missing out on, or if something was wrong. Curious, but too afraid to walk over.

And in an instant motion, Ella put out her arm, grabbing the tablecloth, before collapsing to the floor, tableware tumbling towards her in a loud crash. All attention vectored towards her fall, the startling incident causing diners to intrinsically rise from their seats in shock and concern.

“Ella!” Peter ran over, too slow. He turned over over to her back, looking at her face.

“Peter,” she gazed lovingly into his eyes, as his gaze patterned to his bloody hand to her face and back again.

“Call an ambulance!” he yelled to no one in particular until Grant rushed over, and Peter’s gaze turned to the waiter.

“What happened?” Grant had his phone out.

“I don’t know!” Peter’s voice was fraying to a thin cord. “My fiancée is [].”

But Grant stopped him with a wave of his hand, his phone already dialing, allowing Peter to return his attention to Ella, whose eyes had slid three-quarters of the way dead.

“We should have stayed in heaven,” she whispered, a thin line of vocal diction present.

“Who did this to you? Did you see them!? Ella!! Stay with me! Ella!” Peter did the clichéd thing, and shook his fiancée gently, a feeble attempt to keep her awake. Yet her eyes were already closed.

She didn’t know what she was expecting, however it wasn’t the same sleekness that smoothed Quinn’s house. Claudia’s footsteps echoed her wonderment as they stepped through the hallway of the headquarters. At the end of the hallway, a large desk lay in wait with a large, metal placard above reading: *ROSCO HQ*. The floors were frosty white, glands of dust texturing the perfection of the aesthetic. All along the walls were mechanical drawings, images, and empty pedestals with smashed glass.

“I thought there wasn’t any art here,” Claudia mused.

“This is a museum,” Quinn countered. “There is no artistic value, only the aesthetic utilitarianism you see.”

“I call it art,” Claudia argued, and Quinn kept walking in silence down the hallway.

They rode an elevator down ten flights, stepping off to a short hallway with a desk and monitor. A door stood slightly ajar at the end, beckoning ominously. Unfazed, Claudia and Quinn walked through to a dark cavern with hundreds of rows of shelves of drawers. The lights flickered on in a cool, fluorescent hue, illuminating the vastness of the room.

“Do you know who you’re looking for?” Quinn asked. “It’s all alphabetical by last name, and then first.”

“Looking for the C’s I think,” Claudia said, and wandered off down the rows, Quinn trailing behind her. “It’s weird how empty it is. No one else is here? No one else is alive?”

“No,” Quinn’s response was hesitant, an answer that a witness might give on the stand if they were hiding something.

“What about other countries?”

“Well sure, but I don’t know how many people are left. It can’t be too many.”

Ella turned into a row and started searching up and down. “But someone must know about this place. That’s what I’m confused about. How is no one protecting these?”

“I’m protecting them.”

“Yeah, but you’re old, no offense.”

“Am I my society’s keeper? So what if one disappears every now and then: most of these memories are so bad they don’t deserve to live. Useless, really. A society that hates useless things turns out to be a hoarder of useless memories.”

“Right,” Claudia halted her search. “Well, what would be so wrong if we pulled out everything good from here, and discarded the cruelty? The bad ideas, or failures?”

“Well,” Quinn breathed out heavily. “The way I see it is you can’t have the good things without the flaws. They’re in the system. So maybe you start with everything that’s good, but eventually you do something bad. Well, what if that bad thing isn’t something new, but something old that you forgot about? Something you can’t get rid of?”

“Well, with different views working to progress your society’s technology and culture, I would think that the problems would be our own. Besides, making mistakes is how you learn.”

Claudia continued down the aisle, stopping at a box. “This is it. I’m pretty sure.”

“Try the memory,” Quinn invited. “You’ll know for sure then.”

And Claudia slipped the patch to her temple.

The road was dark, illuminated only by the moon in the distance and the car’s headlights. Peter sat in silence watching the GPS locator travel along the screen, glancing up occasionally to stare into the distance of the forest.

And then he saw her in the distance, a girl, dirtied with mud and leaves, staring at the car with wide white eyes. The car beeped and came to a halt safely in front of the girl. And now that he was closer, he could see how frightened she was, and how lost and confused. Yet he hesitated still, curious, but too frightful to move.

The car flashed its lights, and Peter rolled down the window.

“Are you lost?”

The girl nodded.

“Where’s home?”

The girl shrugged, pointed into the forest.

“Maybe you have an address?”

And she stared at him in silence. He cursed silently, butting his head against the dashboard. A sense of dread came over him, an illogical fear that the girl had transformed into some hideous monster in the time he’d taken to look away. Now swearing himself for being irrational, he counted to three and lifted his head to the same scene. His heart slowed.

“Why don’t you come into the car, we’ll find where you live tomorrow, ok? It’s late, and I need to get home.”

The girl didn’t move.

“Look, I don’t want to force you into something, but it’s not safe out here alone. Either get in the car, or I’m going to call the police and make sure you go with them.”

