

Teeth,  
Cherubs  
and A Toad  
Named Sheri

A Novel

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# Prelude

Porter Stebbins was born with no teeth, which is far from strange. He was the happiest of babies, never crying once.

Porter learned to crawl, learned to walk and then he learned to talk, all without a single tooth. When he blew out the candles on his fifth birthday cake, he still had no teeth. At the age of seven he attempted to ride a unicycle. His mother had no worry of him knocking any teeth out because, he still hadn't grown any.

Porter lived in a water tower next to the Bluegreen stream approximately six thousand paces from the town of Cheese. There he received his education in a one-room schoolhouse alongside elves, leprechauns, giants and mermaids. The town's people were used to seeing Porter with only gums in his mouth when he laughed, cooed, and smiled. He smiled a lot in those days.

Time passed. The boy grew taller. He grew muscles. He grew hair all over his body, and then one day he noticed something else had grown. A tooth had pushed out from his once perfect gums. It was the first of thirty-two teeth to be grown in Porters mouth, but these were no ordinary teeth. Porter had been destined to grow world's most unimaginably perfect teeth, and because of them, love in the world would survive, but just barely.

# The ANVIL

## 1

In the Realm of Mortals, a young woman sobbed while blinking her eyelids rapidly attempting to clear away the tears so she could better navigate over the rocks and tangles of roots. The tears tickled her cheeks, but she didn't laugh.

She had always come to this stream to do laundry, though she had never walked this far to do so. At long last she stopped and set the laundry basket onto the ground, then collapsed onto a grassy patch, and after she had cried long enough, she scrubbed the filth from the clothes.

Close by, a young horseman was roused from his reverie by her woeful sobs. His eyes followed the directions his ears relayed until he found himself staring at the girl washing clothes. Uneasy vibrations surrounded him, blanketing his essence.

Unbeknownst to the youngsters, there was another person watching. He was both patient and violent. He waited, now, for the perfect moment to strike with his weapon.

The girl sensed eyes upon her and stopped washing. She stopped weeping and turned with stiffening anticipations of encountering the Boogieman. She melted at seeing a handsome head atop a capable body staring down at her. The horseman gazed at the girl's rosy cheeks and blond hair enhancing her green eyes.

When the youngsters gazes met, the other, the stalker with his weapon, smiled a teeth clenching grin. This was the instant he had been waiting for. This was the time to strike. This was his moment. The moment he loved. The same moment he had always loved and would always cherish. This was the moment he existed for. The chain he clenched, slipped from his hands and gravity took hold of the anvil attached. The iron anvil sped toward the ground. His aim as always, was true.

The anvil struck the horseman directly on top of his head. The impact forced the young horse rider's body to take the painful shape of an S. As his head caved in and snapped backwards his chest pushed forward popping vertebra and splintering ribs. His neck crackled and fractured before his spine shattered. He then slumped off his horse and

onto the ground with a broken, squishy thud.

Upon impact, the winged owner of the anvil, Ubia, erupted with laughter and coos like a child giggling at a game of peak-a-boo. Spreading his wings he flew loop-da-loops while clapping his hands and kicking his legs. The two foot tall cherub had seen this exact thing happen a thousand times before, but it never got old. He still erupted like an audience watching a champion's victory over unrealistic odds.

Down on the ground the young horseman lay twisted next to his steed which hadn't moved at all. The young man laid still for a moment until his eyes rolled back to the front of his head. He then sat up and began dusting himself off. His face was red with embarrassment and excitement but the rest of his body was unmarked. The girl was laughing out loud though she didn't want to. When the horseman looked her way she quickly covered her mouth with both hands but continued laughing through them.

Feeling strangely comfortable she walked over to the horseman who had just fallen off his horse and into love with her; all because of Ubia's anvil. She helped him on to his feet. Their hearts danced while they locked eyes. Under the golden skies of sunset they kissed their first kiss.

Ubia, the cherub, gathered his senses well enough to take advantage of the kiss and after swooping out of the skies and retrieving his anvil, ascended back up into the heavens. He looked back over his shoulder at the world and thought how much more beautiful it all appeared now that there were two lovers painted into the landscape. Glowing with the satisfaction of a good days work he flapped his wings and headed off into the sunset; homeward bound to the Land of Myth, into the town of Cheese.

