

Drunken Angel

by Charles Stoll

* 1985 – Age 72 *

The old man sputtered and pointed a liver-spotted finger toward the door. "Get out of my room and let me die in peace." He sniffed at the air as if the sanitized smell would kill him.

"You don't mean that, Old Man," his niece said, mascara running down her cheek. "I'm too old to take your crap anymore."

"Maybe it's my fault. I've always protected you from reality. I should have let you face the monsters that were always there." He mimicked a menacing animal to make her laugh. He realized she was forever lost to him.

She remained stoic. "You were the only monster I faced. If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be walking with a limp today." She pulled a hanky from her purse and blew into it.

"Stop your fucking crying. I wish you didn't react that way to every fucking little problem. I couldn't just let you wind up a spineless faggot. You were too stupid to know how people would've treated you."

"How dare you?" She spat at the man and threw her tissue at his

face. Then she composed herself and faced him. "This is your last chance for forgiveness. I was the only member of the family who was willing to speak with you, but even *I* am at wit's end. So, if there're any regrets you wish to relay to your family, tell me now."

"Yeah, my whole fucking life was regrets. None of it went the way I planned. Any satisfaction I ever got was cheap and fleeting. Your aunt was the bane of my existence. She demanded things I couldn't provide."

He looked around the pleasantly furnished room as if he was in hell. His niece nervously shuffled her feet, avoiding direct eye contact with him. He strained to lift himself up in the bed, but his muscles felt paralyzed. He continued, "I'm not sorry about what I did, Anna. I was the only one who had the balls to stop you before you made a big mistake."

Her face reddened, and she slapped the man hard. "You don't get to say that anymore. If I had the strength, I'd strangle you myself, right now. But it's better I just go and never think of you again. It's up to Daisy now to do the rest." She started toward the door.

"What the hell do you mean by that? And who the hell is Daisy?" His face began to sweat profusely

Her silence was his answer. Then her eyes darted nervously about the room, her face full of resignation. "Listen, is there anything I can get you before I leave?"

"No! It's a little late to start paying attention to my needs now. Just leave me here to die."

His hand reached out for her, but she remained by the door. His speech grew more distant, but impassioned. "I only wish to know what lies on the other side now. Either I will fade into oblivion or all the answers to life's questions will be revealed to me." He looked giddy, repressing laughter. "I'm going on life's greatest adventure, far more daring than anyone can go on in this physical life." He laughed out loud and stared right through her. "But all of us take the ultimate trip in the end. Are you even a little bit jealous? Want to come with me?"

"You are a piece of work. You always manage to take me to a darker place. You never knew what love was." She fell into a chair and wept uncontrollably. "At least, I've found love in this world with Angela."

He snorted. "You'll never learn. Girls shouldn't be with girls. But you'll just continue to snuffle and blubber your way through life. Just acknowledge what has happened and move on." He shot her a look of disgust and then looked away. "Most of all, never lie to family."

"Sometimes people lie to you for your own protection," she cried. "The truth doesn't always take you where you need to go. Sometimes, it just leads to pain...or even death."

"You still should have told me—"

She walked back to the bed and reached over to grab his hand, but he pulled it away. "There are times when you just have to let others make the important decisions for you. I learned long ago I could never trust you."

"Not this place. I don't deserve this."

"It's for the best, Mr. Hoffman," she said.

"You should have told me—"

"I forgive you."

She ran from the room past Daisy Perlman who was lingering by the door, nodding her head in sympathy for the words she had overheard. Daisy, a large formidable woman with short orange curls and an innocent-looking face full of freckles that belied what lay beneath, entered the room and approached the man on the bed.

A frail thin woman with short black hair accompanied her. She darted behind the man as Daisy commanded his full attention. The old man attempted to raise himself up on one arm to confront the larger woman. With nimble dexterity, the thin woman injected a small syringe into his left arm. He fell back and lay unconscious.

"Now you will be more compliant," Daisy said.

Daisy Perlman was not the prettiest of little girls, as her mother frequently reminded her. She was stocky and muscular. Her one chance at beauty was her curly orange ringlets on top, but her mother kept her hair short, so the child would not be as pretty as herself.

At the tender age of seven, Daisy learned how her mother made money. One night, she lay fast asleep in her bed when she was awakened by a repeating thumping noise coming from the wall behind her. She heard a man screaming at her mother, then slapping her. She had heard such noises before, but they never seemed as violent. Daisy wrapped her pillow about her head. She had been told never to interfere when her mother had guests. Her own heart was telling her different, though. Then she heard her mother's piercing scream again, and she leaped out of bed. She ran out of her bedroom and pushed open the door to her mother's room.

"Get outta here, Daisy," her mother yelled, pulling up the sheet to cover herself. "Din't I tell ya never ta come in here?"

"But ya screamed so loud—" Daisy protested.

"I'll make you scream, too, little lady," a fat hairy man with a big floppy thing sticking out between his legs warned her. "I'd pay extra to break her in," he said to her mother.

"Ya hear dat, Daisy? Would ya like ta become a woman?" her mother

cooed.

Daisy cowered in fear. “No, Ah hate ya. Ah don't want to be like ya. And Ah hate him, too.”

“That’s no way to talk to your mama,” the hairy man said, “I’ll teach you, you little bitch.” He removed a book from the night table and hurled it at Daisy, hitting her in the head. The young girl rubbed her scalp and wailed, glaring at the man. Daisy picked up the book and threatened to throw it back but hesitated. She had never seen a book and was curious, so she just held on to it.

“What, do you want to watch?” The gross old man jumped up on the bed and wagged his stiff boner at her. “There’s plenty here for both of you.”

Daisy screamed at the sight. Clutching the book, she ran out of the house to the woods, the only place she ever felt safe., Trying to erase the image from her mind, she walked endlessly until she grew weary. When she could go no further, an outcropping of stone that formed a natural bench appeared, and she sat down. Daisy couldn't remember seeing this spot before as many times as she'd wandered these woods. She felt like the angels had made this space just for her to rest on when she was tired and needed comfort.

She looked at the book, still held tightly in her hand. Her mother could barely read. She had taught Daisy to spell cat and thought that was enough of that. Maybe the man who brought the book didn't know

that. Maybe her mother pretended that she could. Most people in Marmalade couldn't read. It had no schools, no hospitals, no police, no library. It was just a beach and some woods, like most of Florida. Daisy just stared at the picture on the front cover.

It was a circle with a wavy line down the center. Half was black, and half was white. But the white side had a little black circle in it, and the black side, a white one. Daisy wished she could read the book and maybe understand the picture on the front. But the longer she stared at the symbol, the more she believed she knew what it meant.

* Age 13 *

Daisy always preferred the woods to the beach. The shore was exposed to the view of others. When she did wander in that direction, she always headed toward the Winkleman house, a beautiful yellow Victorian owned by the local banker Henry and his wife Shirley. Daisy loved this house because it was the only beautiful structure in Marmalade and it had many places to hide: trees, sheds and a bright red, oversized playhouse in its backyard.

Marmalade was a town that didn't technically exist. Resting between the Tomoka Hills and the shore, it was not listed on any map.

Even the government had never heard of it. No one paid taxes, and all paved roads ended at its entrance. Its four thousand plus residents were all on the run from something: bad investments, failed relationships and criminal acts.

Henry Winkleman was rumored to be a powerful but disgraced banker in New York and had also come here to escape his past. He and his wife were the only people in Marmalade who had money and were not afraid to spend it. He let her design the Victorian house, which was built the year Daisy was born. Mrs. Winkleman operated it as a bed and breakfast for her friends and family. She did not advertise because people would never find Marmalade on a map, and she didn't need the money. Daisy always had always felt an affinity for the house, as if she belonged there.

Mr. Winkleman also built a small bank on the edge of town where the paved road ended. He did so, not because the town required a bank, but because he did not wish to travel fifty miles to go to work up in Norris, the nearest neighboring town. People in Marmalade never had enough money to require a bank account, but they came in mostly to apply for a loan or just to talk. Loans were never approved because no one had collateral, but Mr. Winkleman listened carefully to their problems. His heart was not as corrupt as his brain, and he solved their problems in his own way. He had electricity

installed in the home of a woman who was going blind, so she could see. He added a telephone to the home of a terminally ill man, so he could call for help. He sent food, milk and diapers to the home of a teen who was pregnant. He was called the Wizard of Marmalade by all who knew him.

* Age 16 *

Daisy had only one goal in life—to get away from her mother, whom she would always call “Mutta”. She felt she never had a real mother—not one she could trust, at least. She knew this town like the back of her hand and had already picked out an empty hovel she could live in.

When the opportunity arose, Daisy took a few of her mother's possessions and the money she hid in her underwear drawer while her mother lay passed out on the bed beside her. She left a home that never had room for her. She was able to survive because of the things she had learned subliminally over the years from her venomous mother: how to steal, how to run a con and how to lie with a straight face.

Daisy enjoyed selling health care policies that were only pieces of paper to the elderly, renting out hovels she did not own and selling lottery tickets that would never pay out. She moved into the empty shack she had found on the other side of town from her mother and was finally free. It

had electricity and a phone like her mother's and even a TV, and these were rare in Marmalade. She liked best that it was close to the woods.

The one thing her mother had taught her was how to make a good moonshine. She had to use Daisy as the task required her assistance. Still, it was quality time for Daisy, and she paid close attention to every move her mother made.

She enjoyed life on her own at first. But in a town this small, she quickly ran out of rubes stupid enough to buy her phony policies. Daisy realized her mother had taught her one other thing, how to make money whoring. She knew she was not as pretty as her mother, but the men in Marmalade were horny, and fucking was the only entertainment around.

Daisy turned to tricking, but over time, the disgust she felt from pleasing fat old men inspired her to build her own still in the backyard. Then she could drink before they arrived and forget them after they left. Daisy could not find the materials she had taken from Mutta's house to build her own still, so she put it off. When she found herself falling asleep during encounters, she turned to meth-amphetamines and then cocaine.

* Age 17 *

Daisy cursed as she searched beneath her kitchen sink for the two

bowls she had stolen from her mother's house the previous year. As hard as she tried, she could not improve the one-room hovel she had moved into. She found an old can of paint and attempted to cover one wall, but rust from the old metal container made the wall look as if a murder had just occurred. Daisy would have to live with it, having no other paint to cover the mistake.

There was only one thing that could make her life better after her series of failed attempts at life on her own. She had to find the items she needed to construct her still. They were not with her other pots and pans in the lower cabinets. She rose suddenly and knocked her head on the kitchen counter.

“Shit.” She ran out the door and over to the shed she had begun to construct to house the still. It only lacked a front wall, but once again, she had run out of materials. In one corner, under a tarp, she spied the items she was searching for: a large cooking pot, a round-bottomed steel bowl, a brick and a thermometer. She was not comfortable with other drugs. She wanted the one that her mother had given her to calm her down since she was two.

“Thank you,” she yelled to the universe. She began construction of the still immediately. It would provide the relief she needed to calm herself and give her solace. It would keep the real horrors of life from affecting her, at least temporarily.

Daisy placed the bigger pot on her grill. She put a large glass in the center of the pot with a brick inside of it to hold it in place. She then added

her mash into the pot around it. With great satisfaction, she fitted the round bottomed bowl on top, forming a perfect seal.

“Halleluiah, maybe there is a God,” she yelled and began to prepare the fire.

“I am here,” a booming voice from up above responded.

Daisy looked around nervously. She believed she could always detect the presence of another human being, but this one had eluded her. Then she heard laughter and a rustling of leaves and stared intently in the direction from which it came.

A thin black man slithered noiselessly down from a tree about ten feet from her. He had a friendly air to him, with a broad Cheshire smile and a certain grace in his descent. He seemed just a few years older than her, and his natural fro, torn jeans and t-shirt showed he was no better off than herself.

Daisy continued to focus on preparing her fire as if he hadn't scared her. “A man could git his'self killed sneaking up on a woman like dat.”

He stepped toward her. “Oh, ya dink ya always know when someone's watchin' ya, huh?”

Daisy took a moment to study him before looking back at the grill. “I been watchin' ya fer years,” he said and grinned.

“How's it Ah never seen ya den?” she asked. “Ya only da second black man Ah eva seen.”

“Da other one's my Uncle Marlin. He used to visit yer maw when ya was but a tadpole.”

“Ma what?” Daisy asked. “What's a 'maw'? Oh, you mean my mutta. I never had no cute term for dat one. How long ya been snoopin' on me anyways?”

The man settled himself, sitting cross-legged on the ground beside her. Daisy sensed that he meant her no harm and continued her chore unfettered. She enjoyed having someone she could talk to besides the animals and trees.

“I guess da first I saw a yer was da day ya was born.”

Daisy looked up from her work and studied the man but said nothing.

“Ma Uncle Marlin took good care a yer maw when she were pregnant. He's da one what delivered ya. I know 'cuz I watched da whole t'ing through yer maw's bedroom winda. And ya come out wid gumption, too. Wiggled yer way right out of ma uncle's hands. Didn't want no one to touch ya, even back den.” He laughed like it just happened yesterday.

Daisy wasn't buying a word he said. “Yer makin’ dat up. Ya din't see nuttin'. Ah kin always tell when someone's nearby, it's a sense Ah got,” Daisy insisted.

He winked at her. “Oh, no ya don't. Ya don't even know when yer sitting on the front entrance ta ma house in da woods.”

Daisy eyed him suspiciously. “Da only place Ah eva sat down in dem

woods is on a nat'ral stone bench what da angels made fer me special."

"Hardly nat'ral at all. Ma great-great granddaddy and his brudders built dat afta da Civil War. Behind it is a bunch a tunnels dat lead ta where ma kinfolk lives, all t'irty-two a us. It kept us hid all dese years."

"Bullshit. Back behind dat bench is a wall a poison ivy." Daisy threw match after match at the kindling she had arranged so carefully to burn evenly.

He giggled. "Next time, touch da poison ivy. You'll see."

"Ya beginnin' ta scare me. It's like Ah don't know nothin' fer sure now. Ya hain't been watchin' me my whole life, have ya?"

"Offen on. Mostly when ya takes yer walks in da woods. I love dem woods much as ya. I remember one day, ya couldn't a been more den six or seven and ya sat down on dat stone bench, clenching a book in yer little hands. Ya was so mad, I wanted to stop hidin' and help ya. But as mad as ya seemed, ya was never helpless. I knew ya would solve da problem yaself, as ya always did. Ya stared at yer book like it somehow held da answer ta all da wurl's problems. And den I saw da smallest of smiles peek out on yer face. So, I knowed ya was all right."

Daisy resigned herself to the man's knowledge of her. She remembered that day and felt glad that that he was there that day. Daisy had always felt there were angels who looked out for her. Maybe she had just met one of

them now. She looked at his deep brown, playful eyes for the first time.

“So, what's yer name?” she asked.

“Willy.”

Daisy turned back to her brew. It was beginning to boil. “We gotta be careful now. It startin’ ta condense. Ah don't want it ta boil too much. Ya can't cook dis shit too fast.”

Willy jumped to his feet and asked, “What kin I do ta help?”

“Hold dis towel and lif da top bowl when Ah tells ya.” Daisy continued to check her thermometer and adjust the fire by poking it ever so carefully.

“Ya like a mad scientist when ya makes hooch.” He smiled his ever-widening smile.

Daisy nodded. “Ever’ one know somethin' in dis wurl. Ah knows dat water boils at 212 degrees. Methyl alcohol evap'rates at 148 1/2 degrees and ethyl alcohol evap'rates at 173 degrees.”

“Whoo, ya know all dat widout never havin' no schoolin'?”

“Ah got schoolin', jus' not in a school. Ever' baby learn fum da wurl 'round it. Ah learned fum ever' squirrel and ever' animal in da woods. Dey taught me ever'ting Ah need ta know 'bout life. Ma worthless mutta taught me what *not* ta do. Ya don't gotta force ideas down my throat. All learnin' should happen natural-like, like it do in da forest. Life don't give away its biggest

secrets no' how, no matta what ya dink ya know. All dem secrets, dey hidden in da woods." Daisy took a second to check her thermometer. "Quick now, lif da bowl out."

Willy did as instructed, burning his finger as he did so. He appeared amazed that the glass inside was now filled with a clear liquid.

Daisy looked at her first batch with satisfaction and pride, and then invited Willy to sit on the grass while they waited for the liquid to cool. "Da only t'ing Ah enjoyed doing wid mutta was making hooch. It were da only time she paid attention ta me cause she felt Ah was useful ta her den. Ah spent half ma life dreaming a killing her just ta git her off'n ma back. But now dat Ah moved away and figgered Ah left all ma problems b'hind, life still ain't so great. Ah just make do."

"I dink dat's all mos' people do, jus' get by. Somes like ta pretend dey better den ever'one, wid dere fancy cars and houses. But no matter what extra ya got, ya neva git away fum da problems a being human. Ya still git sick. Ya still gotta watch bad things happen ta folks ya love. And in da end, ya still gotta give it all away and die."

"Guess that's what makes it all fair."

Daisy looked at Willy in a new light from the way she saw all other men. He hadn't once come on to her, and he treated her as if she were his equal.

“I'm glad I decided ta let ya meet me,” Willy said. “I coulda stayed hid, but I could always tell when ya needed someone, even when ya was a little girl.”

“Ah didn't think anyone paid attention ta me. That's why Ah was making da hooch, to be my fren'. Ever'one needs sumpin' dey can turn ta.”

“Ya got more than the hooch ya kin turn ta. I been yer friend since ya was born.”

“Yer betta den a friend,” she said. “Ya ma guardian angel.”

* Age 17 *

Daisy refilled Willy's empty jelly jar with hooch. She picked a few strawberries from a patch by the shed and squeezed them into the mixture, leaves and all. Willy took a sip and beamed his broad smile. “Tastes betta wid dem strawberries,” he said.

“As much as ya had, ya could drink dog piss and tell me it's good.” They both laughed and set down on the ground along the side of the shed. Daisy's shoulder brushed against Willy's, and she would have normally recoiled. Instead, she just lay her head calmly on his shoulder.

“Din't ya get sweet on me now,” Willy warned. “Ya like a daughter ta me.”

“Dat da 'xact reason Ah kin do dis wit ya. Ah always needed a parent more den a lover. Ya makes me feel safe.”

She hugged him, and he looked straight into her eyes. “I'm here for the hooch, not the cooch,” he said and tickled her nose. “And I always be dere when ya need me.”

“How ya gonna know when Ah needs ya? Ya read minds or some'tin'?”

“I know da paths ya travel.” He looked at her like a father would.

She returned a quizzical look. “It nice ta git ta know someone ya kin trust,” she said. “I neva knowed what dat felt like.”

“Feels good, right?”

“Feels like Ah don't have to be explaining what Ah do all da time. Feels like someone finally gits what Ah'm talkin' bout. Damn right it feel good.”

He hoisted his jelly jar in the air. “Just between you and me, some things, you do-em just cause dey make ya feel right inside.”

Daisy lifted her glass to his. “To ma only fren' in da wurl.”

“Ya only needs one.”

They laid back, rolling in the grass, tickling each other with long blades of grass and murmuring inanities until Willy pulled her down and rolled on top of her. His eyes grew dark and mysterious, as if he were about

to unleash a secret.

“I’ll even protect ya fum da wood nymph if ya ever needs it,” he said.

She pushed him to her side and squinted at him. “What wood nymph? If dere was a wood nymph in ma woods, Ah’d know it.” She looked at him for the first time as if he were crazy.

“No, ya wun’t. Ya can’t even find us thirty-two peoples hiding back dere.”

“Oh, Ah seen you, all right. Ah just thought ya was a black snake.” She snorted, reached over to punch his shoulder and toppled their drinks in the process. “And dere ain’t no wood nymph, probably jus’ a child or a fox.”

“If’n it’s a child, he got da face of a old man, and he got powers, too. Dat day I watched ya got born, he kept making my body pull away from the window so’s I can’t see what’s going on. He din’t talk, but he was tellin’ me ta mind ma own business.”

“Ya don’t ‘spect me ta believe dat,” Daisy said. Then she just stared into space. “Ya know what? Dat time ya saw me when Ah was little, somethin’ led me ta dat bench ‘cause Ah was so tired, and Ah thought Ah saw somethin’ dat weren’t quite animal nor human scurry behind da brush, but Ah had udder problems den, so Ah gave it

no mind.” She leaned her face over his to look at him directly. “Do ya think it coulda been da wood nymph?”

“Coulda been. He do all kinda things, both good and evil, ta keep his woods da way dey supposed ta be.”

“Kinda like a force of nature,” she said. “Does what he gotta do ta keep order, and nature can be cruel sometime, right?”

“Kinda like you.”

She smiled.

* Age 18 *

Daisy spent every weekend with her first real friend. Willy could roll on top of her, grab her ass, put his head between her breasts and shake it back and forth. Daisy would never get angry. Their love was pure, like a dog and its master, like two boys wrestling, like brothers and sisters. There wasn't a thing they couldn't say or do anything to each other.

“Daisy, ya eva tink a leaving Marmalade? Starting over some place in da real wurl?” Willy looked up at the clouds and sipped lightly from his jelly jar.

“Dat just a bigger mess den what we got right here,” Daisy

said. “Ungodly t’ings happen once ya get outside a Marmalade. T’ings ya can’t control.”

“I din’t tink ya believed in God.”

“Ah still know what people mean when dey say ‘God.’ It da goodness inside ya dat keeps you from killing ever’one ya meet.”

Willy smiled. “Ya din’t mean dat. Dere are plenty good places ta go. Ya could get a good job, take care a yerself or find a rich man—”

“Ah don’t need a good job, and ya give me money ‘nuf to get by,” Daisy interrupted. “Ya said ya don’t want me ta hook no more. Now where would Ah find a better man den ya?”

Willy rolled over to face her. She patted his hand. “Besides, Ah like my own little world where Ah disturb no one who don’t disturb me. Ah’ll bet Ah can have more t’ings if Ah left here, but dey wun’t be better t’ings, just more. When Ah watch dem people on da TV, dey seem so confused and rushed and unnatural, and dey talk about t’ings Ah don’t give a damn about. Ah don’t want no part a dey wurl.”

“Ya so funny, Daisy. Ya tell da truth about ever’ting, yer own truth. And ya don’t take no guff fum no one. I know ya’s a lot smarter den people say.”

“Dat just it. Ah don’t care what people say or what dey got. Dere just wasting more of what’s real in life den Ah do. Ah know why Ah

own ma few things and Ah likes my t'ings.” She pointed at the wooded hills in the distance. “Ah's part of dem woods really. Ever'ting dats good and real in life can be found dere, and it all belong ta me. Ya don't need what else. Ma heart is dere. I'd neva leave Marmalade. What 'bout ya?”

“Me? I'm like ya. Ma soul is in dem woods, right wit ya,”

Willy admitted. “Ma two brudders work in da real world, but just ta make money fer da family. Dey never got nothin' good ta say 'bout it. Dey keep givin' me dere money. I give it ta ya. Got no need fer it maself. I live off'n dem woods and what I kin find, and kindnesses like dis hooch offered by good folk like ya.”

“Ah got no need fer yer cash. Kin't manage it maself. Always got too much or too little.”

Willy smiled. He handed her an empty jelly jar, brandishing an impish smile she could not resist. She grabbed the jug and refilled both of their drinks.

“Ah like folks like ya, Willy,” Daisy said. “We not big city types. We got no needs, and we don't ask no one fer nothin'. Dey no closer to da truth wit dere fancy ways. If dey was, someone would come out and tell us all the truth. Dey just *act* like dey better.”

“Me an' ya,” Willy said. “We happy da way we is. Dat a real blessin'.”

“It din't mean Ah don't never want nothin' better.” She looked off into the distance.

“Dat not what I mean. I mean you don't need no fancy cars or big houses.”

“Oh, ya right dere. Ah don't need no fancy cars.” She paused and stared at Willy's big brown eyes. “But Ah want dat big house.”

* Age 19 *

Daisy grew weary of Marmalade as she drained the swamp of human slime that represented the men who could afford sex there. There was no amount of hooch that could make her forget their stank from lack of hygiene and their inability to make her feel anything. The woods comforted her as she made her way to the bench the angels had made for her.

As she sat there, she remembered the words Willy had told her. This bench was not made by the angels. It was built to disguise the entrance to Willy and his family's hidden caves. Maybe all things were that way, misunderstood until their mystery was revealed. His crazy story was compounded by the addition of the wood nymph. But that was just like Willy. He had a way of revealing his truth slowly to you, so you

would enjoy all the mystery.

Daisy was not one to believe anything without seeing for herself. She walked around the stone outcropping and examined the mix of vines, scrub brush and, clearly, poison ivy. She could sense the presence of plastic immediately. The smell of her woods was not right. Daisy bent down to examine the poisonous substance. Something did not look right, and eventually she reached out to touch it.

The plastic plants came out of the ground, and she threw them back down, disgusted. She examined the other vegetation and found it to be a mix of live and artificial. She tried to separate the vines but still could not find an entrance. Daisy was angry with herself for not noticing something so unnatural in the one place she felt she understood.

Frustrated, she sat down in the dirt and began to toss rocks at a tree opposite her. When her supply of rocks dwindled, she rose to gather others. She spotted something odd wedged beneath a larger rock, a smaller stone that did not appear to be natural. It did not have the rough edges and striations from being exposed to the weather.

Daisy was proud of her powers of observation once again. No one else would have noticed the minor differences, and she bent over to pull the smaller rock out. It did not budge, so she lowered her head to look underneath. On the bottom of the larger rock, a channel had been

carved out, with the smaller rock sitting at one end. She pushed the smaller rock along the channel to the other side.

Daisy gasped as the vines separated and the entrance appeared. She took a step back, but the thought of surprising Willy in his own domain taunted her. It delighted her devilish side. The more she thought about it, though, she felt it just wouldn't be right. She could always tell Willy she had found the entrance when she next saw him.