The girl moved to the passenger door and got into the car, before it sped off obstacle-free. The ride was mostly silent, Peter watching the huddled mass in the passenger seat. It stared in awe of its surroundings, jumping at the GPS system. They got to his cabin, and he led her inside.

“Are you hungry?” He asked.

The girl nodded.

“Um, ok. Well I don’t have too much. I guess I should have stopped at a store,” Peter started opening up cabinets, searching for food that a kid might like. At long last, he rediscovered a box of cereal, and gave a bowl to the girl. “Sorry, I’m a bit old fashioned so I don’t have access to fancy stuff you’re probably used to.”

The girl was too busy eating.

“Um, what’s your name?”

She stopped, and looked at him in the eye. “Mama told me not to talk to strangers.”

“Jesus wept,” Peter went and poured himself a drink. “Well you got in a stranger’s car, so you might as well talk to him.”

She shook her head.

“Well, how am I going to get you home?”

The girl kept eating cereal. Peter drained the glass and poured another, sitting down to watch the stranger. Children were a thing Ella had talked about with him, and it was painful to see a child in his house. She finished the cereal and pushed the bowl away, sitting there waiting for something. They sat like that for a time, looking intently at each other, as if waiting for the other to give a signal of what to do next.

“Well, I have a guest bed set up. It was ready for my sister who’s coming tomorrow evening, so [as long as you’re home by then you’re welcome to use it, unless you’d prefer the couch],” Peter sighed. “You can shower and get a good night’s sleep.”

He led her out to the guest room, and shut the door after her. Back in the kitchen, Peter turned on the alarm system around the house, and poured another drink. He debated on who to call, and if he should call the police. No amber alerts had been sent out, but it would probably be safer for him if he called her in. He settled down on the sofa and drank himself to sleep, looking at a picture of Ella.

The lull of the ocean around him made him drowsy, and the warmth of the house comforted his bones. He relapsed into the couch, drifting off in a weightless trance, his heavy breathing ebbing with the tide. It was harder to breathe now, in fact, sharp and painful to breathe. He coughed in confusion and tried to move, but couldn’t. Struggling, he gasped for air in the fading red room until

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Claudia coughed awake standing alone against a crevice of a structure, her lungs burning open from the unfiltered debris she was inhaling. She squinted her eyes, covering her mouth, and breathed her hand-filtered air deeply. “Quinn!?” She called out, attempting to clear her head. It wasn’t until she gained clarity that she realized ahead of her, two white eyes glared patiently at her, accompanied by a hungry grin.

IV

“You see, me and the boys were out for a day of *relaxation*, and who happens to be here, but the old man himself.” Kurt pushed against Quinn with verbal power. “Now what could you possibly be doing out here?”

“Nothing that matters to you,” Quinn defended himself against the younger man: a short build with well-defined muscles. He was lean, his face just as weathered as the ruined city’s architecture, making him look older than he was.

“Well, old man,” Kurt took a step forward. Like a tripwire, Quinn twitched his arm to a better position in which to draw his gun to the sound of four guns clicking ready. Kurt eyed the situation with cat-like caution. “Now, let’s not get ourselves into any trouble.”

“What do you want?”

“Simply put, we just want to make sure you’re not up to something... wasteful. You have a history.” Kurt looked around, surveying the tall building. The dust was just starting to pick up again, and he noticed Quinn take a micro-glance to the left. “You alone?”

“Yes,” Quinn lied unconvincingly.

“Well, seeing as the storm’s about to pick up, why don’t you join us inside?”

“I’ll just be on my way.”

And growing ever more authoritative, Kurt’s voice boomed through the oncoming wind, “Why don’t you join us inside.” With a swift motion, he stepped right up to Quinn in a lopsided gait and gazed into his eyes powerfully.

And there was nothing to do except follow, so with a sigh, Quinn turned around and led the way into the headquarters, followed by Kurt and his four men. As the door closed in a heavily-fateful thud, a faint scream sounded in the distance, and Quinn was unsure if it was the wind.

She was standing on a ledge. The blowing dust on the building’s roof camouflaged with the desert floor. Claudia breathed a sigh of relief at the vertical drop that appeared to be a good five stories high. And yet those haunting eyes stared right at her, patiently allowing her to question her safety. And yet that grin bore right into her heart, ripping away the thin fabric to reveal a void of fear.

Claudia stepped back, collected herself and looked around. There was a wide space behind her: a square platform. In front, the ledge that extended to the sides, reaching around the building. A door stood with a rock holding it ajar, and she walked over to it quickly. Taped to the handle, a note read *“Stay put. I’ll come get you as soon as I can. If you see the dog, do not take your eyes off it until you’re safe inside.”*

Claudia whipped her head back to the edge, searching for the beast's outline. And there was nothing. Frozen for a second, she stood and looked around wildly. Convincing herself it was nothing, she opened the door to step inside.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a paw place itself delicately from behind the corner. Claudia froze again, the door wide open, afraid to move. And then the large, silhouetted profile of a beast poked its head forward, grinning ever so grand. And it turned its head slowly to Claudia, exposing its feral eyes, glazed with bloodlust.