## 2

The young man, Walter von Ceindume and the laundry girl, Megan Trailhead, had just begun creating their lives together, unfortunately it wouldn't be good for either of them. Young and madly in love, they soon slipped out of the real world and created one of their own. In a very short time Walter had made a great deal of money for himself. He bought a large home complete with a surrounding moat and flying buttresses like the great cas-

bles of old. Soon after the purchase of the home he and Megan were married. It was the happiest day of their lives.

Inside their home on the tenth day of January, Megan von Ceindume gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. She came into the world with a smile on her face. She was born with all her fingers and all her toes, but she lacked one thing, a penis.

Megan never liked children, much less wanted one of her own, however she loved her husband so deeply that she kept her dislike for children to herself. She knew her husband wanted, not necessarily a child to brighten the home, but a son to carry on the von Ceindume name. The pregnancy was difficult, but compared to the seemingly infinite hours of labor it could be viewed as rather entertaining. Despite all the best doctors and all the best medicine the birth would be Megan's last. Her ability to have more children was lost.

Having a female child and his wife's ability to reproduce eliminated in a single day shattered Walter's compassion for almost all things in the world. Most of the blame for the destruction of his wife's baby making abilities fell on the child (which he never once called his daughter). His thought processes ventured along the lines of: *such devastation from someone so small could only mean the child is evil and therefore cannot be tolerated by me!*

Walter ignored the child from the moment her life began. Staring into her newborn eyes for only a moment he scowled with disappointment then turned and walked out of the room without any further thought of her. He never picked her up. He never, not once in his life even nudged her, not even on accident. She never knew the feeling of being held in her father's arms. She never knew the sensation of him tickling her feet or having her forehead kissed before going to bed. In fact, the only time his eyes fell upon his first born was that fateful day she destroyed her mother's womb, and then, once again years later, on the day of his death.

Having never liked children, Megan had zero motherly instincts and offered the child no more attention than her husband. She tried talking to Walter, siding with him on the point that the child must be evil, in the hope to gain back his affection, but he became disenchanted and didn't look at her with the same fondness they once shared on that mag-

ical day when Ubia had dropped his anvil into their lives. Megan slowly fell into depression. The joyous times she had usually spent with Walter were now spent in bed wallowing with gut wrenching nerves relentlessly eating away at her essence.

The butler, gardener, care taker of the moat, and maids of the von Ceindume home cared for the infant by feeding her goat's milk and mashed carrots. What to name the little monster was of no concern to her father or mother. The child got her name from being passed around from maid, to the butler, to maid, to the gardener, back to another maid or to whomever was able to tend to her at any given moment of the day or night. They all shared her, thus ended up calling her, Sharon.

Eventually Sharon learned to do all the things a normal child does. She crawled and then walked, cooed and then talked, smiled and yawn and played. "Good girl Sharon," is what the staff raising her would say, and in those moments, she felt joy.

Megan continued slipping into depression while laying alone in a bedroom that was not Walter's, barely eating, barely sleeping, barely feeling anything at all. An empty chasm consumed the space where her heart and soul once resided. Her husband had stopped touching her, had stopped speaking with her. He had eventually stopped looking at her.

Walter paid his wife no mind. He had convinced himself that the womb he had married, the womb that under vows made to God himself, the womb that had promised to supply him with a son was ruined, in part, not entirely but in part, by its owner. Not to mention the audacity of having a girl in itself was simply unforgivable. He would not absolve her and he would not leave her because that would look poorly in the eyes of his lord, however he would not be denied his blood line, thus he sought to have a son with another.

A mistress came to live in Walter's home. He felt little need to hide their relationship from anyone including his wife, after all, it was a necessity to extend one's bloodline.

