

What Eyes Remember and Womb of God

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Statement from the Author

What Eyes Remember is a collect of stories, memories, and reflections from different members of my mother and father's families. I want to thank everyone who took the time to speak with me, and patiently answer my questions, especially my mother, Jill Brown, and father, Dallas Brown, These stories are my interpretation of these family memories.

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For my grandmother- Jane Marie Lackey
"You are my sunshine"

What Eyes Remember

Part One- Little Eyes (1921)

It is my christening, and I am their first child. All I see is vaulted ceilings and all I hear is the priest's voice as it booms out over the congregation.

"Let us welcome into God's peace the newest member of our parish." His thumb presses down on my forehead in the sign of the cross. Next my father and mother fingers, wet with the holy water of Christ, mark me as an eternal member of heaven.

I am the first child of Robert and Margaret Lackey, and I am a beautiful child with hazel eyes and silky brown hair already covering my baby head. Everyone is gathered in the church, St. Ann's Cathedral in Etna, and I am wearing a long dress of white cotton that my Aunt Vera sewed for me. A lacy baby bonnet covers my head and is pulled down over my ears. My mother looks uncomfortably tight in the front row of the church with her brown dress buttoned up to the very top. She is only seventeen, still a child herself. Churches always make her nervous, they always have and they always will. She has beautiful dark brown hair and a milky white Irish complexion. My father, in a brown suit to match my mother's severe dress, tucks his fingers into his pockets and lets everybody look at his baby girl. He has

light green eyes that my grandmother says will hold the devil someday, and a shock of blondish hair that does not stay down under his hat. Margaret returned out of the mystery of a two month disappearance with this man named Robert Lackey. My grandmother doesn't know who he was or where he came from and doesn't much care to either. However, because Margaret not only came back home with a new man, but also pregnant, my grandmother had very little choice. They agreed to be married in a Catholic church, (which proved good enough for my grandmother, and unpleasant enough for my mother) and started living in a little house in West View until I was born. It was only because of my grandmother that I was christened at all, because, as I mentioned before, churches made my mother uncomfortable.

Paired with my first gifted memory of my father leaning over the baptismal, grinning from ear to ear with yellowed teeth and kind green eyes, was the memory of the party afterwards. The story was forever immortalized in stories for neighbors, mailmen, bus drivers, and beauticians by my grandmother when she would introduce me in the years to come.

"This is my granddaughter Jane." I would curtsy. "Her father was a drunk. He even ruined her christening,"

"

"Poor child," They would say and cross themselves quickly. "It is truly the devil to have an Irish father."

The christening party was at my grandmother's house. My grandmother's name is Caroline and she mothered seven children, my mother, Uncles Elmer, Bill, and Eddie, Calvin and my Aunts Vera and Ruth, as well as two children, George and Edith, to her previous husband. All of them, except George and Edith were under the age of sixteen when I was born. My mother Margaret Sophia is the eldest of the Richter family. Caroline's house was on Mount Troy on Evergreen Ave, and was considered a pretty big house by all of her neighbors. But when it housed over fifteen people, all ruled over by my grandmother, it was its own universe-sized problem stuffed into something about the size equivalent of a bowling ball.

This story would follow.

Mama and Papa have brought me home, and Pap Richter, has grabbed my mother around the waist swinging her in circles.

"When are we going to have another one out of you Margie," he says poking at her slender belly.

Uncle Elmer, the oldest of my uncles, hits my father hard on the back, congratulating him and handing him a fat cigar. Grandmother, (or Mum Richter as everyone knew her)

never approved of smoking and definitely not in her kitchen. She shoos them to the upstairs, and Uncle Mike, Mum Richter's brother, follows the rest of the men with a large glass bottle of amber colored whiskey hidden under his thin jacket.

My mother and her sister Vera pull large, long rolls of bread out of the oven and place them on a cooling rack over the old pot-bellied stove until the smells of bread overtake the whole house. These were to go with the beef stew simmering in the big steel pot. My mother seems more calm now that she is out of the church, and she and my Aunt Vera talk about plans for new dresses and a dance that's going on over in Northside next week. Ruth helps Mum Richter pour small tumblers of whiskey and cups of dark coffee to the guests that have made themselves cozy in the living room and along the front porch of the house.

While everyone surrounds themselves with good food and laughter, the sound of singing, very bad singing, comes pounding down the stairs accompanied by feet stomping against the floorboards. While the older women try to drown out the noise by talking and laughing louder it is my mother who finally sees the thin stream of yellow liquid coming out of the attic window. It hits against the closed kitchen window and leaves streaks down it. By the time she

tries to distract Mum Richter it is too late, and Mum Richter sees that the men are peeing out of the window because they are drunk and don't want to come downstairs. Later, when my mother tries to remove the bottle from my father's hand, he pushes her arm away so hard that there is a bruise on it by morning. I lay the whole time in a crib by the back bedroom.

Part two- What eyes remember (1974)

I don't know if it is still possible to see your childhood when you dream. It is something that perhaps only the very old see, something we glimpse around a corner, it flashes quickly into our memory, that short instance before we die. This happens to me in my sleep. I see you before you were stuck in this bed. I see glimpses of my childhood, and the places long forgotten in the realms of waking and reality. I am so much older now, but I can remember many things. I remember all of the things that the teenager in us blocks, that the young adult tries so hard to push to the very back of the memory and the things that the mature adult wants to edit out. When I close my eyes I see children waiting on the front steps of a tall brick house, I see my broken doll on the sidewalk, and I see the sailboats made out of leaves that I sailed down the river when I was seven. My eyes remember the Steel city, as it was seen by those who came here to make a new life.