For a moment, they held each other's' gaze: the hunter and the prey. The beast's eyes narrowed, exposing more teeth and gums, allowing a spot of drool to escape its mouth. It jumped forward. Letting out a primitive scream, Claudia was overcome with spastic movements as she entered the door, kicked the rock out, and slammed out the horror.

Inside, she stumbled back as the door rattled, howling out the frustration of the beast. For a timeless moment, there was nothing but the loud rage against the door. She stared intently at the door, expecting any moment for it to give way to her death, and felt it better for her eyes to be shut. So she shut them and waited patiently for the jaws of an unknown beast to find their mark.

She thought to herself, 'at least it will be quick. At least I got to see againe before I died.' And for the first time, she thought of her mother and how frightened she must be. Except, she couldn't picture her mother's face, and in that moment, she realized the true futility of her mission to convince her world that this... place... existed.

It came to her of how much she had missed. How many things she couldn't see, or didn't know how to describe other than basic geometry. And Claudia decided that she had missed enough, and opened her eyes to the safety of silence beating with her terrified heart.

And then the doorknob turned, and Claudia was gone. She found a large panel of elevators and called one, looking wildly around and impatiently hitting the "down" button. With her heart filling her chest, she got in, and the doors clanked shut. She was safe in the elevator; moving far away from the beast, and yet she didn't feel safe.

The doors opened wide to the lobby and, having collected her breath and courage, Claudia stepped out to a peaceful calm. Now was a time for remoulding her brain from the pulp it had deteriorated to living in the moment.

It became eerily silent in the lobby, after Claudia had pulled her mind together. Logically, she was safe, however it was the abrupt stillness of suspense that kept her hairs raised. She started wandering down the halls, peering into each of the rooms out of hope she'd find something.

Seventeen doors down, there was a dark room with a few sofas. Reading the side card, Claudia entered the employee's lounge and merged herself in holy matrimony with the most-comfortable, cotton couch. She involuntarily let out a pained creaking sound, as her back racked with pain before accepting the state of comfort.

She let herself doze off in peace, the room dark except for the integral of light from the hall window.

"Now, what were you doing here?" Kurt leaned against the elevator doors, glaring maliciously at Quinn.

"It doesn't matter now."

"Well you say that, but I have a thing for useless facts. It's a hobby, you see."

"Then find another one." The old man grew agitated with concern, which in turn made him frustrated and angry. Kurt struck him across the face, and Quinn felt heat pulsing in his cheeks from rage and the bruising welt.

"You're hiding something, and I want to know what it is. You don't just come to a place like this for no reason! No one just takes that risk!"

The cart was silent for the rest of the trip.

They reached the bottom floor and stepped out into the hallway with the security desk and open door. The lights flickered on immediately.

"I don't want any trouble," Quinn attempted a final excuse. "I know what you guys do, and I'd rather not be a part of it."

"Hear this old man?" Kurt joked to one of his fellow mates, and they laughed.

"We're not offering you any," the armed man broke the laughter to deal a serious tone. "Kurt hasn't decided what he wants to do with you yet."

And Quinn was pushed forward into the cavernous room, the men following behind.

“Alright, make it random,” Kurt opened his arms to the wide room, and the four men spread out, leaving Kurt alone with Quinn. “They’re good soldiers, the best,” Kurt’s tone was paternal, and caring, which surprised Quinn.

“Not for long if you dope them up,” Quinn mumbled. “Kurt, whatever fight you have with me, I’m begging your forgiveness. I swear I’m not stealing or anything.”

“Yes, well that’s not the concern, old man,” Kurt said. “It’s that we set some very simple guidelines, and you broke them.”

“Just this once. It was just for posterity’s sake.”

“Posterity? You’ve got one foot in the grave, and the other in the afterlife. What future do you hope to have?”

“Just... to die happy,” Quinn’s eyes saddened with grief. “I just wanted to relive a memory.”

“Which one?”

“My partner.”

“Bullshit. You and I both know queers like you weren’t afforded memory rights.”

“Well then, I suppose I had hoped for [].” and he stopped, breathing shallowly; his crinkled face brooding solemnly.

“I tell you, useless facts are my hobby,” Kurt walked right up to Quinn. “And you know what? I can always tell a fact from a lie. And you sir, have just given me a lie, and I just [hate that with a burning passion].”

There was a suppressed bang, and Quinn dropped to his side, gripping his leg in pain from the bullet wound. Kurt bent down and rested his kneecap on Quinn’s neck, wrenching his head to a halt.

“What are you doing here!?” Kurt yelled, watching tears stream from Quinn’s pain-laced eyes.

And sobbing, with a salty stutter, Quinn managed to get out “I don’t know.”

And he looked into Kurt’s eyes pitifully, and broken, asking for mercy while his mind prayed for a miracle. And sitting very still, Kurt gazed into Quinn’s eyes, with disgust, and in confusion lifted his knee while he stood up self-righteously.

