

by QDesjardin



the days before
Christmas

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1

The day begins like any other day at school; trudging in ankle-deep snow and feeling the crunch beneath your feet. A sombre morning, when the orange streetlights are still on.

Martin is carrying his loaded knapsack full of goodies – class binders, his laptop and lunchbox – when he feels exhausted from all the weight. He finds a bench by the soccer field to relax his knees at, and beside him, there is a girl, her jacket hood covering her face.

He has never seen the girl before, but one glance and he could tell she is quite pretty in a sullen way. Her eyes gaze off somewhere, at the players kicking around the ball.. no, beyond that.

He wonders what she must be like. Probably one of those goth-types who is into death metal music, he could imagine.

There's only one way to find out.

"Hi," he goes, a half-whisper amongst the chatter.

She doesn't budge an inch.

"Hey," he says, louder, and she turns to look at him. She has earbuds in her ears – she takes them out.

".. yes?" she goes.

Martin's looking for some excuse to begin a conversation with her. He notices the mist coming out her mouth. The first thing that comes to mind is: "Chilly day, isn't it? I wish they could open the doors to let us in.."

"Oh – I'm fine outside," she goes. "I don't mind the cold."

She has on a black coat with a dark chartreuse scarf.

"I don't like being cold," Martin says, huddling his arms. "I just can't stand when my cheeks and hands get numb. If it was me, I'd.. I'd be still in bed, cozy under all the blankets. And I'd be watching TV on my phone."

The girl giggles. "That's cute. I like winter's crispness though – makes me feel alive."

"Cool."

The events of the soccer match play out, with David booting the ball a mile high into the air (along with a burst of snow), and everyone else chasing after the ball's trajectory like bees.

"What're you listening to?" Martin asks.

"Music," she says, glancing at the player in her pocket.

"What kind of music?"

"It's nothing that you'd like.." she says.

"Well, I'd like to have a listen anyways – how do I know unless I hear it?"

So reluctantly, she hands him an earbud. What Martin hears is a beautiful, joyeous sound – a woman singing about the birds and the bees who flutter through someone's garden at night, and they'd sing a nightly song, their buzzing and chirping in sweet harmony, a song which bugs the houseowner to no end.

The girl is dazzled, seeing how Martin actually

enjoys listening to it.

The next song is about a woman's inner pain, and her struggle to overcome it much like how a warrior fights against an endless tirade of monsters who'd tell her she is worthless, and the warrior's blade would slice through them all because nothing they say is ever true.

"They're wonderful, your songs..!" Martin goes.

".. I'm glad you like them," the girl says, beaming at the cheeks. "To be honest, I was a little scared you'd find it--"

"Weird?"

"Weird, yes." Her eyes frown.

"Why? I mean, not everyone likes the same things, but that doesn't mean it's bad or weird. It's just.. different. You know?"

The girl seems to ruminate over the word 'different.'

Suddenly, the school bell rings, and everyone is journeying inside.

"Hey, what's your name? I'm Martin--"

But the girl hurriedly leaves, and all Martin can do is watch her departing form. Then he too heads inside where it's warm.

2

His classes go on as usual. First is his mathematics class where his teacher goes on about Calculus, much like how a geek would gleefully share his card collection, as if it were the most interesting thing in the world. Martin is half-listening, half-daydreaming about the girl. He pictures her like a layered cake, where he's only managed to sample the surface toppings, while the deeper layers are yet to be savoured.

Next is his English class. The teacher resumes where they left off on the 'Romeo + Juliet (1996)' movie, where Leonardo DiCaprio has murdered John Leguizamo in the rain-- er, Tybalt. That was when Leonardo still had his youthful charm, before he went on to more serious acting roles.

The silly thing Martin finds about watching movies in class is that usually, you could manage to relax and allow your eyes to soak in the visuals. But when you have to do a partnered essay on the movie, it's a different story – now it becomes a chore as the English teacher expects everyone to write about how different the movie is, compared to the original Shakespearian play.

Sure, it's a *movie*, for one. And it's modernized to make it more relatable for today's audiences.

"Think of thematic context!" his teacher goes. "All the motifs, recurring themes, important details!"

And then at lunch, he orders a mucho burrito with vanilla yogurt and fries from one of the food

court kiosks. He is about to head over to his usual eating place at the computer lab room, where his friends are, when he spots that girl, passing him by on the opposite end, carrying her food tray to a table somewhere.

He recognises her fey face that was underneath her coat – now he sees her more fully, her cropped blonde hair in a pageboy cut, her black dress and outwear.. there is something about her that gnaws at his feelings, as though he is seeing one of those feral cats that's wandered into his backyard.

Wondering about her, he decides to follow her down the hallways.

He doesn't notice it at first, but he hears the other students whispering to each other, with the occasional glance at the girl, and then he realises that the girl is the butt of their jokes. It makes his stomach churn.

"That's the weirdo girl..!" Martin manages to overhear.

He feels a little pity for her.

The girl rests at a secluded spot by the lockers, where she slurps her pasta and drinks from her bottled water. Martin debates whether to join her for lunch; it'd be strange if he'd asked, since that would likely imply that he's been following her. But still, he'd like to cheer her up since eating lunch by yourself can be rather gloomy.

She must not have that many friends..

He starts approaching the girl, but before he could get there, a band of other girls and guys turn

around the corner – he recognises some of their faces from the band and cheerleading squads. They stop by the girl, standing, leering over her.

"How's it going, Clare?" one of them says.

"Nice lunch, Clare!" another says. "Care to give me some of your fries?"

The girl is quivering, back against the wall. A look of mixed fear and anger shows on her face. ".. get your own fucking fries," the girl says.

"What was that, Clare?"

"She said, 'Get your own fucking fries.'"

"Ooooooh. Is that how you wanna play, Clare? Is that how you wanna--" The boy lands a kick to the girl's shoulder, knocking her against the locker's side.

The rest of the gang join in with brutalizing her, and all Martin can do is quiver with fear while watching the scene play out to its horrific end, hiding by the janitor's closet.

Eventually they get tired of beating her, and they leave her with scruffles on her dress, scratch marks over her neck and bruises on her face.

"Anyone want some fries?" one of them goes, holding up a pack of fries in the air.

Martin glances at them with contempt. They don't notice him as they pass by down the hallway, and for good measure, he gives them a raspberry behind their backs before heading over to poor Clare, who is crying, her pasta sauce spilled over her tray.

He pulls out a tissue from his pockets (usually

saved for when he gets nosebleeds) and gives it to her.

"Those maricons are animals," he says. "I bet they'll grow up to be garbagemen in the future."

Clare doesn't say anything. She just wipes her eyes and continues sniffing.

"I know some of those guys," Martin says. "They're from the band and cheerleading squad – listen, I'm sorry for what they've done to you. I've got.. some of my fries and yogurt if you want some." He hands her his pack of fries, which Clare takes, hesitantly at first, and then she begins wolfing down on them like there's no tomorrow. The sight of which makes Martin smile.

"It's always been like this.." Clare goes, once she's done. "They'd come and take some of my lunch, or if I sit somewhere more public, I get people talking about me."

"That's no way to live," Martin says.

"I wish I never have to come to school." Clare's eyes redden with sadness. "Every day, people tease me because of who I am, a strange, unsociable person. In classes, in the hallways. I hate it."

"That's because the majority of everyone doesn't know any better," Martin goes. "They expect everyone else to be just like them, and then they come across people like you and me. I got teased too, my first years here, and I saw others getting harassed. Then I learned how to find nice people."

Clare glances at Martin.

"I'll be your friend here, if you want," Martin says.

"You'll be my friend?"

"Absolutely. And my first act as your friend is to get you some medical help. Those bruises on your face look like they must hurt."

Martin takes her to the nurse's office where the in-school nurse (Dr Reily) wipes away the dirt, cleans Clare's wounds and patches her up with some gauze.

"What happened?" Dr Reily asks.

Clare looks down, as if unsure what answer to give, or if the nurse would even listen. So Martin answers, "I saw her getting pummelled by a group of people. Enrique, Gina--" and he gives out a list of names. "All that over her fries.. meng.."

A look of trepidation crosses over Clare's eyes. (Non.. don't tell her..) *but I have to.*

"Is that so?" Dr Reily is scrawling notes with a heavy hand. "This is pretty serious – is this the first time, or has this happened before?"

And Clare mutters, "Yes.. it's happened before. Dozens of times, really."

"Why didn't you go to a teacher about it?"

"Because.. the teachers never do anything." Anger rises through Clare's voice. "The most they've ever gave anyone on my behalf is a light slap on the back. It's like they make so much light out of it that they never grasp what's going on – most everyone here hates me."

"I don't," Martin goes.

"—they hate the way I dress, the way I'd always be staring off somewhere, when I curl up to myself

whenever anyone wants to talk with me.. there's nothing anyone can do." There is a kind of despair in her eyes, a hopeless and bleak despair that is colder than any winter. "I'm just an aberration in the school's population."

"No," Martin goes, rebelling against the despair's chilliness. "I don't believe that, not for one instant. Those people may come and mock you, but they'll never see the angel who you are. You're an *angel*, Clare. That's the truth. So what if people don't realise that? Ugly ducklings are really just swans in hiding."

"You've only been with me since this morning.." Clare's lips tremble. "How can you mean all that?"

"Because.. I absolutely refuse to be like those animals who'd hate you. Never.. I never want to believe that you are doomed to be misunderstood."

Martin grasps Clare's hand tightly. "And if there is anything I can do to convince you that, I'd do it without hesitation."

You don't notice it at first. But something inside Clare changes. Like a spark has been lit inside her.

"Clare," the nurse goes. "I will report what's happened to the principals. Hopefully, you'll have more happier days here." She gives a smile.

3

It is tomorrow morning. It's gotten so cold that the teachers decide to let everyone in early. Martin notices the posters all over the school hallways, advertising an evening Christmas dance for this Friday.

Normally, Martin would shrug off the event and stay at home, because he wouldn't have any girl to hang out with. With Clare in mind though, he decides to give it some thought – Christmas dance is almost as important as the Summer prom, and he'd imagine he'd be able to make some good memories with her.

He'd have to dress up fancy though; it's semi-formal attire, and all he has at home is this one-piece suit zipped up in a bag. He hasn't worn it in a while; he wonders if he could still fit wearing it..

Martin scours the halls, looking for Clare. He bumps into his friends David and Lucho who are just walking rounds in a circle path – asks them if they've seen Clare. She has blonde hair, and maybe she's wearing a black dress.

They don't know about her, unfortunately.

"Are you suddenly seeing a girl, Mart?" Lucho goes. "Is that why you haven't shown up for lunch before?"

"It's.. I've only met her yesterday," Martin says, "but it's actually kind of a long story.."

"I think we've got time, tell us!"

So Martin starts explaining to them the situation

with Clare – how he met her by the bench, all the things that made him fascinated about her, and when he brought her to the nurse's office after a group beating.

"I made a promise to her that day," Martin says. "I want to show her that people can still be good to her. That she should never have to be afraid of getting bullied. She's beautiful, meng. Oh, if you guys meet her.."

There's still ten minutes before classes start.

"Why don't we go look for her?" Lucho goes.

By luck, David spots her in one of the classrooms, already sitting at a desk, reading a novel. ("That her?" "Yep.")

They enter. Martin notices she's got on some black eyeliner this time. As they come closer to her, she gets more and more buried in the pages of her book, shying away from them.

"Clare--!" Martin greets.

She glances up, recognising him, and her eyes light up with warmth. "Oh, hey. For a second, I thought you guys were--"

"No no, these two are my friends," Martin goes. "David, Lucho – this is Clare."

"Howdy!" Lucho shakes her hand, smiling. "Nice to meet you."

David meekly says "Hi."

Clare seems to scrutinize them from head to toe. Lucho, with that smile that comes out of nowhere, would be the kind of person you'd easily be able to get friendly with. David meekly stands, gazing off

some distance away yet still receptive to the situation at hand.

"You've seen those posters over the hallways?" Martin goes. "About the Christmas dance?"

She doesn't look too enthused about it upon first mentioning, until she realises just what he is about to ask. "What about it?"

"Well.." Martin blushes a little. "Do you want to go, with me? For a dance?"

A mixture of happiness and hesitation rushes through her. "I.. the dance.." She pauses. "People there are going to poke fun at me and you."

"So? Ignore them! That's not hard to do. If they try anything funny to you, Lucho and David can come along as our bodyguards."

"Right!" Lucho goes. "Damn.. I don't have a dance partner.."

"Go dance with David! Bodyguards shouldn't complain!"

"Emm.. okay!"

"As long as I'm around, I won't let anything happen to you," Martin says. "All that suffering you've been through, it is going to take a turn around, starting right now."

The bell rings, and they have to leave for their classes. Clare glances at them going for the door – she hears Martin say, "Just remember; if you can find even an ounce of happiness, all the pain and sadness won't matter."

And for her Physics class, the teacher's voice seems to die out of her awareness. Einstein's

theorem of gravitation and energy.. what good does an abstract theory do against Martin's words? *An ounce of happiness.. and all the pain and sadness won't matter.*

She'd like to believe it with all her heart, *really* believe it, *a glimmer of hope*, and yet, there is always that dark spot in her mind laughing at her.

(it's more like all the happiness in the world won't matter)

(drowned away under pain)

Of course, Clare tries to fight it off, that goblin. Struggling against the icy rapids. With what little strength she has left-- sooner or later though, she'll fall victim to the void.

The warmth drains from her hands and legs, leaving them numb. She wants to curl up in a ball.

Fight it.

Picture yourself, held in his arms – he'll help carry you into the light.

Clare winds up forgetting to take notes for the class; instead she folds a piece of notebook paper into origami, a paper phoenix which she colours out with highlighter. She puts that into her pocket for later.

4

The monochromatic hallways are always an eyesore. Clare hauls her binders to her locker, doing her best to ignore all the voices that might be pointing at her. She puts away everything for next period – it's Home Economics class, where you get to do a little baking.

It's one of the few classes where she's able to relax. The others have always congratulated her because all the food she's made tastes just *perfect*.

She remembers when she was very young that she liked to try mixing various ingredients from the kitchen, even though most of them turned out to taste not-so-good. Here, when the teacher provides everyone with a recipe for something, Clare just trusts her own gut instinct instead. She'd bake cookies with some vanilla and cinnamon inside of them, or cake laced with banana and chocolate chips, and she'd smile when everyone would hungrily devour them. ("It's soo good..!")

Heck, she might grow up to be a chef someday.

She is just lucky enough to finish baking her brownies in the oven, and already the teacher is awaiting the first taste. "Mmmm.. c'est magnifique!" after her teacher has finished chewing one. "Mme. Clare, you will grow to be a fine chefesse in the future."

Clare lets a few of the students have her brownies before she saves the rest of them in a tupperware container.

At lunch, she heads for her locker to retrieve her lunch bag – a minute sandwich with strawberry yogurt and salad. She keeps the brownies with her as she wanders off, looking for Martin.

"Did you hear? Enrique and Gina got suspended because of her..!" she overhears.

She bumps into him near the vending machines.

"Clare!" Martin goes. "There you are!"

"Martin.. I want to go to the dance with you."

"That's the answer I've been hoping for." He grins.

"Let's go."

He leads her over to the computer lab, where David and Lucho are huddled by the monitors at the back, watching the League of Legends World Championship Series.

"You guys go here too.." Clare comments to herself. "It's just you've been sitting at the back all this time."

"And you usually sit where?" Martin asks.

Clare points at one of the computers in the left aisles, by the middle.

"Ohh – I never noticed you!"

Martin and Clare pull up chairs to join them. Right now, it is 53 minutes into the match between 'Las Dodos' and 'Counter Logic Gaming.' Both team's inhibitors are down, and everyone is duking it out at the Baron Nashor. It'll be the deciding point of the match – where the team that wipes out the other team will make a rush to the other team's base and destroy their nexus.

"Red team triple kill! Red team quadra kill!" the

in-game announcer goes. "Ace!"