A rustling in the brush behind her caused her to turn. A single bush shook and then stopped. She assumed it was an animal and turned away. The bush shook again, more violently. Daisy walked toward it, and a creature emerged.

Humanoid, it was two feet tall at best, its head being half of that. Daisy wondered if she had drunk too much hooch. Perhaps Willy had described the creature in such perfect detail that she believed she saw it. It had the beady sunken eyes of an old man, a hooked nose and spotty remnants of hair, and it wore a diaper-like garment made of fur. She approached the little man, but when she grew close, her body shivered violently, and she took a step away. Her shivering ceased. She bent down to look at him more directly.

“Why do Ah shake so when Ah come close?” Daisy asked.

His voice strained like the strings of a violin, “Your body's

vibration. It lets you see me. Not all can.”

“Ah sees ya wit ma eyes,” she assured him.

“Eyes tell some. Vibration tells all. Connects to all spirits.

Links you and forest. You and animals. You and others. You and self.” He pointed at the cave's entrance and jumped up and down.

Daisy followed his gaze. “No. I kin't go in. Dat Willy's folk in dere. It ain't ma business.”

“World your business. Outside known. Inside unknown. Be curious. Don't hesitate. Must go inside to know unknown.”

Daisy scratched her head and stared at the enigmatic creature. He faded in and out of her vision.

He seemed to understand what was happening to her. “Must go now. Only can maintain vibration for short time. Outside illusion. Inside reality. Follow vibration.” He disappeared.

Daisy wondered what type of adventure might await her with Willy's family. He hadn't lied about the entrance to his family caves, and he hadn't lied about the wood nymph. She proceeded into the opening.

* * *

As she entered, pulling the vines apart, she stepped on a rock

that descended an inch into the ground. The vines closed behind her. A string of Christmas lights dimly guided her along the rocky terrain. The path sloped ever downward until she reached a point where she could hear the echoing of her own footfalls. Then she heard a murmur of voices unfamiliar to her.

A female voice rang out. “Dat you, Willy?”

Daisy could see the larger cave in front of her as it was much better lit than the passageway. Still, she could not make out the person who had called out to her. She stopped, but then realized she already knew of her presence. Who was it but just another person anyhow? She feared no one, so she continued onward.

Soon, she could make out the elderly black woman focused on her cooking. She was a scrawny woman, hunched over, but very dignified in her dress. Her hair was pulled tightly in a bun, and her face barely had a wrinkle. She looked at Daisy and showed surprise, but not alarm.

“Din't mean t-ta break inta yer house, ma'am,” Daisy stammered. “It's just Willy told me where da entrance was.”

“Dat m'boy. He'd as soon give away the key to our house to a stranger—mmm, mm, mm,” she said, wiping her hands on her lace apron. “He never did understand 'owning' anything. Ever'ting in life was

ta share, can ya imagine?”

“Dat's what Ah likes 'bout him,” Daisy admitted. “But he din't tell me how ta git in here. He just tole me dat da stone bench by yer door wasn't made by da angels fer me ta rest on.”

The old woman reeled. “What kinda dern fool tells a young girl sumpin' like that? If a girl dink da angels made her sumpin' special, ain't no man got da right ta tell her diffrint.”

“Me an' Willy. We tells each udder da truth,” Daisy said defiantly.

“Not when it means breaking a girl's heart—”

“I'm no girl. I'm a full eighteen. And I been a woman since I'se fourteen. No one breaks ma heart. . .no more, no hows.”

“I like your spunk. Call me Mama. Ever'one do.” She pointed to a seat by a metal and Formica table. “Make yerself comfy. Willy should be by any time now.”

“My name's Daisy,” she said.

“Didn't never have to tell me dat. Willy only got one real friend, and dat Daisy Perlman.”

She should have felt proud but suddenly grew nervous. She didn't want Willy to find her snooping. He *was* the only friend she had. “Ah gotta be gittin' home right off,” she said and rose to leave.

Men's voices and footsteps blocked her exit. She could see Willy's skinny body leading two broader men toward her. Willy immediately recognized Daisy and came running and embraced her. "What ya doin' here, Daisy? How in da heck did ya git in?" He looked at the woman who had a thousand tricks up her sleeve and sighed. "Damn, ya just figured it out, din't ya?"

Mama slapped Willy across his cheek. "Whad I tell ya 'bout usin' dem cuss words?" The two other men laughed heartily at him.

"Sorry, Mama," Willy said, bowing his head. "An' dem snickerin' idiots behind me is ma brudders, Ned and Leon." he said to Daisy. They both managed a wave. "An' dis is Daisy, who no doubt ya heard tell 'bout."

Daisy nodded. She was not surprised when people knew about her before meeting her.

"I'm sorry I can't hang out wit ya today," he continued. "Ma brudders work a short shift, fo' hours, up in Norris. I said I'd go wid dem and see da town."

"Now where's yer manners, Willy?" his mother asked. "Maybe Daisy would like ta go wid ya's. With as strong legs she got, I'll bet she like to take a walk, too."

"It ain't dat, Mama," Willy said. "It's just Daisy ain't never left

dis town and said she neva would.”

Mama turned her attention to Daisy. “Now, young lady, dere's more ta dis world den just Marmalade.” Mama put her arm around Daisy's shoulder, treating her like one of her own. “Ya scared ya might learn somethin' new? Travelin' makes ya see da world a little diff'rent way, sometimes better. If a woman don't never see nuthin' else to compare, then she can't rightly make a proper choice on what she likes, now can she?” Daisy felt the warmth she'd never experienced before. While she never enjoyed being told what to do, this woman was truly concerned about what happened to her. It felt right.

“Sure, Mama, you right,” Daisy said with conviction. “Ah ain't 'fraid o' nuttin'.”

* * *

When the men led her to the car, Daisy changed her mind. Willy's brothers climbed into the front seats of the '72 Valiant that had seen better days. Willy smiled broadly as he held open the rear door for Daisy until he saw the look of concern on her face.

“Ain't hardly like ya to be a' scared,” he said. He beckoned her to enter with his free hand.

“It ain't dat Ah'm scared, jus' neva rode in a car befo',” she asserted as she pointed at the rusted Plymouth. “It's just, what if'n dis hunk a junk gits broke down up dere, and Ah'm stuck up dere forever?”

“We get you back here, that's fer sure, by hook or crook. Besides, don't ya ever wanna see nuthin' diff'rent, like Mama said?”

Daisy thought about the kindly old woman who was so concerned about her and entered the car. What could possibly happen there that hadn't already happened to her here?

“Why ya bean so dang stubborn?” Willy asked. “Be easier to git a mule in da car.”

Daisy smiled at his reaction but felt she had sat upon something. She checked underneath herself and pulled out various items: napkins, wrappers and squashed paper cups. “What? I gotta sit on this crap?”

“Dat just da fast food,” Willy explained. “Jus' trow it on da flow.”

Daisy continued to examine the items in her hand. “Don't see no food, just trash. Why it *fast* food?”

“Cuz it go trew ya fast,” Ned laughed at his own joke, as he started the car and put it in gear.

“No, it cuz dey serve it to ya fast,” Willy explained. “My

brudders, dey jokers.”

“Well, it sure leave a mess,” she said.

“Hey, Daisy,” Leon yelled from the front seat. “It true ya neva once left Marmalade?”

“No, not never. Ah got everyt'ing Ah needs right here.”

“Well, what if ya got sick?” Leon asked. “Say ya needed someone ta take care a ya? Dey got a big hospital in Norris—t'ree stories tall—what could set yer leg or any'ting.”

“Willy could set my leg if Ah needed it,” she said calmly.

“Wouldn't go someplace full of sick people ta git dat done. Ya come out wid some'ting else what's worse.”

Leon snickered. “She 'xactly like whut you said, Willy—a real pisser.”

Daisy watched her beloved hills slowly fade away until the land was completely flat, and it depressed her. After a half hour of travel, she lamented, “Ain't nuthin' but a wasteland outside a Marmalade.”

“It get better,” Leon assured her. “We only ten minutes from Norris now. It fo' time bigga den Marmalade, near eighteen t'ousand peoples. It got a library, a police, a school, da hospital and two stoplights.” He held up two fingers for emphasis.

Daisy remained unimpressed. She did not know what most of

those things were or what use they could possibly have. “Yeah, wake me when we goin' home,” she said, nodding her head.

“Look, Daisy, up ahead,” Leon said. “Dere da hospital, now ya b'lieve me?”

Daisy didn't even glance at the structure. “Just go quick,” she said. “I don't wanna git sick.” She stared down at the garbage by her feet.

Leon shot a quick look back at his brother, circling his finger about his left ear, suggesting that Daisy might not be 'all there.'

“Aww, Daisy all right. She just pay attention to diff'rent stuff fum normal folk,” Willy explained.

“Ah pay attention to stuff what needs my attention, not stuff what don't mean nuthin',” Daisy said. She remained quiet until the car came to a sudden halt, sending her into the back of Leon's seat.

“What ya do dat for?” she asked and slapped the back of Leon's head. “Trying to kill me?”

“Sorry, Daisy,” Leon said, rubbing the back of his neck. “But da light changed suddenly.”

“What light ya talkin' bout?” she asked, looking to her left and right.

Willy pointed to the light hanging over the street in front of them. “See dem t'ree lights, red on da top, den yellow, den green. Well,

da red one lit up.”

Daisy remained confused. “So, what?”

“Well,” Willy continued, “when da red one light up, ya stop to keep from crashing into cars what come from da udder way.”

She shook her head and looked in both directions. “Ain't no one comin' neither way,” she said.

“But ya still gotta stop, Daisy,” Leon explained. “It da law.”

“But dat just a box. It a machine. You a man,” she said. “It da end a da wurl’ when a man obey a machine, even dow he know better.” She twisted her face to understand, but it still didn't make sense.

When the light turned, Ned accelerated ever so slightly so Daisy might not notice. He was careful not to point out anything that might trigger a response from her. Willy saw something he thought she would like.

“Do ya see da Winkleman Bank, Daisy?” Willy asked.

“Da one here be two stories and got dem big columns out front,” Leon added.

Daisy did not look up. “We got a Winkleman Bank in Marmalade,” she said.

“Won't nuthin' never excite you, Daisy?” Willy asked in exasperation.

“I’ll let you know,” she muttered. She played with the lever on her door and raised and lowered her window several times. After a while, she left it in the open position and put her head outside the window like a dog and enjoyed the wind whipping about her face. She seemed to enjoy gazing at the passing buildings more in this manner.

She continued staring at the new things around her until she suddenly yelled out, “Stop. Stop the car here.” She pointed to the right.

Ned pulled into the 7-Eleven parking lot. Daisy’s excitement mounted.

“What, ya hungry or sumpin’, Daisy?” Ned asked.

“No, it a real one,” she cried. “It not just some house wid a sign. It got big winders wid big signs and everthin’. Ah just gotta get inside.”

She struggled to unlock the door, so Willy reached over to help. She leapt out of the car before Leon was even fully in the parking spot. The men watched Daisy stare in wonder at the door that had just opened automatically when she approached. They laughed when she poked her head inside and looked in either direction to see who had opened it. Then she disappeared into the building.

The men diverted their attention to a group of teenage girls fussing with their makeup and telling tales by the side of the 7-Eleven.

The girls screeched and giggled, letting out uncontrolled bursts of laughter on occasion.

“Look like dis town got a bunch a Daisy's, too,” Leon observed.

Willy slapped his brother on the back of his head. “Dey couldn't hold a candle ta Daisy. Dey little stupid ho's. She got self-respect.”

“A ho is a ho is a ho,” Ned said. “And you ho ain't no diffrent.” He held up his arm to ward off Willy's attack.

“She ain't ma ho and ya knows it. She mo' like my girl chi'le,” Willy said.

“But ya love'r jus' da same,” Leon said.

“It a diffrent kind a love, one ya can't understand,” Willy said. He looked off in the distance for a bit, and then added, “Well, we might as well get going.”

Leon and Ned looked back at him in surprise.

“Ya jus' wanna leave'r here, den?” Ned asked.

“Dat's what she'd want,” Willy assured them. “She found her place.”

“We should jus' go ta work and pick'r up when we done?”

“Dat what I said.”

* * *

Daisy scoured the brightly colored aisles and the signs everywhere that she couldn't read. She picked up items she had never seen before and wondered what these strange foods were and what they tasted like. The shelves were all made of stainless steel, not like the splintered wood tables and old rusty metal bookcases in the only 7-Eleven she had ever known.

A young woman dressed in Daisy Dukes and a pink halter top cleaned the enormous Slurpee machine that now loomed in front of her. It stood tall and gleaming with six choices instead of three. Daisy enjoyed blending her flavors and grabbed the largest size cup.

“Lady?” she asked the woman. “Could ya read me da flavors?”

“Sure, I'd be happy to.” The woman read the flavors for her. Many of the teenagers in this town were not ambitious. She pointed at the first lever. “This one's fruit punch.”

“Oh, dat a good one.”

Daisy filled the bottom of her cup, spilling part due to her excitement. They continued this process for the first five choices, with Daisy always going too fast and spilling part of her selection, the woman

remaining ever so gracious to clean up after her.

When they got to the last lever, the woman said, “And this one is sugar-free.”

Daisy shoved her cup under the spigot, then quickly pulled it back. “What ya say dis one is?” She looked suspiciously at the spigot.

“I said there's no sugar in this one.”

“Good t'ing ya warned me. Ah might a actually drunk it.” She finished filling her cup from another spigot. “Imagine sellin' a sugar drink what's got no sugar. Ya big city folk got some crazy ideas.”

“This is hardly a big city,” the woman said. “Most people here are aching to get out of this one-horse town.”

“Can't even imagine a town what's bigger den dis.”

Daisy didn't understand why the woman was smirking when she rang her up.

* * *

Daisy heard the laughter of the girls nearby when she left the 7-Eleven. She would normally have tried to avoid people, but she recognized something familiar about them. In a single glance, she could tell that they were like her, young girls trying to make it with no money and only what God had given them. They probably didn't fit in with

normal society and hated their families, too. She walked right into the center of the circle of four friends.

“Your mother's the biggest whore of them all,” one of them said to another, confirming her suspicion. “What right has she got to call *you* out?”

Daisy listened intently and remained quiet. She wanted to know where this was leading because it sounded like her own story. The girls ignored her as if she weren't there.

“She's just jealous because you're younger and could steal all her tricks,” said another. Daisy wondered if this was the reason her own mother might have been jealous of her.

“Yeah and did anyone offer you another way to make that much money?” came yet another. *Yes. That was the reason they all did it.*

“Murder the bitch,” Daisy said under her breath but very clearly.

The girls ceased their chatter and stared at the newcomer.

“Did I hear you right?” asked the prettiest one with long wavy auburn hair and purple lipstick and eye shadow. “You're saying Lacy should kill her mother when she disrespects her? Just up and kill her?”

The other girls giggled, and then waited for her answer.

Daisy stood with her hands on her hips. “Damn straight, it wud

only grow worse if'n she din't, Ah should know. If'n she makes ya feel like yer life ain't worthy or ya don't belong. Ain't a animal in da woods what feels out a place or dat it don't belong dere. Sometimes, a person's wicked will try and git into ya, and ya gotta stop it any which way ya kin."

The girls exchanged glances among themselves, but no one seemed to know what to make of the new arrival.

"I'll give you her address," the shortest girl said to break the awkward pause. "You can do the deed." They all sniggered.

"Who the hell are you, anyway?" the pretty one said. "Don't remember seeing you around here before."

"Ah'm Daisy Perlman, come up fum down in Marmalade." She spat on the ground next to her as if to say it was the truth.

"Well, I never heard of you, Daisy Perlman. And I never heard of Marmalade," the pretty one continued. "But this is an A, B conversation, so C yourself out." She dismissed Daisy with a wave of her hand.

Daisy stood her ground and said, "Dis ain't yer private property, and like da animals in da woods, I gotta right to be here and talk ta you ho's."

Daisy made the girls cease their mindless chatter with her

pronouncement, and they all gave her their full attention—like everyone did upon meeting her. She demanded it.

Daisy instinctively knew the pretty one would be the girl to take down, and the others would fall like dominoes. The pretty one looked stunned by Daisy's almost animal-like aggressive nature and approached her cautiously.

“My name is Tina,” she began. “Maybe we got off on the wrong foot. These are my friends, DeeDee, Shirley and Lacy.” She pointed to each in succession. “I think you might have misjudged us. You don't really know us.” She gave Daisy the opportunity to reappraise them. “So, what gives you the right to call us *ho's*?”

“Only so many kinds a people in da world,” Daisy said, “and yer girls is ho's. Ah know cuz Ah's a ho. Ma mutta be a ho—a bad ho, too. Cuz a mutta should stop being a ho when she got a kid. Can't do both wid out wreckin' da kid. Dat's why Ah say murder da bitch what can't make room fer her own kid.”

Lacy, who had complained about her mother's intrusion on her life, frowned and shifted awkwardly. “I think you're being too severe. Would you murder your own mother?”

“Ah thunk 'bout it.”

“No,” Lacy said. “I would just like my mother to be tied to a

chair for a couple of hours while I hit her with a rolled-up newspaper and tell her what I really think about her.” The girls laughed.

“Really,” added DeeDee. “You can't murder a person just because they *think* differently than you.”

“But ya kin. . .” Daisy smashed one fist into a cupped hand, “ifn dey act on dem thoughts. Din't ya girls eva wanna murda one a yer tricks—one what tried ta take advantage cuz he wuz stronger or faster or cuz he wuz payin' cash money?”

“Yeah, my man,” said DeeDee, considering the idea. “He always forces me to go all the way when he just paid for the ten-dollar package, petting only.”

“Maybe ya too weak when ya tells'm no. There's not many can wrestle me down ta do what Ah ain't willin' to do,” Daisy said proudly. “But ya should get money up front wid him, he playin' ya.”

“How about my Carlo?” Shirley asked. “He won't wear a condom—just says he won't shoot, but he always does, and there's nowhere to spit in his bedroom.”

“Oldest trick in da book,” Daisy said. “You gotta put da rubba on him or give him a handy. A girl's gotta take control, or she just gets walked on. Ya gotta lay down ta be a doormat, ya know.”

The girls looked on Daisy less suspiciously now that there

might be some advantage to knowing her. At least she held their interest for entertainment value.

“But you're different than us, Daisy,” Shirley said. “There's no way I could ever handle Carlo like that. He wants me to be submissive—”

“What dat word ya said?” Daisy asked.

“*Submissive*,” Shirley repeated. “It means you let him be the man he imagines himself to be and let him control you.”

“Yeah, but *is* he da tiger he dink he is?” Daisy asked. “Ya gotta show him he jus' da pussycat.”

“I couldn't do that. I'm not you, Daisy. He'd punch me in my face—”

“Don't say that to me.” Daisy tensed up. “Dat da one t'ing Ah din't wanna hear. Ah din't like when a man tries ta force one what's weaker ta do sumpin' agin they own will. It jus' ain't fittin'.”

“Well, there ain't, I mean isn't, a damned thing I can do about it,” Shirley lamented. “They're simply stronger than us, and they got the twenties.”

“Din't matta. It not just da strength ya got but da strength a all who would back ya. A real woman can make a man beg ever' time, and den *he* be da whadaya call it...submissive.”

DeeDee laughed at such an idea. Shirley put her lipstick back in her purse.

“What world are you living in, for God's sake?” Shirley asked. “In *this* world, the one that's got the money calls the shots.”

“Not when it leaves ya wid his baby or disease,” Daisy said defiantly. “Dat where ya draws da line, and ya sets down da rules yaself.”

“Well, you can tell that to Carlo when he comes by to pick me up,” Shirley said. For the first time, she looked Daisy directly in the eyes. “I want to see how brave you are then.”

“Ah never feared a man, and Ah ain't a'scared a your'n,” Daisy said without a second thought.

The girls spoke softly among themselves without including Daisy. Some seemed inspired. Some appeared afraid. All looked confused. Daisy stared at the woods behind the 7-Eleven as if it held the answer.

A '64 blue VW Bug leaped over the curb into the parking lot, straining its twenty-four-horse power motor. It sputtered to rest in front of the 7-Eleven. A lanky man in his twenties jumped out, half muscular, half scrawny, and too tall for his width. He stood with seven chest hairs exposed by an open Hawaiian shirt. He walked jauntily toward the gaggle

of women.

He breached their circle and waited for them to calm their chatter. He stared at the one who was facing away from him scanning the woods. He could not tell if it was a man or a woman by the jeans or the short, curly orange hair. The shoulders and arms were masculine, but there was something about the way she held herself that was feminine and defiant, like a warrior princess. He hoped he was not being aroused by a man.

Carlo continued to stare at the stranger, and Shirley yelled, “Hey, Carlo. You're a little bit early.”

Carlo took a moment to suppress his thoughts and then turned to Shirley. “Never too early for my sweet cakes.” He grabbed her by the butt, both cheeks, and he pressed himself firmly against her jeans.

She looked at his bulge and up to his eyes. “I never saw you get aroused that fast. Must be something in the air.”

The other girls giggled. Shirley looked over at Daisy, who was still captivated by the trees in the distance.

“Don't worry,” said Carlo. “I wouldn't let my seed spill inside my little darlin'.”

Daisy turned to face Carlo. Now he could clearly see she had breasts and felt relieved. But when he noticed the look on her face, he

grew anxious.

“This is my friend, Daisy,” Shirley explained. “She’s come up from Marmalade. She’s the same kind of girl, you know. . . like we are.” She winked.

Carlo’s hard-on reignited. “I heard good things about Marmalade,” He pointed at DeeDee. “from your brother.”

“Tony?” DeeDee asked. She took a break from combing her tangled tresses. “I can believe it, though. Tony is such a horn-dog.”

“Tony about twenty-two but he got a bald head?” Daisy asked.

“That’s him,” Wendy said, “but how did you know?”

“Oh, he mine,” Daisy said, “and he ain’t half-bad.”

Carlo took a refreshed interest in Daisy. He had heard things about what she did to men. He glanced over to Shirley every ten seconds to make sure she wasn’t registering his interest in another woman. But Shirley had a new look on her face, not a jealous one, almost an interest in what was about to happen next. Carlo took his shot.

“Maybe I should ride down with Tony someday and see what the fuss is all about,” he said and looked toward Shirley for a reaction. She seemed to be in a sort of daze but fixated on the conversation.

“Why would ya go and do dat,” Daisy asked, “when I’m standin’ right in front aya now? Ain’t no time like da present.”

He summoned all his strength and placed his hand lightly on Daisy's waist. She looked down at his hand and he removed it. Carlo looked over at Shirley. She still seemed unconcerned.

“Now whatcha gonna do?” Daisy asked.

He looked at Shirley, who nodded her consent. Then he boldly slipped his hand around Daisy's waist again and led her gently toward his car, but she abruptly stopped.

“What's the matter, sweetheart?” he asked. “Don't you want to go home with me?”

“It ain't that,” she said. “But Ah rathered *ya* go home with *me*.”

“I would, Strawberry Shortcake, but I don't have time to drive all the way down there.”

“No, ya din't get it,” she said. “Jus' foller me.”

She took his hand from her waist and led him in the opposite direction toward the woods.

“And don't call me nuthin' but Daisy.”

As they passed the tree line, Carlo began to slow his pace. He looked at Daisy suspiciously and stopped.

“I hope Shirley didn't put you up to this. Usually she doesn't even let me look at other girls.” He pulled out a comb and swept back his greasy black mane.

“Naw. Girls ain't smart enough ta fool a man like *ya*.”

“I hope Shirley didn't tell any lies about me. She does that, you know.”

“She din't do no lyin'. She jus' tol' me what *ya* like.” Daisy lowered his zipper, and he popped right out at attention. She stroked him with the back of her hand and then held his balls in her right hand. “Shirley just wernt in da mood, so I told'r I'd take care aya.” She squeezed her right hand slightly.

Carlo winced but took the pain like a man. “You're a bit rougher than Shirley, but I heard you could make a man scream. You could loosen your grip a little, though.”

“Ah can make a man more'n scream.” She tightened her grip. “Ah can mak'em beg.”

“Daisy, I don't want any trouble here. You're hurting me now. I never did anything bad to you.”

“Dis is fer Shirley.” She maintained his gaze.

Carlo's felt his face redden. “I *love* Shirley. What the hell are you talking about? I would never do anything to hurt her.” He began to sob.

“But *ya* don't stop when she tell *ya* to. *Ya* take what she say like it a big joke. And *ya* kin git a girl in trouble that way. And den men

like ya jis go off wid anudder girl, and she git left all alone wid yer baby.” He felt her loosen her grip slightly and he could finally breathe.

His face was full of remorse. He looked at the ground and then into Daisy's eyes. “I swear to God I would never hurt that girl.”

“Well, yer god din't always punish ya right away when ya do sumpin' wrong, so's Ah can't depend on him. Yer god ain't gonna change ya. Ya gotta do dat yesself.”

“I will, Daisy. It's just no one ever put it to me the way you just did. I was just, I don't know, doin' what guys do. From now on, every time I feel ready, I will pull out—”

Daisy placed a finger against his lips to silence him. She reached into her purple satchel, pulled out a five-dollar bill and handed it to him.

“Ya don't pull outta no one. Ya march inna dat 7-Eleven an' git yaself some rubbas. Den take ya stanky ass home, ya hear? If'n I ever hears ya got dat girl in trouble, I'm comin' fer ya, got it?”

He watched her reach for him suddenly, as if to grab him again, but he quickly secured himself and zipped his pants. He skulked around the other side of the building so the girls would not see him. He darted in and out and drove away as elusively as a thief.