I don’t know anymore,” Quinn continued. And they stayed like that, in silence except for Quinn’s heavy, and pained, breathing.

When the four men came back, Kurt got out a small container, and opened the top, holding it out to each of the men. “So who do we have the pleasure of this time?”

“Rita Harper,” the first man said, and placed a memory tab into the container. And around they went, each with two different names, and their corresponding memory tabs. With the eight pads in the container, Kurt shut the lid and pressed a side button. There was a grinding sound, a mechanical whir.

Kurt dumped the contents back onto a spoon, except now the tabs had been ground into a powder. Using a lighter, and a bit of water from his pack, Kurt heated the spoon until its contents were viscously bubbly.

“Would you like some? It might help with the pain,” and for the first time, the young man’s voice had an air of concern in it. A compassionate empathy that spoke deeply to the old man, laying in pain on the ground. Quinn was almost tempted, but shook his head no. “Well, more for us then.”

And the five men dipped their finger into the mix, and then into their mouths, licking the substance clean.

It had been a lovely moment of eternity that Claudia had drifted off, followed by the more unpleasant moment of sudden fright (for no good reason). Claudia twitched violently with her heartbeat, and then fought to keep calm.

Should she go search for Quinn, or remain in safety? Moreover, the question really was if the beast was still out there, and if it was smart enough to follow her. She shuddered at the thought that if she went searching, she’d run into the violent brood. And yet if she stayed, perhaps the gruesome beast would find her.

At long last, she decided she was safe, and just to make sure, moved a couch across the door, and faced her couch away from the window. This way, she could see if anything blocked the outside light, but wouldn’t be able to be seen.

A few moments passed, as she lay there, before curiosity got the better of her and she fished out the tab from her pocket and slipped it onto her temple. She was safe enough.

“I hope this means you’ll actually move on this time,” Nora moved about the kitchen, chopping vegetables while Peter looked on. “They’re crediting you with helping discover that

door. I mean, as if this country wasn't advanced enough, think of all the wonders that'll happen now. I mean, I'm considering getting citizenship myself!"

"Don't upend yourself just for a door," Peter folded his arms, a glass of whiskey just within reach. "All they know is that it's a serious power source."

"And you were the one that discovered it!" Nora slated her chopped veggies into a bowl and began on a few onions. "I mean, they offered you a full-time position with tenure! And you'd be good to take that after... well. You know."

"Yes, yes," Peter dismissed the unpleasant suggestion. "Well we'll see."

"Peter, you're smart, and young. Now go do something with your life," Nora pleaded.

There was a pause. "So how's your apartment coming along?"

There was a pause. "Wonderful. Well, I suppose as well as any apartment can come along. It's certainly not where I'd like it to be."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Oh, just small things. Really," Nora was chopping a bit more robotically. "The stove broke down and of course there aren't any more being sold in a reasonable price range, so now I have to wait for something to come along. And there was a lovely painting I bought that just didn't fit. Should have measured but you know sometimes I purchase things on impulse because it would really go well with the room but it's just a bit too large for the space is all."

"Nora," Peter's voice was warningly firm. "He's not there anymore."

"I know," Nora drew her hand across her brow hurriedly. "I know. I just... it's hard sometimes."

"Yes," Peter echoed. "It's hard sometimes."

And they stood there staring off into the emptiness.

"Well," Nora turned to look at Peter. "Are you going to help or just be the old alcoholic who watches TV and gets fat and stupid?"

"I'm not fat yet," Peter smiled, and went to help his sister cook.

It was about then that Claudia noticed a man standing in the shadows of a hallway, observing the action in the room. 'Curious', she thought, 'that this young man wasn't helping out, or interacting in any way.' She studied him for a good while. He was a bit taller than average, with brown hair cut handsomely short, and a thin face weathered with years of seeing things. Yet he was young, around Claudia's age perhaps.

“Idiot!” Nora hit Peter playfully in the shoulder.

“I just wanted to know!”

“Well now you know not to do that,” Nora put a steaming pan into the sink and turned on the water. It hissed loudly, and Claudia felt a hand on her shoulder.

She jumped, screaming, and turned around to see the young man behind her, hand outreached.

“It’s ok, it’s ok!” the young man said soothingly.

“How,” Claudia looked back. The entire place had frozen, the smoke still pouring up from the sink, Nora slightly reeling back from the burst of heat and steam, and Peter cracking a light smile of amusement.

“It’s complicated,” the man said. “Basically I can reach out to people suspended in this state and talk to them.”

“This state,” Claudia wasn’t sure if it was the correct question to prioritize, and followed it up with “Who are you?”

“My name’s Atascos Smith,” Atascos said. “And I have been waiting a very long time to meet you.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re Claudia, and I know this is going to sound crazy, but a friend told me you’d need my help right now.”

“What help?”

“Well, first off, to tell you to wake up. You’re in danger.”

And the memory shattered around Claudia as she bolted straight up to the sound of approaching footsteps.

“It’s just up here,” a muffled voice sounded. “Perfect place for relaxation.”