"Look at Reno go!" Lucho exclaims. "I tell you, you don't need ADCs anymore; you just need a good AP to soften everyone up and bruiser like Lee Sin to finish em down! Fatality."

Clare lays down her box of brownies on the table and opens it up. "Anyone want some brownies? I made some."

"Mmm.. brownies," David goes, as his fingers pick up one of the sweet chewy things and munches on them. "Man, they're really good!"

Lucho half-mindfully reaches for a brownie, not batting an eye to the screen, and when he finally tastes it, it's as if a switch has just flicked inside him and he turns to Clare, saying, "These are professional quality – Clare, you made those?!"

"I did."

"Waw.. to me it tastes like.. I don't know, it has a very sweet taste upon first eating, and then you chew it and you discover deeper layers of sweetness."

Clare takes Lucho's comment very deeply to heart. She smiles, reflecting over all those moments making those brownies.

"Do you cook at home?" Martin asks.

"Sometimes. When my parents are out on business meetings or if my maman gets sick. *On se lève à l'occasion si nécessaire.*"

"You're French..?"

Clare coolly scoffs. "Oui. My parents.. they've always told me I come from royal heritage. As a

little child, they'd tell me old faerytales about queens and princesses – how I was destined to be a princess when I grow up."

This gives Martin an idea. "Hm.. do you have some attire for the dance?"

"Do you mean formal wear?"

"Something like that. You could dress up just like a princess at the dance, Clare. Easily outshine all the other couples who attend." He grins. "A swan princess.."

A beat.

Clare nods a little. "Maybe.. maybe I could." The most that she's ever dressed up fancy for is during Halloween a few years ago, dressed as the evil witch Maleficent from Sleeping Beauty. Some of the younger children were visibly intimidated by her, which she took as a compliment – the adults and older siblings would admire her outfit otherwise.

Overall, she thinks of herself more as a 'dark' person, and dressed herself everyday as such. The image of being a bright and pure princess, it doesn't really apply to her.

"How about a *spider* princess?" she goes, shocking everyone around.

"Why?" the surprised Martin goes. "What are you thinking? Spiders are very creepy.."

"Most people are afraid of spiders.." Clare explains. "But I personally think they are terribly misunderstood creatures. They spin beautiful webs, just for the likes of flies and mosquitoes. They are not out to hurt or scare people, unless you intrude

upon their safety." There's a hypnotic tone to her words.

She comes up to Martin, seductively playful now, a finger under his chin. "And just imagine yourself.. wrapped under the spider's embrace. All its eight legs holding you at its mercy. For a few seconds, you don't know whether it's the last moment of your life."

Martin is visibly eeked out.

"Then-- it gives you a back massage! Bwaaaa!" Clare giggles.

"Don't scare me like that!" Martin says, almost shaken out of his chair. "Why can't you be a nice swan? Halloween's over two months ago."

"Hey, a spider princess might not be such a bad idea actually," Lucho says. "She could dress up like 'Elise', the Spider Queen.."

"Yeah, but spiders? They don't really fit in with Christmas."

Clare says, "They meshed in Santa Claus, elves, pine trees, and the myth of Jesus into Christmas. Maybe spiders are the next thing."

5

"Seriously, why become a spider?" Martin goes – they are walking home from school, he and Clare, and the dimming sun grazes their eyes just over the trees and houses. "That is a very off-beat choice.."

For a while, Clare just shuffles forward. The snow intermittently tumbles from the tree branches onto the ground, as her footsteps go 'crunch'.

Then she says, "Do you really want to know why?"

"Si."

"I'm not an angel, Martin," she goes. "I never was. I don't have the white wings or the angelic purity of heart. Instead, I'm the shadow underneath your feet, which you constantly overlook. I'm the shadow that hides in every corner, under every thing and every one. Hiding behind every smile and every light. Because the people who love the light hate me, I thrive in the darkness where even the ugly things can be made beautiful."

Before God made it light, there was shadow. Before people were born, they were nurtured in shadow. And when they die, they come back into the shadow again.

The smile Clare has bears a heartbreaking fondness.

"I know who used to live in that old, shabby place," Clare says, pointing at a dilapidated house with plastic wrap over the fractured windows. Martin has passed by this house a couple times

when he'd go to the galleria. "He was a Vietnam veteran who only wanted solace after his line of duty, having seen death and destruction a world away. He only comes out just to buy groceries. Then they carried him over to a nursing home and this place is left empty since. I think his name is Roger."

"I never knew that.." Martin says.

"His pet hamster is buried underneath the bushes there."

Clare's house is by the cul-de-sac that overlooks the hilly field. The maroon roof and steep staircase to entrance make it look eerie. *Not that far away from my home*, Martin thinks.

By the door, Clare gets the key from her knapsack and lets Martin in first.

Her house is quite claustrophobically small – Martin can already see the cluttered kitchen and the living room with its small flat-screen TV hung on the wall beside many family portraits and paintings.

"My place doesn't look like much, hehe," Clare goes, helping Martin hang up his jacket in the closet.

She watches him stare at all the memorabilia on the shelves. The bronze coat-of-arms, bearing the name "Belhomme." Some awards from Clare winning artistry contests. A toy cow resting beside a Cowstian Dior cowbell.

"Waw..!" Martin exclaims. He points at the surrealist paintings of landscapes, of flowers and dolls on the wall. "You did this?"

"Mm mm. It was for the Gothica contests, where

you have to paint based on a theme or certain constraint." Clare pauses, gazing upon her own pictures. To her, it is remarkable how the things one sees everyday, taken for granted, can be joyeous and interesting in the eyes of another. Having Martin in her home makes her feel delicate, as though everything she is has been put on display for his eyes. "The one with the Siamese dolls for example, I could only use the warm colours."

The Christmas tree hasn't been hung up yet.

Upstairs, when Martin sees her room, he is awestruck by the eclectic layout. Tatami mats are lain on the floor beside the pink bed, with a glass cabinet of perfumes and perfume samples beside her closet. In the corner is her bookshelf with a pile of stuffed animals by the bottom. And just by the window, he sees her desk littered with a laptop, papers, scraps from magazines, and a makeup kit.

Clare lays her bookbag down before jumping onto her bed, landing on her back, bouncing up and down. She invites Martin to join her in its comfyness.

"It's soft," Martin remarks. "Smells like lavender."

"I wanna show you something." Clare opens the glass cabinet and gets one of the samples. She sprays it over her neck. "Here, smell."

Oh, that's where the scent comes from.

"Every time I get the chance, I collect perfumes by the mall," Clare says. "When I smell them, it.. whisks me somewhere. The lavender-scented one is a garden deep in the forest, where the sun can

hardly penetrate. And hidden beneath the vines, is a Celtic gate, where it leads you to the labyrinth below."

Martin tries out each and every one of her perfumes; after three samples though, he finds it difficult to distinguish amongst the next bunch, and Clare gets him to take a breather before continuing on. He eventually picks out for her Belle D'Opium (by Yves Saint Laurent) as the perfume of choice for the dance.

"I think this suits you the best," Martin says. The scent is quite mysterious.. a dark, deep and sensual violet.

Clare just nods. "That will go with some black lipstick." Then she rummages through her desk, through the fashion clippings with the outfits, and finds the one with the black-laced dress. She shows it to Martin. "And this is what I'll want to wear."

The dress is droopy, with webbed embroidery around the neck and spidery "legs" protruding from the shoulders.

"Along with this."

She picks out another clipping with dark red Christmas gloves.

"And this."

Black combat boots that almost go up to the knee.

"That's what I mean when I want to dress up like a spider," Clare goes. "At the dance, I could definitely shine with these on."

"I guess you could.." Martin says. "You are going to stick out like a sore thumb, though. How are you

going to pay for these?"

"I still have the winnings from the contests," Clare says. "Think that amounts to \$350, more or less – those outfits aren't much in demand, or else I could be paying twice that."

—

Martin gives his parents home a call to let them know he'd be staying over for the night. He goes with Clare to the galleria – the air has grown dramatically colder, and by the time they arrive inside, he is shivering through his layered coat.

And he's hungry.

Man, he should have eaten something before--

"I'm hungry," he admits.

"Are you? Hmm."

"I don't have much money on me.."

They make a detour from their planned shopping and wander off to the food court. There are a lot of choices, ranging from the standard burger combo at McDonalds to Thai cuisine at Yum Yum's.

"It'll be cheaper if we get the 2-combo special from Yum Yum's," Clare says.

Overall, she pays \$14 for the both of them, and by the time the chef is done frying their combo, their mouths are watering from the rich cuisine that's served.

It's sweet and sour fried rice, with teriyaki chicken, peppered duck and vegetable curry. With two Sprites on the side.

They sit beside the glass railing where they can see all the shoppers one floor below.

Clare just silently eats her portion for the first three minutes – pausing mid-bite once in a while as if some thought has grabbed her focus from the present moment.

"You know what I'd like to do during the holidays?" Martin says, finishing his duck. "Host a movie marathon night with friends. The theme of the movies will be Westerns, because I like the bad ass cowboy action." He aims an imaginary revolver at Clare. "Bam bam bam. 'I'm gonna be a cowboy, baby.'"

"How nice." Clare remains coolly detached while glancing elsewhere, at the other people eating.

"What's the matter? You don't like Westerns?"

"They're not really my cup of tea," Clare replies. "I don't know why.. it's just the idea of being out on the crude desert, guns blazing, it doesn't really appeal to me. I like science fiction more. Solaris, Twelve Monkeys.."

"There's Sci-fi Westerns, like Firefly and Serenity," Martin goes. "Best of both worlds, huh?"

"Hm, touche. Listen, I'll be back – I gotta pee."

As Clare proceeds down the hall to the washroom, she spots a familiar face – one that makes her heart leap and her gut freeze inside. It's the ringleader from the group who assaulted her before! His beady eyes lock on with hers.

(Enrique, his name is?)

She flinches.

He notices, and lets out a light chuckle. "You're funny, Clare." He fakes a light punch to her face

before walking away.

Clare clenches her fists very tightly, staring at the guy's back. His red shirt has a grizzly bear and the number '9'.

Getting suspended didn't even faze him, apparently.

All she can think about while sitting in the stalls is the dread of facing him and his goonies in the future. Will they be at the Christmas dance? ("They're from the band and cheerleading squad..") Most likely they will.

No.. it's not that.

It's the fact that she flinched in his presence – that she is afraid of him, that she could not forgive.

"Merde!"

She punches the side of the stall, so hard that it bruises her hand, making the stalls rattle.

"Hey-- what's going on?" she hears from the other side.

"Err, nothing!" she says. "My hand slipped."

"I heard a shout, was that you?"

"That was me yelping in pain! I'm fine."

Clare notices an indentation where she punched the stall wall. If that is the guy's face instead, she wouldn't mind how hurt her hands get as long as she makes him bleed for what it's worth.

6

"I saw him by the washrooms," Clare tells Martin. "Enrique."

"Did something happen?" Martin puts away his phone – he's been playing Candy Crush while waiting for Clare to come back.

"The bastard taunted me." Without thinking, she grabs a soy sauce packet from the table and squeezes it in her grasp. She feels the packet pressed to its limits before it finally pops, spilling the wet sauce dripping down her fingers, onto the floor. "It's just like a dog, who's able to yip at his prey knowing it can't fight back. You ever know that feeling, Martin? Huh?"

Martin just stares at her stained hand for a moment. He's never seen this side to her before – it frightens him a little, actually. "Clare.. try to relax," he says.

"Non, why don't you tell *him* that instead? Maybe he'll relax after I make him hurt--"

"**CLARE!**" Martin erupts. "Put a madre! You will accomplish absolutely nothing out of revenge. He and his goonies hurt you – okay. I'm sorry. But striking him back, you'll be entering his realm, a place where dogs just bite other dogs lower than each other. A realm you'll be trapped in. And you will never find any happiness there, only misery."

Clare quivers, her hands shuddering at her sides, staring down in shame, eyes teary and red. The other people in the food court are staring at the

both of them.

".. what am I thinking?" She lets go of the packet, letting it fall to the linoleum floor. "I'm.. I'm like a monster.."

"No you're not." And Martin holds her to his side in the empty space, in comfort.

"I wanted.. to hurt him, hurt them all so bad that they'd never breathe air anymore." Clare catatonically rests her head on his shoulder, shutting her eyes to the world. "I'm no good."

"It's alright.. everyone has these kinds of thoughts at times, whenever they get wronged by someone. It doesn't make you a monster though; you can always choose to move beyond it. What's good and what's not good, it lies in how you act to those feelings."

And with her sinuses tingling, Clare goes on shopping with Martin for her outfit. They visit the Christian Lacroix boutique store for the spider dress – it's dark inside, with low key incandescent lighting so that the shadows are noticeably defined on the clothes displayed. The spider dress itself, eloquent with dark seduction upon the mannequin, is \$260.

Luckily it happens to be on sale, being 10% off.

So Clare asks one of the assistants to get her the dress – he sizes her up first with a measuring tape, and then grabs an appropriately-fitted dress from the storage.

"Try it on," the assistant tells her.

She takes off her clothes in the dressing room and

puts it on, finding it a bit hard to pull up the zipper at the back by herself. It fits her snugly.

Once she emerges out with the dress, it's like a different person is there. Her movements make the spider legs sway. The dark angel pirouettes, and Martin only gazes upon the black fabric overlaying her form, like it is an exposure of her inner being. He realises that having a swan dress upon her wouldn't fit her at all.

"Does that fit?" the assistant says.

"It does, oui."

So Clare gets the dress folded up in a box. Afterwards, she buys the gloves and boots from the Bay (for \$80 total), and by the time she leaves with Martin, it is incredibly cold outside. Everyone is running back and fro from the mall to their cars. The blizzard tosses the snow on the ground in a whirlwind, and the icy air seems to penetrate through Martin's clothes, utterly numbing his joints.

It seems like an eternity before they make it back to her house. None of the lights are on inside, and Clare opens the door herself instead of ringing the doorbell.

Martin is shivering, his coat and pants white with frost.

"C-c-cold!" he goes, as he takes off his jacket and gloves. "Hey, why aren't your parents home?"

"They're on a business trip," she says, laying down the bags. "They'll be back in two days."

"I should have brought a warmer jacket.." He

notices that Clare isn't shivering – she takes off her jacket without any complaint, and then helps Martin out of his coat and shoes.

"Oh, before I forget--" She gets the paper crane out of her pocket, which has been mangled from the blizzard. "I wanted to give you this."

"What is it?"

"It's supposed to be a paper crane. But it's.. miffed now. Sorries." She thrusts the colourful crane into his hand. "Here. Think of it as a lucky charm."

Martin smiles. He puts it into his pocket. "Now it can be miffed in *my* pocket, hehe." He takes a few steps, finding it awkward to move – his joints are still recovering from the cold, and his skin is fuzzy all over, getting adjusted to the house's warmth.

"My, you really are cold.." Clare gets the idea of putting him in the shower. "Why don't you come upstairs? I think I know a way to get you warm, fast."

She leads him up to the petite bathroom, where the shower hose is right beside the toilet, without a curtain. Some plastic buckets and little tubs are on the floor. A glowing LED display on the wall tells the temperature of the running water – 20 degrees celsius.

Martin thinks that Clare is going to blow-dry him warm – she takes off his sweater and puts her fingers by his shirt, lifting it up, making his hair fuzzy with static.

She gazes at his bare, masculine chest for a moment. There's some hair growing down his navel,

and the thought of what might lie down there gives her a jolt of excitement.

"Clare..?" His heart starts thumping faster, sending a flush of warmth through his body. The only other time he's gone shirtless before a girl is at the pool parties, when he'd be hanging out with his cousins and their friends – but this is different.

This is just strictly between him and her.

He's never thought of her *that* way before.

"We're going to shower, if that's okay with you," Clare goes.

And then it hits him – he's about to get very close to making it with her; she's got no qualms about getting the both of them down to bare skin.

"What about my night clothes..?" he says.

"There's spare pajamas in the closet, just in case. I think they should fit you."