Daisy watched the girls continue their gabfest. She smiled as she thought of the change Shirley would soon find in her boyfriend but did not rejoin the group to tell them. She just watched this strange new world play out from the comfort of the woods until her friends returned.

* Age 19 *

“Ya done slobbering around down dere? Ah kinda need a rest.” Daisy lifted the sheet, revealing the over eager teen from Norris, panting and drooling, looking surprised that he had not pleased her as much as he thought. “Ah mean ya got any other tricks in ya, or Ah'm jus' gonna watch ya eat yer lunch?”

“My brother said you like that.”

“Yer brudda din't do it all day. He moves onta more important things.”

She lifted him out from between her legs and stared at his crotch. “What are ya, a baby? Ya only got half a dick and yer pubes ain't full in neither. What make ya think ya could handle a woman like me?”

He stared at her in horror. “I can handle any whore.” He slapped her across her cheek.

Daisy reacted so quickly that time stopped. She instantly had

the boy in a headlock, ready to snap his neck. She laughed at his quivering lips, trying to form words. She put her index finger to his lips, attempting to calm him before he died. A feeling pervaded her entire being, telling her that this was what she was meant to do, to be an angel to the dying, to lead them in the right direction. Then she ferociously twisted his head to the left.

She allowed the body to fall on the bed. She rose calmly and lifted the bedroom window. Daisy never looked at the body as she unceremoniously hoisted it over her left shoulder and forced it through the window. She could deal with the body later. She could deal with the dark thoughts that she knew would fill her head tomorrow.

She walked over to her bedroom door, opened it and yelled, "Next."

A young man barged into the room, brushing against Daisy as he entered. "Ya seen my brudda? I looked ever'where. Momma's gonna kill me if I don't get the punk home."

Daisy did not waver. She looked down at the arm he had brushed against as if it represented the rudeness of all men. She could only see in him the restless energy that drove all men, concerned only for their own needs, the longing and lusting and lying, and worst of all, the

total disinterest once they were satisfied.

“Do ya really wannna find yer brudder?” She said in a low, intimidating voice.

Daisy watched the young man stop fidgeting for the first time since he entered the room. His face turned from concern to fear. “What do you mean by that?”

Daisy was toying with him. He said, “You know you got a rep beyond being a sex slut.” He added, “. . .and an ugly one at that.” Nervousness dripped from his voice.

Only her mother had been bold enough to call her ugly and useless up to this point, and she would receive her just deserts for that someday. But this man needed to learn his lesson now. She could take her time. He was within her arm's reach.

“You not gonna do nothin' stupid, are ya?”

Daisy glanced at the open window to his side, and he made his way toward it. Daisy lunged to block him at the last moment. She glared at him and grabbed him by his shoulders. His face turned to tears as he fell limp out of her grasp to become a shivering lump on the floor.

“Please do it quickly,” he pleaded from the floor. “But people know you a killer, and they'll come looking fer ya, all right. Let me go. I won't tell nobody.”

Daisy reached down and lifted his chin with two fingers until his eyes met hers. “Ah know fer sure ya won't be snitchin' on nobody if'n Ah kill ya here and now.”

The young man changed his tack. “I could be a big help to you. I'm a killer, too,” he lied.

“Yeah? What'd ya kill, a bug?” She snorted and farted at the same time.

“I could do other things. Dig holes for the bodies. Keep a lookout.”

She remained stoic. “Ya must t'ink Ah plan dese t'ings, but dey more jus' happen, like dis.” Her arm moved with lightning speed, so he would never hear the snap or feel his head disconnect from his body. She was kind in that way.

She dumped him unceremoniously on top of his brother and slammed the window shut.

* Age 21 *

A loud rapping on her window awakened Daisy in the middle of the night. She jumped out of bed in just her panties. She grabbed the bat she had hidden beneath her bed and searched for the prowler.

“Who dat knockin’?” she yelled. “Ah kin defen’ maself.”

“It me, Daisy.” She heard a muffled voice. “It me, Willy.”

She stared at the window and could barely make out his black face against the dark sky.

“Jis come ta da dow’. It open,” she said with glee.

Willy had barely gotten in the door when Daisy hugged him furiously. He glanced down at her bare bosoms and blushed.

“Don’ act like ya neva seen no tits befo’,” Daisy said. “Now what ya visitin’ at dis hour fo’? Hain’t seen ya in near two years.” She ran into her bedroom and grabbed a robe to cover up.

Willy yelled to her, “Mama won’ let me visit ya no mo’.”

“What dis all ‘bout?” She returned with a confused look, her robe on but untied. “Ah liked yo’ mama.”

“She don’t feel da same bout ya since ya went ta Norris.”

“Why should dat change any din’? Ah din’t do nothin’ wrong up dere.”

“Well, dat boy ya had a talkin’ wid. He ditched town, or just disappeared, or some say ya killed ‘m.”

“Dat jus’ plain crazy. Ya din’t dink dat, do ya?”

“Course not. But Mama do. Wunt let me see ya fer near two years now. Sez I gotta work wid ma brudders now ta support da family.

Sez a boy gotta leave his child's way behind and become a man."

"But dat ain't fittin' fo' ya ta do dat kinda work."

"Dey force me ta do da same t'ing ova n ova, ten million time."

"So dat why ya hain't come ta see me?"

"Mama would kill me if she knowed. But I couldn't fall ta sleep tanite, so's I had ta come ta tell ya."

"Well, it's no wonder ya couldn' sleep wid all dat on yer mind." She hugged her old friend. "Ah just wished Ah knowed all dis."

"Dis were da soonest I could get away widout Mama or ma brudders findin' out. I really did wanna tell ya."

"Ah kin tell ya one t'ing, Willy, you'se a nature boy. Ya at home when you'se in nature only. Ah din't mind dey make ya do da same t'ing all da time, but den dey try to take over ya mind and make ya dink like dem."

"Dey sucked da soul right outa ma brudders."

"We can't let dem do it ta ya. Ya was meant to live like nature. Ya can't be forced to chop down a tree when ya wanna build a path around it. Ya wun't t'ink a pulling up weeds, bein' dey fine as dey is. Dey tryin' ta make ya t'ink agin nature."

"Ya right, Daisy. Dey never make me t'ink like dem," Willy

admitted. “Like ya, Ah always looked ta da woods fer da answers. All da answers is dere.”

“Dat exactly right. Ever’ting in nature fits in an’ work together jus’ fine. We just gotta learn ta do it, too. The big trees don’ try to control da little flowers. No, dat’s just how humans is. Dey favor some an’ some’s lef’ out. Dey don’ belong less’n dey gots da money or power ova sumpin’ what’s weaker. In Marmalade, we all runnin’ from someone or sumpin’ what’s trying ta control us. We din’t play by dey rules. Dere’s a lot more life in stayin’ free.”

She looked to Willy for understanding. He acknowledged her with his eyes. They held their stare for a moment, both knowing this may be the last time they ever see each other again. Daisy pulled away first. She had never attached herself to anything in her life, no idea, no person, nothing.

Willy frowned, and his voice wavered when he next spoke. “Nobody never knowed me like ya,” was his final words to her. “Ya see right tru da bull and keep it outta yer life, and ya only let what’s real inside ya.”

He hugged her tightly in perfect silence. He was sniffing when he closed the door behind him.

* Age 39 *

Daisy loved her walks in the woods where she could be alone. She found nature to be truth, even though it was sometimes cruel. The strong ate the weak. It didn't make apologies. It just followed its natural instincts. It made sense to her.

She had tricked with many men and found them all to be useless. Now, Daisy wondered if any man might have a purpose in her life. But she hated meeting them, making eye contact, and even worse, conversation. She kept sex impersonal and drank herself into oblivion when it was over.

She spent most of her time walking through the Tomoka Hills, getting lost in her thoughts. She knew these woods instinctively and considered them her own.

Daisy sensed another person approaching on her path and stiffened. She looked off into the woods to avoid his gaze, tripping over an exposed root in the process. She scurried to right herself, but her foot slipped in the muck and she fell again.

The stranger grabbed her muddied hand and lifted her upright with a grin. She never trusted grins but there was something symbolic about

the gesture—a man raising a fallen woman to her feet. As embarrassed as she was, there was also a twinge of enjoyment at the attention, something she rarely felt, even in her youth. Then she looked down at her filthy clothes and felt the urge to hide.

“Don’t worry about your appearance. You’ll be fine,” he said and brushed some dirt from her shoulder. She shrunk back when he touched her, and he stepped away.

There was something in his voice that calmed her, and she chanced to look at him. He was a little dowdy in appearance, like her. His hair looked like he cut it himself, and he had several holes in his well-worn sneakers. She liked that. Daisy attempted a smile, but she was so long out of practice, it was at best a smirk.

“My name is Simon. I don’t bite.” He flashed an even broader grin enough for both.

She looked at him suspiciously. *Simon. That was a strange name.*

“Ah didn’t ask yer name,” she said coldly. “Ah gotta go.” She turned and briskly walked away.

He changed his direction and followed her. “Hey, where are you going...to grandmother’s house?” he yelled after her in a playful manner.

She did not get his reference. Daisy continued to ignore him, but she felt his approach behind her. The hair rose on her neck and her

muscles tensed. She stopped, turned abruptly and glared at the stranger defiantly. "Maybe ya din't hear me, mista. Ah ain't got no use fer ya."

"Can't a man seek out a pretty lady's company anymore without being jumped on?"

"Ah din't want no man's company. And Ah know Ah ain't purty. Ah learned dat early on."

He looked at her sympathetically. "Maybe no man ever treated you right, like a lady."

That would be nice, all right, to finally get the respect she craved, but was it likely? She could give the possibility credence for only a few seconds before reality set in.

"Ah certainly ain't a lady, and da only t'ing men ever wanted fum me is right here betwix ma legs." She pointed at her groin.

Simon tittered and averted his eyes. Then he looked straight at her. "I think you've got me all wrong. Not *all* men are dogs. If you want me to, I'll walk away and never bother you again."

Now that he had offered her what she wanted, he no longer seemed so intimidating. She was not afraid of him, anyway, and knew how to take care of herself.

"Ya kin come along. Ma name is Daisy. Just mind yer business."

"I'm honored," Simon said and bowed.

As they each made observations about the rocks, trees and vegetation that surrounded them, Daisy began to feel more comfortable. They shared a deep appreciation of the woods in common. More importantly, they discovered that they both believed implicitly in Mother Nature and both had problems with human nature.

Daisy began to feel more comfortable with Simon. There was now at least the possibility that she had finally found another person with whom she could relate. Still, she carried baggage from her life that would always keep her dark side active. Simon had no idea with whom he was dealing.

After a long hike got the best of them, Daisy sat on her beloved stone bench that cropped out of the hillside. She beckoned Simon to sit beside her. "Dis ma fav'rite rock in da whole fores'," Daisy said. "It always give me a place ta rest when Ah kin't go on no further."

Simon brushed some twigs away and then sat up against her. Daisy pulled away but continued to gaze at him.

"I never met anyone who liked nature as much as I do," he said and leaned in to kiss her. She took the kiss on her cheek but glared at him as a warning to go no further.

Simon moved closer to Daisy, and she immediately tensed up. She

felt him grab her head and pull it toward his groin. Her mind froze, but her body reacted instinctively. She snaked her arm around his with incredible speed and slammed his head down on the rock, splattering her jeans with his blood. Daisy removed the wallet from his pants and walked away.

* * *

Daisy only felt badly when she looked at the damage done to her jeans. It looked like her vagina had exploded. She only had two pairs of jeans and two tee-shirts to her name. She always washed one and wore the other. Her system had worked fine until now.

She exited the woods and headed toward the Salvation Army. There were plenty of people in Marmalade who sold what they could from their house or along the road, but only two brick-and-mortar stores, the 7-Eleven and the Salvation Army.

The woman who owned it was gruff and disliked eye contact as much as Daisy did. She never asked stupid questions and was strictly business—a person Daisy didn't like but could deal with.

Even looking like Cary returning from the prom, Daisy was not self-conscious. She was born to blend into the environment, even

covered in blood, and not to shine on her own. People never noticed her, or at least pretended not to. But they always moved to the opposite side of the street when they had the chance.

She passed the 7-Eleven and stopped abruptly. There was dryness in her throat that she hadn't noticed before. Two teens leaning against the brick wall pulled at their Slurpee's, making more noise than progress. She saw one boy point at her and make monster faces but made no mention.

She entered and headed straight for the Slurpee machine. It was a small rusty unit with three spigots, on the side of which someone had painted the word "Slurpee". Unable to decide on a flavor, she made a mix of them all and brought it over to the cashier who was admiring her own freshly painted fingernails. "What do you think?" The hydrogen-peroxide blond held up her nails. If there was one thing that irked Daisy all her life, it was perky people. Why were they so happy all the time? Didn't they live in the same world as she did? Were their lives somehow exempt from all the suffering?

She stared sourly at the barely conscious teen. "Ah t'ink ya should ring me up is what Ah t'ink."

"Oh, excuse me, your highness. I didn't realize it was *you*," the cashier said sarcastically, like she thought she was somehow better

than her. This did not strike Daisy as odd because everyone seemed to think they were better than her. But the young girl's expression turned to horror when her eyes drifted down to the stain on Daisy's pants.

"I'm so sorry," she exclaimed. "Tampons are in aisle three. You must be so embarrassed."

Daisy slammed a five on the counter and grabbed her Slurpee. "Ah don't git 'barrassed. Udder people do," she said. "And grab me a quick pick."

When she left the store, Daisy threw the lid and straw on the ground and tried to drink it in gulps to get rid of the dryness. The ensuing brain freeze made her do a spastic dance in the parking lot, and she heard the teens mocking her. She walked up to them and threw the remaining liquid at their faces.

"You were lucky this time," Daisy advised them and continued her way.

* * *

Daisy picked out a new shirt and pair of jeans at the Salvation Army without interruption from the owner, who continued to sort clothing behind the counter. Daisy felt all the shirts were too brightly colored

or had designs she hated. She threw piece after piece on the floor until she found a simple gray shirt with no fringe and jeans with no ornamentation. She brought her items to the counter.

The woman rang her up without conversation but appeared to be thinking something. When Daisy exited the store, she yelled after her, “Don’t leave your mess in my alley this time.”

Daisy immediately turned into the alley and walked toward the dumpster. She removed her offending clothing and kicked them in a corner. She enjoyed being naked in public. It really didn’t matter to her since people didn’t seem to see her anyway. She secretly harbored a wish that a man would come down the alley and try something with her now. Daisy laughed because she knew exactly what she would do this time.

The jiggling from her laughter made her want to pee so she arched her bare back against the brick wall and sat on an invisible seat, unleashing a gush of liquid worthy of a race horse. A long turd dropped from her butt and merged with the yellow fluid.

Daisy raised herself up and stepped out of the mess.

Eat with the right hand, wipe with the left, she remembered one other thing her mutta had taught her. She cleaned herself, grabbed her bag of new clothes and put them on.

* Age 40 *

Daisy made some changes in her life when she hit the ripe old age of forty. She learned that selling strawberry hooch could earn her more money than selling her body.

Her life seemed to go more smoothly when she avoided interaction with others. Selling hooch involved just a small amount of talking to make the exchange. But even that was too much for her. She hated people who insisted on talking about nonsense. So, she drilled a hole big enough to stick an arm through in her kitchen wall. Customers soon learned that the only way to obtain the product was to put their money through the hole and hope to receive a bottle in return.

After some time, however, she began to miss unleashing her power over men through sex. She allowed only her favorites to come to her but insisted on a 'no talking' policy. The men didn't seem to mind. Daisy no longer needed the money as her liquor sales earned her three times the amount she needed to pay her bills. When men offered her money, she still accepted it, not so much out of habit but so she wouldn't insult their masculinity. And she always handed them a free pint of hooch and a smile when they left.

Word of Daisy's special service spread all the way to Norris. Daisy's brief visit there had earned her some notoriety. Young men heard that her special brand of rough sex could make a boy a man, and that the hooch she gave away had something in it that increased your sexual prowess.

Daisy, who never had a pretty day in her life, still held a special power over men. It wasn't her beauty that made men desire her but the way she held herself, like nothing could ever defeat her, exactly what they all wanted to feel themselves. They found their way to her house by hand-drawn maps made by others without ever knowing they had entered the town of Marmalade.

Daisy understood the nature of her own power. It was inside her since the day she was born. Besides being the one trait that made men grovel, it was also what people feared most about her. She seemed naturally connected to the source of all power, and she might unleash it at any time.

Men could feel her intensity. It was in her sex drive. They wished they could duplicate her ferocity, that balance she had between wanting to kill you and giving you the greatest thrill of your life. It made them forget their own blasé lives for a while and enter her world of pure power and complete control.

* Age 41 *

Daisy awakened with a hunger in her heart. She went outside to greet the day. She could not start her day properly inside her hovel. She had to step outdoors and greet each aspect of nature individually. She did it rain or shine, inhaling the new day into her lungs.

She greeted the trees, the clouds, the wind, the birds, the squirrels, the flowers and the rising sun. Then she plopped herself down in the overgrown grass by her still. She lay on her back, stared at the clouds and thanked it all for letting her reside within its glory.

But wonder and awe have a time limit, and her mind reverted back to more mundane matters. She thought of her friend, Willy, and the thought of not seeing him again offended her. *Why did life undo relationships that were meant to be? Why do people never understand what you mean?* Her mind was not equipped to handle problems as great as these.

The thoughts passed through her mind as quickly as the clouds above her. They kept invading her mind faster and faster. She could not control her own thoughts, and they never led her anywhere good. Five minutes previous, she had been one with nature. Now her head was filled

with imperfect human thoughts that clashed with the perfection of nature. She wanted nothing more than to escape her head and return to her heart.

She stared at the clouds and commanded them to stop moving. She stopped the wind from blowing, the birds from flying and the squirrels from snickering. She tried to stop the blood from flowing in her own body, but when she did this, Daisy felt her own heart. It was there the whole time, waiting for her to find it.

It felt like a tiny vibration in the world she had stilled. She felt it in her hands and feet at first, but soon noticed her whole body was vibrating. When she acknowledged it, the world began to move again. She felt the vibration of the grass that blew against her thigh, the vibration of birds in flight, and the whimsical vibration of the squirrel's chatter.

Once again, she was part of life, vibrating along with all the other living thing things on the planet. She felt at peace because vibrations never clash. They just blend into one another. She felt that this is what the forest had been teaching her the whole time.

* Age 41 *

Daisy grew tired of her daily walks through the woods. She

hated when her trails became trampled enough to be followed by others. She chose to walk along the ocean which was equally beautiful but left her susceptible to strangers.

The day was radiant. The ocean sparkled as if someone had strewn diamonds upon its surface. Two dolphins leaped from the water. The sight calmed Daisy's mind. Her thoughts moved from thinking about strangers and she settled back into her preferred realm, animals. She wished she had learned to swim so she could get to the dolphins, ride them out to sea and never return.

Daisy stopped for a moment when she sensed people up ahead. Parson Rudy's sermon had just ended, and the congregation was dispersing. Daisy could feel her skin crawl when she saw half of them heading in her direction. Her heart rate increased as she picked up the pace and headed behind the Winkleman house, straight for the protection of the large red playhouse.

She closed the plastic door behind her, as if it would provide added security, then sat on the floor Indian-style and tried to calm her breathing. She could hear the voices and scuffling of people outside, but none came in her direction. Finally, she relaxed, extending her legs and pushing her back from the wall until she lay flat on the floor. She drew in a deep breath and exhaled it slowly.

The door opened. Parson Rudy stood there with a cigarette in one hand and a sterling silver lighter in the other. He was flustered when he saw her and awkwardly tried to hide his bad habit.

“Now we all grownups here,” Daisy said, pulling herself back up to a seated position. “No need to pretend ya free from sins wid me.”

Parson Rudy put the cigarette to his lips and lit it. “It’s comforting to know I don’t have to be one person in the pulpit and another in everyday life.” Rudy exhaled three smoke rings.

Daisy smiled and admired his smoke circles. “My friend Willy could do that, ‘cept he did it wid dat udder smoke. He called it Mary Jane, like it was a girl or some’ting.”

“Well, that *is* a different kind of smoke,” the parson said. “Last time I smoked that, I got to speak to God personally.” He winked to indicate a lie.

“Ah tried it, too. First time Ah eva felt calm inside. But Ah swear Ah neva got nothin’ done dat whole day.”

They both laughed and felt at ease with each other.

“I think I know who you are,” Parson Rudy said.

Daisy grew irritated. “People dink dey know stuff ‘bout me all da time, and dey din’t know shit,” she responded in her no-nonsense way.

“I don’t mean anything bad, just that you have a very

straightforward demeanor, and I like that in a person.”

“Meaner den who?” she asked.

“Not meaner, *demeanor*. You always tell the truth, no matter the consequences.”

“Ya sayin' mos' people jus' lie ta ya?” Daisy twisted her face, trying to understand.

“In a way, yes. Or maybe they just don't tell as much of the truth as you do. They forget the big things that are bothering them and tell me everything's fine. They think they'll receive a 'get into heaven' card free if they visit me once a week. And what's worse, some of them think God is judging them on what they wear to the service.” He looked to her for validation.

“None of dem t'ings make no sense ta me,” Daisy said. “What da point a puttin' off da truth? Dat's where ya gotta git ta anyhow.”

Parson Rudy threw his cigarette out the playhouse window and stared at her. She could feel his eyes piercing her.

“What ya starin' for? Ah know Ah ain't much ta look at.”

“I'm looking at your dignity—your forbearance and self-reliance. I'm looking at a self-made woman who lives on her own terms.”

“Ya sees all dat?”

Parson Rudy laughed. Daisy grew nervous as she watched him

eye her like a ham sandwich. “Ah hope ya ain't getting' no ideas dere,” she said, pointing at his bulge. “Ah won't be doing it wid no holy man and end up in hell.”

She made him smile. “Why, Daisy. I wasn't sure if you believed in God.”

“Not God,” she cried. “But hell is a good idea, ya know. Ya gotta punish da wicked.”

She seemed to have caught him off-guard with the things she paid attention to. “It isn't a wicked act to sleep with a holy man. We can marry.”

“Good,” she said, slapping him on his thigh, “Den Ah'll go buy a wedding gown.” She waited for his reaction, bearing a smug expression.

“Now you know that's not what I meant.”

“Ya mean ya just want ma cooch now, not da whole lifetime?” She laughed hysterically.

He started pacing and lit another cigarette. “Okay, Daisy, you win. I'm just another lustful man, but you bring out something in me that makes me feel like a lion. And maybe I *do* want to change you. You've got too much integrity to keep going from man to man.”

Daisy was not accustomed to compliments. She just stared at

the man and felt good on the inside.

“Think about it,” he said as he left.

Integrity. Daisy repeated it over and over in her mind.

* Age 41 *

“Why you want me ta go wid only ya, Parson Rudy?” Daisy asked. “A girl's gotta make a living any which way she kin. Ya should know betta den any dat yer God gave us only one t'ing we can turn ta money, and dat's sex.”

Parson Rudy reached beneath the sheets and pulled up the underwear that straddled his knees. He laughed as he digested her logic. “That's just it. It's the only thing we have, and it should be regarded as our greatest gift. It should be given very carefully, and only to people we admire greatly, and certainly not to just anyone who gives you a twenty.”

Daisy sat up straight in bed, revealing her bare breasts and her upper pubic hair. He seemed to love that she had no privacy concerns and no use for underwear.

“Ya give me a twenty when ya leave,” she reminded him. “What makes God people so diff'rent all da time? Ya got da same urges as any udder man. At least, dey only cheating on dere wives and girlfriends. Ya

cheat on God.”

Rudy continued to smile through her logic.

“Daisy, please. I am not cheating on God. You can't have a sexual relationship with—”

“Dat's it. Ah'm sick a hearing 'bout yer invisible friend who ya never heard nor seen, and nobody's seen nor heard fum God since da Bible. Sure, when some udder man beds me, he a cheater. But when ya do it, ya trying ta make a betta woman outta me. When yer life is good, ya praise Him fer good things what ya done yerself. And when any little t'ing go wrong, ya blame God 'stead of da people what caused da problem. Ah can't buy into it, and Ah wun't blame someone else fer what Ah do.”

“It's not about praise or blame. It's about having a Lord above who loves us all and the peace we can all find in that love.”

“Love come fum people, not a boogie man. Besides, Ah'm not seeing dat love when Ah looks 'round. Ah see people struggling ta keep dere heads 'bove water what don't got a pot to piss in. Dey not swimming in yer Lord's sea a love. Ah don't see dis god of yers as some 'ting diffrent fum us. It part a nature and it part inside us. Dere's no god what is all good and a devil what is all bad. Good exists inside a bad, and bad inside a good, and dey wave into each udder.”

Parson Rudy looked intrigued, as if he couldn't believe that Daisy would have thought so hard on this topic. She reached over to her nightstand and retrieved a well-worn paperback. "Here, let me show ya. Look at da cover."

"That's a yin-yang." He looked surprised. "I never thought you might belong to another religion."

"*No. No religion.* Ah believes in dat picture. Religions are bad 'cause dey claim ta know stuff dey kin't poss'bly know. Dey din't never get to da truth, just a lie ya can believe if ya so choose."

Rudy's smile became concern. "Religion can give meaning to your life and make you feel less alone."

"Do ya mean ta say ma life got no meaning if Ah don't choose a god? Maybe Ah got my own god inside a me. See, dis is my god." She pointed to the white dot in the black section of the yin-yang. "Made a da little bit a love Ah found in dis world." Then she moved her hand over the white side. "And dis is da rest a da love in da world what Ah'm trying ta git wid by getting outta dis black region here. Dat ma religion." She set her book back on the night table, a contented smile on her face.