You were an Irish queen, and my father was a drunk. In the darkness, I sometimes wonder if I can remember the top of that smoky city without also remembering the red-rimmed green eyes of my father, or the tired brown eyes of mother.

My vision fades into focus. Not unlike the creaking

start of a movie that isn't too sure it wants to begin. First the edges fuzz in and the camera draws steadily closer on a city that is just waking up. It is a city that has one to many names for its self- The Steel City, the Golden Triangle, The Three Rivers, The Burgh, The Smokey City- It was Pittsburgh own shining era, a spreading rash of tall buildings and narrow twisting alley ways. These are buildings that have nowhere to grow- except up. They are all squashed into the triangle made by where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers converge. At the top of the triangle, pressed into the point, is a huge stone fountain to get the Ohio River flowing off to a good start. But it all begins in Pittsburgh.

After my mind's eye remembers the over-crowded, out-growing buildings, it remembers the rivers. They are straight, wide and blue. They close in around the city like a vice. The 40th Street and Liberty bridges leap across from bank to bank, connecting one shore to another. Moving out from the city, I now remember cobblestone roads, the kinds made for riding bikes on, turning into dirt lanes and leading out towards the country. They lead towards Gibsonia and Butler. These foreign places where, when I was a child, crowded houses on a hillside were replaced by fields, and trolleys replaced by a lone figure walking down the path.

My eyes remember much, but not much of what I remember exists anymore. There are parts of Pittsburgh that I can no longer travel to and parts that I haven't seen in many years. Pittsburgh is a town built in upon its self, built upon years and years of toil and industry. It was built on the backs of foreign workers. I watched as each wave of immigrant and migrant worker as they flowed into Pittsburgh. As if with each new lap of water against the shore more people climbed on land with a coal pick in hand or a laundry basket under their arm.

They families that moved into the Three Rivers, those that gave it the breath it needed, moved under the skin of the city. German families, with stern fathers and big boned grandmothers with ringing laughter, turned the Northside into Dutchtown. Some Germans and even more Jews lived up in Squirrel Hill. I can still remember the blue glass I saw that decorated the outside of their Synagogue when Mother and I once took a trolley ride to the Squirrel Hill Park after the first of mother's many doctor appointments. The sun shone through it in patches on the sidewalk, and I looked for it each time we returned to the park. And even still there was the Hill, where the Blacks lived, and had wonderful dances in the community center built by the church. Sometimes, we were able to catch snatches of the

music when we passed on our bicycles.

My people are Irish and I can still see you, my mother, tall and proud with a straight back and curls of hair around the nap of your neck. You hum *Rosin Dubh* as you hang out the wash in our small yard.

The Irish built the city, "from ground up" or at least that's what Daddy would tell me when he still cradled me on his knee.

"Just look at the thanks we got," he would say. I'm sure my baby eyes held no understanding but still gazed at his mouth and listened to his strong voice. The Irish had no one place to call theirs in Pittsburgh. We carved out niches wherever we went. We settled in where we could. When I went to the butcher as a child, I would hear the throaty voice of our German neighbor. At church, Poles sung the Halleluiahs next to us in the back pews. In later years miners and railway workers from Eastern Europe would move into the workers houses that were on the other side of Mount Troy.

For a moment you look at me with your old eyes, and I think you might scold me for remembering how it used to be. "That was a long time ago," you would tell me now. I move the pillows back behind your head, and adjust the tubes in your mouth and nose. The doctor has said you will die

within the week; the emphysema has set on to quickly. I feel that I need to remember faster for I am almost to my childhood, and almost to you.

The next thing that comes before my eyes are small houses carved out of the sides of hills. They are stacked on top of one another and laid over top, over and over again, all the way up the side of the hill. Northside- It wasn't just the Northside of the city. It wasn't just DutchTown with small winding streets, bakers, repair shops, grocery shops, and Ramsey's Candy shop where my daughter would one day buy her penny candy. It was where most of the Irish, and nearly all of the German families in Pittsburgh ended up, and it was my home.

If you want to remember how it was, mother, try to imagine Pittsburgh at the center of a blanket, and the rest of the blanket running out in rolling bits away from the center, where the city sits comfortably nestled. Across the river from the north side of town, on the side of that first roll, sits the North Side. Off to the side of that little roll, high up, over-looking the river and sitting opposite of Mt. Washington is Mt. Troy.

It is here that my vision sharpens. It is here that I remember the small house with odd turning stairways, and small cold rooms. My grandmother's house is on the top of

Mt. Troy. It was at that house that I could lie on an attic bedroom floor with my brother Buddy, and smell the cooking of Mum Richter's Sunday pot roast and potatoes, possibly the only meat we would taste that week. It was this house that we fled to after the disaster that was my father.

Part 3- What **eyes saw** (1927)

My eyes do not adjust well to the darkness and I sit up in bed quickly. I look around and focus on corners and small details in the room, *my dress is put out on the chair, my father's rosary hanging on a pin by the door,* until I am sure that the room is mine. I feel the cotton sheets, and hear the snores of my brother next to me in the bed. His light brown hair falls against his eyes as he breathes in and out softly. He is only a year younger than me. His five-year old brain swims with the imagination and dreams that accompany a child. I however, cannot fall back asleep.

The room is half lit by a street light on the corner, and a soft snow falls, throwing strange moving shadows onto the wall. The slanted angle of the light falls on the empty spot next to me. It is where my mother should be. I suddenly remember, and know why I have woken up in the middle of the night. I remember what I saw earlier in the night through the crack in the downstairs hallway door. I saw what was nothing more than a rough lined hand against the small of my mother's back, curling the fabric into a tight knot around its knuckles. There were low voices and murmured promises of *I'll see you tonight*. When I creep

back into the room after seeing this I notice the blue dress hanging in the closet.