So she unbuckles his pants, letting it fall to his feet. And then his underwear. And finally, his socks. The places where she touches him make him feel tingly. While he is standing there, she puts his clothes by the chair on the corner.

Then Martin watches as she undresses – without any detectable trace of shyness in the motions. He sees her body, thin and slightly bony, her breasts lush and her nipples like buttons.

Visibly blushing, he fights the urge to get hard.

Clare can only smile; she nudges him to the shower, where she turns the water stream on, adjusting the heat of the water so to get it just right, where it's pleurably steaming, but not scathing.

The droplets pour down both their faces, their figures.

Clare grabs her father's shampoo and starts lathering Martin's hair – it would be a tad silly to have his hair smell like cherry (like herself), so instead it'll smell like zesty mint. Her fingers rub to his scalp, massaging every bit of his hair.

Some of the lather drips down his back, his chest and legs, spilling down onto the drain.

It reminds Martin of being in a massage parlour, except with more sensuality and intimacy. He just closes his eyes, and let himself drift off into a place where he could relax, his senses at the behest of her whims.

After rinsing off his hair, Clare gets a handful of soap cream and starts washing his body – first his chest and back, and then his arms (his armpits are quite hairy)..

He shivers with anticipation about her washing his lower half.

She manages to keep a straight face about it, even though it feels kinky.

Once she's done with Martin, she washes herself-- he asks her if he could do it for her, but she says no.

Finally, she shuts off the tap, and the whole washroom is covered with steam. Water drips from the showerhead, with the tubs and buckets on the floor filled to the brim. Clare pours out all the accumulated water – splash!

She dries Martin first with the towel, rubbing the

cloth on him like she's making a fire, and then herself.

With the mop from the corner, she dries the floor.

"Wait here, I'll get you pajamas," Clare says, having the towel wrapped around herself as she exits. This leaves Martin alone in the bathroom, time enough to dwell on Clare – the different facets of her he's seen; the shy girl at school, the tasteful girl at the mall, the sensual girl just moments ago in the shower..

She'd wanted to hurt those people who humiliated her all these times. He vividly pictures her bloodshot eyes as she squeezes the soy sauce packet.

Thinking about it, he'd be no different if he were in her shoes. Vengeful, afraid and withdrawn. Maybe he is lucky enough to have had avoided all that, but then, what would give him the right to tell her to let it go, just like that? He hasn't felt the kind of pain she's endured.

It actually pisses him off, realising how some people just land in unfortunate circumstances, whether by accident or by luck. That there are people who are inherently better off in life, and they don't even realise the disparity between themselves and others, or that they realise it, but they don't seem to care.

Everyone should always have equal opportunity to find happiness.

Out of that noble notion, he is with Clare now. As a friend, a self-appointed guardian angel who will

try his best to make the bad people go away.

He should tell her that she's truly one-of-a-kind person he's ever met – that's what he feels.

She emerges in the washroom, wearing pink bunny pajamas (so cute!). The pajamas she has for Martin are quite plain in comparison, blue with white stripes, and he puts them on with no trouble whatsoever. They seem quite loose and baggy, wearing them.

"They don't exactly match your size," Clare goes, giggling. "I guess it's because we might have guests over who are on the bulky side."

"It's fine, it's fine, I like the looseness, it makes me feel comfortable."

By the sink, Clare gets a spare toothbrush beneath the counter for Martin, and they brush their teeth together.

—

In the darkness of Clare's room, the window is a faint and distant orange from the diffusion of street lights outside. You can hear the howling of the icewind gale, the sound of which makes Clare and Martin grateful they're huddled up in those three layers of blankets.

For some reason, he finds it difficult to drift away into sleep. He's so close beside Clare, and he could smell her cherry-scented hair, and the lavender from the bedsheets. He sees her outline in the darkness, and he wonders what it would be like to steal a kiss from her lips.

He hears her breathe in and out, softly and

gently.

I wonder what she dreams about, every night? He could only guess – he hopes they are pleasant dreams, as a solace from the harsh reality she faces at school.

One thing comes to mind – to make a prayer for her well-being; he remembers his mother always used to whisper prayers from the book of Psalms when he was young, when his mum thought he was asleep in bed. Perhaps the same kindness can be shared with Clare.

So he whispers one to the empty air, in the name of St. Maria. He tries very hard to recall the exact words his mother used; the parts he found fuzzy he improvised.

Then he hears Clare shuffle in her sleep – she tosses an arm over Martin's chest, and it feels like he is being clutched to her side.

7

On the night of the Christmas dance, Clare is dressed in her spider dress, her coat on, waiting by her doorstep for any sign of Lucho's van. Her parents have wished her good luck, and may she enjoy her time in the arms of a pretty boy.

The air is tinged with a crisp coldness – the kind of coldness she feels comfortable in, exposing her cheeks to. She doesn't know why that is. Coupled with her budding anticipation, it makes her feel precious (like she could walk easily in the inches-deep snow) and a foreboding – her dress would be the crown of thorns lodged on her body, the others jeering and mocking at her.

But no, they will never break her. Though she could have chosen the typical fluffy outfit like all the rest, or give up attending altogether, she is here now, ready to be laughed at, ready to hold Martin's arms in the music.

Earlier at school, Martin demonstrated how he will protect her during the dance; Lucho and David will be attending also, staying near her side (but not conspicuously so) – while there is little they can do about the occasional whispering, they will be watching out for anyone who tries something like splashing her with fruit punch, or outright assaulting her. They'll be dancing in the meanwhile, with each other or with other friends there.

"You'll be safe under our watch," Lucho promised. "That I guarantee."

Much of the houses in the cul-de-sac are lit with lights, multi-coloured hues diffused onto the dusk sky, as if to make a stand against the impending night. Her parents, having returned yesterday from their business trip, are busy setting up the Christmas tree inside at this very moment.

She sees the headlights come around the corner, and the van skidding slightly on the road. It pulls over next to the driveway. A loud honk.

Clare gets in the passenger door – it's a spacious van, and she is seated by Martin, drinking coffee.

"All set back there?" Lucho asks. "Okaay-- let's go."

The drive to school is tedious; when they've managed to see the building, numerous cars are jamming the road, where other students are waiting their turn to be dropped off or park. A white limosine in the midst takes up space – one guy steps out with a girl, dressed in matching red and white, and they are greeted like celebrities stolling on the red carpet. It's Vincent and Maria.

Apparently, the dance is so much of a big deal for everyone to get noticed, and Clare glances out the snowclad windows to see groups of people, dressed like Santa and his jolly green elves.

She is already looking out of place.

"Damn, the parking lot's filled.." Lucho says, noticing how the cars ahead are moving to the mall's parking spaces now, opposite the school's entrance. "Hope we don't get our suits dirty."

"Are you ready for this Clare?" Martin asks,

holding her hand. "This is going to be our moment – let's make the most of it."

The parking spot they eventually wind up in is a considerable distance from the school. Their feet trudge through a mixture of yesterday's slush and today's snow, and it takes a while to cross the road over when the other cars are honking their horns at the passersby, impatient.

—

In the school's foyer, there are signs posted, pointing to the gymnasium and the cafeteria. Most people are swarming in the direction of the gym – Clare, Martin and his friends have to drop off their coats though.

Much of the school's hallways have been cordoned off. Only Lucho's locker is available, so they all agree to stuff their coats in there.

"Whoa.. Clare--" Lucho's eyes seem to widen, seeing Clare's outfit for the first time. "That really looks stylish!"

"She picked it out herself," Martin says, in his old one-piece suit. It's the same suit he wore when he auditioned for the strings orchestra a year ago. "I think it looks nice. Yes."

David just gives an approving nod. With his white tuxedo and bowtie, he is a debonair charmer (something like Sean Connery), having slicked his hair back.

—

And when the doors open to the gym, it's surprising how the gym's transformed from the

typical basketball court to a lush dance floor. The spotlights from the ceiling dazzle; everyone is dancing, boogeying to the rapid beat of the music set by the hired DJ.

And Clare recognises the tune – it is *September*, by *Earth, Wind and Fire*. Hearing that song blared over the loudspeakers immediately gives her a sense of reassurance; she's heard it dozens of times back at home, when she'd privately dance it out wearing headphones in her chair.

So she dances.

She dances, shaking her body left and right. Nevermind what other people think of her. She dances on the floor, enjoying herself – sees Martin doing the same (thanks to her), and as the music starts transitioning to another song, she feels a wonderful euphoria rushing through her body, hot and warm.

If the night goes on like this, it could easily be the best night she's ever spent at the school.

..

After a while, Clare decides to take a short break from the dance floor – she pulls Martin along with her to the cafeteria for a eat to bite. David and Lucho head along too.

The kiosks are closed for the night, but in the midst of the food court is a table filled with cupcakes and caramel brownies, watched over by the janitor (who made them). The people who aren't really interested in the dancing sit by the tables, playing *Magic the Gathering* or just talking about

the latest in game news. Numerous balloons are stuck floating by the ceiling.

Clare helps herself to as much of the brownies and cupcakes as she can; apparently her early dinner wasn't enough for this particular night.

"I'll be back, I have to go washrooming," Martin says.

In the washroom, as Martin sits down in the stall, he overhears someone entering, talking over the phone.

"Oh, it's perfectly alright," he hears, "I hope you're enjoying your time back at home. I'll show you some clips of Gina's wild dance moves after."

"Damn it, why did I have to get suspended by that bitch?" Martin recognises who it is over the speakerphone; it's Enrique! "I'm missing out on a lot of fun-- but that doesn't mean I have to cry about it. Listen, did you see her there?"

"Her?"

"Did you see Clare there at the dance!?????" There is a kind of frenzied urgency in Enrique's voice.

"Yeah – she's got on this weird-ass black dress, and dude, you should have seen her funky dancing! Urghaurghaurgg! Trash like that shouldn't even be here in the first place."

"Go send her my regards for me, would you kindly. See to it she never wants to come back."

"Absolutely." That someone hangs up his phone.

Oh no..! Martin hurriedly finishes using the toilet, but before he can get a look as to who it is on the phone, that someone has already disappeared out

the door. Clare is going to be under attack at the dance, but what should Martin do? She's having such a good time dancing, and he doesn't want to spoil her mood worried about the fact that someone's aiming their sights on her – the solution would be to have David and Lucho be extra vigilant watching out for her, and they should be able to intervene before anything happens.

Back at the cafeteria, Lucho is having fun with the helium balloons – he's breathing helium air from them, making his voice high-pitched like Donald Duck, which Clare giggles at.

"Hey Marty--!" Lucho grins. "Try the helium!"

"No, there's something important I need to tell you guys first--" He huddles Lucho and David together in a whisper, such that Clare can't hear – she glances at them, wondering what they are talking about.

"I was in the washroom and I heard someone talking over the phone with Enrique. They're going to do something to Clare – but I'm not sure what exactly."

"Who was that on the phone?" Lucho asks.

"I'm not sure. I didn't get a good look at him. Just be extra careful, and don't ever let Clare out of your sight; who knows how many people are going to be involved in this. Understand?"

"Si."

David nods.

Clare has heard her name mentioned in their whisperings. "What are you guys talking about?"

"I'm telling the guys some advice about watching over you," Martin goes. "So you don't need to worry about anything Clare. I've got everything under control!"

They make their way back to the gym, where it has become a slow dance, everyone coupled up in each other's arms.

"Relax," Martin says, taking Clare's hands, "and don't let go of me."

She buries her head in his neck, and allows herself to float through their movements. It's one of those sappy songs they're playing, but you can't help needing to be by someone's side upon listening.

*been a long road to follow
been there and gone tomorrow
without saying goodbye to yesterday
are the memories I hold still valid?*

Of all the loneliness she's endured, perhaps this moment signifies the light at the end of the tunnel.

*or have the tears deluded them?
maybe this time tomorrow
the rain will cease to follow
and the mist will fade into one more
today*

She stares into Martin's brown eyes, glad that he has coaxed her to the dance, looking forward for

today and tomorrow, and all the days afterward. To her amusement she notices over Martin's shoulder that David and Lucho are dancing as well in each other's embrace.

At the end of the song, everyone stops dancing – a slow clap from a few, which turns into outspoken applause for the DJ.

"Thank you! Thank you," the DJ goes, speaking into the microphone. "I would like to take this opportunity to give special thanks to the sponsors who have made this Christmas dance possible."

Martin feels someone tug at his collar from behind-- dropping a sharp pin down his suit.

"Aaagh!" He tries reaching down his back to get it, but can't reach it – the pin is poking him by his torso.

"What's wrong?" Clare asks.

"Mierda, someone dropped a pin down my back..!" Martin says. He looks around for the perpetrator, but all he sees are people staring at him reacting out of pain. "Who did this?"

No one says anything; Martin hurries for the door so he could get the pin out in private.

Clare sees him go, and it feels like watching the comforting edge of the swimming pool moving away as she drifts towards the deep end.

She is suddenly surrounded by people – two girls who start grasping her by the shoulders.

"Hey Clare."

"How's it going, Clare?"

She immediately recognises the underlying

mockery in their tone of voice; her first instinct is to struggle, break free of their grip. She tries lunging forward, but their hands still hold steady over her. "You bastards, let me go!" Clare yells.

Lucho and David hear the commotion behind them – they turn around to see Clare's arms pinned behind her, and the sound of a handcuff locking her wrists together.

"Halp!" Clare goes, gathering everyone's attention.

But suddenly, Gina takes the microphone from the DJ, a spotlight trained on her. "This is the Student Response Team, stepping in to intervene. We are taking Miss Belhomme from the dance floor for the sake of everyone's safety. Please clear the way to the doors."

Because the teachers needed a way to claim responsibility over the Christmas dance without having to actually supervise, they have appointed students to do that job for them. The Student Response Team, consisting of people wanting to get extra credit.

"What the hell?" Lucho and David step in between the gropers and the gym doors. "Clare didn't do anything wrong – you let her go!"

"Get those bastards off of me!" Clare tells them.

"Mister, she slipped a tack in her dance partner's suit," Groper #1 goes, hauling her by the shoulder. "That is why we are taking her out of here. Come on, Clare, let's go."

"I don't believe a word of it--" Lucho takes a

swing at one of the gropers, but she quickly dodges and slams him in the chest with her elbow, sending him down.

"Resistance will be considered an act of insubordination!" Groper #2 glances down at the sprawled Lucho, before picking him up. "What is your name, boy?"

".. Lucho."

"Well Lucho, you have officially given up your dance privileges. Get out. Go home. If we ever see your face here again--"

Only one of the gropers have their hands on Clare, so Clare takes that opportunity to slam her on the leg, before yanking herself out of grasp and make a run for the exit.

Groper #2 paws at Clare as she rushes by, tearing her dress at the back.

The doorway is almost in reach..

Someone trips Clare and she tumbles down, her cheeks sprained by the waxed floor. She sees it is Maria, who just stares down at her, eyes blank and unsympathetic compared to the effervescent facade she had on earlier.

"Thank you, Maria," Groper #2 says. "We'll take it from here."

Clare could just barely hear everyone clap after the doors has shut behind.

8

The student council room is a neutral white from the fluorescent lighting, where you could hear the faint buzz of the lamps that slowly diminishes the moment the light switch is on. Room 414.

Clare is brought over to a table, where she is made seated on a plastic chair that feels it could just about collapse under her bum. Her handcuffed arms are behind the chair's back, while her feet have been bound together with duct tape, behind the front legs of the chair by the ankles.

The two gropers are sitting on the couch, taking a bite from the opened chip bag in the midst – discussing all the things they'd want to do during the holidays, going skiing by Lake Louise, doing a 'Sex and the City' marathon, buying a nice sweater for their boyfriends; all as if Clare isn't even there, scornfully watching them. Janice and Emilia.

Then Gina shows up, along with a boy – it's someone whose name Clare doesn't know, but she recognises from the beatings she'd get. He'd just stand by and glee without even throwing a punch.

"Do you want to know why you are here, Clare?" he goes, coldly, scrutinising her reactions.