Rudy joined in her smile. "That's what I love about you, Daisy. You've got your own logic, your own reasons, completely unaffected by the world outside. It's refreshing."

“Lots a folk din't find me so—refreshing.”

Parson Rudy smirked. “They don't know the real you like I do.”

“If ya knew da real me, ya might not love me so much.”

“That's why I believe in God.”

*Age 42 *

Daisy kept seeing Parson Rudy through the year. From time to time, he would bring up some of his religious teachings that he felt might benefit her. And on rare occasions, something would register with her.

Parson Rudy seemed to love the fact that he could reach her at times. And Daisy was happy each time she learned something new. She felt she had reached a point in her life where she could accept that she needed improvement. But she only learned from people who truly cared about her welfare. She was very sensitive to the fact that she could accept new things only when her heart and mind aligned. She had learned that in the woods.

People had pointed out to her what she did wrong all her life, but it was easy to ignore their advice when she knew in her heart that these people really didn't give a damn about her.

Still, Daisy had a burning desire to find out what other people

knew but wondered if she had simply waited too long to ever change.

She trusted Parson Rudy enough to express this longing to him.

He offered only a warm smile. Parson Rudy had also heard the rumors about Daisy, but from the moment he met her, he acted like he believed that murder was not in her heart. It must have been the influences on her life that made her do such things.

The next time Parson Rudy came to visit, he carried a blue tote bag. He dropped it beside her bed, then sat and talked with her for hours. It was as if time, itself, had stopped.

It was the first time Daisy had ever entrusted the horror that was her life to another person. She felt sure that Parson Rudy would never use anything she said to hurt her, and that made all the difference. Parson Rudy confessed things he had done that he said might offend the Lord in which he believed. Together, they dumped their baggage all over that room and both felt a hundred pounds lighter from its release.

“You know, Daisy, our lives are made of these moments when time is suspended,” Parson Rudy said.

Daisy looked at the clock but didn’t understand his meaning. She wondered why Parson Rudy did not ask for sex that afternoon. He acted like something much greater than his need for sex had entered his

soul. Another man had fallen under her spell.

Daisy had no idea what this sensation was she was feeling. It was something she had never experienced before. But she wanted to feel it forever.

When Parson Rudy stood up to leave, Daisy felt empty inside. She watched him pick up his tote bag and empty it on the bed beside her. Out fell books, magazines, pamphlets and articles that Parson Rudy felt might encourage Daisy. She saw all the literature she knew she couldn't read but could only feel the love coming from him that it represented. As much as she had unveiled to him, she did not have it in her heart to tell him she couldn't read. He had clearly put a lot of effort into this just to help her.

Daisy tried to thank him but could not form the words. Parson Rudy gave her a peck on the cheek, grabbed his empty tote and left. A tear rolled down her cheek even though she had never felt this happy before.

* the next day *

Daisy looked at the all the books she had carefully lined up against one wall. She wished she could read every one of them and felt

slighted by life that she couldn't. Daisy also felt bad that she hadn't properly thanked the parson. She knew it was Sunday and that he would be giving a sermon on the beach next to the Winkleman house. She also knew that attending one of his sermons would please him more than anything else she could do. That would be the thanks he deserved.

She fought her hatred of crowds and set out to do what she had to do. She took the long way through the woods, so she could avoid strangers. When she exited the woods, she felt a twinge of anxiety because she could see others heading for his sermon on the beach.

She quickly grabbed a seat in the last row, next to a little blond girl who buried her nose in a book. She sensed the girl was peering at her on occasion but also knew that no one ever looked at her for long. Daisy looked around for Parson Rudy, but he had not yet arrived, so she turned back to the little girl who was still staring.

“Dat good what ya kin read,” Daisy said.

“What did you say?” the child asked.

“Din't ya talk English?”

“You speak funny,” she said and poked her mother to tell her about the strange-talking woman. Her mother just hushed her and told her not to speak to strangers. Daisy thought that would be good advice to herself, too, and kept her mouth shut from then on.

Daisy forgot about the incident when she spied Parson Rudy walking alone down the beach toward the crowd. Her heart began to flutter and fill with anticipation. She admired the way he walked, the way he held himself, the way people looked up to him. If there was one man who could make an honest woman of her, it was the parson.

As he drew closer, Daisy noticed that a woman she recognized ran up to him. She embraced him tightly and walked with him with her arm about his waist. Daisy hated her, the only other successful whore in town. That woman took all the men who just wanted the pretty one, and Daisy got all the men who wanted a real experience, so they were not really in competition.

Daisy hated her because she was pretty like her mutta. She hated her because the bitch's arm was around her man. Daisy could hear the pretty whore's shrill voice begging him to come over more often and claiming that she had baked him something special and had another surprise waiting for him, too.

Daisy wished she really could disappear. She didn't want the parson to see her, so she silently slipped out of her chair and walked away.

She looked back as she walked to find only the little girl was looking in her direction. She paused after a few more steps to check if

Parson Rudy had seen her. How could he? He was staring intently at the pretty whore but took a moment to glance at his congregation.

Daisy was afraid he would spy her and ducked into the red playhouse that Mrs. Winkleman had custom-made extra-large, so she could play with her nieces and nephews in it. She closed the door and the shutters on the window for further discretion and sat on the one bench made for an adult next to a child-sized table and chairs. She felt exhausted, like she had just run five miles. She also felt empty.

A few minutes later, Daisy saw the playhouse door opening. Her heart froze as she pictured Pastor Rudy finding her in this ridiculous hiding place. But instead, the little blond girl entered, her book still clutched tightly in her right hand. It reminded Daisy of the time she had been a little girl, holding her own book ever so tightly.

The girl did not seem surprised. She marched right in and took a seat at the child's table, placing her book in front of her. Daisy admired her audacity.

“Ain't yer scared a being here wid a strange old lady?” Daisy asked.

“You're not strange. I saw you before, don't you remember? You sat right next to me.”

“But yer mom told ya not ta talk ta strangers.”

“I don't do everything she says. Besides, I come in here every Sunday when the pastor gets boring. Mom knows I do. She doesn't mind.” Daisy liked the little girl who could make her own decisions, like she always had to do.

“So ya ain't scared, ere ya?”

“No, I like you because you talk so funny. Besides, I used to play with Mrs. Winkleman in here all the time. She was nice and used to teach me things. Why would I be afraid of you?”

Daisy loved her innocence and felt grateful that she might be the only person in Marmalade who had not heard of her escapades.

“What's yer name?” Daisy asked.

“Everyone calls me Dody. My name is really Dorothy, but when I was little, I couldn't pronounce it. I spoke more like you. I kept saying 'Dody'.”

Daisy looked at her oddly, her head askew. “Well, dat a cute name. Ma name Daisy.”

“You see, you said that wrong. It's *'that'*, not *'dat'*, and you should say *'My name is Daisy.'*”

“Ain't ya da smart one?”

“*Aren't you the smart one?*”

“Aren't ya the smart one?”

“Aren't *you*. ”

“*You*, ” Daisy repeated. She would have smacked anyone else who treated her in this manner, but Dody had no hidden intention like most did. Daisy's eyes kept returning to the brightly colored book that sat in front of Dody.

“I'd let you read my book, but it's for babies. I couldn't find my *Hardy Boys*, so I had to take my baby sister's book.”

“Don't matter never how. Kin't talk good. Kin't read neither.”

Dody looked flabbergasted. “How'd you ever get to be so old without knowing these things? My mother taught me all that when I was five.”

“Ma mutta never taught me nuttin'.”

“My mother never taught me anything,” Dody corrected. “I'm going to keep doing it until you get it right. Now say it.”

“My mutta never taught me anything.”

“Mother.”

“Mutta.”

“I guess it doesn't matter. If I teach you to read, you'll learn proper diction, too, because most authors speak properly.” She reached for her book and held it, so Daisy could see. Pointing at each word, she slowly read, “See Dick. See Jane. See Spot run.”

Daisy repeated the words she had memorized but pointed at the wrong word as she read.

“No, all the 'sees' are the same. This is the word 'Dick'. This one is 'Jane', and 'Spot'—that's the dog, is this one.” Dody pointed at each word and taught with the patience of a saint, going over and over the same things until Daisy could grasp them.

By the time they were done, Daisy could read “Dick and Jane” by herself and understand which words were which. There were also minor improvements in her speech. She never said 'dis' or 'dat' or 'dem' ever again.

“Ah, I mean I... can't...thank yer, you, enough,” Daisy managed. “I sure was lucky to run into you.”

Dody beamed. “I was the lucky one. I like teaching stuff to people. It makes me feel like an adult. Next week, I'll bring a better book.”

“Next week?” Daisy was surprised.

“Sho nuff,” Dody mocked her. “Ah ain't done learning ya as yet.”

Daisy looked forward to Sundays more than any other day. Each week, she would beat the congregation by an hour, sneak into the playhouse and practice her reading before Dody got there. Daisy wondered if she was learning to read for her own good or just to impress that sweet little girl.

Dody arrived earlier each week, too. She had explained to her mother what she was doing, and her mom approved, saying that it was a very blessed way to spend her Sundays. Dody looked at the book Daisy had placed on the small table and nodded her head approvingly.

“I see you finished a *Hardy Boys*,” Dody said. “No more kid's stuff for you.”

“Those boys go on some great adventures,” Daisy said. “I wish they had a book about a *girl* who was as brave.”

“They do. It's called *Nancy Drew*. But it's not as exciting.”

“Yeah. Why is it the boys get to have all the fun?” Daisy asked.

“It's just because we let them.”

Daisy laughed. “I suppose you're right. But if I ever wrote a book—”

“*You* want to write now?” Dody's face lit up.

“Always did, just didn't know how. I've been thinking up

stories in my head since I was a little girl. I didn't like what was going on around me back then. I preferred to create a story that I could control.”

“I do that, too,” Dody said, “especially when my little sister gets all the attention.”

“In my story, a *woman* takes charge. I made her a witch, not because she's evil, but to give her power.” Dody rested her head on her arms and hung on Daisy's every word. “This character, I call her Lucy, she gets a reputation for being a murderer, but she really doesn't deserve it.” Dody's eyes widened and her mouth opened slightly. “Well, anyway, people start writing letters to Lucy, telling her about people in their own family who committed unspeakable crimes but went on with their lives scot-free. They begged Lucy for help.” Daisy stared at the innocent child who showed fear in her eyes and stopped telling her story.

“What did Lucy do?” Dody begged her.

Daisy lessened the severity of the story for her. “Well, she found a way to help those people.”

“How? Did she kill them?” Dody appeared to prefer the real story.

“It's more like she taught them a lesson,” Daisy said.

“You've simply got to write that story.”

“You simply *have* to write that story,” Daisy corrected her.

Dody giggled and searched through the tote bag her mother had given her. She pulled out a pen and a tattered notebook and handed them to her. “Now you just start writing that book. I want to know what happens.”

“You have a lot of faith in me, little girl.”

“I’ve seen what you can do when you try.”

* Age 43 *

Daisy slipped into the children's playhouse in the Winkleman's backyard to find Dody waiting for her with a stack of books.

“Oh, boy,” Daisy said. “More of them *Hardy Boys*?

“More of *those*, but no, you're moving on to more 'adult' material,” Dody said.

Daisy snickered. “I don't think *you're* ready for adult material. What are you, about ten years old?”

“I'm eleven and a half.” She reached into her pile of books and pulled out a *Cosmopolitan* magazine. She showed Daisy some of the pictures inside, but then hid it away as if it was a secret. “This one's for me. Don't worry, the ones for you were all picked out by my mom from the library in Norris.”

“I can really see a change in you from when we first began.”

“You, too. You have no idea how much better you speak now in the year and a half you've been reading.” She pointed at the stack of books on the table. “You're ready for these now.”

Daisy scanned the pile and saw many names she had heard but was not sure who they were.

“Mark Twain, Martin Luther King, Cher, Queen Elizabeth. Who are all these people?”

“You have to read the books to find out. They're called biographies and autobiographies.”

“What's the difference?”

“Biographies are written about other people and autobiographies are written by the person themselves.”

“Do they solve mysteries like the *Hardy Boys*?” Daisy asked.

“No. They tell you about their lives and why they did the things they did.”

“Why should I care about what *they* did?”

Dody seemed exasperated. “Because they're all famous people who did great things.”

Daisy pulled the pile closer to her. “Well, I guess I'll read them. I'll let you know when I'm done how great I think them people are.”

“*Those* people,” Dody corrected.

“I want to thank you for all you've done for me. I speak better, and it's all because of you. Now I notice mistakes when other people make them.” She stroked the young girl's hair and was surprised at her own act of kindness.

“You have to really *want* to learn to get it as fast as you did. You gobbled up everything faster than I could teach you. That's how I was, too, Mrs. Winkleman always said. That's why I like old people. They know all the stuff I want to learn. Kids my age don't have anything to teach me that I don't already know.”

“I think you got life figured out just fine, little girl. Even if you were my age, you're way ahead of your years.”

Dody beamed at the compliment.

“You helped me reach my greatest goal—simply to be able to read a book I've kept close to me since I was seven.” Daisy reached down and grabbed a purple velour sack cinched with a ribbon at the top. While it once held a bottle of Crown Royal, a present from one of her tricks, it now served as a purse.

She reached in, pulled out a small weathered book and handed it to Dody. “I understood this book before I ever read it because of the symbol on the cover. I used to stare at it for hours and believed it had the

secret to life in it. When I was finally able to read the book, everything I believed was true.”

She looked at Dody to see if she registered the significance and importance of the book to her. Dody seemed entranced. “I have never let this book out of my sight or lent it to anyone. But now I want to give it to you.” She handed the well-worn paperback to Dody.

“I can't take a book that means so much to you,” Dody protested.

“Nonsense. I was given that book when I was very young. Not so much given. It was thrown at my head. But it held the truth inside. It is the only thing I have to give that is as valuable as what you have given me.”

“But I enjoyed teaching you. I didn't do it because I wanted something from you—”

“You did it from your heart. I get it. Those are the acts that deserve reward most,” Daisy said. “This book has given me great comfort over the years. It gave me what Mutta didn't. Now that you have given me the ability to read and understand it, I'd like it to do the same for you. And even though you *can* read the words, I want you to experience the book as I did, by staring at the yin-yang for hours, days, maybe weeks before you ever read it.”

Dody seemed perplexed but stared at the front cover. “That’s a strange request, but I’ll read it exactly like you did. I’ll tell you every Sunday what I can make out of the symbol, and when I can’t figure it out anymore, I’ll read the words.”

Daisy smiled and reached for the pile of books Dody had brought for her.

“I don’t think they’ll fit in your purse,” Dody said, pointing at the small velour sack.

“Don’t worry. I’m a little bigger than you are. I think I can manage.” She scooped the books up in a single swoop.

“Mom says I’m as big as what I read.”

* Age 44 *

“Daisy. Daisy. Wait till you see what happened?”

Daisy could hear Dody’s voice before the door to the playhouse flew open. A young woman entered, hardly the little girl who had taught her. Dody stood, her t-shirt replaced by a more mature blouse, unbuttoned at the top to reveal the edge of her new training bra. Her stringy blond hair was cut and curled. Her face now boasted bright red lips and rouge improperly applied, giving her the appearance of a

Raggedy Ann doll. Daisy rubbed her cheek to blend the color.

“You've become a beautiful young lady in the time I have known you.”

“I know. I've been practicing with my mom's make-up and getting better every day. I could do it for you, too, if you want. You have pretty features. You just have to bring them out.” Dody looked at her with eyes that reflected that the world could really be a great place if you just believed.

Daisy snorted. “Sweetheart. You have given me something much greater than beauty. You believed in me when the rest of the world had given up on me.”

“I just taught you how to read. Everyone should know how to do that.” She pulled a lipstick from her purse and carefully reapplied.

“Yes. Everyone should. But I didn't. Many people knew I couldn't read but said, 'That's just Daisy'. I had to wait until I was forty-two years old and met a pretty little girl before someone actually fixed my problem.” She looked at Dody with adoring eyes.

“I never thought of you as having a problem. I just thought of you as a friend.” She offered her lipstick to Daisy, who waved it away.

“Yes. That's right. I remember when you asked me to be your friend. It was the best decision I ever made.”

“Well, it's just reading. I don't even know how much I like it anymore. I think I like boys now that they've started to notice me.” She stuck out her breasts to reinforce the idea.

Daisy smiled. “I'd stick with books. There's more substance.”

“What do you mean? You can go out with a boy. You can have wild, romantic adventures, fall in love and get married. You can't do that with a book.” She looked at Daisy inquisitively.

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply there was anything wrong with boys. Just make sure the one you choose *can* read a book.” She winked at Dody.

“I didn't give up on reading. I'm just reading books that are more—mature.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a paperback with Fabio on its cover. “He's my fave.”

“You can't stop nature in its course. You have indeed entered womanhood, with all its curses and blessings.”

Dody beamed. Daisy marveled at the girl who had really become more like the mature companions she preferred. Daisy felt more mature herself.

“You know I enjoyed every minute of teaching you to read,” Dody said. “I even liked correcting your English mistakes and watching you speak more and more like an adult each time. It made me feel like *I*

was the grown-up for once.”

“I always knew you were smarter than your years. And now that I see this mature woman standing in front of me, I’m just gushing with pride as if you were my own.” She looked lovingly at the young woman standing before her and thought, if Dody really were her child, that it wouldn’t even be possible to treat her with the indifference her *mutta* had shown.

They embraced, sobbing for a long minute, longer than Daisy had ever connected with another in her life. When they separated, they seemed renewed. They examined each other as if for the first time. Finally, Dody broke the silence, “What was your favorite book of all?”

“*Wizard of Oz*” Daisy said, not missing a beat.

“Why?”

“Because I was born full of courage and heart. Know what I was missing?”

“Brains.” They both screamed and fell down laughing.

Dody said, “I didn’t mean—”

“Never apologize for telling the truth,” Daisy instructed her.

“That book showed me the reality of my own life. I never thought a book could do that except for the one I’ve entrusted to you.

“With every book I read, I took a journey through someone

else's mind. I read what they think and feel and understand about life.

And I understood one more person in this world, making me a little more human.” Daisy stared into space, then took one final look at Dody and sighed. “I have enjoyed our time together.”

“You act like I'm never going to see you again, Daisy.”

“Well, you've taught me to read, and during that time you've become an adult. Now you must pursue your own dreams. You've outgrown this old lady and the playhouse.” Daisy paused. She realized this young woman had done more for her than teach her to read. She had also taught her that, at times, you can trust others to do the right thing. A tear formed, and she grew anxious to leave before Dody saw her cry. “It's time to become the great woman that's inside you.” Daisy picked up her book and turned to leave.

“But Daisy...Daisy, don't go—”

“I will always be your friend,” Daisy said and left.

*Age 52 *

Daisy reached her arm as far up the bedroom wall as she could to squash the roach that tormented her. “Usually, I'd grant you mercy, but your brother jumped in my hooch, and that's bad for business.” She

swiped her hand hard against the wall but fell an inch shy. “Dammit!”

The roach continued its trek, reaching the ceiling but then descending enough to be within reach again. Daisy lunged to intercept the bug, tearing her jeans on a nail that stuck out from her dresser. Blood flowed from the gash. “Now you're going to get it. You ruined my jeans.”

Ten minutes, some toppled furniture and torn curtains later, she slammed her hand down hard on the kitchen table and slayed the offending roach. “Sorry, nature can be cruel sometimes.” She wiped her hands together to release the bug's remains. Then Daisy looked down at her jeans and considered the real cost.

She did not mind the stain so much, but sewing was one of the many life tasks that Daisy had never learned. *I guess I'll have to visit that bitch at the Salvation Army.*

She headed into town, taking her usual evasive route. Daisy did not even want to deal with the nasty woman who ran the place. She was afraid that might be because she reminded her of herself.

Daisy didn't look at the woman when she entered the store. She walked directly back to the jeans section.

The woman she hated looked up and yelled a sarcastic, “Back so soon?”

Daisy stopped in her tracks and turned to face her. “You well

know it's been six or seven years. Why do you have to be such a bitch all the time?"

The woman straightened up and returned Daisy's direct look, stocky woman to stocky woman, short curly orange hair to short brown straight hair, no make-up to no make-up. "Because you walk into my store and don't respect me. You don't even know my name. You talk in some back- woods language, so no one knows what the fuck you're saying."

"Do you hear me talking like that now?"

The woman ignored her. "Then you take a dump in my back alley."

"Hey, I asked to use your bathroom," Daisy protested. "You said 'no' and went on working, like I didn't exist."

"Bathrooms are just for staff."

"You're the only staff. You just didn't want to share with a person like me."

"I'd share with a friend. I'd share if you even knew my fuckin' name. But my mother taught me one thing and one thing only in my life, and that's to never let a person make a sucker out of you twice."

Daisy's eyes softened. Her words lost their ferocity. Something had triggered her 'surrender' button. She looked at the woman she had

hated with searching compassionate eyes.

“What *is* your name?” Daisy asked softly. The woman did not answer immediately. Instead, she pulled a hanky from her pocket and wept into it.

“My name's Irma,” she finally said, and assumed her usual stern countenance. Then she looked away again.

“You're sad because you thought of your mother,” Daisy confessed for her. “I sometimes feel that way, too.”

Irma studied her face, as if she were trying to determine exactly how truthful she could be with Daisy.

“There was a time I wanted to kill her. I'll admit it, but I never had the nerve,” Irma said, staring at her feet. She looked up suddenly and added, “I heard *you* killed people.”

Daisy took a step backwards. “Maybe so, maybe not. I just know some that deserve to be dead, and maybe I'm a little more headstrong than most. But it was what you said that struck me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I'm not sure. It went straight from your heart into mine—that your *mutta* only taught you one thing. It made me feel like I know you better now, what's in your heart, and that's a good starting point.”

“All because I said I hated my mother?”

“No, because I finally found something we have in common. I don't have to despise you anymore. All those crazy thoughts I made up about you, just so I could keep hating you. Now I see you more as a real person.”

“Imagine that,” Irma said. “I'm sorry, you were saying—”

“I always trusted my heart. Your mind gets facts out of order all the time, but if your heart tells you there's even the tiniest thing wrong in a situation, you'd best believe it. It can tell you when to believe a person or not.”

“It's hard for me to believe a murderer would think so clearly.”

“That's because you're thinking of me as a murderer. I never killed anyone who reached my heart,” Daisy mumbled under her breath.

“What did you say?”

Daisy remained quiet for a second, then responded, “I said, I think we could be friends.”

She left the store quickly, forgetting her jeans.

* the next day *

Daisy looked at her still and knew this was a day meant for drinking. Life had atrophied into complacency, which for her was a

sentence worse than death. There was only one cure for such days. She whipped up a fine hooch inside of an hour with the intention of drinking it all and passing out.

Daisy was drunk two hours later, lying in the grass beside the shed that housed her still. Her mind drifted in and out and swayed with the trees.

She stood up and headed toward the woods in a zombie-like state. Daisy stopped on occasion and stared at the world in front of her as if she were seeing it for the first time. She wandered deeper and deeper, closing her eyes on occasion, walking on pure instinct. She paused for a second, then she followed a trail to the right and stopped by a creek.

"I'm glad you came," said the wood nymph. Daisy stared at the unlikely creature that had eyes which glowed a brilliant green when he spoke. "You wanted to know if I was real, didn't you?"

"Fact is, I never believed you were, even when I saw you the last time." She blinked her eyes a few times to see if that would make it go away. "Still not sure. I've been drinking." She shook her head.

"I'm the guardian of these woods. I'm natural as every tree, bird and blade of grass you see. You and I be best friends. You love this forest much as me."

"These woods taught me all I know about life. I respect this

place. But I have as much trouble believing that *you* run this place as I do believing in God.”

“I don’t run it. I’m its guardian. I’m the vibration that holds it together. When you walk in woods, do you feel vibration?”

Daisy pondered the word. “Its vibration is its voice—” She smiled even as she thought about it. “I’ve felt it all my life.”

“Every place you go. Every room you enter. Everything you say has its own vibration. You be perfectly still. You feel them.”

“The whole earth vibrates together,” Daisy said. “I’ve always felt it.”

“I’m just a vibration. So are you. It holds *you* together,” he said. “Everything in universe. Held together by vibrations. Feel them. You find the secret of life.” The little man faded away before her eyes.

Daisy was confused. She knew what the strange creature was telling her. Her heart felt his meaning as clearly as she understood the yin-yang symbol, but her mind couldn’t grasp it. She felt dizzy as she passed out.

A shove to her right shoulder brought her back to consciousness. Her eyes flew open to see the immense figure of Irma hulking above her.

“I should have known I'd find you stupefied drunk,” Irma said as she threw an old plastic bag on Daisy's lap.

Daisy looked down at the bag and then back up at Irma. She wanted to tell Irma about the wood nymph, but she knew Irma thought she was crazy already, so she bit her tongue. It was obviously a drunken dream, but it seemed more real than reality itself.

“What brings you by?”

“You forgot to take your jeans when you left.” Daisy peered in the bag, pulled out the jeans and held them up.

“Looks like my size, too.” She beamed.

“I remembered your size from the last time.”

“From seven years ago? How'd you know where I live?”

“You said it was the hut closest to the woods. This used to be Willy's old hut.”

“You knew Willy, too? He was a good friend of mine.”

“Mine, too. Willy gives off a good vibe.”

“What did you say?”

“Vibe. He has a good vibration to him. Makes you want to be his friend.”

Daisy lay in the grass beside her still and thought about the little girl who had taught her not only how to read and speak. Dody had given her the key to unlock her world, but Daisy found herself, once again, without a friend in the world.

She missed Dody.

She wondered what Willy was doing, and Irma, too.