Megan had slipped into a silent crazy world of her own that was completely devoid of anything happy or nice. When Sharon was old enough to realize who the "Sad Lady in the bedroom" (as she had come to call her mother) was, she attempted to develop a rela-

tionship. This was highly encouraged by the staff of the house and thought of as healthy, not only for the child but also for Megan. Sharon would visit her mother's quarters where she presented her with flowers, meals and drawings of the two of them together holding hands (though in most of them Sharon looked like a bucket). The little girl did her best at making conversation but alas, it was all futile. Unknown to Sharon or anyone else, Megan had gone into a crazy world caused by the loss of love from her husband.

When Sharon visited the Sad Lady, she appeared to her mother's eyes as a bucket of sudsy water that pronounced its words through gargling sounds and popping bubbles. Most of the time she didn't speak back to the little girl but when she did it usually sounded something like, "You're a bucket, a talking bucket! How did you learn to talk? How did you get up here bucket? Where are your legs? Where is your mop? Stop talking to me bucket! Leave me and do your cleaning elsewhere! Clean bucket, clean!"

Sharon understood this as a normal relationship between a mother and daughter just as she understood complete isolation as a normal relationship between father and daughter. Megan eventually died of sorrow.

### 3

When Sharon was a week away from turning three her father's mistress gave birth to a baby girl. What little of Walter's heart remained died that day. He wanted to kill the child but its mother refused to let the murder take place. Weakened from giving birth she and her baby daughter fled the house and crossed over the moat for the last time while being chased by Walter clutching a knife in each hand and shouting out saliva soaked words of murder.

Soon afterwards, he found a new mistress and several months after Sharon turned four another female was born in the von Ceindume home. This time Walter stuffed the child into a bag with three unwanted kittens and hurled them into the moat to drown. He sought another mistress and another but they all gave birth to girls which he threw into the moat. One day he stopped trying to have a son and found a sense of peace, lost in depression, alcohol, and pain.

Sharon distanced herself from everyone and everything, everything except for a constant underlining sense of depression and anger that flourished and grew. Being disturbed seemed to be the fate she was born into however, becoming a force of negativity was, in the end, her choice. What started off as a beautiful baby girl slowly transformed into something harboring so much hatred that it twisted her teeth, her spine and altered her soul. Her eyes lost most of their color and appeared as gray rocks stationed deep inside her skull. She slumped over while walking and dragged her feet always. Her numb face never revealed surprise, or fear, or joy, or embarrassment or shame, because these feelings never entered her being. They did not exist in the void. Her face showed nothing because nothing was all she felt. Not even a friendly hello or grin or hug from the staff that had cared for and raised her invoked a response. The servants all gave her love but Sharon did not except it as pure. What she wanted was the love of her parents. She eventually learned to accept the absences of love from her mother and father and then, one day, she learned to embrace it.

An orphan can imagine their parents love.

An abandoned child can even, with a proper imagination, talk to those absent parents while believing they were forced into giving them up because of some secret mission, sorcery or villainy. When these sinister acts have ceased they will of course, recollect the one they love so very much, just as soon as they are done saving the world, surviving tortures or awakening from a spell. These are the truths, the hopes, the daydreams and the night dreams of an orphan.

A child whose father abandoned them is still able to retain a relationship and love with their mother or grandparents but these fantasies were not allotted to Sharon. She saw both her parents often enough to know they had no feelings for her, none at all. Even if they had hated her, that would have at least been an expression toward her, thus acknowledging her existence. But she lived in a vacuum of drab nothingness, alone in a life devoid of love. She became an immense conductor of negativity, drawing in so much bad energy the mortal world nearly shivered while trying to sustain homeostasis.

By the time Sharon turned eight she began radiating such bad energy that the dogs

and cats of the house refused to enter her room, even when she was absent. When she approached horses they would neigh and kick their hooves. When she was ten, a pack of wolves caught her scent as she walked alone through the thickest part of the forest. They hunted her with readied teeth and empty bellies and when they were close enough to see the little girl and smell her sent raw and ripe, they sprinted away howling in pain, their tails tucked between their legs. In the middle of sunny days flowers clasped their pedals shut when she walked by. Within her vicinity baby birds would cook in their egg shells. Rabbit's feet became unlucky. Even four leafed clovers lost a leaf. Her negative energy radiated with such potency it caused her to go blind in one eye. It caused her teeth to turn black and brown. She learned to lie. She learned to manipulate. She learned these tools of darkness not for survival, but to cause pain. She never once practiced them on her father or mother. She honed these tools on those that were available. She sharpened them on those that were near, on that had raised her. She practiced on the servants of the von Ceindume household. Her version of happiness came when she made other people and animals as miserable as she. Eventually, under the shadows of darkness, the servants packed their belongings and quietly fled. The wickedness of the von Ceindume home had become, intolerable.