Claudia lay down again, a plank. A shadow covered the sliver of light, and the door knob turned. There was a loud bump as the door hit the sofa and a halt. “Well that’s odd,” the man said, and tried again a few more times. “Robert, shine a light in there and see if there’s anything unsavory.”

A bright light swept through the room, illuminating the silhouettes of furniture and the haunting features of the room. “Someone’s put a chair in front of the door!”

“Well, that is rather confusing. So either someone’s inside and managed to get out, or they’re still inside,” the first man’s voice reasoned. “We know you’re in there! Come on out with your hands up and we won’t hurt you!”

There was stillness.

“Robert, Tim,” the man’s voice was quickly followed by a loud bang as the door was forced open, and the sofa chair pushed to the side. And a moment later, the rough face of a man holding a gun appeared behind the couch, and Claudia screamed.

“It’s a girl!” the man yelled to the door.

“Claudia!” Quinn yelled and tried to limp through the door.

“Quinn?” Quinn crashed helplessly to the ground.

“What?” Kurt took a step forward with confidence, yet his face betrayed confusion and giddiness; a sense of detachment and disbelief.

“A girl!” the man yelled again. Claudia remained on the couch, bunched up like a spring ready to expand at the slightest movement.

“Well, well. We didn’t bring a girl,” Kurt lumbered over to stare at Claudia, his voice slurring slightly, making his already-dumb statement sound all the more stupid. “She trying to steal from us?”

“You here thieving?” the man spoke timidly and coaxingly, a taming tone entering his voice as a child attempting to get the attention of a cat.

Claudia shook her head. “I... I was running away.”

And then a look of worry clawed out of the man’s face. “Running away,” he repeated, lost.

“We’re safe here, Robert,” Kurt shook his head, looking at the ground. “Find a sofa, I’ll deal with the girl.”

And the men went and took a seat in the surrounding couches. Kurt heaved Quinn up, and placed him down heavily next to Claudia on the sofa. He then went and got a chair, struggling to get it untangled from the corner of the room. Sitting on the edge, across from Quinn and Claudia, he rested his forearms on his widespread legs, leaning forward. His gun was directed at Quinn.

Claudia looked at Quinn, confused, and got a slow headshake. After a moment, Kurt burst into a wide grin, and spread his soft laughter through the room. “That was beautiful, you know.”

And they waited patiently for the moment to pass. And after that moment, it was clear Kurt had forgotten what he was laughing about, smiling existentially into the space between Claudia and Quinn. He breathed in deeply, letting out a sharp exhale and continued. "So what are you doing here? I don't recognize the girl."

There was more silence.

"What are you hiding, old man?" Kurt asked. "Now I want the truth, and I want it now. Or..." and he trailed off, allowing his threat to redirect his aim at Claudia's head, while his gaze remained fixated on Quinn. "And I don't think any of us would like that; Scott would throw a fit if he never made her... acquaintance."

There was a pause.

"We came here because I wanted to see," Claudia spoke finally.

Kurt's head swiveled magnetically towards Claudia. "See what?"

"What memories were."

"Memories?" And then, what struck Kurt as hilarious Claudia couldn't tell, yet he continued his thread of laughter from before, allowing it to grow in volume with the combined laughter of his four accomplices. "She wanted to see what memories were," he mocked her dumbly.

"I'm not from here," Claudia said quickly. "I'm from the hatch."

"Claudia!" Quinn warned quickly and sharply.

And the room went completely still.

"The hatch, " Kurt said slowly, as if he had misheard.

"You call it a door. My name is Claudia."

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“Bullshit” Kurt breathed.

“It’s true,” Quinn supported. “What else would explain her appearance?”

“This is. One. Fucking. Trip!” one of the men shouted, and the five burst out laughing.

“No no, really,” Kurt collected his tears of laughter along his gun. “Because I can’t tell if this is actually happening.”

It was about then, that a seriousness broke through to Kurt, and he nodded his head in acknowledgement. “Okay, okay,” he breathed out heavily. “Okay.

I...

When I come to, we’ll see where this all goes.” And he got up to saunter over to an empty couch, and tossed himself down as if just barely being able to do so. There was a slight shuffle as he turned to face upwards, his eyes glazing over.

“Don’t move,” Quinn motioned at Claudia, who’s wide and wondering eyes stared in fright. And they sat tensely, like that, for a good five minutes.

And after an eternity of frightened silence, Quinn placed his finger over his lips, and nodded for Claudia to get moving. “Quietly. We’re getting out of here.”

“What happened?” Claudia looked over at the men, dazed in euphoria.

“Nothing we can do. They’re harmless,” Quinn winced as he tried to get up. Claudia went to his side, yet he waved her away. “Nonsense, you wouldn’t be able to help much.”

“I’m not weak,” Claudia said offensively, and she wrapped the old man’s arm over her shoulder and they staggered off silently into the hallway, and out into the lobby, where they were met with a low growling.

The animal stood darkly in the center of the hallway, grinning patiently and mischievously. Now they were closer, Claudia could see the rippling fur, rife with dust covering it’s long torso and muscled body. It held its tongue to the side, and smiled victoriously, staring right at Claudia who stared back with the helpless, melancholy gaze of defeat.