I push my hair, only a little darker than my brother's, away from my face as I slide back underneath the cool sheets in the dark and listen for the sound of footsteps or a taxi door. Mother barely makes a sound when she comes into the room; she holds her heeled shoes in one hand so that she won't alert the rest of the house, and so that she won't wake me and buddy. She has a black shawl wrapped tightly around her small rounded shoulders. I see the glint of blue from her dress where the moonlight catches it, the same frayed beaded hem I had run my fingers over earlier while the dress was still hanging in the coffin-like closet. I shut my eyes quickly as mother comes over to the bed and leans lightly over me. She brushes a kiss onto my forehead with her fingertips. I watch her pull on her dressing gown over her dress and push the shoes underneath the bed all three of us share. She is asleep in seconds, and I follow into my own deep sleep only a few minutes later.

The next morning at the breakfast table, I watch mother move gently in and out of the room. She walks carefully, treading slightly on each floorboard, taking

care not to bump her slender hip into the corner of the rough wooden table. She has traded the blue dress for stiff brown pants and a button down shirt with a lacy collar, but she still wraps the dressing gown around her because of the chill in the house. Mum Richter is in the kitchen. She frowns pointedly in my mother's direction.

"Margie," she barks, "The children need taken to school." Mum Richter whisks eggs together in a bowl with the flat end of a fork- short and stunted whirring motion. The points of the fork hit against the bottom of the metal bowl with a sharp staccato. I follow Mum Richter's eyes as she counts over the eggs left, calculating how many more she will have for the week. I hurry into the next room to finish preparing for school as mother and Mum Richter stare silently at each other. Mum Richter moves back towards the counter with a sigh. Her overskirt tucked up to keep it away from the fire, and stray hairs are already coming loose from her bun as she moves around the kitchen. Finally, mother begins slowly pulling on worn white snow boots underneath her robe.

I run to the bureau in the hallway, the one that Uncle Mike once said he would take up to our room, (though he never did). When Uncle Mike tried to lift it up the narrow stairs for the last time I smelled something sour on him,

and he dropped the bureau on one of his toes. Mother, without sympathy, told him to sleep it off on the couch.

I pull out the bottom drawer of the bureau, the only one left that has a handle, and begin pulling out old newspapers and tablecloths until I find a long pair of Pap Richter socks. I double them up over my own and squeeze my feet into my torn brown shoes. From beneath those piles of fabric I sneak a look, ever so quickly, at a black and white photo of a tall man with a shock of hair that won't stay under his cap. My father smiles in this photo. I quickly cover it back up with the socks, allowing myself only a second with the man in the photo. When I stand up, the mirror attached to the bureau catches a reflection of my six-year-old self. My short brown is cut close in around my face, right under my chin, and my nose is a pushed up button in the center of my unimpressive eyes and mouth. I pull my hair back from my eyes and imagine what I would look like with the red lipstick and bright rouge that mother wears when she goes out dancing. Another pot clanks into the sink and I can hear Aunt Edith^A's children running down the stairs to get at breakfast. I glance towards the kitchen and quickly bend to finish lacing my shoes. Mother will have to help me tie them. Soon the rest of the house will be up and at Mum Richter for breakfast. Mother, Buddy,

and I will be half way to Etna by then.

"Are you taking' them by the bus again," Mum Richter calls to Mother while she helps me pull on my coat. From around the corner, Buddy enters the kitchen in the middle of Mother's last furtive look at the broad woman standing in the middle of the kitchen.

"No Ma, I^Am going to walk them down. They'll be fine just give me a break already," Mother takes a final pull of a cigarette and ushers us children out of the door. After we are gone I know that Mum Richter empties the ashtray and hides the rest of the cigarettes in a kitchen drawer.

The air is still chill and hasn't quite yet shed its lingering dampness. The sun struggles to reveal itself from behind a thick black screen of Pittsburgh's filth and smog. From on top of Mount Troy, the entire city lays cut in patchwork- a patchwork that doesn't quite fit together, cut through by small streams and twisting roads that run through the city and out into the country, cobblestone roads that made your bike fall sideways when you ride them, and dirt roads beaten down by feet and wheels. From the top of Mt. Troy, (although it is not so much a mount as a large and steep hill) I see the three rushing blue rivers, the veins of the city, thick and ropey, cut through the gray roads and houses. Far at the end of the city lays the point

where two of the rivers collide into the Ohio, the Allegheny and the Monongahela. I like the way the rivers role off the tongue, "Da Al-a-geny," and "Da Mon" Uncle Mike says. On the other side of the hill is Etna. We walk from Mount Troy. I grasp mother in her right hand, and hold Buddy's hand in my other. I have to make sure he doesn't get lost with the other travelers, the groups of school children and factory workers. At the end of the row, the road drops sharply and curves down the hill right by a bush of lilacs. I am certain that the bush continues right down the cliff, although I always get scared to look over the edge. I look one more time out at the city before turning the corner after mother. The road that goes over the cliff is called Pig's Alley and I can already see the sows and hogs being corralled to run down the steep drop. At the bottom of the hill, and the end of the run, is the slaughter house. While it is still too early to see it I know that a greasy black fog will soon be rising out of the slaughterhouse's big hollow chimneys and pig's screams will cover the hillside.

Part 4: When Eyes Close (1974)

In case you were wondering when I close my eyes, I am trying to fix a picture of you in my mind. Not a picture of the woman I see in front of me now. Not the woman that lies in this bed, pushed down into covers that come up around your body, that threaten to engulf you. I can trace the lines of your face through the sunken valley of your cheeks. Your eyes follow mine as I try to focus on anything other than you, and I have to lean in closer to hear what you are saying.