Daisy looked at her still and realized that even a fine batch of hooch wouldn't abate the loneliness. She considered taking a walk through the woods, but her woodland friends were not the ones for whom she hungered. A walk along the ocean would only lead her past the large red playhouse where Dody had taught her without ever once talking down to her. Others had corrected her speech or told her she should learn to read, but it took an innocent little girl to care enough to do it.

There were good people in the world.

Willy thought it was important enough to sneak out and tell me why he could no longer visit.

Dody took time from her own childhood to teach an old lady to read.

Parson Rudy tried to save my soul.

Irma brought my pants right to my door.

And each one did it for my welfare with no thought of themselves.

I wish I could tell them what they mean to me.

Daisy rolled in the grass head-down to feel the dew cool her face. In time, nature restored her, and she didn't feel lonely anymore because she was grateful that each of these people had entered her life when she needed them.

Whether they were here or someplace else, they were her angels. For a couple of years, she reveled in her solitude. She read books when she wanted to, wrote books when she wanted to and made hooch when she wanted that. She was no longer dependent on money from tricks or on other people for anything. The parson had left her wealthy enough to buy a pair of jeans every ten years. She had so few needs, and the earth provided most of them.

She still loved lying on her back in the grass, staring at the clouds moving past. The books she had read always made her think up her own stories, bigger and more truthful than the ones she had read. They were deeper and darker. They pierced your soul. She was not afraid to travel into areas of the brain that others had locked. She felt a need to get her thoughts on paper if only to get them out of her head.

She thought of the little girl who encouraged her to write her

own stories. She had done that off and on. But when she reached the end of the notebook Dody had given her, she had simply stopped.

Inspired, Daisy ran back to her hovel and searched for pen and paper. In her kitchen drawer, she found a pencil and some old bills that had space on the back to write on. She scratched her head, wondering where she had seen paper in her house. Then she remembered and ran into her bedroom. She pulled the calendar from 1965 that had been hanging there since she moved in. The back of each page was blank.

She sat at the kitchen table and thought. Slowly she began to write in very small letters to make her paper supply last: “Lucy grabbed the knife from the kitchen counter and thrust it into her mother's chest to stop her incessant chatter.”

Daisy re-read her first sentence with great satisfaction.

* Age 56 *

Daisy knew there was no more running from life. While she always realized she was not the most attractive woman, her energy seemed to be what attracted men, and now that was fading too.

She stared at her face in the mirror and saw creases

and sags that had not been there the last time she looked. She would not be able to turn tricks much longer. She knew her phone and electricity would be turned off within the month. Daisy realized that even her mutta knew how to manage money better than her. She never understood it. Maybe her mutta was the better whore.

Only the most desperate johns visited Daisy these days. She had not eaten in a week due to lack of money and interest. Daisy no longer sold her hooch as she consumed it all herself. She was at a crossroads. She didn't really want to confront the truth of her life.

For the first time, she experienced self-doubt, and even worse, questioned her self-worth and wondered if she really did belong in this world. Daisy felt her age, and it left her helpless. She felt the hollowness of losing friends. She wondered if she pushed good people away from herself to protect them.

Daisy had never let negative thoughts affect her. She had learned by the age of five that such thoughts would destroy her if she ever let them in. But now, that inner strength that her good friends had seen in her was absent. All her strong childhood instincts were crushed. She was left, once more, with only the confusion that had always dominated her life. She could see no path

of redemption ahead of her.

Her head flooded with images from her past, and she flailed her arms as if she could swat them away, but they were relentless. She could almost hear Mutta's wicked laugh. She remembered how she got kicked out of the way because the sweaty men always came before her. She marched across the room and punched the wall until her hand bled.

Then she thought of Dody and took a seat at the kitchen table. Dody and Willy and Irma had proved to her that there were good people in the world. Could it be there was also good in Mutta? She had blamed her for ruining her life, but perhaps, she simply didn't know better. She thought about the many things she hadn't understood when she was younger. The missing piece in her life had always been the lack of a relationship between them.

The phone rang as her thoughts rambled on, but she just stared at it—frozen. She knew it was her mother, the only other person who knew her number besides the parson. On the few occasions when she had answered, the ensuing tirade made her feel worthless again. But that vile old woman did have a house, could pay her bills and probably would never die.

Daisy wanted so badly for her mother to understand the small accomplishments she *had* made in life. She wanted, above all else, to feel her mother's love just once before she died. Worst of all, she *needed* her now. She picked up the phone and bit her lip.

“Mom?” she answered with great effort.

“I kin’t believe ya picked up. Thought ya was a’scared a me.”

Daisy ignored the comment. “I’ve been really busy lately. How are you doing?”

“It da same fucking miserable life, ain’t it? Or did I miss some’ting? The vacuum exploded las’ week. Da house is so dirty I keep hacking.” She coughed for emphasis.

“You’re coming up eighty. You might need some help.”

“So whatta ya want me ta do? Find a magic fairy to he’p me. I don’t got ‘outside he’p’ money.”

“No, I’m talking about me. I could move in and help you.”

“Ya? He’p me? Dat would be a first—”

“I could say the same thing, old woman.” She stopped herself this time, but how many more times would she be able to do so? “I’m trying to make amends here. I’m willing to believe you are not entirely the woman I think you are. The time has come for us to talk.”

“I din’t know if’n I wanna talk, ya’s talkin’ funny, ya know, but I do need a cleaning lady. Maybe yer fat ass might be good for some’ting afta all.”

“Yeah, I love you, too.” Her voice dripped with sarcasm. “See you soon.”

* * *

As Daisy approached her childhood home, her body froze. She felt unable to lift her legs up the three concrete steps leading to the front door. She sensed the presence of evil beyond those doors. It gave her chills and she had no idea how she would react.

She knocked on the door knowing there was no going back now. Her mother's steps were growing louder. The door creaked when it opened, and she felt like she was in the middle of a horror movie. She straightened and gritted her teeth. The stone-cold glare she received told her that nothing had changed.

* Age 56 *

Daisy hoped that time had softened her mother—that the years living alone had made her value companionship—that maybe she had come to realize that blood mattered—that the bond between a mother and daughter was sacred.

She cooked her mother's meals, cleaned the house and helped with all the chores. After a month, she realized that her dream was a stupid

fantasy. Every act of kindness brought nothing but criticism.

She thought of the yin-yang, hoping for inspiration. She thought of the forest and the mysterious way it kept balance in the face of all things, but she couldn't feel its usual comfort. The dark forces were winning.

The darkness swept over Mutta as well, making her even more repugnant than she had ever been. Her beauty had faded, leaving her with sunken eyes, drooping breasts, scaly skin and a permanent scowl. Her tangled hair grew down to her waist.

One afternoon, Mutta sat on a straight chair in the kitchen and demanded that Daisy cut it. Daisy did not want to touch the greasy mess, but Mutta handed her a pair of scissors and said, "It 'bout time ya did sumpin' round here 'cept mope. Now git to it."

Daisy rolled her eyes. She was sick of the abuse and wasn't sure how much more she could stand. She wanted to march out of the house and never come back, but she was no longer sixteen. She no longer had the strength.

She took the scissors and chopped away, taking pleasure when she mis cut to further mar her Mutta's looks. Mutta jerked her head and yelled, "Ya stupid fool! Ya hurtin' me."

Daisy took a deep breath. "I'm trying to be careful."

"Oh, la te da. I'se is tryin' ta be cay-ful," Mutta said, mocking her.

“Who taught ya ta speak all fancy?”

Daisy thought for a moment and said, “A little girl who cared about me more than my damned mutta did.”

Mutta spat at her. “Dint ya cuss at me, ya worthless piece a shit. Yer nuttin' but a wore-out whore.”

Daisy tightened her grip on the scissors. She had reached her limit. Her heart palpitated. Her head was ready to explode.

Mutta lifted her chin and said, “Ah ain't got all day. Git on wid it.”

Daisy wiped the spittle from her chin. Mutta was right. It was time to get on with it. She took one final look at the woman who had always been dead to her and allowed the darkness to take over. She grabbed her mutta's hair and jerked her head back hard. With one slice, she swept the blade of the scissors across her neck.

Blood flowed over Mutta's blouse, but the scissors were dull, and the wound was shallow. Mutta let out a scream and grabbed Daisy's wrist. Her grip was strong. She pulled Daisy to the floor.

Daisy broke free, but Mutta scraped her long nails across her face. Daisy slammed the scissors into her left eye. She pushed until they sank deep into Mutta's skull.

Daisy rolled off her and pulled herself to her feet. She thought she would feel some remorse, but relief swept over her. It was over. The

awful woman who had made her childhood miserable would never make anyone else suffer ever again. Her only regret, as usual, was the blood that covered her clothes.

* Age 56 *

Daisy wiped the dirt from her palms and threw the shovel on the ground. She walked back to the house and washed her hands vigorously in the kitchen sink, making certain there wasn't a speck of dirt left under her fingernails. She felt oddly giddy--like her shackles had been removed, and she was finally free at the age of fifty-six. A feeling of satisfaction permeated her body. She enjoyed her method of getting rid of the evil in this world. Recognizing evil in others was the only real power she held in life, but also a talent she could use to make the world a better place.

She could not remember the last time she felt this good. She ran through the house and trashed anything that reminded her of her mother: her pictures, her clothes and her stupid doodads. She opened the windows to get rid of her smell. She smiled when the house was finally her own.

Daisy sat on a recliner, and ideas ricocheted around in her brain like a pinball machine. Memories swirled like a hurricane. She wanted to release all these unpleasant thoughts from her life but was unsure how to do this. She

felt queasy suddenly like she was about to vomit. Were those voices she heard in her own mind? She would have to find a way to subdue all these savage thoughts, or her head might explode.

Daisy went off in search of aspirin. As she passed through the dining room, she noticed her mother's old Smith Corona typewriter on the table. She wondered how she could have missed this obnoxious remnant of her mother. *Didn't she realize they had word processors now?* She looked at the innocent machine with new eyes. It was hers now. And there was a ton of paper on the table beside it. All the ideas she had written down since she had learned to write coursed through her veins. This would be her road back to salvation. She had one hell of a story inside her.

She sat down, inserted a sheet of paper in the ancient contraption and began pecking away. All the disturbing thoughts that were bouncing around inside her head flowed effortlessly onto the paper and remained trapped there. The dark sinister plot unfolding on the page reminded her of her own life--the part she had to purge. She could leave the damaged remnants of her life captured here on paper instead of free to attack her mind.

Her ideas began to line up again. She remembered the character she had called Lucy, a witch who ran a nursing home where evil people spent their final days. Lucy walked through the town and stared into peoples' eyes, directly into their souls. If she found evil there, the person would

mysteriously wake up the next day in her nursing home. She would teach them each a valuable lesson before she killed them. She didn't see this as evil, but more as an eradication of the evil in the world, a final just desert.

She could feel the evil pouring out of her soul and onto the page as she wrote. The first publisher she sent her work to saw greatness in what she had written and quickly found a dark audience who fed upon it. Lucy was surprisingly well received by her readership. They seemed to relate to her.

Readers would write to her publisher with new ways to kill the residents, some very torturous and disturbing. Some sent names and addresses of relatives and the reasons they needed to be sent to Lucy's Nursing Home. Her publisher phoned her weekly with praise.

She had found a place to put the thoughts that haunted her all her life, somewhere that she could look at them and know they were separate from her. She hoped that by dispersing these thoughts among her readership, they would lose some of their power over her by having been named. But it had quite the opposite effect.

Readers seemed to feed on her dark thoughts. Her books developed a very specific following over time. People admired her desire for revenge against people who had inflicted evil on others during their lives. Her readers liked that the evil received some judgment *before* they left this plane to face some god for judgment that some believed in and some didn't.

* Age 61 *

Daisy woke up with her head on the table next to the typewriter. She stared at the machine as if *it* contained all the evil her venomous writing spewed.

Daisy noticed she was nearly out of paper and decided to go visit the Salvation Army and see if Irma knew where to get more. At any rate, she would get to see an old friend and maybe have a laugh or two.

She walked briskly and noticed two children playing in the large red playhouse, but they were much younger than Dody. Her mood brightened as she breathed in the salt air. She marched into the Salvation Army with a grin as big as all outdoors.

“Hey, don't you recognize your old friend?” Daisy called.

“They don't come any older,” Irma replied. They chatted for hours until Daisy forgot why she had come there.

Irma and Daisy remained good friends. Irma began to shut down the Salvation Army at two on Fridays, just so she could spend the rest of the day with Daisy. They learned they had more in common than a tendency toward matricide. They realized the same great truth about themselves, that

they both desperately wanted to reinvent their lives.

“Why do you think we get along so well now?” Irma pondered. “I didn't like you when we first met.”

“That's because I took a crap in your alley. I wouldn't have liked me, either.”

“And yet, that's what I admire about you today.”

“What, that I crap outside?”

“I think it's more your freedom with natural functions,” Irma corrected.

“Yeah, I forgot you have to keep that all hidden like nobody else does it.”

Irma laughed. “Your take on things always amuses me. It's like you have no dignity and incredible dignity all at the same time.”

“You're just saying that I don't subscribe to every fool notion this world offers you, and I don't mind if others do. I can only believe something when my mind and heart agree. If others think there's a robed man who lives in the clouds and rules over us, bless their hearts. I just have trouble with that idea, but no problem believing in nature. I can see nature. It's probably the same thing, anyway, looked at from another angle. Everyone's life is just a story, told a slightly different way.”

“Sure, people believe in all kinds of gods because they all lead

different lives and were brought up with their own culture's ideas,” Irma interjected.

“But the gods are not that different from each other,” Daisy said. “All people laugh and cry at the same events. They're all the same, that's what their god knows, while they continue to believe they're different or special. Life is so simple. People just complicate it. I've only met three or four people in my whole life who I really trusted—whom I understood with my heart and mind. And you're one of them.”

Irma seemed taken aback. “I take that as a compliment.” She reflected on it for a minute, then continued, “but I'm not sure if I'm the person I really want to be yet. I'm not as content with my lot in life as you.”

* the next day *

“Paper, you idiot,” Daisy reminded herself. “That's what you were looking for.” She grabbed her purse and headed back to the Salvation Army.

Irma looked up when she entered and smiled, then resumed staring beneath the counter.

“What, do you have a rat or something?” Daisy asked. “What's so interesting down there?”

“I'm sorry, Daisy. Good to see you. I got a small TV down here, and it keeps talking about a hurricane heading this way.”

“Well, that's just Florida weather. You hunker down, then you clean up the mess.”

“Your place is small,” Irma said, “but those timbers are rock solid. I just moved into tent city.”

“I moved into Mutta's place. It's bigger but it's weaker than my old shack. We can stay there. A tent's just going to blow away in a storm.”

“That's why I'm so worried.”

“So, grab your valuables and stay with me until it passes,” Daisy offered. “I could use the company.”

“To tell the truth, so could I,” she admitted. “So, what can I help you with today? I can see your jeans are still holding up.”

“You may not believe this, but I've been writing books,” Daisy replied with a broad grin.

“So, you've been putting your improved diction to good use. I'm proud of you, Daisy, knowing how you used to be. I wish I knew a better purpose for my life than selling this junk.”

“Thanks. I even know what 'diction' means now. That little girl who taught me to read and write kept correcting my 'diction' every time I

opened my mouth. Now I need to find paper, so I can write my next book.”

“Well, Lord save us, Daisy. And bless that little girl's heart. And bless your heart, too, for offering me a place to stay. Of course, I'd be afraid of any story that came from your head, but I commend you for getting your life in order and doing something to help others. You can get school supplies at the 7-Eleven.”

“Just come by my place after supper.”

* later that day *

Daisy watched Irma break a sweat as she pulled her over-stuffed Radio Flyer wagon onto her property. Daisy was busy disassembling her still and could only laugh at the sight.

“I see you're protecting your most asset,” Irma yelled.

Daisy looked up and smiled. “It's all I got.” She eyed the large bulk on the small wagon that was carefully secured under a folded canvas tent by a heavy cord. “I see you've got a lot more to protect.”

Irma's face reddened, as if embarrassed by her wealth of goods. “It's not a lot, really. It's just when you put it all in one wagon, it looks like more.”

“Well, find a place for it in the house, then come out and help me. After I get the still apart, I want to take two walls from this shed down because the front door is damaged, and my one window has a hole in one of the panes. I'll need to cover them.”

Irma took less than five minutes to put away her gear and emerged with her own hammer and a box of nails. Together, they worked without words and had the window nailed down tightly in no time. They looked at the wall they would use to cover the front door.

“It's a bit larger than the door itself,” Irma noted. “Do you want me to get my saw?”

The wind picked up and knocked the wide board over. Daisy ran to pick it up.

“I think we'll just nail it up from the inside. The wind's getting stronger now. We don't have enough time to start doing reconstruction.”

“But what if we need to use the outhouse?” Irma asked. “We'll be locked inside.”

“There's a bucket,” Daisy said. “You know this isn't a motel, right? I hope you won't be complaining the whole time.”

“I'm sorry, Daisy. You're always so calm in any situation.”

“I'm too busy doing what needs to be done.”

“I can't thank you enough for letting me stay. You're an angel.”

“A drunken angel, maybe.” They both smiled.

Daisy found her Coleman lamp and some candles in case the electricity went out. She lined up four buckets against the wall and began filling them with water. When she had filled three, she called over to Irma and pointed at the fourth bucket. “That one's your toilet for the next few days.”

Irma looked at the boarded-up window and door and moaned, “We can't even empty it.”

Daisy fished through her kitchen drawers, found a clothespin and threw it at Irma.

“Put this on your nose and quit your bitching,” Daisy said.

Irma tossed the clothespin aside and diverted her attention to the TV. “We might as well see what's going on with the storm.” She turned on the old black and white Philco and waited anxiously for it to warm up. After a while, she knocked it on its side several times to improve the picture. “What's the matter with the TV?”

“Oh, what a surprise. You're complaining again,” Daisy said.

“Well, you can't watch a TV without a picture.”

“I used it mostly to improve my diction—didn't need a picture. The programs are mostly stupid, anyway.”

“Wait a second. I think I can help.” Irma ran over to her pile and

fished through her housewares. She returned with a roll of aluminum foil. Tearing off a couple of feet, she rolled it into a ball and placed it over the top of the antenna. She moved the antenna about for a bit and then exclaimed, “Wallah.” The picture was now visible, albeit a bit wobbly.

“How did you do that?” Daisy asked, staring at the screen. “I heard this show a hundred times, but never knew what they looked like.” She felt confused as she examined the characters on the *Leave it to Beaver* show. “Look at that mother serving her kids breakfast. I always pictured her in her bathrobe and fuzzy slippers, not high heels and pearls. What are they trying to pull off?”

“I guess that's how normal families are. You know we're not normal like other folks, don't you, Daisy?”

“I know I'll never be normal if it just means being phony. The commercials are even worse, always pretending I need something that I don't. I'm just glad there's a town called Marmalade for all of us who don't buy into that crap. Turn on the other channel, nine.”

Irma flipped the dial, and the weather report filled the screen. They could hear the wind picking up outside, whooshing its way through tiny cracks between the boards in the hut's exterior. The drops of rain that made it inside and hit them in the face made Daisy dance with excitement, while Irma retreated to the bed and assumed a fetal position.

“I love hurricanes,” Daisy said as she sat on the bed beside Irma.

Irma sent daggers from her eyes into Daisy. “Bet you love wars, too.”

“No. Wars are made by people who have misunderstandings. Hurricanes are all about nature humbling us, making us see how small we are in the grand scheme of things. Nature doesn't do anything to purposely hurt us. It's just trying to keep the balance.”

Irma sat up straight next to Daisy and said, “You've got a way of putting things that makes everything seem natural, even when the world seems anything but natural. I don't know how you do it, but's it's like you take a little bit of your own courage and put it in other people.”

“I didn't give you any of my courage, sweetie,” Daisy said.
“Maybe I took away some of your fear.”

* that night *

The wind and torrents of rain continued to slam against the old shack. The tired boards groaned as they threatened to separate from the structure.

The two women sat upright in the bed together and stared at the single bulb dangling from the ceiling as it flickered. The TV continued to

drone on about the storm, and then, suddenly stopped. They sat in darkness for a moment as they contemplated their next move.

“Shit!” Daisy said. “I should have lit the Coleman lamp an hour ago. Now I have to look for it in the dark.” She stumbled as she got out of the bed.

“I remember you put it on the kitchen table,” Irma said, suppressing a nervous laugh. “But I don't believe I've ever heard such language out of your mouth.”

“I cuss only when necessary.” Daisy walked slowly in the darkness. She stretched her arms forward to avoid bumping into the wall. She forgot about the pee bucket, which collided with her foot, spilling its contents. “FUCK!” She continued toward the kitchen table and lit the lamp. They both surveyed the damage.

Irma doubled over when the room was aglow enough for her to see what happened, laughing uncontrollably. “Only you would take a pee in the middle of the room and leave the bucket there. I peed discreetly in the corner.” She wiped at some drool that drizzled down her cheek.

“Well, pardon me if I'm not afraid of natural functions like you are.” Daisy grabbed a kitchen towel and threw it over the mess.

“You're right. You never were afraid of your natural functions. That's how you got your reputation.”

Daisy reared up. “Is that your way of calling me a whore?”

“Well, if the shoe fits—” She paused to consider her words.

“Well, wouldn't *you* call yourself a whore?”

“There is no devil in your own story,” Daisy said, “and if there was, it would be my mutta, not me. She brought me up in that lifestyle. Kids learn from what they see around them.” Daisy looked away whenever she mentioned her mother.

“I notice you still call her your mutta when you say all the other words correctly.”

“I said that word correctly, too.”

* the next morning *

The women slept peaceably, having been drained by the experience. They slept in their clothes, each with one arm around the other.

The creaking of a board on the other side of the room awakened Daisy. She felt wisps of water attack her face each time the board pulled away from the hut.

“Wake up, Irma.” Daisy shook her friend. “We've got a problem.”

“Please, Daisy,” Irma mumbled. “It took so long to fall asleep, just a little while longer.” She began to drift off when the board snapped, and

torrents of water flew through the room and saturated the bed. Both women bolted upright and jumped out of bed as another gush of water doused the Coleman lamp.

“SHIT!” They exclaimed together, searching in the darkness for something to block the water.

“Get your tent,” Daisy yelled. “We’ll nail it against the opening, but hurry.”

Irma raced to untie the tent from the wagon but could not get it loose.

“Can you do it before the entire place fills with water?”

“I can’t get these knots loose,” Irma cried. “I must have tied them too tight.”

Daisy removed a small switchblade from her pocket and severed the cord. Irma fished for her hammer and nails as Daisy folded the tent to fit the opening. Together, they worked silently to block the onslaught. They finally managed to stop the water from spraying across the room to a small trickle down the far wall. Daisy searched her drawers for a dry match to light the lamp.

“I guess we’ll have to get used to the darkness,” Daisy moaned.

“Or we could just use my matches.” Irma winked at Daisy. “Luckily, one of us had the good sense to put her stuff in plastic bags.” Irma went over

to her wagon and pulled out a dry bag of matches. She pulled one out and lit the Coleman.

They sat at the table and watched each other come into focus. Irma said, "Sometimes you get the bear, and sometimes the bear gets you."

* that afternoon *

"I don't think I can take any more canned tuna," Irma complained.

"It's that or Spam. The rest of the food is soaked."

"Let me check my wagon to see if anything I brought survived."

She rummaged through her goods, removing one soaking wet item after another. "One lousy board breaks loose, and everything we own is useless." She hung her head as if she might weep.

Daisy wrapped her arm about Irma's shoulder. "It's all replaceable," she comforted. "It's just things. It's only important that we make it through. You should keep focused on the most important thing you have to do, not every little thing, and certainly not things you have no control over."

"Nothing ever gets the best of you, Daisy, does it? This hut could fall down and crush you at any second, but you aren't frightened."

"When I was a kid, I was scared all the time," Daisy confessed. "But being scared just makes your whole world scary. I learned that there were

things I could change and things I couldn't. And if I couldn't change a problem, I would just have to endure these things. None of them ever killed me, and all of them made me smarter. So why worry?" Daisy watched Irma study her face and wondered why she admired her.

"You must be smarter than me, Daisy Perlman, because my best ideas have never led me to any real answers."

"Nobody's ideas lead to the real answers," Daisy said. "There's so much more to life we don't know than what we do. That's all you must know. Our five senses don't have all the answers. And that's all your mind has to work with. So, I just let my heart absorb my head. My heart is connected to all of nature, and I feel if you put all of nature together, the answer is in there somewhere."

* that evening *

The winds began to die down like a tired baby who could no longer keep screaming. Daisy grabbed a hammer and began to loosen the board nailed over the front entrance. She needed to survey the damage and breathe fresh air once again. Irma busied herself putting the last of the tuna fish on two plates.

"Are you sure it's safe to unlock our fortress?" Irma asked.

Daisy pointed at the tent covering the opening in the side wall. “It hasn't flapped in the last hour. The winds have lost their oomph.”

“I guess we could use some natural light and fresh air. I feel like we're living in a cave.” Irma left the two plates on the table and went over to help Daisy. They worked silently as always until the sudden blare from the TV startled them. The single bulb that dangled from the ceiling blinded them, and they hugged in jubilation.

“Damned if we didn't make it,” Irma declared.

“Watch that cussing now, the danger's over.” Daisy smiled. “What did you expect with two resourceful women like ourselves? Nature will never take me out. I've always felt a man would do that.”

The two women pulled the remaining nails from the obstruction, let the board fall between them and ran over it to freedom. A light rain fell on them, purifying their unwashed bodies. Daisy stared at her forest in the distance and frowned.

“Two of my favorite trees are down,” she said, looking in the distance.

“I'll bet there's more than that,” Irma said. Her face sported a Cheshire grin. “But you know nature. It always replenishes itself and finds the balance.”