And in synchronized steps, Claudia and Quinn backed up slowly towards the elevators, of one mind to survive. And of the same, the beast matched their steps, moving forward. Quinn hit the elevator button, and an elevator to his right opened.

Yet it was the ding of the ready elevator that caused the beast to panic and move swiftly. In a few bounding leaps, it had covered the floor, and leaped over the large, round desk onto the separator. Quinn threw Claudia into the elevator, spinning in time to see the beast launch itself at the open elevator.

From inside, Claudia watched as Quinn expended all of his energy, using the beast’s momentum to throw it to crash into the wall. Panting, Quinn looked wearily at Claudia, holding his hand out to the side as the feral beast came full force at the old man, ripping into his flesh with its teeth.

Claudia screamed, and just as the elevator doors were closing, a firm arm holding a gun entered into view. It pointed itself directly at the head of the beast, and in just that moment, Claudia saw a flash, and heard a loud bang, as the elevator doors closed. From inside, she could hear a loud whine, followed by a second gun shot, and silence.

Too scared to move, she sat in the dim light of the elevator. Unsure of what had just happened, Claudia was afraid to press a button in fear that at any moment, the door would open to the beast, which had already proven capabilities beyond her understanding. Yet, when the doors did slide open, she just sat there numbly, any ounce of energy left in her gone.

Atascos Smith stood there, looking in to make sure she was alright. He looked a bit older, without loosing any of his youthful features. Perhaps it was in his saddened eyes and solemn face, or his more-weathered skin and clothes.

“Well,” he said after a moment of pure silence. “Come on out.”

And Claudia crawled out suspiciously and slowly, gently afraid of a danger that wasn't there. Looking out at the swirling desert, her mind strained in thought that perhaps she should run outside to safety. Instead she stopped, remembering the old man, her vision clearing rapidly. And as she kneeled down to face her guide, she saw the claw and teeth marks, hot and spurting blood freely. And glancing at Quinn's face, she let out a bursting sob.

"Claudia," Quinn strained his words coarsely. "What a beautiful name." And though she barely knew him, she felt the greatest sense of sorrow. And cradling him with care, they sat there in melancholy numbness. "Get back home, safe."

"Yes," Claudia was distant from her voice. "We'll get you back home."

"No."

A moment passed while Claudia thought of how to appease the kind man. "I kept this for you," Claudia pulled out Sam's memory and went to place it on Quinn's temple, to quell him of all fear. Instead, the old man stopped her, grasping to her wrist.

"Don't give me that, I know it all," and their arms dropped gently to the floor. And another moment passed, a painful moment of waiting for something to happen. "You said you could rebuild this society from our memories."

"Yes, I think we can."

"Why do you care about this place so much?"

"Because it's new to me, and nothing is like the place I come from," Claudia paused to think deeply. "And because I can see it. And because, while you may not see it, people care."

"What a strange woman you are," Quinn smiled. "I would like to ask one more thing."

"Anything."

"If nothing from your world is like mine, I would like to hear something new. Something original I've never heard before."

And Claudia went through her brain, finding a verse she fell asleep to when she was a child: a small poem her mother had passed down to her.

It was dawn, and the sun was rising.

Yet looking west, he saw the end of days;

And to the east, the oncoming pale night.

And in his coracle, left the bay

His soul harmonizing with the calming waves.

“How strange, how lovely,” Quinn smiled into the void of death.

And tears streamed down Claudia’s face as she hugged the old man to her. In the silence of the hall, her ears grew very loud.

She was stopped by Atascos, who placed his hand warmly on her shoulder. “Come along. There’s nothing to be done now.”

She stood up, and allowed herself to be led outside, glancing back at the reception desk one last time, as if she could see through it to Quinn’s resting body.

V

Along the hills in the horizon, the truck drove into the dust storm with its windshield just barely offering a peak of upcoming terrain. Yet with complete confidence, Atascos drove onward to some mysterious place. It occurred to Claudia that she should ask where they were going, yet all she did was sit in silence and watch and wonder at the driver.

They pulled up to a cabin, strangely positioned in a wide ring of similar-looking buildings. While its sci-fi features stood out to Claudia, a rustic appeal took her by surprise. It was made of wood, weathered away fiercely from the winds. She turned to Atascos and asked where they were.

“A house, perhaps you recognize it.”

And indeed, she did. “Peter.”

Atascos nodded and got out. Claudia followed suit, and then followed Atascos into the house. It was clean and homely, unlike the messy halls of Quinn’s house; or the eerily and dark, sanitary hallways of ROSCO HQ. There were itchy-looking rugs on the ground, wool throws on soft couches, and plenty of sophisticated décor.

“Do you need some rest?”

“No,” Claudia sat down on one of the recliners. “I’m fine.”

“Can I get you anything to drink? Eat?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Well, then make yourself at home. I have to clean up the kitchen, I left in quite a hurry,” and he left into the adjoining room, and started to wash a plate.