"Ice," the only word that you say, and I hold out the slippery piece to you. I place in on your tongue like a priest giving communion. Your eyes close in satisfaction, but I cannot stand the picture of you like this before my eyes for the rest of eternity.

Part 5: Rainbow Eyes (1931)

I sit at the corner of the large wooden table in Mum Richter's house. Mother is at work at the hair salon in Etna. It opened three weeks ago. I know it has opened because that is when the fights about it between mother and Mum Richter lessened. Mum Richter had not wanted Mother to open the shop by herself. I remember one of these fights in the final days before the shop opened.

"It will fail Margaret Sophia," she slammed the knifepoint down into the cutting board on the table. "I can promise you that it will." Mother was perched on the same kitchen stool her long arms crossed over each other and resting on her knee. A thin cigarette cradled between her index and middle finger. Mother blew a puff of smoke towards Mum Richter.

"Well what do you want me to do mum?" The question hung in the air. "The children are getting bigger, they need new clothes and school books, and I'm not getting any richer sitting around this house cleaning up after chickens and doing laundry." She took another puff and dared her mother to answer her.

"Working in the house is the woman's place," but Mum Richter said this under her breath and looked at her daughter almost fearfully. "Maybe you should go back to Robert's." At this suggestion, I remember that mother left without saying one more word to the sullen woman who still stood at the kitchen cutting board, slicing tomatoes for sandwiches.

Mother opened her shop on Wylie Road. It was a small rectangular room that had only enough space for two chairs and a small sink. I am ten now and Buddy nine and we are almost through the Etna Grade school. Buddy says that it's my fault Mother had to open the shop because I am outgrowing all of my clothes too quickly, even with Aunt Edith altering my cousin's old clothes for me. Mother opened the shop because she had little other choice.

I sit at the table in the house looking at the small pocket watch nailed to the wall that serves as a clock. I am eating a cold tomato and pepper sandwich and tick off the minutes until I can leave to meet up with mother. Since I am now ten I am allowed to take the bus by myself into Etna. I got a note to meet mother at her shop when it closes at six.

When I leave the house I can hear Pap Richter and my

older uncles in the attic with the still. Several years ago they had decided to build a still to make moonshine in the attic. I make out Uncle Calvin and Uncle Bill's voices out from among grandfather's and the other men from the neighborhood.

Murph runs into the kitchen and starts digging around in the cupboards for a large bowl and a mixing spoon. Murph isn't related to any one in the family. He is around Mother's age, 25 or so and just always seems to be around the family.

"Hi Janie," Murph smiled at me, "Don't tell your Mama I'm borrowing this okay." I glare at him, (a technique I mastered over last summer), and fling my now shoulder length hair over my shoulder.

"I'm on my way to get her right now," I turn on my heels and head out the wooden screen door that leads onto the back porch. The door bangs shut behind me. I duck into the backyard, which isn't much of a back yard, only a few shrubs and a square patch of green grass. There is a large lilac bush near the back fence and a space where I can fit between to climb out onto the back road. I continue to walk down Evergreen Ave. towards the bus stop at the top of Pig's Alley. The screaming of the pigs was something that I thought I would never get used to when I was little. Once I

walked by the slaughterhouse with father, with him wanting to go inside. I didn't want him to take me in and instead stood outside of the gate with my hands over my ears while he went and looked around the slaughterhouse. Since moving in with Mum Richter I am a little bit more used to the screaming clatter of the pigs.

As I make my way down the street towards the bus station, I amuse myself with looking into the windows of the different houses I pass. I cut through a cross street and pass the miners housing units. Outside on their porch, six of the miners sit drinking the sludgy remains of beer in squat brown bottles. Only the circles, where their goggles rest around their piercing eyes, is white. The rest of the skin is blackened and ash flakes away in the dusky light. They nod lightly to me as I cut in front of their complex. Not many of them can speak English, knowing only how to write a name and an address on the back of the envelopes provided by the mining company to send home their paychecks in. The envelopes have of a statue of Liberty in the backdrop.

At the end of the row, is a large house. I scramble under a large bush in its front yard so that I can get a better look into the illuminated room. For the past two nights, on my way to pick up mother, I have looked in at

this family. I look at the father, spread out on the floor of the living room, playing with his small son. The boy is probably only five or so. I don't allow myself very long to look in on them.

"He'll probably never realize how lucky he is to have a father,"⁷ I mutter to myself as I get up off of the ground, dust off my knee length plaid skit and continue on towards the bus.

Part Six- New Eyes (1931)

I meet mother outside of her shop about five minutes before closing time and I wait inside the shop for her. Sitting in her only chair, the one with a mechanical lever to lower the back down so she can wash the woman's hair, I watch her sweep the last of the hair snippings into the trash.

"Come over here darling, and help me fold this thing up," she is referring to a black plastic cape she puts over the customers shoulders to keep hair off of them.

"How was school today?" She keeps her eyes on the floor as I tell her it was fine. Then I tell her about Murph and the men upstairs.

"They'll always be like that sweetie." She pats my arm. "That's something that doesn't change."

"They get so loud though," I counter back. "I always get there ridiculous songs stuck in my head, too." I pause briefly. "Except for the one song, I like the one that Pap sometimes sings when he's really drunk." She looks at me out of the side of her eye.

"Which one is that?" she asks, although I'm pretty sure that she knows which one I'm talking about. I look

down at my feet and begin singing softly, *"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine..."*

"Yeah, I remember that song too," She disappears into the back room to collect her coat. I shouldn't have sung the song around her. Daddy used to sing that one to Mother before he left and he used to sing it to me while I was in my crib. Mother came back out, and walked me back through the front so that she could lock up. She looks tired- older somehow.