It makes her a little sick to the stomach, seeing all their faces.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you!" He lunges towards her, pulling her chin towards him. "Clare.. Clare?"

She languidly glances at him. And spits – landing

on his hazel eyes.

He wipes it off with his hand.

"I don't know your name," she says, "but I'd rather spit your face – *all your faces* a thousand times over than spend even one second looking into those soulless eyes."

(the abyss gazes also into you)

"Soulless..? You think we're *soulless*?" His voice is arid, something like a sucking water drain underlying tenor coolness.

"I think I will call you Ass Hole." She grins. "A. H. for short."

Gina smirks in the background. "Burn..!"

A.H. looks a little miffed, but then his expression changes to a sly one. "You're funny, Clare. For the record, my actual name is Martin. Not that it will matter much anyway- my original question still stands; do you want to know why you are here?"

Non, your name is not Martin, it's still Ass Hole for all I care.

"Because you bums put a tack in Martin's suit, framed me for it and took me here?"

"Martin- what-? Oh. Wrong. Because you, Clare.. you are just a mistake. A clown who stumbles through classes. See, people here think you must have been shit out by accident, and that your parents couldn't really give a single damn about you, so all they did was kept you going on with a minimal standard. Hence, the Clare who gets test scores like 53 and mumbles to herself as if no one else were there. I get you, Clare. I really do, and I'm

sorry about you."

Her face, welling with utter humiliation, an ice cold blade that has lodged itself in her abdomen, piercing deeper and deeper into her heart. A single tear escapes her eye, and then another, as her breath rattles in and out her lungs.

"Aww, poor widdle Clare," Gina goes. "It's always so painful to confront the truth, isn't it?"

"You fuckers.." Clare's wrists pull against the chair, straining to break the handcuffs while she leans forward, getting a whiff of A.H.'s stale breath, wanting so badly to tear his eyes out.

"You want to know why you are here, Clare?" A.H. says. "We're going to fix you nicely, so it won't be such a bother, enduring your presence. Starting with your face.."

Gina pulls out a makeup kit onto the table, and Clare starts to writhe in the chair, screaming, wanting to break free at any cost. But Gina remains unfazed; she notions to Janice and Emilia to hold down Clare while she gets to work, pulling out a white swab and brushes it against Clare's lips, smearing her dark lipstick down her chin.

Clare tastes the alcohol, which is like spicy resin with an antiseptic aftertaste – she tries biting the swab, but Gina's fingers are too fast, and she winds up biting her own lip instead.

Then Gina starts applying another lipstick to Clare, which gets smeared over her cheeks with Clare shaking her head left and right.

"C'mon Clare, it'll only be harder on the both of

us if you resist," Gina goes, as she dabs the lipstick remover over her cheeks.

Clare winces with every touch, as if the humility of it is painful to endure. She gives up struggling as she tastes the lipstick applied, flavoured like mangoes, imagining how ghastly the final result will be.

Gina then starts powdering Clare's cheeks, and after that, applies some eyeliner to her eyes.

"Your hair's too damn short for me to style.." Gina remarks, combing down her pageboy hair. "Ah well. Et voila! Bring the mirror."

Emilia gets a pink handmirror by the sink and shows it to Clare.

It looks as though her own face has been redone in the style of those modelling covers, what with the glossy lipstick, facial skin powdered a light shade – it surprises her that they've actually done a decent job making her look *conventionally* pretty.

But this just isn't her at all. This is herself muddled to look like all those other girls.

"There, you see, now you look more bearable on the eyes," A.H. says.

"Like you scum," Clare goes, scowling at her reflection, how she could have easily resembled them.

"Don't call us that, Clare.. if we're the scum, then what are you? 'Oh, I'm way above all of you plebs, bow down before me, I'm the swan in hiding'!? What rubbish.. you know what? Lose that holier-than-thou attitude of yours. Can't stand it."

"Over my dead body."

"You just *suck*, Clare," Gina says, smirking.
"Always remember that."

There is simply no talking with these people. Because a monster would hardly recognise itself in the mirror – let alone a gang of monsters. Clare tries shutting her eyes, shutting those bums away from her consciousness as she pulls her inner focus on herself, those moments etched in memories that would remind her why she is happy to be alive.

("Oh look, she's closing her eyes-!")

i.

Because what those devils say is absolutely not true. Her mama and papa always told her how she has royal blood inside her. One day, she would grow up to be like royalty, like a princess who would be revered by all and rule kindly over the kingdom. She would strut along the sidewalk, imitating Snow White when she is rescued by her darling prince.

And she would get the strangers on the street to kiss her by the cheeks, how cute it was that has happened.

(you are no royalty, you have no crown and your purity has been stained long ago)

ii.

Forget about royalty. When Jesus was on his way to being intitated as the Christ, he was hounded and attacked by the Devil – "If you really are the son of God, turn this rock into bread." Not only by the Devil himself, but by those other human beings who also cast doubt upon His divinity, shaming him

for even bringing the concept up.

But Jesus managed to overcome all that (somehow), successfully becoming anointed by Jehovah under baptism, and shared His happiness with numerous other people.

But this happiness eventually upset the Jewish orthodoxy and lent Jesus the fate of crucifixion before thousands. The betrayal by Judas leading Jesus into Roman custody, where He is painfully whipped and made to wear a crown of poisoned thorns.

(after all, such a disgusting creature shouldn't even exist)

iii.

When she first ventured into art, she was a struggling amateur, a dilettante, whose brush strokes were unclumsy at best. The images she thought were profound, others found it provoked a slight spark of interest.

She didn't mind in the beginning – there was a lot to discover about making visual art, like colour complements, composition, genres like gothicism and bright, anime-inspired designs. She would scour through other artists' creations to expand her repertoire of ideas and designs.

She prefers using a pseudonym for her artistry; she finds it somewhat jarring to have her creations associated with her real, tangible and mundane self. Rarely will she ever allow anyone she knows in real life to see her art out of an embarrassment, the feeling of having your private self being intruded

upon. Especially with her parents.

Until it came time when she stumbled across the art contests, where she could finally be rewarded with something in addition to people's views and commentings. Some money and awards.

And win them she did. Some of her artwork made third place, only one of them managed to win first prize. Just one.

It was proof that she wouldn't have to land a mundane, dead-end job as some corporate worker. At last, she could have her passions carry her into a sustainable living.

But, even after all this time as an artist, she still hasn't flourished the way she would have liked. Her recent paintings posted online have gathered very little views in comparison with other artists; it has been feeling more like a chore than anything exciting to do, what with the frustrating lack of inspiration.

Is this because she has hit a dead end in being an artist?

Non, she refuses to believe that..

Oh, never.

("Clare, you should pick a more stable career than artistry!" her mere said. "Something that can reliably bring the bread to the table. In this kind of economy, what if you run out of inspiration?")

iv.

Is there such a thing as true love in the world? The kind of love where you could melt yourself into another person's body and soul and caress their

beating heart and pounding consciousness?

Only in fiction, it seems, you can acutely sense the emotion and chemistry between two characters. Their inner thoughts they are vying to express to one another, tales of beautiful memories yet to be shared. The ultimate reminder of why life exists. Why one is glad to be born. To fill a pervading sense of emptiness.

There has always been an inexplicable emptiness in her life. Some moments when she is alone, it is more acutely felt. Is this all there is to living – a series of sequential events, with sleep and dreaming the only reprieve from everyday mundanity?

"One day, everyone will grow to be a star of their own."

The whole world doesn't really matter if you cannot find love. But where to search for it, find it? She's felt the euphoric feeling at parties, while watching movies and dancing to music.

Or when she is staring out at the vastness of the sky, the wispy clouds like gentle whispers – when she would come across that field of towering trees in the mountains, almost like gazing up at snowy giants, imagining yourself getting terribly lost amongst them and never getting found by someone.

..

When she first encountered Martin that day, she'd never expected to feel all those things about him. He looked just like a more youthful version of Antonio Banderas, where she could call him cute (in a way). When he struck up a conversation about the

weather and her music, she was actually a little perturbed.

No one really seemed to engage her like that. It was mostly just another excuse to berate her from other students, or it was just the adults who'd ask her questions out of 'concern.'

Everyone seemed unreal. Like they were dolls engaged with themselves in another world I don't belong.

And when he'd promise to protect her in the nurse's office – it almost felt too good to be real. Like it was a wish-fulfillment dream that she would suddenly wake up from, and sigh to herself about in the darkness.

She'd never forget the glimmer in his eyes when he said those words: "Because.. I absolutely refuse to be like those animals who'd hate you. Never.. I never want to believe that you are doomed to be misunderstood."

It was like a ray of light shining, piercing through the numbingly cold fog. It was that something she'd all but forgotten about – the acknowledgement of her existence. And most of all, it was genuine. Nobody had goaded him into saying such a thing.

(because they pity you)

Except maybe..

Maybe it wasn't really love or attraction to her heart. Maybe it was more *pity* from him, as though he's seen a poor animal, unattended, malnourished, that he feels sorry for – instead of recognising that inner beauty she's been nurturing up to now.

"Why? I mean, not everyone likes the same things, but that doesn't mean it's bad or weird. It's just.. different. You know?"

And if it really is pity, then. How dare would anyone pity her? *I don't need your goddamned pity, most of all.* That isn't real love. It just demeans much of the entirety of her suffering that she's borne. As if to say, "Oh, you've been adrift in the doldrums for all this time, isn't it about time I rescued you from that?"

Has she been deluded in feeling affection for him?

I want you to really love me.. for who I am. That's why I touched you and held you in the shower like that. I wanted you to feel a piece of my heart.

"But I am nice to you," Martin goes. "How can you say-"

LIAR! You're just hiding behind that smile, intentionally keeping things ambiguous!

(because the truth causes everyone pain)

"What are you guys talking about?"

"I'm telling the guys some advice about watching over you," Martin goes. "So you don't need to worry about anything Clare. I've got everything under control!"

(the truth is very, very traumatic)

*"You just **suck**, Clare," Gina says, smirking. "Always remember that."*

But ambiguity only causes me more pain.. it scares me, because I don't know when you'll stop wanting me anymore. All the few friends that I ever

had.. they liked me once, but they've moved on past me. I've been forgotten..

I remember them, but they don't remember me..

Please don't forget me. Don't leave me behind like an old toy. Please let me hear your voice, once more! Please *care about me!*

v.

In the rain, she cries alone. No one is around to hear her sobs. The water pitter-patters, the wind blows, and the leaves fall.

She is lost in the forest.

Those beautiful, gnarly trees.

What was I crying about? I don't remember.. I think my parents left me out after a bad argument.

That day.. I was very upset about my pet bird dying. Because I forgot to feed it during the day. And now it's dead. I have to bury it in the ground myself.

Look at it.

It looks awful. Its body is shrivelled and the feathers are coming off.

But when I lay it in the hole I dug for it, it looks beautiful. It'll return to the earth that has nurtured it. It'll.. rot away. It'll be forgotten. And it could.. be happy again.

Just like me.

I'll lay myself somewhere on the leaves, and go to sleep forever.

I could..

I..

..

She is crying, and she could hear all their voices echoing in the room like a demonic cacophony.

".. help me," she goes. "Somebody please help me.. help me.. Help me. Somebody HELP ME! DON'T LEAVE ME ALONE! DON'T ABANDON ME! PLEASE DON'T KILL ME!"

The room goes silent as Clare's pleas hang in the air, her panting, her eyes the redness of veins.

A long beat, where they glance at her sunken form.

Then Martin scoffs. He walks over to her, laying down his freshly brewed cup of coffee on the table.

"No," he says.

It is a black hole inside her chest, caving in by her heart. Sucking away all the possible warmth in her body into the emptiness. Her entire body goes deathly limp on the chair.

Then, somewhere in the cold, a deep rage begins surging through her.

It is a rage that has utterly relinquished any notion of happiness, of love and warmth. An inhuman rage that seeks to devour all life.

(self-destruct)

She finds the handcuffs easy to break under her newfound will. The chains seem to bend and snap like they were made out of wax.

She throws her entire self at Martin, her outstretched hands lunging for his face, her legs still taped to the chair. The table tumbles over her path, the cup flying and splashing black coffee over him, the porcelain shattering as it hits the floor.

When she feels his flesh, her first instinct is to grasp it and tear it apart.

(die)

He squirms on the floor underneath her, screaming for help, and the others come and try to take Clare off, grasping her numbed body that doesn't feel anything.

She leaves deep gashes along his nose and cheeks – her hands go down to his throat and she squeezes down on his Adam's apple, and she can hear the air wheeze in and out of his mouth, and sees his eyes widen, horrified,

he sputters spit,

only making her squeeze harder and harder until her fingers are aching under the pressure, and he goes through violent convulsions.

Then he stops moving.

He doesn't cough for air after she lets go, yet his eyes are wide open, staring off into blankness.

Clare pulls herself over to the chair where she tears the tape away from her feet, and she stands upright now, glancing at Gina, at Janice and what's-her-name – they are slowly backing away from her, towards the door. She quivers, wincing, a little light-headed.

Nobody wants me. So they can all just go and die.

(then what are your hands for?)

Nobody cares whether or not I exist. Nothing ever changes, so you can all just go and die.

(then what is your heart for?)

All my life, I've only ever felt pain. It would be

better if I never existed. Maybe I should just die too.

"Is it.. alright for me to be here?" Clare asks no one in particular.

They are trembling, too afraid to even answer her.

So to their silence – she screams a primal scream, the beast who screams "I" to a hostile and indifferent world, and they bolt off into the hallways, leaving her alone in the room.

9

"Where is Clare? What happened to her?" Martin is asking David in the hallway. After he'd removed the tack from his suit, he went back into the gym only to discover Clare's disappearance.

"They took her away," David goes. "I don't know where. And they also took Lucho away too, he tried to fight them off."

"Who? Who took her away?"

"I don't know.. two burly girls. I saw Gina announce about it on the stage – the Student Response Team!"

The fury spills out of Martin as he slams his fist onto a nearby locker. "God Damn It!" he goes. "I should *never* have left her alone out there! David, where'd they take her? Did you see!?"

David can only give a shrug.

The music continues to blare on from the gym, indifferent to Martin's growing despair. He paces around a few steps, trying to think of something, then the notion of calling Lucho comes to mind, and he pulls out his phone-

There's already a message from Lucho: *Marty, they got Clare in trouble, and I have to wait by the mall until its over for you guys. I tried rescuing her, but they banned me from the rest of the dance.*

So..

I think they took her to the council room (rm 414). You better do something Marty, because I don't think what they have in store for her is anything nice. Give

me a call if you can.

It's been sent five minutes ago, with a missed call before that.

"Room 414! David!" Martin goes. "Clare might be there!" They make a jog down the vacant corridors while Martin dials up Lucho. "Pickup-pickup-pickup-"

"Marty-!" Lucho says. "You got my message?"

"I did; tell me what went on. Why'd Clare get in trouble?"

"Because they said she slipped a tack in your suit, and they responded for safety's sake. Ain't that something?"

"What the hell? Clare- someone did it, but it sure isn't Clare."

"It must have been one of those bruiser girls.." Lucho goes. "They framed her."

Martin and David round a corner of the hallway, approaching the foyer where a lone clown is sitting on one of the benches, watching a movie on his phone, balloon animals by his side as companions.

"Those *bastardos*.. got rid of me so they can get to Clare.." Martin deduces. "Madafuckars!" He doesn't want to imagine all the possible torments they could unleash upon her. Or the terrible result – the angel of glass ripped apart into irreparable shards.

That is why he has to run, the blood pumping inside him, desperation overwhelming. It's so different from when he's about to be late to movie showings, events. If he didn't make it then, he'd

only feel frustration at most. It's okay, there'll be another time.

If he doesn't make it now, she'll be lost – forever.

"CLARE!" Her name escapes his lungs. "Where ARE YOU?"

The resting clown perks his head up, noticing the commotion. "Hey, slow down buddies! You don't want to trip on the floor, do ya?"

Martin halts. "But I have to find someone! Where is the student council room? Do you know where it is?"