“Who are you?” Claudia asked after a long pause. “How did you do... How did you... do what you did?”

“When you relive a memory, your frontal lobe is put into this suspension, and your mind is flooded with a highly-refined, and modified mix of drugs that allows an imprint of a memory to be played. I can hack my way into people’s minds in this way. Can’t actually do much, but I can host a private conversation without interference.”

“Why?”

“Why what? Do I need private conversations?”

“Yeah.”

“Because there are some bad people out here. Back when we were at war it was a talent that was used by the government to communicate secrets. And it was a tracking system.” And he sighed, putting down the last dish and drying off his hands. He moved and sat down across from Claudia.

“So why did you... how did you know to enter my mind? Was it just coincidence?”

“Just something a friend told me to do; I don’t know if you’d understand.”

“So now what?”

“What?”

“What are we doing here?”

“Waiting for a friend. She asked to see you.”

“Who?”

“Her name’s Cassandra.”

“Why does she want to see me?”

“You have something she wants, and she’d like to purchase it from you.”

“I don’t have anything.”

“It’s not...” and he stopped. “It’s not a material thing. I don’t know if you’d understand. But at least consider her offer, and then I’ll take you back home. You shouldn’t be here.”

“I shouldn’t be there either.”

“You may think that your home has nothing to offer you, but I think you’ll find that it has more than enough. This world is not fit for people anymore,” Atascos said wearily. “They had their time, and they wasted it on wasteful habits and things.”

“Quinn said the same thing.”

“Is Quinn the man you were with?”

“Yes.”

“Well he was right. Go home, and live. Grow old in peace, and find love. That’s a life that you should live.”

“I don’t think I can love anymore.”

“Well it’s not something that you can just choose. I’m sure you’ll find someone.”

“Why would I choose to love someone when I’ve observed true love? When I have seen two people love so deeply and sincerely; the ultimate showmanship of compassion, and selfless care. I don’t know if it’s possible for two people to love more, and who am I to love any deeper?”

“Well, perhaps you’ll find something else, but you won’t find it here,” and with that, he got up and went to the hallway. “I’m going to get a few hours of sleep. The guest room is open if you’d like it.”

“Thank you,” Claudia said instinctively, out of respect. And he walked out of view. Claudia reclined, feeling her back relax, and a comfortable sinking feeling wash over her chest. After a moment, she pulled out Peter’s memory and looked it over.

‘Just to see the ending,’ she told herself, and slipped the tab onto her temple.

The sea crashed gently around the cabin, as Peter woke up in sudden bewilderment, snapping limbs around in the sweat-drenched sheets. For a moment, he was transformed into a feral night beast, before logic kicked in and he tamed himself, breathing deeply and heavily. In a new calmness, he laid back down, his forearm resting over his eyes as if to hide his tears.

Peter eventually got up and walked to the kitchen, grabbing a clear glass to pour a hearty drink in. He drained half of the whiskey in one go, replenishing the drink before taking it over to the couch where he sat down to stare at the blank TV screen. He allowed time to pass like that, soaking in the melancholy stillness of the peaceful calm.

Outside, footsteps approached the door. Nora emerged from the dark hallway with an empty water glass. Stopping in the hallway, she regarded Peter, noticing the drink in his hand. She sighed, and continued along to refill her glass of water.

“Shouldn’t you be asleep?”

“Can’t.”

“Well don’t let me catch you driving again.”

“It was a one time thing,” he said sheepishly.

“Well let’s hope,” Nora mumbled slightly to herself.

“It was.”

Nora nodded suspiciously, and finished filling up her glass. She went over to sit on the sofa adjacent to Peter, turning on a few more lights on her way.

“I know I asked you tonight already, but *[when are you going to quit?]*”

“No. I know,” Peter dismissed her daftly.

“You want to actually address it tonight?”

“Maybe. Let me finish this drink,” and they sat in silence for a few seconds while Peter reluctantly finished his drink. He stood up to freshen it up.

“Won’t you go bankrupt?”

“Not with the money Ella left me.”

“I thought you weren’t going to use that.”

“But I’m set for life. I don’t care how I spend it.”

“I’m sure she’d be thrilled you’re spending it on liquor.”

“That’s such a horrible word,” Peter said, flinching just slightly.

“Well what else do you want me to say?”

“Whiskey. Just say whiskey. She loved a good scotch: Cragganmore was her favorite,” Peter licked his lips longingly, focusing almost entirely on pouring his glass. “But this ain’t no Cragganmore.” He went to sit back down, and just as he got to the sofa, he stopped. Almost embarrassed, he held up his glass to Nora. “I’m sorry, did you want a *[drink]?*”

Nora shook her head no. “No, I’m... I’m fine.”

Peter shrugged slightly, and matter-of-factly. He took a sip before continuing. “You know what’s weird?”

“No, what’s weird?”

“Lately I’ve been leaving sentences unfinished.”

“Tell me about it,” Nora said sarcastically.