"I'm going to take you to Islay's little woman," she draped her arm around me in an easy way as we made our way towards town. "And we are going to get ourselves some strawberry ice, and I'm going to teach you a new song to learn, okay." We continue on down the street this way, hand in hand, towards the city and towards the blackening sky.

Womb of God

Flicks

It was a door that wouldn't be noticed at first. Small, painted black, it was one of those doors you simply pass over. You're eyes never register that it's there. It was down the back street so that you almost had to know about it to find it.

It was a small door to a club that was trying to grow.

Its edges pushed against the bricks of the shrinking buildings next to it. On the right, the corner scraped against a small bookstore whose roof leaked in four different places. Dim window lamps advertised rare and used books, but the lights illuminated little else. The fledgling club nudged and poked the bar on the left so hard it gave the old building a crack along the front corner. All around the door, the deteriorated buildings sunk into the background, while the club, Flick's, slowly was growing.

Rebecca

She moved along the street almost cat like. She wore hardly any color at all, and blended in seamlessly to the black gray buildings beside her. She carried no bag with her, and the hood on her black jacket was up so that it obscured her eyes. When she reached her destination, she could already feel the pulse of the club drawing her in. Her features settled into a decidedly feminine form as she lowered her hood, and, nodding to the thin, terse woman at the door, entered the club.

Edward

Edward waited just one block down, walking back and forth, pacing up and down the sidewalk. He had on a long black coat of some kind of shiny material and the coat glistened in the late evening sprinkle of snow that was falling softly from the sky. He held a note in his hand, and every couple of steps he would glance down at it and read the couple lines on it over and over again, *Come to Flick's Friday night- Isabelle*. Edward pulled a cigarette out of his pocket while he decided where to go from there.

It had all begun with that story.

He didn't know why he had begun to write it, he didn't know how. He was a poet any way. That's why he had come to the University of Pittsburgh to begin with. So why was he writing a story, and why was he writing it about Isabelle?

It had all started with that first class.

He had first seen her during a class in the Cathedral of Learning, an overly important sounding gothic looking building that housed the literature department. She was sitting at a desk next to an arched window that cast a strange halo of light around her. Her hair was shorn in a chunky easy-to-manage style, and she had her nose pierced. She worked as a bar tender at a club to make her rent; the same club that was pulsating so hard with its own life that

Edward could feel it a block away.

Isabel spoke to Edward first. He didn't have the nerve to do it. She had a quiet and encouraging voice that sounded different from other girl's. It sounded like she had a severe cold as a child, and could no longer raise her voice above its mellow and yet raspy tone. From the first moment he had slid his hand into the easy formation of Isabel's, from the moment he had touched her skin in that handshake, Edward had fallen in love and into an obsession.

Rebecca Rebecca was already positioned on the edge of one of the deep burgundy wrap around booths. Tonight, she was twenty-three, stunning black hair reaching for the middle of her back. Her hair glittered straight down the back of her dress. Her blue eyes a bright contrast to the darkness of the rest of her features. Those silky eyes moved along with the patrons of the club, watching them as they began to move in and out of tight knit groups. The room was beginning to breathe.

The entire club was one large circular room, enlarged only by the small balcony that you could reach through the staircase near the back wall. A heavy black velvet curtain, lit to appear like it was littered stars, covered the backdrop of the stage.

Along the edge of the room more and more people began to descend out of hidden hallways. Out of muscle strains of walls and floor they pressed in on them selves trying to get to the dance floor. Rebecca observed all of these things through the curve of her wine glass, holding it up to her face. She loved how the slant in the glass made everyone look as though they were willow trees bending through a gale. This room, bathed in soft red light and lit in black shadows, looked like a battlefield to her, a

violent end to her day.

Often times, people didn't see her there in the corner. She was always silent, sitting in a booth, and hardly ever dancing or talking with anyone. As more people pressed into the room, the more she faded into the background. The more she didn't exist.

Rebecca belonged to a group of people, the ones who changed, and who were always changing others. They had grown up in the city, never happy with the sharp angled turns of downtown streets, and the narrow rectangular bars that their relatives had drunk their lives away in. These builders, Rebecca and those like her, were the builders of the circular rooms, and the results were clubs like Flick's.

Edward

This room hummed, and moved within its own vibrations. Maybe it was the electric whirring of curved light bulbs in their trendy recycled lampshades that hung half way down the wall, or perhaps it was the tinkle of the lip of a wine bottle against the rim of a long stemmed crystal glass. These glasses hung over the top of the bar, suspended on a rack whose origin disappeared into the darkness of the ceiling. The blood red color of the walls seemed to melt into each other, and into the dark wood of the dance floor. Edward slowly made his way down one of the red-carpeted hallways to the center room, and slipped into one of the side tables as far away from the bar as possible. Sliding off his coat he revealed the black t-shirt, black jeans and Doc Martin boots. With his short hair and slim figure, he cast a strange shadow on the wall that didn't appear so much as a man or woman, but as an entity blending into the rhythm of the music and lights.

He pulled the paper out again.

It was after he had met Isabel that she began to write the story. Yes, it was a love story. And the part that surprised Edward was that the lines showed nothing of his over extended metaphors of death and love that permeated his poetry. While he had no hope of reaching his obsession

within the realm of his every day life, his story character moved effortlessly in and out of Isabelle's life. First by making her laugh, smile, and notice him. He made her happy in this world, and took her dancing. They fell asleep in each other's arms in this story.

It had seemed harmless then, but even as he sat there he knew that she would have never recognized that in him. It had seemed like a harmless way to release his feelings. He looked at her strong arms, her soft face, and the easy way that she laughed, and he decided he had no idea why he came there that night.