#### 4

One cold night late in the month of October, when ghouls and witches were free to roam the land, the sky held a moon that was not silver or red. It looked infected, as if pus were seeping from it, polluting the world with a sickly light. It was this color, this sickening green color reflecting across the world that prompted Sharon to walk out of her home. She drug her feet across the bridge extending over the moat and exposed her rotten teeth in an attempt to smile while looking toward the moon's retched glow with her one good eye.

The moat was black and its banks were overgrown with huge tangles of weeds and thorn bushes. She began to walk around the black ring of water allowing the thorns and sharp sticks to scratch and poke her. As she walked she listened to the world but it had

nothing to say. There were no crickets chirping, no owls hooting, no frogs croaking. There was no wind to rustle the grasses or dried leaves clinging to the tree branches scribbled throughout the horizon. The world was a void, a vacuum of intense hollowness.

She paused out of appreciation. The world felt sick, and she, was here to witness it. Tonight the realm felt cold. It felt dark. It was quiet. It was unlike any she had witnessed before. It was as if the whole thing had broken; like it had died and left her alone, in peace.

Sharon opened her mouth and hacked out a slight coughing sound. There was no tickle in her throat, this was just some forgotten instinct, an undeniable urge to call out or signal. Something inside her liked that the world had broken and in its empty death there was room for her to be heard. She was undeniable. The world had no buffers between it and she and for now, it had to listen. And so she hacked a crooked cough once again. Then she did it again, and again, and again linking the hard crackling sounds together, growing louder and sounding crazier with each passing moment, in what was her best attempt at, laughter?

She was aware of what a laugh was or at least what it sounded like having heard the former staff members giggling when they thought nobody could hear. What she didn't know is that laughter is the language of the etherial self. It is the language of the soul. It is the unkempt sound, bursting through with unrestrained positive energy in a celebration of life. Sharon's laugh sounded cruel. Sharon's laugh sounded holy unnatural and so it existed as something else, perhaps an instinctual beacon? She continued hacking long and hard, so long and so hard that her eyes watered and her throat began to hurt. Perhaps she could have continued throughout the night but, in this insanely silent night, she was interrupted.

From the deafening silence came a sharp sound. This thing that cut through that stiff blanket of nothingness resembled a fingernail to chalkboard. It could have been related to, in modern times, a fortified screeching, that being of metal scraping against metal next to the cries of dying sheep and roasting rabbits, still living with their hides intact but cooking.

She fell silent and focused her ears. She listened intently for a long moment, but there was nothing to hear. She stared, but there was nothing to see. No water rippled. No leaves shook. There was no sound. There was no movement. There was only time. Time, ticking, clicking, slowly at first and then slower with every second and even slower still with every half second. Time began to move at a pace that thwarted memory. A pace that spat on tradition. A tempo that ceased to beat. Then, when all was numb; when all was forgotten, she heard it again.

The screeching ripped with spine chilling force, slicing through the muck of silence with sharp fingernails and teeth, sounding like children, many tortured children, screaming, erupting with pain in unison that peeled away the silence with one single word, “Sharon.”

Her eyes opened wide and then she all but petrified, except for her skin which crawled and her feet that sweat. For the first time in her life she was scared, too scared to move, too scared to breath, nearly too scared to see. Her one good eye scanned the darkness but there was nothing, no shapes or silhouettes to be seen, no movement to be caught, not on the land and not in the sky.

Time passed. She felt alone. She felt safe. Then the voice knifed her once again.

The silence was broken, not with a word this time but with a sentence; a question sung through screeching metal and dying animals. “Sharon, what do you have in your dead, black heart that makes you laugh?”