Daisy punched Irma in the arm. “Now you're getting it.”

“Let's rebuild your still,” Irma said. “I've heard a lot about your hooch.”

“I didn't know you had any interest. Are you a drinker?”

“Just socially. But you seem like someone I would really enjoy drinking with. I'll bet you would just get more and more honest, if that were possible. And I must say, I enjoy your particular brand of honesty.”

“The fact is, there was hooch in the hut the whole time. I was enjoying your company so much, I didn't even think of it.”

Irma smiled. “It's good to know I come above hooch on your priority list,”

“It's good you know what priorities are. Most people get theirs out of order.”

“You're a funny woman, but you've got a better grasp of life than I ever did.”

“Would you like me to explain life to you, the way I see it?” Daisy asked. “That's gonna take a tuna fish sandwich and lots of hooch.”

“It's just tuna, bread's all soaked.”

“The hooch is the top priority, anyhow.” Daisy winked.

The two reentered the hovel, soaked from the rain but reanimated in life. Daisy reached under the bed and pulled out two mason jars filled with strawberry hooch and gave one to Irma. They sat at the table, gobbled their

tuna and stared at each other like two reunited sisters who hadn't seen each other in forty years. The TV droned on at too loud a volume about the storm abating. Daisy walked over to turn it off.

“This is the problem with most peoples' lives,” she said, pointing at the TV. “People watch this boob tube and compare what they see to their own life. It makes people believe they should be like what they see. They believe the quick fixes offered for every problem. They believe their problems can be solved, like those on TV, in half an hour. They believe they should own what is advertised, even though they don't need any of it.

“You should focus on your own life and not compare it to anything but how it's improved from what it was before. When I see my life that way, I am so much better than what I was born. I feel great. But if I compare my life to those on TV, I come off a poor fat loser every time.”

Irma stopped glaring at Daisy's animated expressions and looked down. “I've always thought myself the poor fat loser.”

“Yet you're anything but that,” Daisy said. “The people closest to the earth are the greatest. They have no pretensions or delusions like the rich. They have truer relationships than those with complicated lives. There have always been, since the beginning of time, only three or four things we really need to survive: food, clothing, shelter, and I would add, love. The person who needs the least and guards his truth is the richest person. She has always

had all she needed from the day she was born. She's rich because she's happy with what she has. She knows that everything she needs is already within her. Others are in a state of always wanting more. Some people kill each other to get things they don't even need. Some world, huh?"

"I guess I already have what I need," Irma said, "It's just that I still feel as if something is missing from my life, like a purpose, or like the courage you have."

"I found courage when I was a little girl. All those ragged-ass men hanging around all the time, waiting for their turn—telling me things a five-year-old should never hear—Mutta always sending me to my room where there was never anything to do—except listen to her screams—I sat in my bed, wishing one of them would kill her—"

"I didn't mean to bring up bad memories," Irma interrupted.

"They don't go away, anyhow, no matter how hard you try. Mutta never taught me anything, no alphabet, no math, and not even a toy to keep me company. She only told me what was wrong with the world and why I should never trust people. We had no TV growing up, so I assumed this was the way everyone lived."

Daisy's voice grew more distant. "Then one day, I think I was seven, I heard a man screaming and slapping Mutta. Something inside of me snapped. I had nothing left to lose. I don't know where the courage came

from—it just welled up out of nowhere. I only knew you must face your fears to get to the truth. I was prepared to kill that man if I had to, to protect the mutta I hated, because she was all I had.”

Irma hung on every word. “Well, what happened? Did you kill him?”

“I wish. He asked me to join them, and I said 'no', so he threw a book at me.”

“Then you got him, right?” Irma anticipated.

“No, I picked up the book, and I wanted to throw it back at him— But I wanted to keep the book more—I never had anything of my own—So I ran to the woods where I knew I'd be safe—and I looked at my new book.”

“Did the man kill your mother?”

“No, no one got killed.” Daisy shook her head in frustration. “The point is that, sometimes, you have to step out of your comfort zone and confront something that is bigger and stronger than you before you even have time to think. You're tired, your soul is crushed and all you feel is fear. Then something inside tells you that you are the only one who can correct the situation. If you do nothing, then you will have to settle for this for the rest of your life. Your courage comes from having to perform a feat you aren't sure you can do.

“There's just a faint trust in life that tells you, you can do it, that

some invisible force that understands right from wrong will support you. You just must fix this one little problem around you to restore your soul and put the world back in order. The courage comes out of nowhere. You always find the strength when your cause is just.”

Daisy stepped behind Irma and placed her hands on her shoulders. “And you know, you don't have to worry about world problems, you can't change them. If everyone just corrected the small problems that were right around them, it would be a better world.” Irma nodded.

Daisy felt cramped inside the hovel in which they had spent far too much time. “Why don't we take a walk to the Salvation Army and see if it sustained any damage?”

“What's the point?” Irma asked. “My heart isn't in it anymore.”

Daisy remained resolute and stone-faced. Irma recognized that look.

“I guess it couldn't hurt,” she conceded.

“We'll take the long way through the woods.”

“In the ten years we've been friends, you never once took me into your precious woods.”

“You'll need to know its power where you're going. Once you feel its effect, you'll be able to conquer anything.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Irma grabbed Daisy's hand and pulled her toward the tree line. Daisy laughed at her odd behavior and

stumbled on a rock. Irma pulled her hand upwards, so she wouldn't fall.

“Clumsy!” Irma taunted her.

“Am not,” Daisy yelled back with the ferocity of a five-year-old.

Irma stopped pulling but did not release her grasp. “Please, you were all discombobulated there, kinda spastic even.”

Daisy fell to the ground, pulling Irma, who landed on top of her.

“I know you've heard what happens to people who enter my personal space uninvited and make me do things against my will.”

“I heard things. But *I* am on top of *you* now.” Irma pretended to slap Daisy's face with both hands.

“I won't kill you this time because I feel sorry for you,” Daisy snorted, “You know, being so ugly and all.”

Irma grabbed some dirt between two fingers and flicked it in Daisy's face. Daisy spit the little bit that landed in her mouth back at Irma.

“You'll never kill me, Miss Daisy Perlman. It would be too much like killing yourself.”

Daisy looked at her and knew it was the truth. At that moment, she released Irma's soul from her possession. Irma could go wherever she damned pleased in this world with Daisy's blessing. The two helped each other up off the ground and walked in silence, hand in hand, toward the trees.

Daisy stopped at the edge of the woods. She released Irma's hand

and drew a deep breath. After a few seconds, she exhaled and explained, “You have to release all your personal energy. You're about to become part of a much larger organism.”

Irma looked at Daisy oddly but followed her instructions and inhaled deeply. “Is this some sort of ritual?” she asked afterwards.

“I've always considered it an honor to come here. It was a place of great solace when Mutta failed to give me the love or knowledge that I needed. Nature has a way of filling voids in life. It can teach you everything you need to know, all by itself. It takes away all your problems and replaces them with the mystery of life unfolding before you. It has always been a great source of peace for me. I humbly offer my own energy before entering so I can be filled with its much greater energy.”

Irma did not look at Daisy strangely this time. Daisy felt she was beginning to understand her religion.

They entered, and Daisy was immediately more herself. She bent over frequently to remove debris from the path and stopped every so often to gape in wonder at the devastation.

“I used to think the woods was just trees,” Irma said. “But I get the feeling that's all gonna change now.”

“That's because you're looking at it with your brain. There are some things you can only understand with your heart. People depend on their logic

far too much. They think they can break down the mysteries of life logically, but that's impossible. Logic can't explain what you already know in your heart. And your heart tells you immediately when your logic isn't complete, and it never is. The forest understands that every living thing is connected to every other living thing. People do not. The forest doesn't fight itself. It lives in balance. These trees don't need to evolve. Only people do.”

Daisy saw Irma's perplexed expression.

“You learned all that from a tree?” Irma asked.

“Well, from the tree, and the moss on its north side, and the squirrels and birds that live in it, and the leaves that drop in the fall and return in the spring.

“A child learns from whatever she sees. She can grasp mysteries that an adult would miss because a child is more likely to immerse herself in the mysteries without questioning them. The adult attempts to logically explain them. The child's mind and heart are one because adults haven't yet forced her to separate the two. The child is not so much learning new things, but more remembering things she already knows in her heart.”

Daisy looked at Irma with eyes that begged for understanding.

“Were you that child?” she asked.

Daisy answered her with a look. Irma sat on an outcropping of stone and held her head in her hands. “Hey, that's *my* bench,” Daisy said as she

popped down beside her.

“Not yours,” Irma said. “It's all connected.”

Daisy laughed. “Now you're getting it.”

Irma raised her head slowly and stared at the tree that had taught her friend so much. “The hairs on my arm are all standing up just from looking at that damned tree.”

“Well, they should. That tree will be my best friend when you leave.”

Irma smirked. “A little while ago, I would have thought that very sad. But now, it just kind of makes sense.”

“These trees *are* my brothers and sisters. They took me in when Mutta cast me out. I can only be my true self when I'm here. As soon as I leave, I'm completely out of my element. Here, everything always makes sense to me.”

“I'm glad that you brought me here, Daisy. I know I felt *your* vibration on the first day we met, back when I hated you, because it's so strong. I'll bet everyone who's ever met you has felt it.”

“But can you feel your own?”

“Hell, I felt a tree's vibration.” She held out her hands. “I can feel mine in my hands and feet. They're practically trembling.”

“Don't be afraid of it. Don't try to fight it. Don't try to understand it

with your mind.”

“Then what can I do with it?”

“You will feel the same tingling whenever your heart wants to lead you to something. Isn't it calling you to Norris right now? Isn't it telling you to make the change?”

She stared at her fingertips. “I think it is. Maybe this is the first time I ever paid attention to it.”

“It'll make you a better person, but I have a little confession to make. When I first brought you here, I thought you might find the same peace that I discovered and not want to leave. But isn't that just what people do? They try to make you be more like themselves, not caring what's best for you. It's not what I want anymore. As much as I hate for you to leave, I want you to go to Norris and be the best damned mayor they ever knew.”

“I just want to sit on the council.”

“You won't stop there. Once you start following it, you'll go on to greater things. There'll be no stopping you.”

“Just let people feel your vibration, huh?” Irma looked perplexed.

“It happens automatically. I knew it entered you when you had to sit down.”

“Then why have I never felt this before?”

“Because you ignored it. People taught you to restrain your feelings

and avoid anything that triggers your emotions since you were young. I never had anyone teach me that crap. I've only seen it on TV.”

Irma reflected on Daisy's words for a moment. “But don't you think some of that is necessary in a civilized world? Otherwise, we'd all run around killing each other.” She said it like she regretted saying it, but the words had already left her mouth.

“You have a way of sneaking that fact into a lot of conversations.” Daisy stared intensely at her friend. “You're lucky you're in my sacred place, and that you're my soul mate.”

“Soul mate? You may be giving me credit I don't deserve.”

“I think you proved it during the hurricane and with your words right now that we are molded from the same clay.”

“I keep bringing it up because it concerns me. I don't think I even have the capacity to murder someone, nor do most people.”

Daisy took a deep breath. “That's because no one has hit your trigger button yet. No one has hurt you that bad or made you feel you don't belong. What I did was self-defense.”

Irma shook her head and looked away. “I bet the people you murdered didn't feel that way.”

Daisy grew irritated. “Remember, you will have to leave my sacred place sometime.”

Irma remained unaffected. "I'm only doing the one thing Daisy Perlman has taught me, speaking my truth. And if you can't do that with your soul mate, who can you do it with?"

"I wish you would just let it go. Unlike you, I was not brought up with rules to follow. I only knew the spiritual teaching that came from these woods. I learned there were laws to restrain peoples' natural tendencies much later in life, *after* I learned to read. Before that, it was the law of the jungle. I had the same understanding of the world as Tarzan, not a learned person. That was the only book I read that I could really identify with the main character.

"Willy once told me that he could see my love of life no matter how much I tried to hide it. He made me understand that I was deprived of nothing, really, because I found all the mysteries the world had to offer me right here."

She twirled with her arms extended in her magical world. "Willy said if you can't find love in a person, just move on. That person has nothing to offer you. I guess we both had slightly innocent views of the world. But we were fumbling our way through life at the time, doing the best we could with what we knew. I only knew I wanted a world where people like me could roam without fear of being ridiculed or ostracized.

Daisy placed her hand on Irma's leg. "I know you won't believe me, but I did what I did out of love. People were perfectly safe with me if they

didn't force themselves on me or try to make me do something against my own will. When they did, I pushed back with an equal and opposite force. It's a law of physics. It's the law of the forest. But I'm not a murderer, because that was never my intention. I'm an equalizer.”

Daisy looked at Irma's awe-struck expression. It told her she could feel Daisy's power of the forest surging through herself. Everyone who ever met her seemed to feel the same thing.

Daisy was not feeling it, though. The more she had read, the more she questioned her own former behavior. She tried to let the beauty and simplicity of nature, once again, solve her problems. Try as she might, she couldn't eliminate from her mind the fact that she had murdered. She began to walk faster, leading Irma to trip on occasion. But Daisy continued to tell stories of the woods, at times, focusing intently, and at others, staring blankly into space.

“The world is not as bad as we think,” Daisy blurted. She looked at Irma, who registered no reaction. “I'm talking about that story you heard on TV, about the council up in Norris who want to remove our electricity and television.”

“Then you mean the world *is* as bad as we think,” Irma corrected her.

“No, I mean it's not. That council doesn't know if Marmalade is a

real town or just a bunch of squatters—which we are. But they're not evil, just going with what their limited knowledge tells them to do.”

“Maybe they should learn the facts before they go making decisions about other folks.”

“That's what *you're* here for. You're going to tell them the facts. It's all just part of the struggle of life. It's not that one's good and one's bad. You can't call the lion bad because he has a sheep in his mouth. It's just his nature.”

“Like it's my nature to make things right again.”

“And you *will* make things as right as these woods. If everyone followed their true nature, the world would immediately get better. Nothing can upset the balance you find here.”

“Well, that hurricane tried its best.”

“No matter what damage it did, the forest will work together to restore itself.” Daisy extended her two arms and let them float out in space in front of her. Irma seemed to understand she was taking in its vibration. Daisy was completely absorbed and in flow with her environment. Her awareness seemed infinite. “Evil simply can't exist here.”

Daisy tried her best to explain that the love, peace and comfort she should have received from a parent simply came from another place for her. All the things she had been denied in life had been waiting for her right here.

Daisy stopped suddenly and leaned over to brush the leaves from a delicate yellow flower. “Got to protect my namesake, the daisy, the hardiest of flowers.” She stared at it as if it were a miracle. “This little daisy needs nothing but water and sunshine. What it doesn't need is fancy clothes, an education and a trust fund. It doesn't need to think it's better than all the other daisies to feel good about itself. It doesn't have to claim credit for all its great accomplishments, nor does it blame any other creature for all the faults in the world. And you know what else? Its life will contribute as much to the world as yours will.”

Irma looked dumbstruck, like she was not certain if she'd just been insulted or complimented. But it was like that with so many of the things Daisy said.

“This daisy focuses only on what it needs to survive and bloom in its little corner of the forest. It doesn't concern itself with the hubbub around it. It trusts that the forest will work itself. It's happy just to have found its place in the bounty of life.”

“Why do you feel so sure that flower is happy?” It seemed Irma was ready to poke the bear. “It looks like it's listing a little.”

“You don't hear it complaining now, do you?” Daisy said, ignoring her sarcasm.

Irma leaned over and placed her ear near the flower. She whispered

to it, then looked at Daisy. "It says it doesn't like that elm." She pointed to the offending tree. "She says it blocks her sun."

Daisy generally did not take well to mockery, but she enjoyed it when it came from her friend. She plucked the flower from the ground and waved it in front of Irma's face. "First of all, this is a male plant, not a female."

"What makes you think that?"

Daisy smirked and playfully whacked Irma in the face with her flower. "See, it has the killer instinct."

"We all know who has the killer instinct around here. And you just killed a member of your precious forest family." Irma pointed at the limp flower in Daisy's hand.

"That's just it," she said, tossing the flower on the ground. "That flower doesn't even know it died, because everything here is so fully engaged in life. The forest just regenerates another flower, and all these dead branches from the hurricane will soon be new live growth. It even regenerated a little girl who had no one to love her."

Daisy grew tired and sat on a rock. Irma relaxed on a patch of grass beside her. Daisy's heart and mind were aligning so she could explain a very sensitive matter.

"So many times..." Daisy began and paused. "So many times, Mutta

tried to get rid of me. She liked me to go into the woods—said she hoped a lion would eat me. She didn't care when her tricks would touch me, just said she'd have to charge extra. No matter what I did, I got yelled at, and she never explained what I did wrong.

“I felt unwanted and worthless. I wanted to run away since I could walk but couldn't imagine where I would go. So, I always ran to the woods and hid there. It felt safe for a while, but I wasn't sure if I was more afraid of what went on in my house or what went on in these woods with those lions.

“One time, Mutta locked me out of the house all night. I knocked on the door as hard as I could—until my knuckles were bleeding, and I knew they heard me—because I could hear them laughing at me. I was just four at the time. I wailed for an hour at the top of my lungs, but no one came to help me. I hated them. I hated them so much I wanted them all to die. I ran to Mutta's still and grabbed her wooden matches. I learned how to strike them by watching her. I remember trying to light them so many times, but the wind kept blowing them out. I didn't care what would have happened if they didn't.

“The night kept getting darker, and I became more frightened. I couldn't stand the laughter I could still hear coming from the house. It meant they didn't care about me. That's when I realized I trusted the lions more than my own mutta, and I ran like crazy toward the trees. I could barely see the path, but I knew it by heart, so kept on going until I stumbled and fell into a

pile of leaves. I couldn't move, frozen from fear.

“The leaves had taken the chill from the night air and nestled me warmly. I said out loud, 'My forest friends won't hurt me.' I saw the glowing eyes of a hoot owl who sounded and kept an eye on me. There were some squirrels who dropped some walnuts by me. I wasn't sure if they were trying to feed me or simply couldn't carry their load. But I hadn't eaten in two days, so I grabbed a rock to crush the shells. I had to feel around in the darkness to find the nuts, but I still remember how good they tasted.”

Daisy checked to make sure Irma hadn't fallen asleep, but she was just lying there silently, taking it all in. “I could barely see a thing, but I felt the energy of the woods all around me, the shivering leaves, and insects and animals scurrying on their way, it felt like good energy. I realized the horrid laughter from Mutta's hut was bad energy—I made a distinction that would never leave me. I remember feeling, even back then, that maybe all of life was just blurry images, and that it was the energy that passed through things that was important.

“Maybe this will help you understand me, Irma. I always feel the energy of a person before I see them with my eyes. If it's not the peaceful energy of my forest, I pay no attention and move away. My woods have an intelligence all their own, beyond that of man, and that is what I abide by. Wherever you go in this world, Irma, if you can't find the truth around you,

you can always return here. The truth will be waiting for you.”

They rose and continued their walk in silence. There was no need for words as they both were filled with a higher power. Daisy walked without clearing brush from the path. She did stop by one pine tree and looked aghast at how the wind had sheared off all its branches on the north side. But she just shook her head and went on. When they left the woods, Daisy closed the door behind them.

When they reached the 7-Eleven, Daisy was surprised that the store had remained intact, save for some branches scattered through the parking lot. Irma reached down to pick up a torn, mud-covered coat from the ground.

“Looks like one of mine,” she said and tossed it away.

They turned the corner and immediately saw that the Salvation Army had been destroyed. Where it had once stood were just broken boards, scattered debris and random clothing hanging from the trees. Irma surveyed the devastation with a look on her face that showed she knew her fate was sealed.

Daisy harbored a thought that was festering in her mind. She touched Irma’s shoulder and spoke in an uncharacteristically timid and fearful voice. “You know, I regret what I did.” She looked away, cleared her throat and could not speak for a moment. “I’ve met confused people—I’ve met

people who were a little out of balance—But I never met one that was bad through and through. Once you know their story, you begin to understand them.” She sniffled and cried on Irma’s shoulder.

Irma comforted her and rubbed her back. She whispered in Daisy’s ear, “I forgive you.”

* Age 71 *

Daisy’s life slipped into depression after Irma left, and she suffered from loneliness for the next ten years. She never stepped into her beloved woods again. It would only make her think of Irma. It carried *her* vibration now. She was certain Irma was doing well in the new life she had chosen but could only see the mistakes she had made in her own life.

Her love of reading had taken an unexpected toll on her life. Each book showed her the series of ridiculous errors that made up her own life. The characters in each book she read constantly offered her new ways to view life, ways that didn’t need to kill to be effective.

The irony was that writing had shown her that there was an enormous following for her errant thoughts, that people literally fed off the horrible conclusions she had reached. It had not led her to the understanding of life she had hoped for, but only more confusion.

Still, her publisher called her weekly begging for more. For the first time in her life, she knew what it felt like to be wanted, and she liked the feeling. Her depression eased.

* Age 72 *

Daisy became a new woman with a writing career. The evil cloud that was her mother no longer affected her life. Her only problem now was deadlines, but when her publisher told her how her readers were praising her, she felt ecstatic.

Daisy had finally found a way to reach people without having to face them, and she loved it. She became obsessed with producing more pages and frequently forgot to eat. Her stomach growled, so she put her writing away and went to the cupboard. She realized that she had also forgotten to buy food, so she headed for the 7-Eleven.

Daisy remembered the 7-Eleven she had seen in Norris and laughed at the sign on this one which just had the numbers 7/11, painted by the owner's daughter. It hadn't seemed odd when she was growing up, but having seen a real one, she realized there were many clues that should have told her it was fake. For one thing, although it said 7/11, it was only open ten to four on weekdays. It wasn't even a real Slurpee machine, like she had

thought all her life, but closer examination revealed it to be an old frosty-freeze. It occurred to her that this store, like most things in Marmalade, was just an imitation of real life. But it still gave the local degenerates a place to hang out like a real 7-Eleven.

Daisy quickly scoured the aisles, grabbing every item she hungered for until she could hold no more. She dropped an armload of groceries on the counter: a bag of rice, two pounds of burger meat, a jar of sauce, bag of pork rinds and a gallon of cherry Hi-C. She looked around, as if searching for something.

“Can I help you?” the cashier asked.

“I was looking for that ice cream the local lady makes,” Daisy explained. “I think it’s called Remus or something.”

“That’s Reemers, best ice cream around. You must be celebrating.” She went into the back room.

“I want the one with the cherries and the chocolate chunks,” Daisy yelled after her.

“That’s the one I was getting, anyhow,” she said, holding it up high. “It’s the flavor everyone gets when they’re happy.”

Daisy eyed her suspiciously. “What makes you so damned sure I’m happy? Maybe I want ice cream because I’m depressed.”

“No, depressed people buy Ben & Jerry’s. Usually Chubby Hubby.

I've seen you before, lady, but never with a spring in your step or a happy expression. It's a new look for you. You should take advantage when your life is going well. Get a lottery ticket."

"I guess you could say I finally found myself," she said with a smirk, thinking of all her followers. "And sure, give me a Lotto. I've been buying the fucking things for forty years and wouldn't know what to do with the money if I won."

"You could always give it to the less fortunate," the cashier said with pleading eyes. Daisy snorted, unable to control her reaction. She wanted to laugh convulsively but knew that would create a scene. She had never heard a joke before, but she liked it.

The next day, she was 2.47 million dollars richer.

* two weeks later *

Daisy entered the First Trust Bank and saw Mr. Winkleman at his desk next to the large open vault. His eyes peered out from deep set holes. But he still seemed spry for ninety-two. He immediately rose to greet her, knowing as the whole town did that she had won the lotto. Daisy felt more confused than ecstatic.

“Congratulations, Daisy.” He pointed to the chair in front of his desk, and she sat down. “You’ve come to the right place. I wouldn’t want you to lose your fortune inside of a year like so many lottery winners.”

“You’re the only one I can trust. I don’t even trust myself, not ever having too much cash.”

“Have you thought about what you would like to do with the money?” Mr. Winkleman looked about for his secretary and called out, “Violet.”

Violet emerged from the restroom and immediately ran over to congratulate her. As she extended her arms to embrace Daisy, Mr. Winkleman cautioned her, “Violet, please, Daisy does not like to be touched. Just fetch us some coffee, please.”

“Yes, sir. Ma’am, how do you like your coffee?”

“I like Pepsi,” she responded. “Do you have biscuits?”

“Violet,” Mr. Winkleman cut in. “Just bring me a regular coffee and Miss Perlman a Pepsi and some Lorna Doones from the break room.”

“Yes, sir.” She left quickly, and Mr. Winkleman focused his full attention on Daisy.

“I’ve thought some about what I’d like to do with the money,” Daisy offered. “I’d like to buy a big house...like yours.”

“A house like ours would be far too big for you. It has eighteen bedrooms and ten baths. Why would you need all that?”

“Sir.” She stopped, surprising herself. She had never heard a man addressed as ‘sir’ except on TV, and certainly never called any man ‘sir’ herself. That would require that she respected them. But she did respect this man and felt very satisfied with herself for using the term. “Sir, I had fancied myself opening a rest home. You know, for the sick and elderly.” Mr. Winkleman’s eyes brightened.

“That’s a very noble objective,” he began. “Using your money to help others. Help them when they’re down.”

“I would like them to have a chance to see the light before they die,” was her enigmatic response.

Mr. Winkleman offered a warm smile. “Would you like me to contact a real estate agent? Do you have a preferred location?”

“I could never leave this town. I want it on the same narrow strip of land where your house is.” Violet came over and popped the top on the Pepsi, laid it along with three Lorna Doones in front of Daisy and handed the coffee to her boss. “Anything else?”