After he had received the note to meet her at the club he hadn't been able to get her out of his head more than usual. Every part of her life fascinated him. Her clothes were simple, elegant, dark and fun. Her hair was so much like his best childhood friend's. It was so carefree and non-chalant, her writing was wonderful, and her stories about people even more so.

Isabel

The band was really starting to pick up. Isabel had seen Slapdash play at Flick's before, and had always liked them. Not that she usually had much time to watch their show. Isabel had been a bartender there for two years, *lift wine glass from the rack and hold at a tilt*, she had seen many bands, *spin vodka bottle in one hand and pour a shot measured by the eye*, and had seen this scene played out before her eyes many times, *one more parting shot*.

She worked here at nights, and was back at school by the morning. She was only a month away from completing her degree, and the thought of actually having to survive in the world was finally settling in. She was beginning to feel the pressures of not having a "real" job as her parents would call it, or a boyfriend for that matter. Her past relationships had no really ever worked out. Isabel had always been out on her own; always more content to work, go to school, and go out dancing by herself.

"I don't really feel like I need anyone," she had told her mom once over coffee. She had come by to try and talk Isabel into a blind date with the son of a co-worker. She had shrugged the suggestion off without a second thought. "Thanks but no thanks," she said, and she started her last semester of classes single, as before.

This is where she had met Edward. He was one of the more quiet students.

"That's probably why I'm attracted to him," She told her roommate before leaving for work that night. "He doesn't talk to anyone." She didn't even know if it was an attraction. Isabel was never sure about these things.

"But you invited him out right,"⁷ her roommate had asked her excitedly.

"Yeah," Isabel laughed at her, "You don't have to sound that excited that I'm trying to meet people." She left for work that night with excitement knotting up in her stomach, and now, from the corner of her eye, she watched Edward sit in the back booth. Isabel caught glimpses of him sitting in the far edge of the room, nervously swirling a martini and trying not to glance in the direction of the bar.

Edward

He didn't notice many things that night. He didn't really care about the band, or what he was drinking. What he did notice was the fact that he couldn't stop looking at Isabel or thinking what it would be like to kiss her. Isabel looked like calmer version of the storm of beauty in the room. She was not quite as a wild, and not quite in sync with the rhythm of the place. Her hair was cut short like most of the servers in the room; however it still had its natural mild brown color. Its life was not yet severed by the harsh blond and red highlights that seemed to grow on everyone else's head. She was wearing a small black silk shirt and black pants. These separated at her middle to show off the only piece of jewelry she had on, a small silver belly button ring. She moved about in black strappy heels as comfortably as if she were in running shoes, pushing curvy glasses of pink champagne, and chardonnay to the servers as they rushed past her. Edward watched as his own server came up to her with the tray and Isabel set another Martini on it to send over to him. One quick smile and a wink.

Rebecca

As the night went on, Rebecca watched people pulse in and out as they walked. She wondered to herself where people learned how to do this. Where had they learned to move within the rhythm of a room, the rhythm of a walk? She watched the wide-eyed practice of the people as they moved about, scared to blink unless they missed something. A few people danced along to the guitar-driven jazz coming from the stage. She had found a microcosmic universe spinning wildly on its axis. From her vantage point across the room she watched a young man in the booth scribbling quickly in a small pocket notebook. His drink seemingly forgotten, he only glanced up every so once in a while. He made eye contact with Rebecca only once.

She had watched this boy and his furtive looks across the room at the pretty bar tender. He had a way about him that said he wanted to hold her with his eyes for the rest of the night.

"He would be perfectly content to look at her for eternity without doing a single *thing*," she said to herself. "Well, that's something that's going to have to change."

She waited for Edward to tear his gaze away from Isabel, and then she met his eyes with hers.

"*Wait for it.*" Rebecca commanded with her lips, mouthing it to the boy. With these words, she watched as his shadow merged into the shadows of the wall.

Edward

"Shit," Edward cursed quietly under his breath. "Why is this happening now?" He brought his gaze down from the intensely attractive woman who had been looking at him, thinking that she was the reason for the erection he was experiencing.

"Come on. Think of something else." He commanded himself, but all he could see was Isabel's face.

However, what followed was not the feeling he was expecting. In stead of his penis swelling larger it began to get smaller. He realized that it was pulling inside of him. Next, a tingle started between his shoulders and traveled down towards his spine. His black hair, which had been growing a little more than usual in the days before he made the trip to the club, became longer. It grew and twisted down his back. The sensation continued into his hands tingling to the very tips. They became long and slender. The tingling continued down the rest of his body, to in between his legs. On the red wall, his shadow changed shape so many times that he could no longer recognize it and it became part of the red wall. He looked down that his chest that had gained a slight shape to it. His hair lengthened; his shoulders became straighter. His frame turned slighter. Edward's shadow became curvy and his skin

pale. He looked over himself wildly, panic slowly welling up from deep down inside. His mouth worked madly to scream, yell anything to make this stop, but he was unable to make any words come out. When he looked back up at where the woman with the dark hair had been sitting, a slender boy with black hair and a black coat had taken her place. His eyes, however, were just as blue as before.

Shoving his notebook into the pocket of his coat, Edward walked quickly, but not quickly enough to gain much attention, to the bathrooms at the back of the club. As he was about to duck into the men's room, a white-faced boy with short black hair and ice blue eyes grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him away from the door.

"Hey don't you know you're going into the men's room?" Edward looked at him and it seemed that he had seen him somewhere before.

"I'm sorry," He stammered, not recognizing his own voice.

"What's your name anyway," the white faced boy asked with a smile.

"Emaline," she said softly.