"I'm just the visiting clown," the clown goes. "I don't know left from right at this school, besides the bathroom."

"They *took Clare!*" Martin screams. "She's going to die, and all because I left her- MALDITO HIJO DE LAS MIL PUTAS MUY GRANDES-" The burst of madness stabs him through, and he is sobbing already, collapsed onto his knees. He is vividly reliving that moment after they've beaten her over her lunch, except she is lying very still, like a doll, not even able to cry.

The clown gazes at the utterly defeated boy. "I- I remember now. Clare? I think I saw a bunch of people, and it looked like they were carrying someone. I thought- maybe they were celebrating something, I didn't really look. But I know for sure- they went thataway-"

The clown points down the west corridor. "I'm sure you'll find her." He gives a consoling smile.

"Let's go Martin." David pats him by the shoulder.

It's as though Hope herself has sent a renewed light to blow away that impending darkness. "Si, let's go!" With a grin coming over his face, he rises up, and drags David down along the hallways.

It feels like he is actually flying to her, his legs being carried by a supernatural force, and all the lockers go past him as he beats his own sprinting record.

Room 404.. 405..

Ahead, he spots two girls, running his way.

"Hey—" Martin skids to a halt. "Where's the student council room? Up ahead?"

But they just glance at him warily (for some reason), and they continue on running.

"Martin.." David says, "those are the girls who've taken Clare."

They watch the girls disappear along the corridor.

"They put that tack in me..!" Martin recalls in the gym when he'd asked, and he remembers their faces gazing back at him, never answering. Where are they running off to.. or what are they running from? He should've grabbed one of them while he had the chance.

His train of thought gets interrupted when he sees Clare stumble out of a room. She seems in a daze, her steps aimlessly staggering, her eyes looking very damned.

"Clare!" Martin starts to run towards her – yet something isn't right.

Were they running from *her*?

"Clare..!" He's just a few steps away when he

realises she is scowling at him. "What's—"

"You *betrayed* my feelings!" she goes. "You say you're wanting to protect me, be my puppy guard, but in reality you just *pity* me! Like everyone else!"

"What did they do to you?" It's as though her core memories with him have been changed. "Did they brainwash you?"

"Non. I realised you are an absolute liar.. you don't like me, you pity me. You just feel sorry for me, and that's why you hung out with me. Am I one of those sorry people you see lying on the street? And you put your spare change by my lap? I.. I *hate* you! I don't need your fucking pity."

He feels like being stabbed in the chest. "No.. no! I care about you Clare – I don't want to see you suffer-"

"Suffer? To me, what's worse than suffering is that the only love I'm going to get is just to assuage your own guilt. Nothing real."

He is desperately searching for words, looking through his memories for anything that would show he is real. He knows he pitied her from the start – but wouldn't anyone? Is it so bad to feel pity, especially when.. he grew closer to her, he grew to know how she is really like? That someone he would want to hold by his chest, and never want to let go, and heal all her wounds with his whole heart. That pity which lead to love.

"Casse-toi, Martin."

Martin tries reaching for her – she reacts by pulling his wrist in and shoving him against the

lockers.

"CASSE-TOI! I never want to see your goddamn face ever again!" She slams him hard in the nose, and as the pain jolts through him, the tears spill out his eyes as he hears her say, "Putain de merde!"

It is too much for him to take; he faints.

Clare glances at his sidekick. David.

"He really loves you Clare," he goes, like a weak, desperate pleading. "That is no lie."

She wonders what to say to him, then decides to brush David out of her way – running after the girls from the room so they can be just like that other Martin, dead on the floor, without any future. It is the least she can do, to take them with her into Hell.

Now where did they go..?

She rounds a corner where she sees a flicker of movement at the end of the hall – someone's head poking out, seeing her, and disappearing.

She lunges at the visage, a bull on a crash course towards the colour red.

The school hallways feel different somehow. Even though it's the same lockers, the same floor, lighting and promotional posters on the walls, it feels like she's running in a foreign country, whose indigenous population is hostile to her being.

She comes to a T-section, where she has to decipher whether to head left or right. That head was peeking out from the left corner, so left.

Left.

Back into the main foyer.

Along the way, she notices her reflection on a

mirror hung beside the Fashion Studies room. A mirror that distorts herself to look so bloated. It's supposed to beg a message regarding anorexics and those who think they are too overweight to be beautiful.

Here, she sees her face as if for a first time – the face of an utter and absolute nothing. Not because of weight, but because she is herself.

The one person I hate the most.. is MYSELF!

She rams her fist into the mirror, shattering it into a spider's fracture, and the mirror frame clatters onto the floor, leaving her knuckles and fingers bleeding with petite shards.

It stings, but not so much compared with the hurting of her heart.

In the foyer, she notices a clown sitting on the benches, busy talking a friend over the phone.

"Yeah, yeah- wait, hold on a minute," the clown goes, glancing at her. "Something's up." He stands up, striding towards her. "You.. you're Clare, aren't you?"

"What?"

"Whoa.. your dress.. your hand's bleedin'.. um, I saw those girls running down *that* way-" He points down the direction to the cafeteria. "Did they do this to you? You'd better get-"

Before he could finish, Clare runs off where he's pointed.

"Hey, kick their asses hard for me!" she hears him say.

At the cafeteria, the nerds seem to have been

drawn in a very heated debate about an unfair character mechanic in their card game. Seeing past them, Clare finds Gina and her gathered goonies by the brownie stand. They've been waiting for her to come – each of them take a posed stance.

"So.. Clare!" Gina goes, grinning confidently. "Nice of you to join us, eh?"

The nerds start to give attention to the unfolding scene, pausing their discussion.

"You talking to me, Gina..?" Clare says with gritted teeth. "You talkin' to me? I'm the only one standing here.." This is what Travis Bickle must have envisioned when he was talking to himself in the mirror, preparing for the ultimate confrontation.

"This is where you'll end, Clare," Gina goes. "It is about time that we remove the stain that is your presence. Any last words, Clare?"

Clare evaluates the contained faces before her – always, they have always taken delight whenever she suffers under their hands. Whether it is for mocking her bad grades, doing terrible in group assignments (that one time when she had to work with them), or whether it is for being ignoble in the classroom frivolities, saying things out of line from everyone else, missing the standard beats everyone is drumming to.

".. those long.." she mutters, the words choking up in her throat, maybe they won't even listen.

"I'm sorry?"

".. these long years, I've had to endure assault after assault over my dignity. But no longer. If this

were a faery tale, I'd be the witch, scorned and condemned by all until kingdom come. But you.. and you.. *and you*, each and every one of you is a MONSTER! AND I'LL FUCK YOU ALL TO DEATH!"

And Clare throws herself upon Gina – they collide hard upon the brownie table, the brownies flying into the air, the table tumbling over onto its side.

When they land, Clare attempts to decimate Gina's face (because she has her body pinned down) – landing her knuckles just by her nose, and some of the embedded mirror shards get stuck on Gina's cheeks.

Gina is screeching, and tries pawing Clare away. She pokes at Clare's eyeballs.

"Agghh-!"

Clare winces. This gives Gina's goons enough of an opening to take Clare off of her – they haul her down on a nearby table, where they hold her down, landing blows on Clare's abdomen, one after another, each punch pushing her to the verge of vomiting.

Gina is cradling her cheeks while she observes the beatdown, a little hurt yet satisfied.

After fruitlessly wiggling her legs around in the air, Clare finally connects a kick that sends one of them crashing away, and with her left arm free, she bonks the other guy on the chin.

She rolls off the tabletop, away from them; quickly gets back onto her feet – poising to strike.

The nerds are avidly watching the battle, most of them paralysed and sweating on their seats, as if it were Ginga IV again in a seemingly hopeless siege from the Titans, now playing in a theatre near you. One of them doesn't even bat an eye as he reaches for the nearby bag of chips.

Clare scans the cafeteria, looking for anything that could resemble a weapon in her grasp. She'd managed to take down Gina only out of surprise – they weren't expecting that sudden leap – but now that they are very ready for anything she could do, fighting them head-on would actually be suicide.

Her heart is trembling, her skin shimmers heat. It is the first time she's ever actually fought those bums, and the only experience she has is just from watching movies and games.

At the far end, there are stacks of folded metal chairs.

She sprints towards the chairs, clambering over the tables, narrowly avoiding being tripped by a goon.

"That's right, run you pussy-cat!" the goon shouts.

Once Clare reaches the chairs, she grabs one off a stack, and the goonsters start to act more warily.

"Oo-kay, calm down Clare," they say. "Go easy.."

She lunges at one of them closeby, Janice – an overhead swing that bashes the chair against her head, and the result is like a puppet whose strings are abruptly severed. Good.

The other goons are visibly unnerved by the sight. Of Clare learning to smile upon crippling

another. Janice's eyes are still half-open, you could see her green irises that are unfocused.

Clare raises the chair above her, very willing to take another swing. They flinch away. Now they're beginning to feel afraid.

Before civilised law was invented, life ran under the dictum of strength and cunning. The ones who couldn't forage it out for themselves were eliminated. And because humanity has learned to wield weapons against their enemies, humanity has thus flourished and spread across the Earth. The beast who wields intelligence to its aggression.

And what is morality? That silly conscience which acts like a straitjacket, so that one human being does not come to harm another. To ensure the survival of the species, with all the contradictions of their imperfect mixture of intellect and instinct.

But what if it conflicts with the survival of the individual? All those things like love and nourishment and connection – the things you'd take for granted when you see your friends, your family, your love.. if you are outside of society, then it does not matter. It is as irrelevant as garnering Facebook likes or rising to Challenger league when you are starving out of hunger.

Thus, it is her absolute natural right to terminate their lives, those people who would threaten her and mock her to a state of meaninglessness.

Who knows, maybe she is like a mutated cell in a living body. Oui.

"I will kill you," she says. Put out all notions of

ever getting genuine love – they are outdated! As outdated as kid's toys!

(why does it hurt so badly inside?)

One of the goons attempts to grab a chair too, so to fight with Clare on equal footing. She quickly lowers her own chair to chest level, and side-swipes the goon, cracking his ribs. He feebly writhes on the floor, coughing, moaning.

A funny note: it's so easy to destroy, compared with creating. It takes months to write a novel, words into sentences into paragraphs, or many years to nurture and help a person grow. It can take just mere seconds to wipe both away.

Another goon leaps onto Clare, sending her crashing against the chair stacks. While Clare is down, the goon stomps down on her elbow, almost dislocating the joint-

it hurts

"Give it up Clare," the goon goes, rubbing her foot in on her elbow. "You couldn't see yourself clearly to begin with, but now you're just being arrogant. You say you want to 'kill us to death,' but you've neither the strength nor competency enough to accomplish that." She kneels down and pins Clare's head against the floor.

"Give her hell, Pam!" the other downed goon says.

"Look at you.. Clare." The goon is whispering into her ear. "You sad, sad freak, trying to outst the good people of this school."

Clare struggles against the goon's pressure, her

one working arm scrambling around like a desperate snake. The goon just kneels down harder on her back. It's getting hard to breathe.

"You think you can spit on us all and not expect any consequences? You know Clare, I personally think you're really deluded, quite messed up in the head. I'll eagerly await when the orderlies come and they take you away for good, and then you'll never be able to escape that padded cell. Never. You weak little sister."

Clare is trembling at what she is hearing. A million colliding thoughts are igniting behind her eyes, all wanting that goon to shut up for good.

The way her head is held down, she isn't able to see what her arm is reaching for. Her fingers touch something though – it's a mechanical pencil.

Clare reaches back, jams the pencil's lead into the goon (somewhere) – she hears a pained scream, and there's relief from the goon's knee.

Have to get back up..

She pulls herself up on her good arm, and sees that the goon has just managed to pull out the pencil from her neck. It's not a major wound. Clare punches her in the mouth, and kicks her body back so that she topples over onto the lying goon ("Oof!").

And then Clare turns towards Gina, with just two goons left beside her. They look at each other, the same idea popping into their heads. *She's unstoppable!*

They bolt away, down to the other hallway

connected to the cafeteria.

Clare runs after them.

—

Awareness. The feeling of having blacked out, and gradually, the state of awareness returns to you until you realise you haven't been awake.

Gee, this bed is really hard..

Martin opens his eyes and sees once more the school hallways, with David leaning beside him. He wonders for a brief second what has happened. The sudden impact on his nose. "Casse-toi!" Those words from a vengeful Clare.

He feels a band-aid that's been put on his nose.

"Martin!" David helps him back up. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Yea.. yeah.. I just need a moment to think.. is there water around?"

David hands Martin a fresh bottle of Pepsi, which he avidly opens and gulps down a third of its sizzling contents. Pepsi and Coke – the kinds of drinks you'd want to consume for drowsiness or a hangover.

"Clare hates me," Martin goes, ruminating to himself. "Damnit, she really hates me.."

"Things aren't always as they seem.." David goes. "She does not hate you Martin. When you are under a sufficient degree of stress, it can turn even the best memories against you. Those people have really hurt her in that room, and you know, she's been bullied for a long time. She never had anyone to trust, to connect with, before meeting you."

"Things are *exactly* as they seem," Martin says, his eyes tearing, drained. "There's no way.. *no way* that they could ever make her hate me like that. If she actually loved me.. she thought I pitied her, and I *did* David. I did pity her – even though I wanted to make her life better. Look what I've done."

"You've given her hope; she never ever had that before. That's why she is hurting.. and she pushed you away, because she did love you. Deep down inside, she still does." David lays a hand on Martin's shoulder. "I may not know much about anything, but she loves you. I know it. I know she loves you."

For some reason, this tears at Martin especially, striking a raw nerve inside him. There just seems no reason to even try anymore, and it seems better to just forget about it. Forget about her, everything about her, the good moments. Just let everything go.

But some part of him still vividly remembers the tenderness, the experience of love, the angel he's seen, and that part is screaming at the top of its lungs, wrenching him into stirring.

He can't..

It is a very faint yet tangible hope. A dim candle in the distance. The light of which will burn out for good.

"CLAARRE—!!"

And then his eyes widen, and he sees the hallways as if for a first time, like a clear path towards the edges of Eternity.

10

The end of the hallway is mainly a dead end – it was originally supposed to lead out the back side of the school to the basketball courts, but the doors are kept shut until further notice due to repairs.

It seems Clare is going to have Gina and her cohorts cornered. They try pushing the exit doors open despite the warning notice, but they remain jammed in place.

Gina notices there's an emergency stairway to the side. She gets them to follow her as she pushes the door open, and she hurries up the stairwell, two steps at a time, frantically hoping to make it out the second floor landing. The door's locked. Up to the third floor – it's also locked. What the bloody hell.

"She's coming!" Emilia shouts, panting just steps behind.

The only thing left is the rooftop door, which Gina doesn't hesitate to go for.

Clare stumbles on one of the steps (it's awkward climbing with only one arm) and falls, sharply bumping her kneecap on a step's corner, and she has to wince, cradling her poor leg like a child, before she manages to resume chase – albeit with a limp.

She catches glimpse of their moving forms at the very top of the stairs, and hears the creak of a door pushed open.

Along with a howling breeze.

Before the rooftop door slowly whittles to a close,

Clare bursts through it. She is greeted by a familiar coldness. The dark of the night, the haze visible and illuminated by building lights from far below. You could barely see the edges of the rooftop.

It's especially windy as the chill of the air blows through the fabric of her dress, carrying snowflakes in the breeze.

The sight of Gina, just ahead. Waiting for Clare.

"You..!" Clare snarls, but rushing ahead, she senses something not quite right.

Suddenly Jon charges her from the side, carrying her like a bull and he pummels her onto the snowy asphalt. Emilia is lifting a garbage can, where she smashes it onto Clare and the can's old contents come spilling out beside.

"Baited!" Jon exclaims. "Hook, line, and stinker."

Clare wheezes; it feels like she's been rammed in the chest, and the air doesn't seem to enter her lungs properly.