“That’s fine. Please give us a moment.” Violet left, and Daisy shoved two cookies in her mouth. Mr. Winkleman rubbed his brow, as if in deep thought.

“Would you consider buying *my* property?” he finally asked.

Daisy looked dumbfounded as she wiped several crumbs from her

chin. "That's my favorite house in the whole world. But where would you and Mrs. Winkleman live?"

"You would be doing us a favor. We're getting old. Mrs. Winkleman was diagnosed with breast cancer a month ago and will have to go to Shands for treatment. We'll be moving to Jacksonville."

"I'm sorry to hear that." She frowned. "But the house is yellow. I couldn't live in a yellow house," Daisy explained.

"You can make it any color you choose with your money."

"You're right, sir. I forgot. It's just so hard to believe I'm really rich and can do anything I want now."

"I understand, Daisy. I was born in the projects, so I know what you're feeling. My house comes with a staff of seven, so you won't have to worry about meeting new people to hire. It also has a trustworthy accountant who can help you manage your affairs, a groundskeeper, a dietitian, and four housekeepers. I can inform them that you like people to keep their distance. The head housekeeper, Lucy, is just like you in many ways. She runs the staff with an iron fist."

"Lucy, you say?" Daisy looked up with renewed interest.

"Yes. She can be your confidant, the only one you'll ever have to speak to. Like you, she never looks anyone in the eye and gets violent if you touch her. She also has a working knowledge of drugs to calm down your residents,

if necessary. Her father was a chemist. My wife hated the way she distanced herself from others, but you may understand her better.”

“I like her already,” Daisy said. “Tell her to have the house painted purple before I get there.”

* Age 72 *

Daisy looked up at the purple Victorian mansion and had trouble believing it was really hers. Lucy came down the porch steps and walked over to meet her, stopping a good three feet from Daisy.

Daisy nodded, unsure of the new feeling that pervaded her whole body. It was serenity. It was peace. It was gratefulness. For the first time in her life, she felt comfortable in her own skin.

The frail woman held her hand out but didn't look directly at Daisy when she addressed her. “My name is Lucy. You have my complete allegiance. I hope the paint color is satisfactory.”

Daisy stared at the magnificent structure she had admired all her life, save for its color. She finally said, “Who added the gold trim?”

“I did, ma’am,” Lucy said. “I think a Victorian should have a certain stately look.”

“I’m glad you can think on your own. It's beautiful. I think I'll call it

Serenity House. But don't call me ma'am. Work with me awhile and see for yourself if I deserve your respect."

Lucy looked at her oddly as if that shouldn't be necessary. Then she responded, "From what Mr. Winkleman said, you're just like me, and I do respect myself."

Daisy nodded in approval. "That's a good start. I can't wait to see the inside."

They walked up the steps and through an eight-foot walnut door with an enormous brass handle. Daisy stood in awe. The room was the largest enclosed space she had ever seen. It had to be twenty feet wide and forty feet long with ceilings that were twice the height necessary. Two attendants entered the room, lowering their heads and avoiding Daisy's gaze when they passed her.

"I see you've spoken to the staff," Daisy said. "I think we'll get along fine." Lucy smiled and looked at the ground.

Daisy noticed six different seating areas in the room, each with its own beautiful furniture, antique and yet still brand new. Not a rip. Not a tear. There was no other new furniture to be found in Marmalade. Her own couch had sat on two wobbly legs and four bricks. And there, in the center seating area, was the largest TV she had ever seen. Her own TV was a nineteen-inch black and white Philco, but this one had full-sized people in living color. Lucy let her

stare at it for a minute or two.

“Do you like that television?” Lucy asked. “I could have one installed in your bedroom.”

“No, thanks. I don’t think I’d ever be able to go to sleep again.”

At the far end of the room was a long bar that served sodas and snacks. Daisy admired its brass rail and ornate stools. “Have this turned into a real bar and stock it with whatever our residents prefer to imbibe.”

“Do you think that's wise?” Lucy protested. “How will we ever keep order?”

Daisy did not answer but looked at her defiantly. Daisy waited until Lucy averted her eyes. “I thought you had ways of controlling the residents.”

Lucy offered a reassuring nod. “I’ll do whatever you say. Never doubt my loyalty. I can subdue any unruly guests. I have my methods.” She pulled a syringe out of her pocket only far enough for Daisy’s eyes to see. She winked.

Daisy smiled. Lucy led her down a long hall with men’s and ladies’ rest rooms on the left and an office for Daisy on the right. Lucy nodded toward a door. They entered the office, and Daisy ran over to the magnificent mahogany desk that sat in front of a wall of bookcases. She gazed at all the books that Mrs. Winkleman had left behind. She wondered if she could read that many books in a lifetime.

“There’s only one more room on this level, the chapel.” She led Daisy

to the end of the hall and they entered a circular room.

“How could they even build a room like this?” Daisy asked. “Wood isn’t round.”

“Didn’t you see the turret on the right side of the house? We’re inside that now.”

The room was about nine feet in diameter. It contained only two easy chairs with a small table between them, facing an altar. A cross with a man on it hung above.

“What is that?” Daisy asked, pointing at the cross.

“That’s Jesus,” Lucy said. “He died for our sins.”

“Well, I don’t know that it worked. People keep sinning.”

“It’s just a symbol. It doesn’t really stop people—”

“There’s a symbol I’d like painted on the floor.”

* Age 73 *

A gentle chime rang in the residents’ rooms and a soothing feminine voice sang, “Rise and join us to greet Mr. Sun.” Daisy was very strict with her rules and required that all residents start each day appreciating the miracle that is life outdoors. They all struggled to put on a robe and laboriously shuffled out to the front porch. The first twenty got rockers, and five strolled

about aimlessly.

Daisy pointed at a spot of light on the horizon, lighting the waves like diamonds. As the brilliance increased, individual waves could be seen dancing in harmony.

“Behold the mystery that is life,” she said theatrically, extending her arms and breathing deeply. “The sun’s light will soon illuminate our world. It is one of life’s greatest miracles, yet we take it for granted. We are given another day that none of us should ignore. Look at the world around you. It is perfection.

“The trees, the waves, the wind, and the sun live in perfect harmony. They give their all to everyone, but only so many people take the time to appreciate it. The sun shines on the good as well as the bad. The wind carries the breath of an evil man into the lungs of a good man. The trees take our carbon dioxide and turn it into oxygen. They give their gifts freely. They each perform the task nature created them to do without questioning who will reap the benefit. The sea reminds us that we are each just a wave on this ocean of life. Take a deep breath with me.”

They all obeyed. The sun rose slightly above the horizon.

Daisy raised her arms to the heavens, wiggling her fingers to resemble sunbeams, and those who could raise their arms mirrored her.

“Oh, sacred day, we are so grateful for your oxygen to fill our lungs,

your sun to light up our lives, your firmament to walk upon and another day of sacred life. We acknowledge the magic you bring into our lives, a world of mystery and infinite surprise. We are not worthy.”

“We are not worthy,” the residents chorused.

“I want you all to scream 'I love you' out loud, not to any one person or thing, but to the entirety of life, for the privilege of allowing you to live another day.”

“I love you,” they all shouted, somewhat out of sync.

“Now that we have acknowledged the sacredness of life, we can face the day with an open heart. Amen.”

“Amen,” they all chanted quickly, knowing breakfast was to follow.

* Age 73 *

"Manny, I've got another one." Daisy never felt the need to identify herself on the phone.

"You're gonna make me rich, Daisy, the way you turn them out," Manny the Mortician, as the locals knew him, said. "Who is it this time, the arsonist?"

"No, the pedophile, the one who raped his daughter for seven years, from seven to fourteen, when she was finally big enough to fight back. She came in

yesterday to forgive him."

"People who take advantage of the weak are the worst sort, and they always seem to live a long time. And I'll bet the traumatized girl will live out her life in therapy."

"Maybe she will at least sleep easier, now—knowing he's dead," Daisy conceded.

"I'll pick up the body in an hour."

"Thanks, Manny."

Daisy hung up the phone and sighed. Manny was the closest thing she had to a friend besides Lucy. That was because he respected her personal space and spoke to her mostly on the phone. He had learned early that she had a shorter temper when spoken to in person, so he kept out of her way. He removed the bodies through a back door. He also enjoyed his privacy and would do nothing to jeopardize the income she provided him.

Daisy was not one to trust others. Her upbringing had seen to that.

* Age 73 *

Daisy rose at 2 a.m. for her nightly ablutions. She was having trouble falling asleep again and hoped there would be some stragglers at the bar she could chat with. Finding none, she went behind the bar and

grabbed her canteen filled with strawberry hooch. She unscrewed the top and took a long draw.

Daisy was growing unsure of herself and her methods. She took another slug of liquid courage and wished that someone might join her. Only two months of operation and already four residents had been killed. Frustrated, she took a glass off the shelf and smashed it on the floor.

A sluggish Lucy, her short hair ruffled, with well-worn slippers and robe encasing her, wandered into the room to investigate the noise. She rubbed her eyes and turned on the light.

“Didn't mean to wake you,” Daisy said, adjusting her eyes to the light. “Just came out to have a snort and made a terrible mess.”

“Let me help you clean up,” Lucy insisted and walked around the end of the bar.

“I'll get the mess. You have a seat. You're just the person I want to talk to.”

“Me, ma'am?” Lucy cringed in her seat. She seemed to distrust when anyone superior to her wanted to talk.

Daisy rose from cleaning the broken glass and noticed that Lucy looked ill at ease. “You have no need to worry. Your position is secure here. Can I get you something to drink?”

“That's not my drug of choice,” Lucy said.

Daisy considered the statement for a moment and shot a look of distrust.

“It's not that I'm so pure or anything,” she explained. I have my own methods for easing the strains of life.” She pulled a small vial filled with white powder, uncapped it and inhaled it quickly. “Can I interest you?”

Daisy skewered her eyes on the vial as if it contained Satan himself, then slowly smiled. “I guess we have different methods towards the same goal. I should have guessed from the drugs you already provided—”

Lucy raised her head and spoke in a meek voice, “My father had a pharmacy. I adored the man, watched him mix his chemicals, followed him everywhere—then one day I saw him taking one of the drugs he made. It changed his personality. He began to yell at my mother, and then one day, he broke her jaw. I took his side because he was stronger. I was always fearful, but I never forgave myself. My mother died later that year, and I never had a chance to say I was sorry.”

“Sometimes we get things wrong in our heads. I've been having second thoughts lately.”

“You said if I gave you access to those drugs, you would never

bring it up again.”

Daisy took a long drink from her canteen. “I know what I promised, but when I said it, we hadn't killed four residents—”

“We? I just provided the drugs. I didn't force anyone to take them.”

“Neither did I. We just leave their personal demon next to them and know they'll go for it. It's still leaving a lump in my throat, like I did something wrong.”

Lucy fidgeted in her seat. “Why this sudden burst of conscience? I believe in your ability to detect evil in people. I believe in everything you stand for.”

Daisy looked down at her canteen but pushed it away. “It's Mrs. Winkleman's books. I've been devouring as many as I can. They make me see things differently. I'm not as sure as I once was that the final decision should be mine.”

“What about your plan to eradicate evil *before* the evil dies? It *would* be a better world if people knew there was a woman like you who could see into their heart and mind and expose their secrets at any time.”

Daisy looked away. “I'm not so sure we're doing it in the right way anymore. The books have shown me that there are many ways to look at everything, and that's why you shouldn't be so quick to judge.

Had I been in that person's skin, I might have reacted the same way. I'm beginning to see myself in the people I've killed. I'm beginning to believe there was even goodness in my mother. I just couldn't see it." She held her head with both hands, as if it might explode.

"You said 'mother'. You always say 'Mutta'."

"I feel myself changing. Maybe I'm ready to forgive her."

"But then evil gets away with it," Lucy said. "And you watch it happen repeatedly in your life, and you live your life hating that nobody does anything about it. When *you* finally came along, that lifetime of putting up with shit was over. You provided the hope and strength I had searched for all my life. Finally, people don't have to wait until death to face justice. Daisy Perlman has arrived, and there will be justice *now* that you can see."

Daisy grabbed her canteen and downed it. She looked in disbelief at the woman who praised her. "Is that really how you see me, as some kind of savior?"

"Of course, ma'am. You are a beacon of truth in a world that couldn't save itself."

"Then let's pretend this conversation never happened."

Daisy spoke into her phone's intercom. "Lucy, have Mr. Hoffman prepared for the Serenity Room at 9 a.m. tomorrow. His favorite drink is an Absolute martini, dry, three olives."

"He'll be prepped and ready," Lucy confirmed.

There was a spiritual connection between the two. Combining their talents had created a justice system unlike any the world had seen before. Daisy had written about a witch named Lucy. Maybe she was prescient. Daisy had always felt she had angels that visited her after her mother had one of her episodes. She wondered if Lucy had ever read her books but felt sure she would have told her if she had. There was one thing about Lucy of which Daisy was certain in her heart and mind. She was extremely loyal.

Lucy, like Daisy, did not have a lot of people she could count on in this world. Her body held no strength. She was a waif at ninety-seven pounds. Her short black hair was cut badly. Her nose had an odd bend to it, and her mouth and eyes were far too small. But there was incredible strength inside of her that only Daisy could see.

They spoke to each other in short sentences, understanding the other's meaning before words. Lucy had once explained to Daisy that angels speak in short sentences and that there were all kinds of angels. That was the only thing she ever said that Daisy did not fully understand.

* * *

Mr. Hoffman followed Lucy into the Serenity Room at 9 a.m. She sat him in one of the two chairs and pointed to a martini on the table in between. “In case you need refreshment—”

“Well, it’s early but what the hay.” He lifted the glass and took a sip. “Just the way I like it, the right vodka, a wave of vermouth and three olives.”

“Daisy likes to keep her residents happy,” Lucy said. “That’s why she set up a bar in the first place. She feels it’s the only medication you need after a certain age.”

“I was meaning to tell her to keep it open twenty-four hours a day.”

“You can mention it to her. She’ll be in shortly.” Lucy nodded her head and left.

Mr. Hoffman looked around. On the table, next to his martini, was a tall water glass. He wondered if it was water or Daisy's hooch but didn't bother to smell it. What attracted his attention the most was the design painted on the floor. There was a black border around the perimeter and a wavy line bisecting the design. One side white and the other black. But the black side had a white dot in it and the white side, a black dot. He found it intriguing, but finally decided it was just an odd design choice.

Mr. Hoffman glanced at the altar with the cross above it. There he saw an object he recognized, Jesus on the cross, died for our sins, the son of God. He remembered the story. He thought that Jesus should have fared better, being the son of God. He missed the message.

Next to the altar stood an old dirty broom. The sight of it revolted him. It did not belong in this setting and he wondered why Lucy hadn't removed it before she left.

* * *

Daisy entered the room at 9:07. She sat in the seat next to Mr. Hoffman and jotted something down on her clipboard. When she looked up, Mr. Hoffman waved his martini glass to signify he was ready for another.

"Not now, Mr. Hoffman," Daisy said. "Do you know why I called you in here?"

"I assumed it was my comment to the bartender about keeping the bar open twenty-four hours," he replied. "I was hoping you were considering it."

"We have Patrick tending bar from five to twelve p.m.," Daisy said. "But the liquor is never locked up. You may pour yourself a drink anytime."

"Wish someone had told me that when I moved in." Again, he waved his glass feverishly in Daisy's face, and this time, she slapped it fiercely from

his hand, smashing it against the far wall.

"Do we understand each other now?" Daisy glared at him.

Mr. Hoffman locked eyes with hers. He attempted to rise from his chair but was paralyzed. He felt his heart spasm and sat back down.

"What have you done to me, you witch?" he managed, gasping.

"You know, Mr. Hoffman, when we're growing up, everything seems fun. Then one day, we find ourselves grown up. The only reason you know you've matured is that you suddenly realize at whose expense the fun really was."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Daisy, I've always been good to you." His chest constricted, and he spit and dribbled as he spoke.

"Don't worry," she said calmly. "We have at least five more minutes."

"What do you mean, Daisy?"

"Do you think you led a good life, Mr. Hoffman?"

"I always did what I had to do, good, bad or indifferent."

She leaned in closer to his face. "Do you take responsibility for all your actions?"

"I can't undo any of them, so what's the point?"

"Have you ever apologized for a mistake you made?"

"A real man doesn't have to explain—"

"We have control over so little in our lives," Daisy continued, ignoring

him. "Basically, what we think and how we act. And we're each responsible for just those two things. But some people refuse to take responsibility for their own thoughts or actions, and it creates a great imbalance in their lives, and in the lives of others. You see, Mr. Hoffman, the point of life is to bring forth everything good that's within you to the surface, so you can see who you really are, the truth of yourself. It is important for your own spiritual growth to realize this before you die."

"Why do you keep mentioning death, you ghoul?" He began to sweat profusely.

"Do you see the symbol painted on the floor, Mr. Hoffman? It's called a yin-yang. It represents the balance in life."

Mr. Hoffman was completely immobile. He attempted to speak but only gurgled.

"Please don't try to move. It will only make it worse. The lidocaine will cause occasional seizures, but the muscle relaxant won't allow you to move. I like it when men like you are conscious but immobile. It makes it so much easier to get your full attention. You see, Mr. Hoffman, I was born with only one power in life. And that is, since I was seven years old, I could recognize evil in people. I know how it moves. I know how it thinks. I know how it smells."

Daisy rose and walked behind Mr. Hoffman. She took his head and

aimed his eyes downward to see the yin-yang. "You see that it is half white and half black with a wavy line between. Imagine that the white side is the good in life and the black side, bad. Also notice that the good side waves into the bad and vice versa, and each contains a circle of the other."

Daisy walked over and stood upon the black circle on the white side. "This is the one final piece of the puzzle, the dark spot that must be eradicated from your life before you can be saved." She moved back behind him and lifted his head to aim his eyes at the broom. "I'm sure you don't recall this item. It's just an ordinary broom."

His eyes bulged from his head and sweat beaded on his forehead. "It was once owned by your niece, Anna. She wrote me a very long and personal letter about why you belonged in this institution. Let me summarize it for you because we haven't much time. Anna claims that you came to her house one day when she was fifteen and all alone, you said you didn't like her being a lesbian, you claimed that doesn't happen in your family. And you slapped and pushed her repeatedly until she fell backwards down the stairs."

Mr. Hoffman's body shuddered. He appeared to be straining to shut his eyes.

"But that wasn't enough, was it? You ran to the closet and grabbed a broom, this very broom." Daisy took the broom and placed it on his lap. She pointed at the brown stain on the handle. "This is Anna's blood, after you

shoved this broom through her panties deep into her vagina. It caused internal bleeding and emotional scars that will never be undone.

“She did eventually recover some fifteen painful years later and became a successful lawyer. She brought you here because she didn't want the law system she worked for to judge you. They were too gentle. She wanted something much more direct and severe, the kind of thing you did to her, Daisy's brand of justice. She told me to make certain that this broom would be the last thing you see before you die.”

A single tear welled up in his left eye but hadn't the strength to fall. He shuddered once, and then his head fell upon the broom. The door opened, and Lucy stood there with a hand truck and a body bag.

* Age 73 *

Meg Harrington and Bruce Hand bickered loudly at the bar at 2 a.m. Daisy got out of bed, put on a robe and went to investigate.

Bruce had Meg's head firmly lodged in his left armpit while he fondled her breast with his other hand. Daisy lifted his arm to free Meg.

“Are you two fighting or fucking?” Daisy demanded. “Whichever it is, it's going to get you both cut off.”

“No, please, don't do that,” Meg said. “I was just telling Bruce I

thought he had enough to drink. He put me in a headlock and said he could only think of one other thing I was good for. That's when you found us."

"There's nothing else to do here, 'cept drink and screw," Mr. Hand said in his defense.

"What's wrong with the people in this place, anyway?" Meg asked. "They're not normal. It's like you combed the earth to find the most ornery and sadistic madmen and brought them all here."

"You were all sent here by a member of your family," Daisy said.

"Then why is it that none of us have any knowledge of the family member who sent us?" Meg asked.

"And why do none of us remember being transported here?" Bruce asked.

"Yes, we all just woke up here one day," Meg said. "It's like that show—you know—"

"*The Twilight Zone*," Bruce offered.

Daisy walked behind the bar, pulled out her flask of strawberry hooch and took a long sip. "You were all specially chosen, believe me."

"The people I've met here are all scumbags," Bruce asserted. "They're liars and cheats, they all got something to hide, and that's just the ones willing to tell their secrets."

"Do you keep any secrets, Bruce?" She looked at him with the

devil's eyes. "Don't make me bring up your role in the big war."

Meg 's eyes filled with suspicion. "What were you, an S.S. Agent? That's what you act like, you know." He took a swat at Meg, intercepted by Daisy. She twisted his arm behind his back.

"Think you can fight like a man? Well, we'll see about that," Hand said, pulling his arm away from her. "What I did in the past, I did because there was a war on. I was just following orders. I am a different person now."

Meg looked at Bruce in horror. "What the hell am *I* doing here? I worked for animal rescue."

"The truth is, both of you are masters of mass extermination." Daisy screwed the cap back on her flask and set it on the shelf. "I want you both to meet me in the Serenity Room next Monday at ten a.m., and I will set all your fears to rest."

* Age 73 *

"Hi, Manny," Daisy spoke into the phone.

"Please don't tell me you've got another one," he said. "My business has doubled since you opened Serenity House. Twenty-five from you alone and only twenty-three from the whole town."

"You can make that twenty-seven. Two more unfortunate

events last night.”

“Let me guess, the S.S. Agent and the animal mutilator.” Daisy laughed at his understanding. “I don’t know whether to thank you for the business or start an investigation.”

Daisy grew silent, creating an awkward pause. “Good thing there’s no one in town who could perform an autopsy,” she finally said.

“Daisy, *I* can do autopsies. I know the cause of death in every case. It’s lidocaine.”

Daisy considered her next words. “Manny, I do not poison my guests. Maybe it’s Lucy. I’ll have to inves—”

“Daisy, stop! Don’t you have a character in your books named Lucy who kills the evil residents in her nursing home?”

Daisy wished Manny were in the room with her, so she could end this madness immediately. “I had no idea anyone in Marmalade read my books. I’m flattered, really.” She did not know what to say after that and waited.

Manny took his time answering. “You’d be surprised. It’s not that I’m judging you. I’m quite captivated by your concept. Imagine getting rid of the evil in the world by destroying its real source, people.”

Daisy realized the jig was up and pleaded, “Manny. You’re not going to turn me in, are you? I’ve questioned if I have the right to do

what I'm doing. I know making the final decision might be God's domain."

"That's just the point," Manny said. "Not everyone believes in God. Or they think He's a spirit that's just watching us. There is no guarantee of retribution in that case."

"Now I can't tell if you're praising or condemning me. Just tell me if you're going to turn me in or not."

"No, Daisy, I'm not. This town is protected from the rest of the world," he told her. "And you're the most direct, honest, straight-shooting woman I've ever met. I'm just telling you I know the truth to be straight with you."

"It's just that you got something on me, and I have nothing on you. How can you be sure I won't come after you?"

"Because I'm going to trust you with a secret of my own."

"What secret could you have? Your life is an open book. I never met a more upright, decent fellow."

"The secret is deep inside me. It hasn't happened yet."

"How can you have a secret that hasn't happened yet?"

"It's more of a secret that *must* be kept just between me and you."

"Don't be so mysterious, Manny. It's not your way. You got me

nervous, and you should never mess with an unbalanced woman. Just spit it out.”

“Daisy, I'd like you to care for my Uncle Ernie at Serenity House.”

* Age 73 *

It was a beautiful day and the residents were outside if not confined to their rooms. Daisy sat alone at the bar, an empty flask laying before her. She wished Lucy were there to comfort her, but she was outside tending the residents like a shepherd.

She was alone with her thoughts, a dangerous place to be. She no longer believed in what she was doing, not completely, anyhow. Daisy wasn't even certain she could explain to Lucy what she was feeling. Lucy saw her as strong, but she felt like an empty shell.

She imagined just blurting out the truth to Lucy, but that hadn't worked so well with Manny. She worried that would just add one more person to whom she admitted her crimes, one more that could turn against her.

But Lucy was different than Manny. She knew from the beginning what was going on. Lucy supported and believed in her with undying loyalty. Daisy knew she could never have accomplished what she did without her. But would she just be letting her down if she expressed these current feelings to her?

Her feelings included a newfound love for Lucy. It had just crept up on her. She had felt it only once before—with Irma, but it left when Irma went away. She wanted that feeling back.

Lucy would be with her forever, unlike Irma, and she didn't want to damage the relationship before it began. She decided not to change her ways for the moment, but to carry on with the termination of Bruce and Meg. She could deal with her insecurities later.

* Age 73 *

Daisy sat at her desk, receiver pressed against her ear. “Hi, Manny. Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“Never a bad time to hear from you, Daisy,” Manny said.

“How's my favorite corpse maker?”

“Having another moral crisis.”

“You're too old for morals. Whatever you've done, you've done. The only one who can judge you now is God. And from what I've heard, you don't play that game.”

Daisy remained silent for a moment. “It's just that I read a few books by people who do believe. They've got me thinking—”

“Daisy, you read too many books. Besides, it's never too late to

change your way of thinking. I'm an old man and I've changed the way I look at things a thousand times. I have no idea if the God I believe in really exists."

"But now I think there must be a God," Daisy protested.

"Well, this is a new one for you. You're saying you're sure?"

"I'm saying I need one. Tomorrow, Mr. Higgins is scheduled for the Serenity Room. I hate this man as much as the rest. They found twelve prostitutes buried on his property—"

"Sounds like a worthy candidate."

"All the times I've tried to talk to him, I could never get through. But there's something about him—I think he's exactly like me."