Julian

Julian had played at Flick's so many times that it was beginning to feel like a second home. Three hours earlier, he sighed heavily as he once more sat down at the Steinway piano that they had brought especially for him. It was down in *Slapdash's* contract that Julian would always have a Steinway to play, or else the band was free to break their contract and leave the club. In the beginning, it had been fun to do just that, claiming that the sleek black piano was a fake Steinway. They always had plenty of other clubs they could play at, and he, of course, was able to tell a fake. He was one of the best jazz musicians in the last five years. They would certainly understand if he couldn't play on anything less than the best. He had built a reputation for himself out of this, and without a doubt, at every show, a brand new, borrowed-from-a-music-store, Steinway piano was there for his enjoyment.

This has amused him for a while. His band, *Slapdash*, was a jazz/rock quintet that had been gaining popularity through the jazz club scene in Pittsburgh. Flick's was no different. As he watched the club's technicians set up the microphones and cables, he ran his long skinny white fingers down the length of the keys on the piano. He looked around the familiar club. Above the bar on the wide wall

above the austere bottles of liquor, the club showed scenes of old black and white movies. These were silent of course, and no one paid them any attention, it only added to the ambiance of this place. He watched a small attractive waitress setting up squat candles in little black holders on all the tables. They would be opening the club up in about an hour and they had already set the candles burning. Julian had watched the red-eyed patrons of this nightclub before. None of them paid the candles any mind. The candles served no purpose other than to bow a head to the old tradition of a fancy night out. They were on the table because tradition demanded that they be there.

He left the setting up of the rest of the stage to the techs, and joined his band mates at the bar. The bartender for that night, a short girl that Julian had never noticed before, was quietly pouring drinks for them. She seemed to be saving all of her strength for her shift that night, not flirting with the band members as most female bartenders did. He took the offered pale ale brew, and tried to set in his mind how the club looked without any of its swaying inhabitants.

The first half of the show had gone off well. The band took a break to smoke a bowl in the back room. The

inhabitants of the club were also busy refilling drinks, and chatting each other up in the warm air of the club. Julian was probably the only one drinking a beer. He wasn't sure when drinking beer had gone out of style, yet everywhere he looked he saw the red and white glint of wine glasses in the crowd. During the last song, a tune called "Red," there had been a group of people dancing to the thumping of the stand-up bass and guitar. *How appropriate* he thought as he surveyed the sanguine room. The ceiling of the bar was lost somewhere in the shadows of the converted warehouse, and it made Julian feel as though he was at the bottom of a fish tank.

He recalled how, earlier that evening he had laid on the floor of a different room, and looked up at a different ceiling. Back at his apartment, before the show, he was spread on out on the floor, his hands and feet reaching towards the four corners of the room. It was four hours before he was supposed to be at the show set-up. Next to him, in a solid glass ashtray, a rolled joint was still smoldering. The scent of sweat and pot clung to Julian's hands. Around the apartment, stacks of manuscript paper littered the floor, some of it crumpled up. The piano lid was open, but Julian hadn't played it in a while. Earlier in the afternoon, Paul had left him for probably, or at

least for what he imagined, was the last time. They had been living together for a year and a half, but Julian had never really gotten comfortable. Never really felt a groove that he imagined he should. He was sinking deeper and deeper into a depression that he could feel settling over him. The fight had started with Julian wanted Paul to go to the show that night with him.

"I really don't think I should go by myself," Julian had told him. It was the truth at the time. He felt that Paul was probably the only person that understood him and the desire that he felt to create, to create music, to create vibe.

"I really think that maybe you should," was the only thing that he could come back with. Paul already stood with a suitcase in his hand. He paused at the door to Julian's studio/living room, looking at him still sitting on the couch, half dressed before the show. He had made no attempts to get up and stop Paul from walking out the door. Paul tried one last time.

"I'll stay if you don't go to the show tonight. I'll stay if all of this stops like you said it was going to," he paused one more time trying to find something to say that would make Julian understand. "Hell, you don't even like this life anymore."

Julian looked up at him for the first time. "But it's the only thing that I know how to do." He looked down again to the joint he was rolling. "I'll call you tomorrow."

Pulling himself out of his memories at the club, Julian realized the bass player was almost finished with his solo; he took another sip of beer and got ready to play.

Rebecca

Rebecca left a terrified Emaline in the girl's bathroom. She had seen all of this happen before. She had seen hundreds of terrified girls and confused looking guys.

"They all head for the bathroom for some reason." She laughed out loud. She circled the room again in her new form as a man. This was the room where people came into the world dressed in their best, and dancing the night away. This is where the ideas were born. This is where love grew.

"It just never goes out looking the way it came in," she whispered.

She could see the strains of muscles in the walls, the warm air on her face. She was sure she was in the very womb of God, waiting to be born into the rhythm that had everyone else ensnared. Where had these people learned to look into each other's eyes and lie? When had it become such an easy response, if they had not been born with it?

There was one person that had held her attention for most of the night. She watched the small balding man playing the piano on the stage as if he were the most interesting thing there. His hands were gorgeous. She noticed that right from the beginning. He leaned over the piano with such attention, eyes closed and feeling with his fingers. "Isn't that just like musicians," she thought to

herself. She was hoping that he maybe was the anti-stereotype, but he was just another musician obsessed with his world. She wondered if he even noticed his audience. The man's fingers scattered this way and that, as he moved them up and down the keys. He had close cut brown hair that clung stubbornly to his head, but even from where she was seated, Rebecca could see that he was beginning to loose it. During the breaks in the songs, he drank slowly out of a tall pint glass balanced on the edge of the piano, and he kept wiping himself off with a black silk handkerchief pulled from the pocket of his tailored pants. She could see him on the edge of the rhythm of the womb. It was pulling him in slowly; tugging at his shirtsleeves.