"You thought you had me?" Gina goes, approaching. "Thought you could.. grab me by the throat and kill me? So very predictable, like a bull seeing red. You must really hate me that much, I guess?" She glances aside for a moment, looking out at the orange haze of cityscape lights.

"I hate you absolutely," Clare tells her, before brushing the can away and swiftly attempting to stand up. Her vision starts to dim as her awareness undulates; it's what happens when you rise too quickly – the blood pressure has shifted away from your upper body.

They must have been staring at her, wondering why she seems out of it for a moment. As her consciousness returns to normal, someone punches her in the eye and she staggers back, the blunt pain reverberating through her entire skull.

Clare blindly swings at the air, expecting them to follow up. She hears their laughter.

Then another blow to her chest, followed by a knee to her chin-- it dislodges some of her teeth. She holds her arm up against her face to defend, but the next blow comes from the side, onto her jaw, and time seems to jump as the blood and saliva spill from her mouth.

On her knees, Clare rattles, feebly crawling as she sees her blood trickle onto the snow, in a red trail. So pretty.

She hears someone's grunt of effort and gets battered on her back. Her body simply collapses down like a frail table.

"Beat her into unrecognisable shape!"

The trio waste no time with delivering the coup de grâce – they use her back like a welcome mat, stomping on her, embedding footprints over her dress.

—

The clown has been very nice with Martin, avidly pointing the direction which Clare has gone. He's been keeping tabs on the unfolding drama – certainly it's a more than welcome distraction from just waiting around until the dance night is over.

"It'll be a hell of a story to tell at the bar," the

clown notes to himself. "A pair of star-cross'd lovers chasing after each other." (He performs some Shakespeare on his off days.)

Martin makes it through to the cafeteria; David on the other hand is taking a whizz in the washrooms, and will be following shortly.

He sees the resultant massacre, the people who are fallen and just recovering under the geeks' attendance. The spillage of brownies over the floor. Some blood splatters.

A fight has broken out here – between Clare and those girls, Martin deduces. He looks at the recovering bodies, wondering if Clare is amidst them. She isn't; it's just the faces of those he'd see in some of his classes, chatting irrelevantly in the background with others.

Where did she go? She's not here..

"Hey," he says, getting their attention. "There was a fight here, right?"

"Mhm."

"Do you guys know where Clare's gone?"

"Clare? Who's that..?"

Apparently they don't know her name. "She is the girl in the black dress," he says, "with spider legs at the back."

"Oh, that's her, alright. Man, you should've been here, it was so surreal! She fought those guys like.. it was a 1 versus 6, right? Those three right here, if you saw her, she owned them like a boss. Like.. BAM! Bam bam bam!" (imitates karate chops)

"Where'd she go after?" Martin asks.

"Well, the other three, they got so scared of her they ran away, down that hallway there – she went after them. Hey dude, don't worry about her too much. If anything, she'll dominate the rest of them--"

"HEY! This isn't one of your little card GAMES! REAL PEOPLE ARE GOING TO DIE. IDIOT NERD." Martin bitch-slaps the geek on the cheek, before running after her.

"Ough! Sorries."

—

It seems like an eternity before their barrage of kicking stops. Clare starts to cough violently. Until a bit of blood finally comes out her mouth. She is too weak to even move – all strength seems to have left her. Feverish white dots start to spin in front of her blurred eyes.

With Clare still disoriented, Gina notions for the two to haul her up by the arms.

"Drag her over to the edges, would you kindly," Gina goes.

Clare's eyes widen; the realisation it is going to be her final moments alive. But it seems all she can do is look on like a ghost in a crippled body; the edge of the rooftop inevitably coming closer, and beyond it – the abyss of lights.

Strange.. the way her body is numbing the aching pain, she remembers when she would get sick, and while she lay in bed, her mama would come and give her some medicine that made her feel.. drowsy and calm. There isn't anything else in the world she

needs to worry about – just rest there and relax.

Her heart is beating faster and faster, she could feel the thumps within, *pounding*, yet the adrenaline doesn't seem to register in her awareness.

Her mind is jumping from one moment in her past to another, not wanting to endure the present any more it seems; the most mundane memories that take on the sweetest poignancy. Her headphones, her reflection in the mirror when she's brushing her teeth. The way her *mere* would always seem to add too much salt to the dinner food.

The trees in summer.. when she'd take walks in the neighbourhood, and she'd admire the way the leaves would sway ever so slightly in the gentle breeze. The breeze which caresses her cheeks just right. Wonderful..

That joy she felt when she won the awards for her art. People could finally acknowledge the depictions of her subjective world – the look on that person's face when his eyes were wide open to her images, absorbing them sweetly.

Martin..

I.. I want to see Martin...!One last time..!

(he betrayed you)

(remember?)

Please.. I.. I felt so happy when I was with him..

She remembers the way he'd hold her in his arms at the dance. Carefully, delicately. Almost like he was lifting her up onto the clouds. She could float with her head on his shoulders, smelling the masculin conditioner from his hair.

A strong gust of wind blows over her, and she now sees the one thing that just separates her from falling. A knee-high concrete bannister.

"Turn her around," she hears Gina say.

As they force Clare the other way, the very ground seems to rumble underneath her feet.

"Clare..?" Gina pulls at her chin. "You awake? Look at me-- look at me. Do you understand what is about to happen with you?"

Clare can only make a low groan – her throat aches from coughing.

"This is the final minute of your life," Gina goes. "The last thing you will see is us glancing down at your suicide, and maybe some glimpses of the pretty lights as your body tumbles over. But that will not be the end.

"After you die, we will tell the story of a poor, crazed girl named Clare, who decided to go on a psychotic rampage that night. In her path, she injured Janice, Martin, and other people, who bravely attempted to stop the raging bull. We chased you up the staircase to the rooftop, where you had the urge to kill yourself because you thought the unfair world was against you, and blaming other people for your unfortunate position wasn't enough.

"We tried to reason and lure you away, but alas, poor Clare dove off the rooftop and.. in a few years, you'll be all but forgotten, just a ghost haunting this school. Everyone will talk about you like a legend – Clare the basket-case. The moral of your story will

be to never become like you, that weird, offbeat kid.

"Have no regrets about it. Pardon my poor French, Madame Belhomme.. *c'est la vie*. I really can't envision a better future for you than this." Gina smiles. "Good-bye."

Then Clare sees it happen.

The hand that will push her over.

Her own body tumbling down the depths.

The entirety of her last seconds a whizzing blur.

The ground swallowing her existence whole.
(death)

..

And it is as if all the built-up adrenaline has burst through that dam.

From someplace deep within, an emergency reservoir of sheer energy which flows through her body. Her senses are rejuvenated. Boosted to almost superhuman levels.

She just perceives Gina's hand, in mid-motion, every fine detail about it – the slight wrinkles over her knuckles, the pink fingernails, the stamp of a bunny on her wrist.

The hand which must be destroyed.

Clare rips her arm out of Joe's grasp, and clasps her fingers around Gina's wrist. Wrings the joint to an unnatural angle, snapping the bone into two pieces.

Now to Emilia.

Clare stomps on her toes, and knees her gut, crushing her insides, and pushes Emilia's head so far away with her palm that her body follows along

in the air, like an accordion.

Now to Jon. (He is in the midst of aiming for her ribs.)

An elbow striking his plexus, cancelling his auto-attack animation – he vomits over himself (some of it getting on her too), and she follows up with a devastating kick to his groin, and he falters over, and Clare jams her foot on his kneecaps and drives him face-flat to the ground.

Gina's face is full of outraged disbelief; she clutches at her broken hand, dangling limp.

Clare quivers, shuddering in the blowing wind. It's apparent in her stillness that her body is quickly going to give way.

"Now you're gone!" Gina goes. "Finished! I'll fucking send you back to hell, bitch! Maybe you can go eat shit on your way down!"

With a furious grunt, she lunges onto Clare, thudding together. A tango of terrible rage and violence. They could smell each other's breaths. Amidst the grabs and tugs, Gina finds out that Clare still has a deceptively lot of tenacity left in her – it is just all Clare can do to keep from succumbing to Gina's attacks, maintaining her centre of gravity, enduring the blows, conserving her dwindling energies to wait for a good opening to strike.

The rooftop door bursts open.

"CLARE!!!"

His voice, booming so clearly. *Martin?*

Clare wants to see him, so she briefly gives her focus on that figure, running towards her in

seeming slow-motion, so far away..

Gina recalls when Clare's arm was stomped upon in the cafeteria, by the elbow. Time to widen an old injury. So she pulls at that arm which has been huddling behind Clare's back, gets a good hold of it, and applies torque to the forearm.

Hears it snap.

The pain is excruciating and all of Clare's will drains away into that one point of focus. She emits a wailing scream, and starts sobbing. It's just too much to take.

"NOO!" Martin yells. He sprints towards them, charging, wanting to badly just to make pain onto Gina.

Gina finally notices who's been yelling in the background. She turns, only to see Martin in a rush, a collision course towards her.

This time, Jon and Emilia aren't awake to save her.

Martin *shoves* Gina towards the edge, and he bashes her in the face with his two hands.

"DON'T YOU HURT HER ANYMORE! DON'T YOU TAKE CLARE AWAY!"

Gina never lets go of Clare's arm though, and as she topples over the edge into the abyss, she drags Clare along with her down.

"CLAREE!!"

Clare's body tumbles over the baluster, and it seems like she has gone, all trace of her disappeared before he could even.. do anything about it.

A new feeling begins to emerge inside Martin.

Utter bleakness. A world that goes on without Clare. It would not care of her disappearance, even if it hurts him so much. A star disappears from the night sky – millions of galaxies of hundreds of millions of stars – not with the big explosion of a supernova, but with a faint whimper, a speck of one in a blink.

But then--

He hears a faint moaning from below.

Would he dare? He peers over the edge and to his massive astonishment, sees Clare dangling off just inches below, the spider legs of her dress caught up on an antenna.

His heart skips a beat – and his hands quiver. He blinks, wanting to make absolute sure that it isn't just his eyes tricking him. She is still there, real and tangible, against the backdrop of mist and light.

"Clare..!" he says delicately, as if shouting any louder could cause her to fall.

She doesn't seem to react at first. Then slowly yet surely, she glances up at the face that once greeted her a few days ago.. a lifetime ago.

"Martin.." she croaks.

The wind is blowing especially hard, and it makes Clare's dress ripple while the snow catches in Martin's eyes. He reaches down, bending over the baluster. He's only able to reach partway to her.

"Clare.. give me your hand!" Martin pleads. "I need your hand.."

He notices her spider legs starting to tear by their seams.

"Please.. reach for me!"

His voice sounds so far away to her, faint. She is in a semi-hallucinatory state – the darkness is pulling over her eyes. If there is one thing she'd like to tell Martin this instant, she is so glad to have lasted this long for knowing him.

("Clare..! CLARE--!")

And that she is so, so sorry for telling him his love wasn't real.

The white cotton emerges from the split.

"Take MY HAND!" Martin shouts, his fingers outstretched as far as they can go.

Somehow, her awareness still receives his words – in one more burst of sudden reserve, she throws her good arm up blindly.

The overtaxed spider legs finally split.

Clare falls..

Martin clasps her hand at the last second, his heart shooting through the roof.

"I got you!" he yells in triumph, a bit of crazed laughter like a huge relief. "DON'T YOU LET GO."

She's so heavy though. Her grip is barely existent, and the sweat over their palms is making her slip. And the coldness.. he can hardly feel his hands.

I can't hold onto you much longer. I can't stand this pain, my arm is going to tear off.

Please hold my hand, please, at least hold onto it, I'm doing this for you.

Please hold my hand.

Damn. I'm so weak. My grip is losing yours.

I-- I don't want to lose you.

I wish I can hold you a little more longer. If only I wasn't too weak.

Who are you to me? If I could hold you longer, I'll tell you.

You're Clare, and only that matters.

Clare..

Martin gets his other hand to hold her too, at the expense of having a stable anchor to his position (that hand was clutching the railing).

Thus, he gets pulled forward with her.

If Gravity were a man, he'd slap Him so hard for being a total drag.

Martin slides forward over the baluster's railing, up to his lower stomach-- he leans his legs forward, keeping them at a downward angle. So that his pelvis is what keeps him from going any further.

"UrrgghhhHH!"

He tries arching his back up, and now, almost imperceptably, he feels his centre of gravity shift, little by little, back towards the roof.

And once he can feel his feet touch ground, he holds her hand, her arm, hauling her back up.

In the loneliness of the night, he pulls her up.. he pulls her up.. pulls her up..

He starts crying.

He has her here.. in his arms. Nothing could describe the beautiful relief he feels. His cries become unrestrained sobs.

For Clare, it is so heartbreaking to see him cry like that. Don't cry.. you'll make me sad too. I don't want you to cry. See, I'm caressing your face.. my

fingers wipe away the tears dripping down your chin. Why don't you smile..?

I'm.. holding you too.

I..

Clare drifts away into a very deep sleep, and her hand droops down from Martin. Her eyes are still half-open, peaceful. The falling snowflakes gather upon her in the silence.

"Clare.. no.. no." Martin slaps her cheeks, trying to cajole her back awake – starting to panic. "No..!"

The rooftop door opens – it's David.

"CLAREE--!!" Martin screams out to the heavens, followed by the stifled, painful sobs of his bleeding heart.

"Martin!" David goes, rushing over. "Clare's--"

"DIAL 9-1-1 NOW DAVID," Martin demands, all the while fumbling for his own phone in his pocket. His fingers are trembling to press the right buttons, getting to the dial screen.

He types in the three magic numbers, and it seems like forever before he hears the dial tone, ringing.

Click. "911, what is your emergency?"

"MY CLARE IS DYING," he shouts into the receiver. "DO SOMETHING!"

11

There was a dream Martin had once, where he would be chasing after an unknown girl – her face and appearance he does not clearly see. He'd chase her through the woods and the brooks. And off a cliff, where he'd grow wings of his own and pursue her down the skies.

But his wings were made of wax and feathers, and like Icarus, the sun melted his angelic wings and he fell down from the blue clouds into the ocean.

The obsessive, haunting feeling of that dream lingers inside him, and he is feeling it once more, like an old scent reawakened from memory.

He is running down the hallways, carrying Clare in his arms.

The nerds gather around Martin as he enters the cafeteria, and they look upon her lithe form with horror and startlement.

"Oh my God..!"

"Is she alright? Somebody get some help!"

Et cetera.

Even the clown from the foyer is here out of curiosity, and his first instinctive reaction is to reach for his phone and call for the medics.

"Out of the way!" Martin yells – wanting to lay Clare down someplace with enough space. "I called 9-1-1 already, stupid!"

"Oh." The clown puts away his phone.

"CALL THEM ANYWAY! THEY WILL COME

FASTER!" Martin isn't sure what to think anymore; he puts Clare on an empty table, and one of the nerds takes off his sweater and puts it under Clare's head like a pillow. ("GOOD!")

"Why don't you take her mangled dress off?" one nerd suggests.

Good idea – maybe you can assess the damage. Martin's fingers frenetically search for the zipper to her dress, or something, but in the end he tears away through the whole fabric, leaving her exposed in black underwear.

Clare is bruised horrendously. Her skin around her stomach and rib area is a dark purplish-black, with some bleeding gashes at her back. It just reminds Martin of those street fight videos when you'd see the aftermath done to a person, and he'd squirm at the badly injuries.

As well, her right arm is subtly off-kilter by the elbow – her forearm bulging in a way it shouldn't.

And most of all, her face, the bruises over her eyes and cheek, and her broken lips – blood that trickles down the side of her mouth.

"Dude, is she even breathing meng?" a nerd asks.

"AAAGHHH, what do I do?" Martin goes. He waves a hand over her mouth and nose, and feels the faintest trace of breath. Then notices how her entire chest seems to strain with taking air in and out.

More blood emerges out her mouth.

"DO I GIVE HER C-P-R!?" he goes, cupping his hands over her chest.