"I don't think you have twelve dead bodies on your property."

"No, mine are all in your funeral home. There's no difference. He believed he was punishing the wicked, just like me. But seeing it in him led me to realize I shouldn't be placing final judgment. That must belong to a God. I also require a God for atonement. No man can forgive my sins." She began to sob, and Manny respected the pause.

"If you have sinned, then I am also a part of it," Manny finally said. "I can't forgive your sins, but I can tell you that you are only human, and humans make mistakes."

"I appreciate your comforting, but it doesn't help much. You

shouldn't make mistakes with other people's lives, just your own."

"So where does that leave you? What do you intend to do tomorrow?"

"I can't tell you. That's why I called. I'm at an impasse. You're the only one I can trust with a decision like this."

"Then I say don't kill him." Manny paused for effect. "It sounds like you finally met your match. I would marry him."

Daisy snorted. "Why is it you're the only one who can make me laugh when I'm in the pits of hell?"

"I don't know why you're comparing yourself to him. He has some weird sexual fetish that led him to kill the girls when he was done using them. You should want him dead most of all."

Daisy laughed. "I saw that right away when you suggested I marry the man. You have a way of shedding new light on things."

"Is there anything else I can help you with?" Manny asked. "I'm a little bit busy with Mrs. Mortimer here."

"No, you've been a big help. I know what I have to do."

* Age 73 *

Daisy awakened with a start. *Why did I tell Manny that I knew*

what to do? I'm more lost than ever. I haven't slept.

She got out of bed, threw on her robe and wandered out into the hall. She headed straight for the bar, as was her habit, and pulled out her flask. This time, she just stared at it. This time, it didn't hold the answer to her problem. She put her flask away unopened and continued to roam.

She stood outside of Lucy's bedroom and raised her hand to knock but could not. A flood of thoughts and emotions seized her, and she sobbed softly, trying to avoid a panicked cry. She raised her hand to knock again, but it fell limply by her side. She knew that what plagued her was her problem alone to solve, and it shouldn't be placed on the shoulders of one as frail as Lucy.

The door creaked open, and Lucy stood yawning in old pajamas with her hair sticking up on one side. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"I couldn't sleep again," Daisy replied. "I'm having one conscience attack after another."

"Would you like to talk?"

"It's either talk or explode." Daisy followed her into the room.

Lucy sat on the side of her bed and patted the mattress next to her for Daisy to take a seat. Daisy complied and looked nervously about

the sparsely furnished room. "I think I should turn myself in," she finally said and exhaled. Her empty eyes implored Lucy to give the okay.

"It's a fine time to decide this when you know there's a termination tomorrow morning."

"I can't go through with it. You'll have to do it."

"You know I've never had your courage."

"Sometimes courage is just stupidity, and stupid people are sure everything they do is right. I thought that the way I saw the world was the only way to see it, and everyone should see it the way I did. But as I got older and opened my mind to new ideas, I'm now left with only doubt." Daisy slumped over and began to sob.

Lucy placed her arm about Daisy's shoulder and pulled her back to sitting upright. "You only did what you knew how to do at the time. There's so much more to this life than what we can know. Nobody's sure what's right or wrong, and this is no time to lose your edge. When I met you, my whole life changed. I no longer felt powerless. I finally met a woman who was like me, except that she had the strength and a plan."

Daisy smiled, barely. "I felt the same when I met you. I thought, finally a woman I can relate to, who can be a real partner that I can be honest with." She hugged her friend, a gesture Lucy hadn't expected, and they both fell back on the bed with one arm around each

other, talking to the ceiling.

“This is no time to lose your edge,” Lucy said. “Let’s face it, gals like us weren’t meant to be seen. We don’t come from good families, haven’t got the smarts or the looks—”

Daisy tugged hard on a lock of Lucy’s hair. She smiled and said, “Where exactly are you going with this?”

“I just mean we were designed to work behind the scenes, doing the dirty work. No one likes to look at their mistakes. We do what we can to make the world better, using what little we have, in whatever way we can.”

Daisy looked at her quizzically. “It’s not about our smarts or our looks, though. It’s about doing the right thing when we *do* know better. All that time, I just wanted someone to blame for my lousy life because I was suffering so. I learned early on in life that I couldn’t trust people who had evil within them. And if I couldn’t trust them and I couldn’t control them, I simply decided to kill them. I know it was immature now. I guess I did it because I was frightened of a life in which I had no control—”

Lucy put a finger to Daisy’s lips. “No one is blaming you, Daisy. When your mind can’t figure out what to do, your heart gives the final say. You are not an evil person.” She kissed Daisy on the top of her

short orange curls. Then she kissed her lightly on the lips. Daisy did not resist.

“I just wish I could go back and not kill all those people. It was so easy to do because a part of me was already dead. But I don't want to live in a world with loose cannons like me running around in it. I could have simply let these people go on with their lives and just stayed away from them.”

Lucy looked aghast at Daisy, and for the first time, with doubt in her eyes. “That doesn't get rid of the evil in them,” she said. “When you were young, your mother took advantage of an innocent kid who didn't have the knowledge or ability to fight back. You ran away from your mother at sixteen because it was the only way to get her off your back. But you were still bothered by it all those years. You still had to return to satisfy that itch. Evil doesn't go away on its own until someone strong like you stand in its way.”

Daisy thought for a while. Then she rolled over on top of Lucy and planted a big wet kiss upon her lips. “I hate that you always see right through me. Even though I know what I'm doing is wrong, I still feel compelled to do it. There's an energy and a freedom that disappears from your life in being civilized. I know it's the only way. I'm not sure what I was thinking.”

“You were never meant to follow the rules.” Lucy returned Daisy's kiss with a more passionate one of her own. “You were never meant to be civilized. You were meant to be wild.” She grabbed Daisy's breasts and jiggled them crazily.

“You're the only one who understands,” Daisy said.

Daisy unwrapped herself from Lucy's grasp and stood up. She walked toward the door.

“Don't leave me, Daisy. Not now. Not when everything feels so right,” Lucy pleaded. “I didn't mean to—”

“I was just going to turn out the lights.”

* the next morning *

Daisy got out of bed and left the house very quietly so as not to wake Lucy. She wanted to make it to the Winkleman Bank promptly at eight when it opened.

Mr. Winkleman was unlocking the front door when she arrived. “Well, hello, Daisy. What brings you by so early in the morning?”

“I was hoping you could help me with something.”

“Come on in.” He led her to his desk, but she didn't take a seat.

“You seem nervous, Daisy.”

“Not so much nervous as confused. Can't explain it, just a bad feeling. I want to know about that thing you set up for when you die.”

“You mean a will?”

“I think so. It says who your personal belongings go to after you die.”

“Yes. That's a will.” Mr. Winkleman seemed concerned.

“Do you mind if I ask why this suddenly concerns you?”

“We all die, you know.”

“Yes. I know. But not today.”

“You never know. Sometimes I get dark feelings and it's best to be prepared. Didn't you leave your stuff to your wife?”

“Of course.”

“Then why would it be any different for me?”

“Absolutely no difference.” He settled himself at his desk and pulled some papers from his top drawer. “Tell me, Daisy, how would you like your property distributed?”

“To Lucy Farkel. All of it.”

Lucy awakened with a start at 8:30. Still embraced in afterglow, she felt the bed for the one woman in her life who had professed love for her. She hadn't thought it possible, to be loved.

She grabbed a robe and searched the house but couldn't find Daisy. An aid told her Daisy had gone to the bank. She went back to her room, put on her dress and paced back and forth. She grew anxious when she realized she was uncertain as to what Daisy expected her to do with Mr. Higgins. Kill or not kill. She wasn't strong like Daisy. She couldn't make that decision herself.

Lucy led Mr. Higgins into the Serenity Room at 9:55 in the morning. She remembered not to touch the man or get him agitated in any way. Lucy pointed to the seat. He obliged.

She brought his drink to him. She thought what she was doing was what Daisy would have wanted. She managed to go through the motions as she had always done.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” Lucy asked.

“Just tell me what this cockamamie meeting is all about, and don't give me no shit,” he demanded. “I've been here two years and never had to report to the principal's office before.”

“Daisy just likes to speak with the residents on occasion. I'm

sure it's just routine.”

“I think it's something more than that. I think Daisy knows that I figured out what's really going on here.”

Lucy tapped her fingers nervously against her arms. “And what is that exactly, Mr. Higgins?”

Daisy arrived back from the bank five minutes late and could not find Lucy. She stared at the closed door of the Serenity Room and could hear Mr. Higgins mumbling inside. She felt relieved that Lucy had followed through with the plan. She could always count on her.

Still, she didn't want to do what she had to do. Evil lurked in that space. She felt compelled to face it but wondered why. Who had appointed her to make the world right? Everyone had some evil in them. Why did she have to be the one to decide when that evil surpassed the good—when its vessel had to be destroyed?

Death was the only cure for evil. She wasn't sure if she believed in a god, but she knew that if he were real, he would want her to be his avenging angel. It was not a responsibility that she wanted, but the mere scent of evil unleashed forces in her that she could not control.

She had always felt justified in everything she did, just as the forest had taught her. She was neither proud nor ashamed of her actions,

just doing what she believed needed to be done.

Today, however, doubts clogged her mind. She was a murderer when all was said and done, no better than those she killed. Her confidence was diminished, but doubts or not, she couldn't change the course she had set.

Daisy opened the door and stepped into the Serenity Room. Mr. Higgins was pacing. His glass remained in his hand. He hadn't taken a single sip. She wondered why.

He shook a finger at her. "I want to know, Miss Daisy Perlman, why you brought us all here, to a place nobody ever heard of, for reasons no one knows—"

She pointed to the chair. "Sit down, Mr. Higgins, and I will explain everything."

"I prefer to stand."

She stood with her arms folded. There was no way to proceed until he drank from his glass. After a full minute, he rolled his eyes and sat in the chair that Daisy normally used. Daisy pulled a flask from her pocket and unscrewed the cap.

She held the flask up for a toast. "To final justice."

He shrugged, clinked his glass against the flask, and together they gulped down their drinks. He said, "I'm not sure what that all

means.”

She smiled, content now that it would all be over soon. “The truth, Mr. Higgins, is that it wasn't I who brought you here, but your family.”

“What's that got to do with justice?”

“Everything. This is a final resting place for incorrigibles. For families who can't stand the fact that one member soils the entire family's reputation. They can't wait any longer for their god to punish them and have no other recourse than to hand them over to me.”

“That's ridiculous. You're just an old whore who's outlived her usefulness.”

“I gather you haven't heard the rumors.”

“Of course, I have. They're ridiculous. You'd didn't poison those people. You'd never get away with it.”

Daisy crossed the room and stood facing him. “Maybe not in a real town, but Marmalade has its own system of justice. And it's even easier when you know the mortician. Besides, no one expects to find poison in their drink.”

The color drained from his face. He stared at the empty glass still in his hand. “You didn't.”

Daisy smiled. She could almost smell his fear. “Why not? You

know you deserve it. How many innocents did you kill? I only have to kill one to avenge all of them. Don't you think they deserve some sort of retribution? Don't you think someone should make things right?"

"What have you done? What did you put in my drink?"

She pointed at the yin-yang symbol on the floor. "Your life is out of balance. The black has overshadowed the white and crippled your soul. There is only one cure."

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "And what is that? Get to the point."

She placed her flask back in her pocket. "You have to die."

He laughed. "And how do you propose to do that? You're a washed-up old bag. I could take you out with my bare hands."

She stepped behind him. "Not anymore, you can't. Not since you swallowed that drink. You can't even pull yourself out of that chair."

He jumped to his feet and faced her. "You're crazy."

Daisy stared at him in shock. His drink had been just a drink. It contained no poison. The one person she trusted and left all her belongings to had betrayed her. She glanced toward the door.

He roared. "You're not going anywhere. It's your life that's out of balance, and *I'm* the cure."

"*LUCY*," she screamed.

Daisy could feel the evil streaming out of him. It permeated her core and sent chills down her spine. She would have to kill him the old-fashioned way. Then she would deal with Lucy.

He lunged at her. She sidestepped and delivered a hard kick to his balls. He groaned and doubled over. She slammed a fist against his ear, drawing blood. Pain coursed through her hand. She stared at the broken bone that protruded through the skin and realized she had grown too old to wreak justice on anyone.

He stumbled backwards, upsetting the table. His glass shattered on the floor. She stepped over it, and threw another punch with her good hand, but this time, he blocked it and struck her in the chest.

Daisy fell back against the wall. Her chest burned, and her breath came in gasps. She fell to the ground, floundering and trying to get air in her lungs.

Mr. Higgins grabbed her by the hair and pulled her into a headlock. An image of her woods filled her mind, and its vibration filled her soul.

He tightened his arm. Daisy felt her options fading. She could no longer breathe. The last thing she saw was the wood nymph, and she rode out of that room into eternity on warm vibrations.

* * *

Lucy slammed open the door to the Serenity Room and rushed in, staring at the scene in horror. Mr. Higgins stood over Daisy's body. He glared at her and kicked the corpse.

“What have you done?” Lucy pleaded.

“The bitch tried to kill me,” he snarled.

Lucy felt tears rolling down her face. She felt weak until she gazed at the dead body. Then she felt stronger than she ever had in her life.

Mr. Higgins stepped over Daisy's body and shoved Lucy out of his way. Lucy reacted with an ear-piercing shriek, lunging toward his chest with the syringe she had pulled from her pocket. She pushed the needle in so hard, it shattered. He wrapped his hands around her neck and squeezed.

Her vision blurred, and she felt faint. Slowly, his grip weakened, and he collapsed onto the floor.

“I don't think you're going anywhere,” Lucy said and spat on his face.

She ran to Daisy's body and lifted it in her arms. She wailed and hugged the body. “I knew I shouldn't have done it, Daisy. I wanted to

do things the way we always did,” she cried. “But you put the fear of God in me. I wanted to tell you this morning that you were right, that we shouldn't poison them, but I looked for you everywhere. I wanted to do your bidding.

“When I couldn't find you, I finally went with my conscience. I really thought this was what you wanted me to do. It's what you said. I didn't even see you go into the room. When I finally realized you were in there with him, I ran to get a syringe.” She wailed again and hugged the body. A cold shiver ran through her when her breast brushed against Daisy's breast. “But you can't ever be a hundred percent sure of anything you do in this life, can you?”

She laid the body back down on the floor and crossed Daisy's arms on her chest. She pulled her eyelids closed.

Her eyes glazed over, and she stared blindly into space. “Now I know you were right all along.”

* Age 73 *

Mr. Winkleman had purchased her casket. It stood on stanchions before the Atlantic Ocean. It was covered in purple irises to match the purple mansion beside it.

Manny brought the folding chairs from his funeral parlor. This was an occasion which couldn't be held there. Holding it inside would be an insult to Daisy's spirit. Her funeral would be held outside where she most loved to be. He set up the chairs without gazing upon the casket. He couldn't.

Parson Rudy brought in another truckload of folding chairs. Each man acknowledged the other weakly, without words but a simple nod of the head. They continued unfolding chairs like zombies, preoccupied with the task at hand, unable to comprehend anything else.

The townspeople slowly gathered, but no one spoke. The sun refused to shine. The birds failed to chirp. The heat and humidity were relentless. But even those who rarely left their houses attended. The death of Daisy Perlman was the only event that ever brought the entire town of Marmalade together.

No one knew how everyone found out she had died. But even Mr. Winkleman and his wife had heard and returned to their old homestead. It was as if angels had spread the news.

Lucy, dressed head to toe in black, led the mourners to their seats. She recognized Dody with her handsome husband and two adorable little girls and walked over to them. She saw that Dody was dressed in purple, Daisy's favorite color. She dropped a silent tear and led

them to the first row.

Thirty-two black people solemnly followed Willy and quietly sat in chairs to the side. Although many residents of Marmalade had never seen a black person, they did not proceed to gossip. Everyone had but one thought on their minds, the death of Daisy Perlman.

The silence was deafening.

Parson Rudy stepped in front of the crowd to a pulpit and tapped on the microphone. It discharged an ear-piercing squeal to which no one reacted. He cleared his throat and continued.

“People of Marmalade. We are gathered together to celebrate the life of Daisy Perlman. She was a poor woman, like many of us, but her spirit captivated all of us. She did not have a glamorous life, lived in, perhaps, not the best of circumstances, fought many battles in her own inimitable way, and is a bit of a legend to everyone here. She reminded us that life doesn't give us all the big moments we see on TV and the movies. Sometimes life just sucks, day after day, and the miracle is that we don't just give up.

“But Daisy had an energy inside her, a vibration, almost, that permeated every fiber of your being when you met her. She lived in a world of her own creation where life made sense to her. And if you were lucky, she would invite you in for a while. Daisy understood the very

sacredness of life and would fight you to the death if you treated life otherwise.”

Parson Rudy paused for a second and surveyed the crowd. He wanted to see if there was any reaction to his mentioning her violent tendencies, but there was none. The crowd continued to stare at him reverently and listened in silence.

“Daisy was not psychotic,” he continued. “She was a natural result of what she had experienced in her life. She hated evil, as we all do, and did what she felt she must to keep evil from spreading. Many might consider her actions wrong.”

Once again, he paused and looked to see if even one person might stand up and declare that murder is wrong under any circumstances. No one spoke.

“We are a unique town in that we have no written laws, nor police to enforce them. We rely on common sense and the dictates of our conscience to govern us. And when those didn't work, we had Daisy. She was our conscience. People knew that if you did something that hurt another person, you just might run into Daisy. And that worked better than the mightiest police force. She killed a few scumbags, sure, but never once did any relative or friend of the deceased come to complain. Nor did police from another town ever come to investigate. People here

knew that committing a crime might lead to facing Daisy. And facing Daisy meant facing the truth. No one wanted that, and so they behaved. I have no idea how everyone in town knows so much about Daisy and her exploits—”

“I can tell you.” A woman in purple stood up. Parson Rudy seemed surprised at the first utterance from the audience.

“Please come up and share,” Parson Rudy said.

Dody joined him on the podium. “My name is Dody Parker, and I was the one who taught Daisy to read. I was only ten at the time, and a woman as large and tough as her would normally scare me, but I was never afraid when I was with her. Although she was in her forties then, each time I'd look in her eyes, I'd see another ten-year-old girl who just needed a friend. I taught her how to read right in that red playhouse over there.”

She pointed, and the audience sighed. “In time, Daisy would read anything I handed her. And I became a young teen who had developed a crush on a boy. She told me to go out with anyone who interested me but to marry a man who could read a book. Six years later I married the librarian at Norris Library. He told me they had books by Daisy Perlman at his library, and I asked him to bring them to me. I read them voraciously. They were dark and foreboding, and incredibly

truthful, like Daisy herself. Those books never made it back to the library. I lent them to anyone who knew Daisy and then to people who didn't. They spread through the town like wildfire. Folks started buying their own copies.”

One by one, people pulled a copy from their pocket or handbag and held it high in the air. They began to wave them slowly back and forth in effigy.

“Everyone made the connection between the nursing home in her books and the one she had owned. They were both operated by a woman named Lucy. Yet no one in this town would ever dare give up her secret. I'll never forget the power inside her, compared to how weak I felt inside myself at the time. Somehow, she gave me some of her power. I gave her the smarts she needed, and in return, she made me feel my soul.”

The audience set their books down. A light smattering of applause grew into riotous clapping. Parson Rudy tapped on the mike to settle the crowd.

“Thank you, Dody. I think you speak for all of us. In fact, I think Daisy *was* the soul of this whole damned town. Would anyone else care to speak?”

Mr. Winkleman stood up. “I'd like to say something.”

“Please come forward,” Parson Rudy said.

Mr. Winkleman stepped up to the podium. He removed his handkerchief and dabbed his eyes before he spoke. He began softly, “I will never forget the day Daisy showed up at my bank, her eyes full of wonder like a child at Christmas. She had no better idea what to do with all the money she had won than that she wanted a big home like mine and she wanted the elderly to see the truth before they died. Of course, I had no idea what she meant back then. But when I looked into her eyes, I saw only truth, steadfast unwavering truth, not that saccharine sweet vomit I get from most people. Daisy was not one of the artificial humans who are taught how to respond. She came at you from her inner depths. Her eyes could free your soul. I wanted to run out of that stuffy bank on that day, strip off my suit and run naked through a field of daisies.”

His wife tittered in the audience. “And look how she helped my wife. We would never have been able to sell a house this size in a town that doesn't officially exist. Because of Daisy, we were able to move to Jacksonville and get my wife the medical help she needed. Her malignancy is now benign. My wife is proof that Daisy also gave life in her own mysterious way. I thank God I had the privilege of knowing her.” He bowed his head and returned to his seat.

A stocky woman ran down the beach toward the gathering,

waving her arms in the air. Lucy gasped and stood up because, at first, she believed it was Daisy. She then awkwardly composed herself when she realized she was mistaken. This woman had darker hair, although she did carry herself as Daisy always did.

The townspeople did not recognize her right away, being the best-dressed woman there. As soon as she stepped up to the podium and spoke, they all recognized her as the woman who ran the Salvation Army.

“My name is Irma Pitts,” she gasped, catching her breath. “You may recognize me as your Senator, but more likely, as the lady who ran the Salvation Army. When I heard of Daisy’s passing, I dropped everything to be here. Without Daisy, I would never have become what I am today. You see, although I knew right from wrong, I never had the courage to stand up for what I believe in.” Irma pointed at the casket. “Well, I borrowed her strength.

“I think we all did to some extent or another. Because of that woman, I fought to keep electricity and TV broadcast signals sent to Marmalade. And that was just the beginning, just like Daisy had told me. I began to make bigger changes after that, and my confidence and belief in myself soared. There’s no limit to what I can accomplish now. You may be looking at your next president. It’s all because of her.”

The people cheered. Irma ran over and tightly hugged the

coffin. Parson Rudy gently pulled her away.

Willy had never spoken to a crowd this large, but he hesitantly made his way up to the front and looked down at his feet as he spoke, “Da ding I remembered most 'bout Daisy is she loved da woods. No one controlled her dere. Da only rules was da laws a nature. But nature, like Daisy, was cruel sometime. Most times, Daisy were da kindest soul I eva met. She only got mad at dem dat weren't actin human in da first place. Death din't scare Daisy. She knew it waited fer all a us. To her, it were da only road to peace. I sometimes dink in my head she only killed people what couldn't find no peace in dey own heart, ya know, and she sent dem to a place where's dey could find some peace.

“When I told ma kin bout Daisy havin to kill sometime, dey wouldn't let me see her no more. Dey sent me to work wid my brudders. I made me some money and tried ta grow up, but I just felt holler in ma heart. I still yearn fer da times I laid back in da grass wid ma best friend, Daisy, just spittin' out da truth.”

He looked up at the audience and unleashed his tears unabashedly. He sniffled and snorted. Tears fell from every eye. Their hearts all beat as one.

Parson Rudy comforted Willy and led him back to his seat. As the crying subsided, he asked with a stutter, “Is t-there anyone else?”

Manny made his way forward. He stared fiercely at the townspeople. “Daisy never made excuses for anything she did. She never even experienced remorse until the very end. She broke my heart then because I realized she also had a weakness, an inner hurt, just like all of us. That was when I felt...That was when...” He stopped mid-sentence and stared at Dody, as if she held the secret that would allow him to continue. “That was when I felt that little girl inside her that Dody felt, too. She just wanted me to be her friend, someone she could trust, someone to tell her she mattered.

“I tried as hard as I could to tell her these things, but she just grew distant, as was her way. I knew she had retreated into herself, the only person she knew she could trust, the only one who could solve her problems. She wouldn't put them on another person. She always took the whole weight of the world upon her own shoulders. And like Dody, again, I felt her true strength, so much greater than my own. I will go to my grave wishing I could have done more to ease her pain.” He walked back to his seat, his head turned away from onlookers.

The crowd's attention turned to Lucy. The frail woman sat next to Dody in the first row. She wore her usual black frock, but with a black veil to hide her tears. The purple iris she held had lost two petals from the constant shaking of her hand. She had whimpered through the entire

event, never once taking her eyes off the casket.

She heard the murmuring of the people and suddenly became aware of all the eyes peering at her. She knew she would be expected to speak, being Daisy's confidante.

She struggled to stand, but her knees buckled. She collapsed onto her seat. Parson Rudy rushed to her aid. He lifted her up and braced her shoulders as they walked slowly to the podium. She held on for support and stared down at the microphone. Each time she lifted her head to speak, she could only utter a few undecipherable sounds.

"I...I..." she struggled.

Parson Rudy sensed the awkwardness of her position. He did not want to force her to speak at her weakest moment. He approached her from behind and held her shoulders to support her. He whispered something in her ear and gently pulled her away from the mike.

Lucy tugged herself free from the parson. Her grayish complexion burst into a bright red. She looked directly at the casket and uttered three quick words, "I loved her."

The crowd went wild. No one had ever imagined that Daisy could fall in love. Everyone rose to their feet, cheering and hollering.

The clouds began to separate, and shafts of brilliant white light striped the people. A rainbow appeared that ran from Daisy's mansion to

the Tomoka Woods.

“Dat her,” Willy screamed. “She tellin us she made it home.”

He blubbered uncontrollably. Many joined him.

“Willy's right,” Mr. Winkleman yelled to be heard above the din. “I'd recognize her anywhere.”

Dody could not take her eyes off the mysterious rainbow. She cried out, “What are we ever going to do without her?”

Lucy still stood at the podium, face down. She lifted her sunken head and pulled her veil away from her face. All eyes fell upon her. Her mind and heart agreed that the legacy of the one woman she loved must go on. Her frown turned to rapture, and she spoke in a loud clear voice. “I will be proud to carry on her legacy. Long live Daisy!”

“Long live Daisy,” they all cried out as one.

The end.