Isabel

During the commotion of the night, Isabel had lost track of Edward. The patrons of the club were slowly starting to leave the club, sometimes only in two or threes, sometimes in large groups that filed out, back into the cold night. She thought she caught a glimpse of a man that looked like Edward, but something wasn't quite right about it.

"All these people look the same after a while."

At the break in the music, Isabel watched as the piano player sauntered stiffly over to the bar and crawled up onto one of the black leather bar stools with silver rings encircling the legs. Setting down the cocktail napkin, Isabel kept her eyes on the black-haired boy as she asked the young piano player, "What'll have?"

"Same as I had before Isabel, Boddingtons's." She placed the thick pint glass under the tap and set it running. It was then she noticed a scared looking woman come out of the bathroom and sit down at the booth Edward had been sitting at a few moments before.

"Will you excuse me one moment Julian," she didn't wait for an answer as she quickly untied the short bartending apron she wore and ran her fingers quickly through her hair. "I'll be right back."

"I'll keep an eye on him Isabel," a low thick voice said from behind Julian. The boy Isabel had mistaken for Edward had come up behind him unknowingly. He made eye contact with Isabel. "You go on. We'll be fine." Isabel didn't really stop to question why the man knew her name when she had never told it to her before.

She walked quickly over to Edward's table, and sat down. She didn't really know what to say.

"What is your name?" Isabel asked by a way of some kind of introduction, something to fill in the horrible silence between them.

The girl's fiery eyes looked up, and she sighed. "Why does everyone keep asking me that?"

Without saying anything else, she grabbed Isabel's hand and pulled her towards the bathroom with her.

"Look at that." She pointed towards the small bathroom mirror that they were both peering into. "Tell me what you see." Her voice strained. "Tell me what you see Isabel."

"Whoa, So now you know my name too?"

"Just look at me and tell me what you see." She was close to her, not more than a few inches away from her face.

"Edward?"

Julian

At the break in the music, Julian went over the bar, and was given a drink by the same attractive bartender with the short brown hair. He had played badly tonight, and he knew it, even if no one else knew he had. All around him, at the bar and on the dance floor, people were talking about how good his group had sounded tonight. How tight they had been, and how they could anticipate each other's moves. Julian knew this was bullshit. Anyone who knew anything about music would have known that those were all practiced changes and moves. He could have done them in his sleep. These people would go back to their offices or coffee shops tomorrow, and talk about what a great jazz band they had heard. The desired effect: they would seem cooler to everyone around them.

The bartender brought his beer, and Julian nodded slightly to her. He had known Isabel for a while. Simply by sight if nothing else, and she always had his Boddingtons's ready for him. Beer was easy to serve, she always said, so she had never minded that he was the only one who drank it. Tonight she seemed kind of distracted though, and half way through pouring his beer made an excuse and left the bar.

"Guess she had a date to get to," a man's voice came at him from behind him. "I told her I'd keep you company."

she finished. Rebecca went behind the bar and retrieved his beer, and also set down a glass of wine that he had not seen earlier. "My name is Ben," She said.

"Julian," he replied curtly. He sighed and decided to launch right into it.

"Look I just got out of a relationship," *Did this sound as cliché to this guy as it did to him?* "I don't really feel like getting into anything right now." He told him briefly about Paul, and his feelings about Julian's music.

"He said it best, I'm not making a difference of any kind so, you know, I don't feel like talking."

"That's fine," but he didn't walk away. "There was just something that I wanted to show you." Rebecca put her hand over top of his folded ones that were resting on the bar, and Julian felt the tingling between his shoulders. He looked around and saw the strains and muscles, the pulsing that Rebecca had been seeing all night. At the middle of this violent blood bath, this red glow of people changing bodies and minds, of lies flowing from their mouths like rivers, and of the final truth spreading from some of their finger tips, he saw, actually saw, the music that was coming from the stage. He watched as his music mixed with what was most intensely the people in front of him.

Rebecca moved her hands from off of his and picked up

her glass, but before she left the bar she leaned over and whispered into Julian's ear. "See, it does matter. All of it changes us" When he looked up, she was gone from his side.

Emaline

"What happened to me Isabel?" All nervousness and uncertainty had left her voice. She looked down at her form. She was a very pretty girl. Her black hair had grown to her shoulders with a silky feel. She had small shoulders and a tall frame, small breasts curved under her shirt. She had dark blue eyes.

Isabel looked just as stunned.

"I don't know, honestly I don't Edward."

"It's Emaline actually," she looked down at the floor. "I don't really know why, it just came out when this boy asked me what my name was."

She paused and, almost without thinking, Emaline bridged the gap between them in a second, slid her hand up behind Isabel's head and pulled her in close, kissing soft and unsure lips. They pulled their heads apart after a while.

They didn't speak at all, but Isabel kissed her back, longer and harder, pressing her up against the wall of the bathroom with Emaline breathing softly in her ear.

Flicks

Closing time in the club was like a machine winding to a stop. Street lights popped on outside on the sidewalk and illuminated the path home for those whom had spent the night deep inside the clubs red walls. Isabel had gone back to work. She had finished wiping down the last of the counters and tables. She had hung the last long stemmed wine glass on the hanging rack. The top floor lost in the darkness was no longer so ominous and harsh lights flooded the dance floor. The rhythm slowed to a steadying beat.

Not long before closing, the members of Slapdash saw Julian leave on the arm of a white-faced boy with black hair. He was someone they had never seen before. When Paul came in a little bit later looking for Julian they told him that he was sick, and had gone home early.

Isabel wiped the dark wooden bar one last time, and hung the rag up. Rebecca pulled a drunk and wide eyed Julian through the darken streets. A jazz tune played circles in Julian's head as he gazed up at the brilliant stars.