Time froze. Sharon froze. For how long is unknown. The only movement was her eardrums, still vibrating from the shrilly voice, that, and her mind which continued playing the words over and over and over again.

“Sinful one, do you hear my words?” said the voice, this time sounding more like a choir of cats in a box screaming out in tortured discord. Sharon’s memory flashed. She heard a rabbit screaming as it sprinted through its last beats of life as an earthbound fireball, set aflame by a giggling little girl, however unlike the rabbit, this sound, this voice, didn’t give her any pleasure, none at all.

Sharon’s breath left her. Her lungs refused to work under the tension of the moment.

The terror, the all engulfing terror crippled her most basic functions. Her heart beat rapidly but with no oxygen her lips and fingertips turned blue. She would have collapsed but even the law of gravity disobeyed the rules this night. Thrust back into the world of feelings would have been by itself, shocking, but to be escorted there by this twisting metallic voice was exceptional. Finally...at last, Sharon was able to draw a breath and used it to respond with a forced, squeaky, "Yes."

Out of the darkness the voice shrieked again. "Then answer my question. What does your dark heart hold which makes you laugh so?"

Her oxygen deprived brain refused to function. There was no possible way to evaluate this question. She pictured a black heart drawn on paper, something she used to scratch out with a quill, and then shoes flashed in and out of her minds eye, shoes of a woman running, and then, nothing. A blank absence echoed through time, uninterrupted by the world or the voice. She felt as if there was something important she had to do but couldn't remember what.

Sharon began to breath and finally the wheels in her brain began to turn and with a little courage she managed to whisper, "Who's out there?"

She listened intently for a response. After a long pause she heard the voice say, "Something."

Sharon turned towards the black water of the moat. She turned towards the direction from which the voice came and began walking. She could not understand why. The moon had slipped behind the tallest part of her father's home shadowing the black waters that yielded no reflection. Nearing the water's edge Sharon was struck in the nose and started gagging. The smell she had walked into was pungent and thick and powerful enough to stop her mid stride. She turned away as if her back could shield her from the stench. Her stomach quivered and squealed while it shriveled, as if it were trying to protect itself by shrinking. The rest of her felt like curling into a ball however, before the thought could fully manifest, something splash out of the water behind her. Whatever jumped out sounded big and was sloshing its way towards her.

She tried to run but instantly stumbled (dragging her feet all those years developed a

sloppy technique). She regained her balance, got two steps into another attempted sprint and then a massive hand, clammy and cold, fell on her shoulder and stole her freedom.

Panic stricken, she screamed.

“Shhhhhhh” screeched the voice, tearing at Sharon’s eardrums. She couldn’t move even if the hand had allowed it, and she could not scream because her energy was depleted. “Do not scream. Do not struggle, for if I wanted to hurt you I would do it. I would do it right now! Doesn’t that make sense?”

Sharon meant to nod, but she may not have.

“We have been listening to you, for many years now, and are quite impressed, with how you have chosen, to define your reality, young Sharon,” screeched the voice through such putrid breath that Sharon couldn’t help but to begin dry heaving even though she was exhausted. Her knees went limp but she did not fall. The hand belonging to the shrieking stench held her in place, suspended like a rag doll. An unbroken string of shimmering green spittle extended from her bottom lip to the ground.

“So cunning, so distasteful, so wicked of a force are thee,” continued the voice from the moat after straining to fill its waterlogged lungs, “you nearly match our hatred, for the world and all that live in it.”

Sharon wanted to respond but her jerking stomach insisted on holding her attention as she concentrated on suppressing the dry heaves while her rapid firing heart kept blood rushing into her head, threatening the possibility of a fainting spell. As her stomach and heart went about their business her mind went about its own.

The creature took in a long straining gasp for air. Thick, wet, juicy words were expelled from its mouth and Sharon felt all of them take physical form on the back of her neck and head. “Listen to me,” scratched the voice. “We will release you but you must not run, for what we are about to say will interest you. We promise.” The words we promise sounded as if fifteen voices or more voiced them at once.