"No wait-- DON'T!" The clown restrains Martin before he goes any further with chest compressions. "I think her ribs are broken in, you'll just make it worse! Jesus, what in crikey's name happened there?"

"Those assholes beat the shit out of her, that's what!" Martin fumes, slamming his fist onto a seat. "They've always been picking on her from day one, and this is what she gets on DANCE NIGHT!"

"Whoa, please try to calm down mister," the clown says.

"Who the hell are you to calm me down!" Martin yells. "You don't even understand what it is like for her, having to face every day at this mierda school, getting raped by people who put on nice faces for everyone else! Like all those maricons you see lying there--"

On the floor, Janice has an ice pack over her forehead, and Martin's rant is assaulting her ears. What a headache.

"They're the ones who like making Clare's life a living hell!" Martin says. "Every day, they come and steal her lunch and give her a beating! Every day, people go whisper about her behind her back like she's some ALIEN from OUTER SPACE. Make her feel like shit!

"Nobody really gave a damn, until I met her. You all should have seen how happy she was when someone can actually be good to her. The kindness you take for granted from people, it was a real, precious luxury to her. Would you still rather make

her cry, pretend to be good guys to your friends? Or you want to help her find the happiness she deserves? The happiness she badly needs.."

Everyone seems to simmer down in silence to Martin's words. In the distance, you hear the muffled approach of the rest of the students, getting out of the gym.

"Well.. whatever odds are for Clare's 'happiness' now, they're dwindling--" the clown points out. "She ain't going to have a future at this rate, if the medics don't show up."

Clare is coughing up more blood.

"DAMNIT!" Martin twiddles his thumbs. He's helpless to the horrible mechanics playing out within her body. Time still continues running.

"I'm not finished yet-- there is one thing we can do.." the clown says. "Have we got ice packs over here? Anyone? It should help ease the bruising and slow down her bleeding somewhat.."

"We're out of ice packs!" one nerd mentions.

"Oh come on – think of something you lads!"

"Hey-- let's get some drinks!" another nerd goes, pointing at the vending machines.

"What? This is not the time to--"

"No, the drinks are cold, you know?"

"Ohh, right on! Hurry it up then!" The clown (whose real name is Sir Michael Caine, CBE) takes a renewed appreciation for youthful ingenuity. He watches them run over and buy Coca-Cola bottles with every spare change they've got.

Then they put the bottles atop Clare's chest.

"Pray to God this is going to work," the clown goes.

Suddenly David comes in the cafeteria from the foyer. "Hey!! The ambulance is here! The medics are coming!"

"WOOOOARGGHH--" Martin leaps up with massive salvation. "LET'S GO CLARE! YOU'RE SAVED!" He does a manic dance on the floor, not unlike what you'd see on the Maury Show when Maury tells the guy the magic words "You're Not The Father(TM)."

David has been leading the paramedics over to the cafeteria, suited up in red, where they bring multiple stretchers along with them.

"Get that one, she looks critical," one of them tells, pointing at Clare.

While they get the fallen goons onto the stretchers, some of them assess the damage done to her body. "Faint, erratic pulse; her lung is collapsing. We need to stabilise her fast."

"Are there any more injured on the scene?" the head medic asks.

"Just a few on the rooftop," David goes.

"The next time, you should have notified us about that beforehand. What we heard over the phone is that this girl and the three people in the cafeteria needed help, correct?"

The clown nods.

"I think we can afford to get a medicopter to the roof.." the head medic goes.

And thus, they wheel Clare and the three goons

down the foyer, wading through the sea of dance attendees. Everyone is stunned to see them on the gurney, and they start asking amongst themselves if there had been an accident.

They take their phones out and snap as many pictures as they can of this major news event.

Then they see how Clare is the worst injured, with a respirator mask, a cold pack and a blanket over her body.

"Oh.. is that Clare..?"

"I'm betting she's behind the accident.."

Martin and David hurriedly stride alongside, trying to keep pace as they head out the entrance doors, feeling the cold air hit them, the orange street lights casting the night in a bright shade.

There, the extra large ambulance is parked on the road, its siren lights strobing red and blue. The medics struggle with carrying the strollers down the steps – Martin points out there's an accessibility ramp that zig zags in-between the steps, but the medics don't seem to care.

They load the stretchers in the back of the ambulance, Clare first.

"Hey, can I ride along?" Martin asks. "I just want to make sure she'll be okay."

"There isn't any room left," one of them replies. "Believe me, if there were, I'd gladly let you sit beside her. She'll be fine – don't worry."

Martin whimpers. He sees them swiftly get in the ambulance and shut the loading doors from within, and a brief pause before the vehicle departs,

carrying Clare inside.

Tearfully, he watches it go. Until it's little more than an indistinguishable speck amidst other cars. And even then, he still gazes out at the emptiness, like it is some place he is unable to follow her through.

—

The street lights are dim behind the window blinds. In his room, he hears the whispers of the wind from outside. While his parents sleep (it's 11:28 PM), he's sitting by the side of his bed, alone in silent virgil – alone with a sadness he could not put to words.

His eyes stare at the darkness, trying to find answers to the unshakeable feeling spreading through his chest, making his hands cold.

He used to feel lightly about Life, playing League of Legends or sports with his friends whenever he isn't busy with schoolwork. He'd imagine one day when he'd graduate into University, that he'd meet a cute girl and have a light-hearted romance – take her out to the parks, bring white flowers for her, and sing sweet songs he'd compose on the guitar.

Yes.. life could be like that..

But with Clare, what he felt with her is infinitely more meaningful than those childish whimsies. The joys that could make his heart explode, the sadnesses that cut deeper than pain, and every emotion in-between.

He's only tasted the tip of the iceberg before all that.

Now, he isn't sure of anything – of what is to happen tomorrow, if she'd make it out alive, or if he'd ever find someone as precious and beautiful the way she is. If it were Destiny that had introduced them together, or just plain, thoughtless luck.

Damn, he should have taken a picture with her, or even given her a kiss..

—

The holiday weeks roll in, and Martin scours for a chance to meet with Clare. But he doesn't know which hospital they put her in; there's 10 hospitals in the city, and he could only guess which one. So he heads over to Clare's home where upon ringing the doorbell, it takes around a minute before her parents even answer.

"What do you want?" her mere asks.

"Which hospital is Clare in? I want to go see her."

"Forget it! All you kids have done is hurt my Clare, and I won't allow you to hurt her any further!"

"But.. I'm a friend. I was the one who took her out to the dance.. that night.."

"You were responsible for looking after her." Her mere is prepared to shut the door flat in his face. "Now.. she needs months to recover.. her lungs need to be replaced.."

"There were people beating her to death – she could have actually died then, mierda! But I helped save her from those bums.." Martin wonders if he should mention rescuing her from falling off the rooftop.

"Regardless, you have allowed them to injure her to that extent. That is something I can never forgive. Goodbye, whoever your name is."

She shuts the door, and Martin resorts to asking the people he knows about Clare. They don't know any more than he does.

The news reports the outrage parents have over the Christmas dance incident; Martin has been found dead by the janitor in the student council room, and passersby have seen Gina's mangled body on the sidewalk, covered with a layer of snow. Meanwhile – Janice, Emilia, Clare, et al.; they are recovering down in the Rockyview Hospital. Police investigation is ongoing, asking various attendees what they've witnessed, as well as asking the recovering patients what they've experienced.

The testimonies given so far are inconclusive.

Rockyview Hospital..

When Martin tries visiting Clare there with his friends, to his dismay he finds that Clare is still badly unconscious in the ICU (Intensive Care Unit). It would take her at least two months for her to regain consciousness, and another four months to rehabilitate.

He leaves her some flowers, and buys her a 'Get Well' card from the nearby postcard store.

For Christmas Day, he gets a new guitar – a Gibson Les Paul Studio, one of the better guitars out there, and he avidly tries out all the songs he knows. Man, it sounds so refined, with a creamier feel than his old Fender.

He passes by an old doll shop, where one of the dolls on display catches his eye – a black-haired woman with a skull in hand. Clare comes to mind; he's reminded of her dark paintings and hopes she'd appreciate it as a gift. It smells like dark vanilla, and he gets it gift-wrapped in a box, where he goes to the hospital and tells the orderlies that this is his present for her.

Every chance he'd get, he'd see her, lain in that room, surrounded by various tubings like a dormant princess caressed by vines. The Sleeping Beauty. Hear the artificial respirator pump the air for her with a steady, calm rhythm.

He'd tell her about the everyday happenings, such as seeing the latest blockbuster 'Quicksilver' by director Jean-Paul – it's about two rival scientists competing to invent the world's first warp engine for interstellar travel. He liked the intense rivalry portrayed between the characters; what's tragic is that once before, they were good childhood friends who had only ever fought over picking ice cream flavours, or worrying that they'd be caught for a prank on their mean chemistry teacher. Until one tragic event when they were both competing in the Science Fair (separately) – one of them won first prize, while the other got last place.

The disparity of mood in the movie seems to mirror his own, in a way. He tells Clare that Life just hasn't been the same for him ever since the dance night. He misses hanging out with her, and how the holidays would have been so much better if

she were awake by his side.

He could show her his own music, strumming the tunes on his new guitar. That would have been a real Christmas present for the both of them.

Alors.. he'd have to leave every time her parents show up during the evening.

But there is always the next day to see her. And the next day..

Until school days start once more, and he sees Janice, Jon, Emilia.. they're out of the hospital and everyone is swarming around them like they're celebrities. But Clare isn't anywhere to be seen.

By the will of Clare's parents, the hospital has discharged her for an emergency transferral to a Swiss clinic in France, where they can rebuild her lungs and properly repair the dislocated bones in her body.

There's a sign by her house, saying the property is for sale.

They've left.

The school has transformed for him somehow. It's no longer a place of youthful innocence anymore. He glances at the spot in the computer lab that Clare used to sit at, and just sees the occasional guy desperate to complete his English essay on time. In his new classes, he grins and makes new friends, but keeps wary of the possibility they've been mean to Clare in the past.

And in the hallways, he'd lookout for anyone who needed help from bullying. Two times, he saves the nerds from drive-by spitball barrages.

The days turn into weeks. Weeks turn into months. Months into years. Martin has formed his own progressive metal band at the University, *Katarsis* – he's studying for a music degree. In band rehearsals, he'd bring the origami crane for good luck, and to remind him his feelings for that girl.

The only picture he has of her is in his high school's yearbook, and she looked.. if you peer closely, you recognise the sadness, the loneliness and the pain in her brown eyes.

He couldn't find her over the internet on Facebook. When he tried looking for her artwork, he typed in search terms like 'gothic,' 'surreal,' 'haunting' – the very words which came to mind when he saw it. But the images returned are nothing resembling her art, and he's forgotten the name of the art contest she's been in. Was it *Fantasia*?

After a lot of hard work composing the lyrics and melodies, Martin's band launches its first album – *White Chalk*. An impressive album that sells over 3 million copies worldwide, and which wins them music awards like the Grammys.

He tours various places around the world, in the USA, in England, Italy and Russia.. each night a maelstrom of wild energy and cheers. He's always wanted to see the world since he was young.

More albums, and more tours. Each album heavily different, but still with the same fiery, soulful energy infused into the songs.

14 years have passed since that night.

Clare is an artist working at Studio Escalier in Paris, producing various works that are commissioned by clients, ranging from the realistic (painting the Notre-dame de Paris) to the fantastic ('Le Petit Mais Belle Mort,' an erotic, sensual depiction of angel dance) and even the silly ('The Portrait of a Cow,' €14.95).

Ever since she's moved to France, her parents had changed their last name to signify a fresh start, and to distance themselves from the horrid events that had transpired back there. Her own recovery had been unsteady; she grew frustrated having to walk with crutches, and lashed out against the doctors who constantly told her "You're doing great, but you have months to go until you fully recover."

The crutches changed to leg braces, and one early morning, Clare forced herself out of the apartment where she pushed her legs to the limit on the streets, enduring the pain until the braces finally broke and she was able to walk freely like a dignified being, albeit with a gait.

The leg pain soon disappeared with painkillers and ointment.

She never graduated with a high school diploma – instead, she relearned how to speak French more natively, and took her timedrawing sketches outside. The hands of an elderly woman stroking her cat, the violet mime pretending to be trapped by a box, the lions and the contemplative bishops at the Place Saint-Sulpice.

Soon, people noticed Clare – her in her black beret and shabby-chic wear. They paid her money to do their portraits and this eventually lead Clare a recommendation to the art studio.

At first, she was very shy with her other artists. She'd peer at their art, but when approached, she'd seem to shrink away. That made them only more curious about her, and one night, Paola found her crying in the washrooms--

Clare told her everything. The story of a lonely girl in high school, who nobody saw as anything more than a strange alien, until she met a nice boy named Martin.

"He must be the sweetest guy in the world.." Paola went. "And I'm really sorry about what you've been through. A lot of people can be cruel to each other there."

Soon, Clare started opening up to the other artists, and they grew close to her. She realised she'd always been the swan, and it was because she found people who could truly understand her at last, who were also just like her too on the inside.

..

She sees a floating advertisement for a concert that takes place tonight, a band named *Katarsis*. On the striking graphic, she thinks she recognises a face, holding his guitar up high in the air. It's a face that has grown lean, more mature, but still the spark exists in his eyes.

Could it be?

The concert is all but sold out, but she's able to

get herself a ticket anyway, ordering online.

That evening, it is a thunderstorm, and Clare could not wait to have headed inside amidst the swarm of giddy fans.

The wait is palpable. It's merely the dimmed darkness before the band appears on stage. Then there is red smoke and yellow spotlights, and there is Martin, standing there, waiting for the massive cheers to dim down before he begins his act.

Maybe he doesn't see her, but it just feels like all the songs he performs are laced with.. it is hard to describe, but the words and music seem to transport her back to a time when the snow was falling, and she felt touched by that boy who introduced to her the light to her overwhelming despair.

She struggles to get herself to the front lines, where she can see him more clearly, his head bobbing and his guitar whishing in the air. She listens intensely, like those around her caught by immortal poetry and a superb performance.

Once it is over, her heart lingers in ecstasy as she revisits every detail of his performance in her memory. She could live off of the pure two-hours of emotion she's just experienced..

There is only one more thing she has to do, that urge she cannot ignore.

Clare tries sneaking backstage, where there are hundreds of die-hard women all wanting to meet Martin, who are held back by the burly security guards.

Damnit.

There's no way she'll ever see him now.

Dejected, she can only turn away, and head back home..

But something snabs everyone's attention. An especially crazed fan breaks through the guards and makes a dash for it down the hallways.

"Stop! Come back here!" they go, and they glance back at the other fans for a moment – promise us you won't go past this doorway.

Clare is smiling. While the fans stay here, she brushes by them and enters the backstage halls, hoping the guards won't come back any time soon. She glances at all the doors, looking for the right one. A washroom.

She passes by a caterer who has broiled beef on a tray.

And there she sees it. A door with a gold star, with Martin's name on it. His dressing room.

Clare looks both ways for any sign of the security guards, before she turn the knob and pushes the door open.

Inside, he is standing there, in the middle of the room, just washing away the makeup applied to his eyes and cheeks.

She gazes at him silently for a while, just simply adoring every inch of him, comparing what he looks like now to the Martin in her memories. He's so grown-up now. His hair curls down to his shoulders, and he's a few inches taller than her.

He doesn't seem to notice her in the mirror – he's so deeply absorbed in his own thoughts. She just

knows he's thinking about her. She comes up behind him, and whispers, "Martin..?"

Martin turns – he sees her as if she's stepped out of a dream. It is a sudden blow to his heart. His face starts to glow alight, the look of somebody whose buried feelings of love cannot help spilling through the surface.

"C-- Clare?" he goes, her name haven't been said in a long while.

".. I've found you."