Ignoring this, Peter went on; “I’ll be talking, and then just out of the blue, I’ll stop. It’s as if the words just quit. Or sometimes I’ll just start back up again, but it’s just such a completely different topic, it might as well be the words quit on themselves.”

“You’ve definitely done that to me.”

“Sorry. I just thought [/].”

And in the pause, Nora looked at Peter with a very-concerned face, everything contracted and tense.

“What?” Peter asked.

“Nothing.”

“No. What?”

“Just... What are you going to do? Sometime you have to keep going.”

“I thought I might prolong my time in heaven a bit.”

“This isn’t heaven.”

“Ella was.”

“Peter, look at me,” and her voice was stern. “Ella wasn’t heaven. Ella was a lying assassin who would have made your life a h[ell].” Nora stopped herself.

“Hell?”

“Well more than it is now.”

“I still loved her.”

“More than anyone I saw, I know. I’m sorry, I just... Her life would have followed you. Did you think about that? It’d be like those films.”

“Yeah. Maybe. They’re called films for a reason though.”

“You’re the one who wanted to live in a black-and-white flick.”

“With her,” Peter finished the sentence quickly. “Live in a black-and-white flick with her. Now it’s... I don’t want to. Not anymore.”

And they sat in silence, looking at the television screen. Peter sighed suddenly, a cathartic release of true, inner peace. “There she goes.”

And Nora gave him a bitter glance. “In those old films you love so much, did it ever get to be like this?”

“No sis, I don’t think it did.”

“Funny, all those things that happen, yet right now, in this moment, it’s just you and me. Like the rest of our lives don’t matter.”

“But our histories do. Otherwise we’d be strangers.”

“Can’t you let me be philosophical for once?”

Peter bowed his head drunkenly in apology. “Sure. I’m just saying, I’m drunk, and that made no sense to me.”

He stood up and went to the kitchen, emptying out the bottle of whiskey into his glass. He frowned a bit at the emptiness, before heading back to his seat. Nora noticed. In fact, she noticed everything. She watches her brother closer than she’s ever watched him in his entire life. “I’ll get more tomorrow,” she told him blandly.

“No bother, I’ll turn a new leaf.”

“Well, never too soon to start.”

“Why do you sound so morbid?”

“No. No no, I’m not. Just... wary. I want to believe you, but I *[don’t have any proof that you’ll actually get better].*”

“That’s morbidness.”

“Well sorry for showing concern. Is it so bad I want you to get your shit back together?”

Peter lifted his glass in a defeated salute, slumping down in the sofa. Nora watched him, her gaze softening kindly.

“I had the perfect life,” Peter began.

“Oh Peter, we all have bumps and inconsistencies in our lives. Remember Todd?”

“How could I forget Todd? Best guy I knew. We’d smoke weed together and”

“No.” Peter looked over at Nora, slightly afraid of what she might say next, perplexed that she interrupted him. Nora continued, “I mean, yes you used to be best of friends. But then something happened and you never hung out as much. I remember you’d keep trying to get in touch with him, but... I think you bought weed from him because you knew that money would drive him. You’d purchase drugs just to be around him, because you thought maybe... I don’t know why you did it. He clearly didn’t like you as much.”

Peter stared at Nora, haunted. “But I was reminded of when we’d just be young and peaceful. When there was a moment to just be happy for a time. Yes, maybe it wasn’t the most economical, but... Nora... I could escape. I could escape the stress of an exam! I could escape mom, you know how she was. And I could spend a few moments at peace.”

“With all your logic, I never understood that.”

In a trance, Peter talked right on. “And then when Ella showed up, just like this nihilistic angel, I thought boy: I’d give up all logical constructs to be with her. Nothing else matters. And

when she moved to the ninth-floor apartment with me, I thought maybe I'd do something to ruin our relationship. But each day she'd entertain me with the most beautiful, sexy notions, and wonder life-stories... I. I was so much... *[in love].*"

And Peter started to doze off, nodding in agreeance with the beating waves outside, his glass slipping slightly. Nora quickly reached over, gently caressing the glass out of Peter's hand to place it on the side table. "I know, I know. Just rest now. We'll deal with it tomorrow."

Peter spoke in a dreamy high, floating about in mind while Nora laid him on the couch, placing him in a comfortable position. "You know, I still imagine her up there, in the apartment. I'd get home from work and she'd be there, in the kitchen. She'd prance right up to me, and we'd kiss. Dance with me, she'd say. And we'd dance, and I'd dance with her all through the night... All through the night."

Nora nodded, sitting back down alongside Peter until he rolled over slightly, asleep. She stood up, walking around to pick up a blanket. Draping it over Peter, Nora gave one last glance, squashing her mouth into a worried line, and swallowing. She went around the room, turning off all the lights before exiting to the guest bedroom.

Inside the living room, Peter slept in tears while the ocean raged around the cabin. And at some point in the night, his soul washed away into the lifeless sea.

And Claudia cried tears of understanding, loss, and grief; of raw epiphany, hopelessness, and sinking pain; of horrifying compassion, beauty, and misery. She wept freely for the second time that day.