The Ugly Duckling

a faerytale by Hans Christian Andersen

It was lovely summer weather in the country, and the golden corn, the green oats, and the haystacks piled up in the meadows looked beautiful. The stork walking about on his long red legs chattered in the Egyptian language, which he had learnt from his mother. The corn-fields and meadows were surrounded by large forests, in the midst of which were deep pools. It was, indeed, delightful to walk about in the woods, but the ducks liked much better to swim about in the river than to climb the slippery banks, and sit under a burdock leaf, to have a gossip with her. At length one shell cracked, and then another, and from each egg came a living creature that lifted its head and cried, "Peep, peep." "Quack, quack," said the mother, and then the country. In a sunny spot stood a pleasant old farm-house close by a deep river, and from the house down to the water side grew great burdock leaves, so high, that under the tallest of them a little child could stand upright. The spot was as wild as the centre of a thick wood. In this snug retreat sat a duck on her nest, watching for her young brood to hatch; she was beginning to get tired of her task, for the little ones were a long time coming out of their shells, and she seldom had any visitors. The other ducks all quacked as well as they could, and looked about them on every side at the large green leaves. Their mother allowed them to

look as much as they liked, because green is good for the eyes. "How large the world is," said the young ducks, when they found how much more room they now had than while they were inside the egg-shell. "Do you imagine this is the whole world?" asked the mother; "Wait till you have seen the garden; it stretches far beyond that to the parson's field, but I have never ventured to such a distance. Are you all out?" she continued, rising; "No, I declare, the largest egg lies there still. I wonder how long this is to last, I am quite tired of it;" and she seated herself again on the nest.

"Well, how are you getting on?" asked an old duck, who paid her a visit.

"One egg is not hatched yet," said the duck, "it will not break. But just look at all the others, are they not the prettiest little ducklings you ever saw? They are the image of their father, who is so unkind, he never comes to see."

"Let me see the egg that will not break," said the duck; "I have no doubt it is a turkey's egg. I was persuaded to hatch some once, and after all my care and trouble with the young ones, they were afraid of the water. I quacked and clucked, but all to no purpose. I could not get them to venture in. Let me look at the egg. Yes, that is a turkey's egg; take my advice, leave it where it is and teach the other children to swim."

"I think I will sit on it a little while longer," said the duck; "as I have sat so long already, a few days will be nothing."

"Please yourself," said the old duck, and she went away.

At last the large egg broke, and a young one crept forth crying, "Peep, peep." It was very large and ugly. The duck stared at it and exclaimed, "It is very large and not at all like the others. I wonder if it really is a turkey. We shall soon find it out, however when we go to the water. It must go in, if I have to push it myself."

On the next day the weather was delightful, and the sun shone brightly on the green burdock leaves, so the mother duck took her young brood down to the water, and jumped in with a splash. "Quack, quack," cried she, and one after another the little ducklings jumped in. The water closed over their heads, but they came up again in an instant, and swam about quite prettily with their legs paddling under them as easily as possible, and the ugly duckling was also in the water swimming with them.

"Oh," said the mother, "that is not a turkey; how well he uses his legs, and how upright he holds himself! He is my own child, and he is not so very ugly after all if you look at him properly. Quack, quack! come with me now, I will take you into grand society, and introduce you to the farmyard, but you must keep close to me or you may be trodden upon; and, above all, beware of the cat."

When they reached the farmyard, there was a great disturbance, two families were fighting for an eel's head, which, after all, was carried off by the

cat. "See, children, that is the way of the world," said the mother duck, whetting her beak, for she would have liked the eel's head herself. "Come, now, use your legs, and let me see how well you can behave. You must bow your heads prettily to that old duck yonder; she is the highest born of them all, and has Spanish blood, therefore, she is well off. Don't you see she has a red flag tied to her leg, which is something very grand, and a great honor for a duck; it shows that every one is anxious not to lose her, as she can be recognized both by man and beast. Come, now, don't turn your toes, a well-bred duckling spreads his feet wide apart, just like his father and mother, in this way; now bend your neck, and say 'quack.'"

The ducklings did as they were bid, but the other duck stared, and said, "Look, here comes another brood, as if there were not enough of us already! and what a queer looking object one of them is; we don't want him here," and then one flew out and bit him in the neck.

"Let him alone," said the mother; "he is not doing any harm."

"Yes, but he is so big and ugly," said the spiteful duck "and therefore he must be turned out."

"The others are very pretty children," said the old duck, with the rag on her leg, "all but that one; I wish his mother could improve him a little."

"That is impossible, your grace," replied the mother; "he is not pretty; but he has a very good disposition, and swims as well or even better than

the others. I think he will grow up pretty, and perhaps be smaller; he has remained too long in the egg, and therefore his figure is not properly formed;" and then she stroked his neck and smoothed the feathers, saying, "It is a drake, and therefore not of so much consequence. I think he will grow up strong, and able to take care of himself."

"The other ducklings are graceful enough," said the old duck. "Now make yourself at home, and if you can find an eel's head, you can bring it to me."

And so they made themselves comfortable; but the poor duckling, who had crept out of his shell last of all, and looked so ugly, was bitten and pushed and made fun of, not only by the ducks, but by all the poultry. "He is too big," they all said, and the turkey cock, who had been born into the world with spurs, and fancied himself really an emperor, puffed himself out like a vessel in full sail, and flew at the duckling, and became quite red in the head with passion, so that the poor little thing did not know where to go, and was quite miserable because he was so ugly and laughed at by the whole farmyard. So it went on from day to day till it got worse and worse. The poor duckling was driven about by every one; even his brothers and sisters were unkind to him, and would say, "Ah, you ugly creature, I wish the cat would get you," and his mother said she wished he had never been born. The ducks pecked him, the chickens beat him, and the girl who fed the poultry kicked him with her

feet. So at last he ran away, frightening the little birds in the hedge as he flew over the palings.

"They are afraid of me because I am ugly," he said. So he closed his eyes, and flew still farther, until he came out on a large moor, inhabited by wild ducks. Here he remained the whole night, feeling very tired and sorrowful.

In the morning, when the wild ducks rose in the air, they stared at their new comrade. "What sort of a duck are you?" they all said, coming round him.

He bowed to them, and was as polite as he could be, but he did not reply to their question. "You are exceedingly ugly," said the wild ducks, "but that will not matter if you do not want to marry one of our family."

Poor thing! he had no thoughts of marriage; all he wanted was permission to lie among the rushes, and drink some of the water on the moor. After he had been on the moor two days, there came two wild geese, or rather goslings, for they had not been out of the egg long, and were very saucy. "Listen, friend," said one of them to the duckling, "you are so ugly, that we like you very well. Will you go with us, and become a bird of passage? Not far from here is another moor, in which there are some pretty wild geese, all unmarried. It is a chance for you to get a wife; you may be lucky, ugly as you are."

"Pop, pop," sounded in the air, and the two wild geese fell dead among the rushes, and the water was tinged with blood. "Pop, pop," echoed far and wide in the distance, and whole flocks of wild geese

rose up from the rushes. The sound continued from every direction, for the sportsmen surrounded the moor, and some were even seated on branches of trees, overlooking the rushes. The blue smoke from the guns rose like clouds over the dark trees, and as it floated away across the water, a number of sporting dogs bounded in among the rushes, which bent beneath them wherever they went. How they terrified the poor duckling! He turned away his head to hide it under his wing, and at the same moment a large terrible dog passed quite near him. His jaws were open, his tongue hung from his mouth, and his eyes glared fearfully. He thrust his nose close to the duckling, showing his sharp teeth, and then, "splash, splash," he went into the water without touching him, "Oh," sighed the duckling, "how thankful I am for being so ugly; even a dog will not bite me." And so he lay quite still, while the shot rattled through the rushes, and gun after gun was fired over him. It was late in the day before all became quiet, but even then the poor young thing did not dare to move. He waited quietly for several hours, and then, after looking carefully around him, hastened away from the moor as fast as he could. He ran over field and meadow till a storm arose, and he could hardly struggle against it. Towards evening, he reached a poor little cottage that seemed ready to fall, and only remained standing because it could not decide on which side to fall first. The storm continued so violent, that the duckling could go no farther; he sat down by the

cottage, and then he noticed that the door was not quite closed in consequence of one of the hinges having given way. There was therefore a narrow opening near the bottom large enough for him to slip through, which he did very quietly, and got a shelter for the night. A woman, a tom cat, and a hen lived in this cottage. The tom cat, whom the mistress called, "My little son," was a great favorite; he could raise his back, and purr, and could even throw out sparks from his fur if it were stroked the wrong way. The hen had very short legs, so she was called "Chickie short legs." She laid good eggs, and her mistress loved her as if she had been her own child. In the morning, the strange visitor was discovered, and the tom cat began to purr, and the hen to cluck.

"What is that noise about?" said the old woman, looking round the room, but her sight was not very good; therefore, when she saw the duckling she thought it must be a fat duck, that had strayed from home. "Oh what a prize!" she exclaimed, "I hope it is not a drake, for then I shall have some duck's eggs. I must wait and see." So the duckling was allowed to remain on trial for three weeks, but there were no eggs. Now the tom cat was the master of the house, and the hen was mistress, and they always said, "We and the world," for they believed themselves to be half the world, and the better half too. The duckling thought that others might hold a different opinion on the subject, but the hen would not listen to such doubts. "Can you lay eggs?" she

asked. "No." "Then have the goodness to hold your tongue." "Can you raise your back, or purr, or throw out sparks?" said the tom cat. "No." "Then you have no right to express an opinion when sensible people are speaking." So the duckling sat in a corner, feeling very low spirited, till the sunshine and the fresh air came into the room through the open door, and then he began to feel such a great longing for a swim on the water, that he could not help telling the hen.

"What an absurd idea," said the hen. "You have nothing else to do, therefore you have foolish fancies. If you could purr or lay eggs, they would pass away."

"But it is so delightful to swim about on the water," said the duckling, "and so refreshing to feel it close over your head, while you dive down to the bottom."

"Delightful, indeed!" said the hen, "why you must be crazy! Ask the cat, he is the cleverest animal I know, ask him how he would like to swim about on the water, or to dive under it, for I will not speak of my own opinion; ask our mistress, the old woman—there is no one in the world more clever than she is. Do you think she would like to swim, or to let the water close over her head?"

"You don't understand me," said the duckling.

"We don't understand you? Who can understand you, I wonder? Do you consider yourself more clever than the cat, or the old woman? I will say nothing of myself. Don't imagine such nonsense,

child, and thank your good fortune that you have been received here. Are you not in a warm room, and in society from which you may learn something. But you are a chatterer, and your company is not very agreeable. Believe me, I speak only for your own good. I may tell you unpleasant truths, but that is a proof of my friendship. I advise you, therefore, to lay eggs, and learn to purr as quickly as possible."

"I believe I must go out into the world again," said the duckling.

"Yes, do," said the hen. So the duckling left the cottage, and soon found water on which it could swim and dive, but was avoided by all other animals, because of its ugly appearance. Autumn came, and the leaves in the forest turned to orange and gold. then, as winter approached, the wind caught them as they fell and whirled them in the cold air. The clouds, heavy with hail and snowflakes, hung low in the sky, and the raven stood on the ferns crying, "Croak, croak." It made one shiver with cold to look at him. All this was very sad for the poor little duckling. One evening, just as the sun set amid radiant clouds, there came a large flock of beautiful birds out of the bushes. The duckling had never seen any like them before. They were swans, and they curved their graceful necks, while their soft plumage shone with dazzling whiteness. They uttered a singular cry, as they spread their glorious wings and flew away from those cold regions to warmer countries across the sea. As they mounted

higher and higher in the air, the ugly little duckling felt quite a strange sensation as he watched them. He whirled himself in the water like a wheel, stretched out his neck towards them, and uttered a cry so strange that it frightened himself. Could he ever forget those beautiful, happy birds; and when at last they were out of his sight, he dived under the water, and rose again almost beside himself with excitement. He knew not the names of these birds, nor where they had flown, but he felt towards them as he had never felt for any other bird in the world. He was not envious of these beautiful creatures, but wished to be as lovely as they. Poor ugly creature, how gladly he would have lived even with the ducks had they only given him encouragement. The winter grew colder and colder; he was obliged to swim about on the water to keep it from freezing, but every night the space on which he swam became smaller and smaller. At length it froze so hard that the ice in the water crackled as he moved, and the duckling had to paddle with his legs as well as he could, to keep the space from closing up. He became exhausted at last, and lay still and helpless, frozen fast in the ice.

Early in the morning, a peasant, who was passing by, saw what had happened. He broke the ice in pieces with his wooden shoe, and carried the duckling home to his wife. The warmth revived the poor little creature; but when the children wanted to play with him, the duckling thought they would do him some harm; so he started up in terror,

fluttered into the milk-pan, and splashed the milk about the room. Then the woman clapped her hands, which frightened him still more. He flew first into the butter-cask, then into the meal-tub, and out again. What a condition he was in! The woman screamed, and struck at him with the tongs; the children laughed and screamed, and tumbled over each other, in their efforts to catch him; but luckily he escaped. The door stood open; the poor creature could just manage to slip out among the bushes, and lie down quite exhausted in the newly fallen snow.

It would be very sad, were I to relate all the misery and privations which the poor little duckling endured during the hard winter; but when it had passed, he found himself lying one morning in a moor, amongst the rushes. He felt the warm sun shining, and heard the lark singing, and saw that all around was beautiful spring. Then the young bird felt that his wings were strong, as he flapped them against his sides, and rose high into the air. They bore him onwards, until he found himself in a large garden, before he well knew how it had happened. The apple-trees were in full blossom, and the fragrant elders bent their long green branches down to the stream which wound round a smooth lawn. Everything looked beautiful, in the freshness of early spring. From a thicket close by came three beautiful white swans, rustling their feathers, and swimming lightly over the smooth water. The duckling remembered the lovely birds, and felt more strangely unhappy than ever.

"I will fly to those royal birds," he exclaimed, "and they will kill me, because I am so ugly, and dare to approach them; but it does not matter: better be killed by them than pecked by the ducks, beaten by the hens, pushed about by the maiden who feeds the poultry, or starved with hunger in the winter."

Then he flew to the water, and swam towards the beautiful swans. The moment they espied the stranger, they rushed to meet him with outstretched wings.

"Kill me," said the poor bird; and he bent his head down to the surface of the water, and awaited death.

But what did he see in the clear stream below? His own image; no longer a dark, gray bird, ugly and disagreeable to look at, but a graceful and beautiful swan. To be born in a duck's nest, in a farmyard, is of no consequence to a bird, if it is hatched from a swan's egg. He now felt glad at having suffered sorrow and trouble, because it enabled him to enjoy so much better all the pleasure and happiness around him; for the great swans swam round the new-comer, and stroked his neck with their beaks, as a welcome.

Into the garden presently came some little children, and threw bread and cake into the water.

"See," cried the youngest, "there is a new one;" and the rest were delighted, and ran to their father and mother, dancing and clapping their hands, and shouting joyously, "There is another swan come; a new one has arrived."

Then they threw more bread and cake into the water, and said, "The new one is the most beautiful of all; he is so young and pretty." And the old swans bowed their heads before him.

Then he felt quite ashamed, and hid his head under his wing; for he did not know what to do, he was so happy, and yet not at all proud. He had been persecuted and despised for his ugliness, and now he heard them say he was the most beautiful of all the birds. Even the elder-tree bent down its bows into the water before him, and the sun shone warm and bright. Then he rustled his feathers, curved his slender neck, and cried joyfully, from the depths of his heart, "I never dreamed of such happiness as this, while I was an ugly duckling."



QDesjardin

When she isn't working on a goodly story, she enjoys seeing a goodly movie, or playing a goodly game on her petite laptop. A walk in the park is nice too.

She lives in Canada.

<http://wattpad.com/user/QDesjardin>

<http://qdesjardin.dreamwidth.org>



SYNOPSIS

One special morning at school, a boy named Martin stumbles across a mysterious, aloof girl named Clare in a chance encounter. He finds her interesting, and later discovers that nearly the entire school mocks her existence.

Unwilling to believe in her tragic situation, he decides to help turn it all around for her.

He invites her to the Christmas dance, where hopefully he will be able to make some nice memories with her.

But can they really fight against impending misfortune?



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