The creature behind the voice waited for a response. When there was none it asked again. Sharon groaned meekly. The person from the moat released its grip from her shoulder and Sharon flopped face first onto the ground. The coolness of the grass press-

ing against her body calmed her stomach and she was again able to take regular breaths. Her numbed normal state of mind began to return and a familiar distant look came back to her eye. She got off her belly and on to her knees as the creature continued gurgling behind. Sharon stood and then slowly turned to face her mysterious company.

Courageous knights of old would have told stories of drawing their swords but in truth would have run in horrified panic. Most would have pee themselves, shit themselves or just dropped dead with fright. In truth, few would have the strength to turn and run but Sharon, having returned to her usual hollow self, only stared at the beast's unique form.

Before her stood a fat, mincemeat, mangled, horror of a beast the likes of which had never been seen with human eyes before (and technically still hasn't, since Sharon only had one eye that functioned).

Slouching to one side, the beast at first glance seemed to be supporting its weight with three crooked, dented, lumpy legs of different lengths and widths. Sharon looked a little harder and as her eye focused she noticed there were only two legs (both covered in wet fur) supporting the monster. The third limb looked like a human arm bulging with muscles, but instead of a hand being attached to the wrist, there was an oversized cat's paw. This limb could not help in supporting the mass of the beast because it was too short and would not have touched the ground at all except for a single claw extending five inches in length. Several other legs and arms attached to its back and torso were violently twitching and jerking in all directions at random intervals, casting long contorting shadows that seemed slightly out of sync. Mounted in varying positions and levels atop the beast rested seven heads. Some had necks and some were mounted on the body like trophies on the walls of a big game hunter. Some of the heads had whiskers. Pointed ears protruded from many places, not just the heads but the forehead, temples, shoulders and one grew from an elbow. Crooked almond shaped eyes, yellow and green, opened and shut at different times and one of the heads kept licking the underside of an arm in a grooming fashion. One mouth yawned as another smiled revealing rotten spear shaped teeth. Sharon's eye drifted down and saw a few large nipples pulsating from the beast's bald belly. The spectacle was most definitely ghastly but Sharon was, for the most part, unaffected. She had

gotten use to the smell and had regrouped into her natural state of emptiness.

Satisfied with the studying of the beast's anatomy Sharon looked back up and picked an eye to stare at. Fear had left her. There was now only curiosity.

"What are you?" she asked in an unaffected tone.

"We are an abomination," screamed the moat monster in its chalkboard scratching voice.

"That is obvious," said Sharon. "What exactly are you?"

"We are the combination of children and kittens our father disposed of in the moat," spoke two of the heads nearly simultaneously as the other faces frowned, winced or turned away.

"Shouldn't you have drowned? Infants breathing in the water isn't possible, it doesn't make sense. How were you able to survive?"

The head grooming its armpit paused, took in a bong like breath and said, "We are cursed! The pure, uninhibited hatred our father projected upon us and pushed our souls into a state of limbo."

Sharon stared at the monstrosity that shouldn't exist, reflected on its words and thought back to when she was a smaller person. There was a time she remembered, when her play was interrupted with screaming and shouting and she trotted after those sounds towards their source, to the birthing room. The woman that had been living in Walter's home for the past year was giving birth. It was quite the scene. There was a sense of uneasiness and despair and these things were of interest to little Sharon, so she slipped into the room and backed herself into a corner. There, she was able to hide from site. She watched for a long time as the sweating lady huffing and puffing gave birth. The show had been entertaining up to this point but it was about to get a lot better. Walter became angry and screamed and threw chairs and fists. On this particular occasion he didn't wait for the umbilical cord to be cut before throwing the newborn out the window. The infant fell until its organic bungee cord tightened, recoiled then ripped the placenta free from her mother. The memory of the woman being tugged toward the window (screaming with physical pain, but mostly emotional agony) as her baby's weight pulled at her uterus, was

a treasured memory to be sure, but Sharon couldn't get lost in memory lane just now. She had to focus. There was a monster in front of her claiming to be a relative. Sharon observed that one of the heads on top of the beast looked dented or bashed in. That newborn baby on the other end of the umbilical cord surely smashed against the outer wall before tearing the placenta free. Perhaps this was the head belonging to that particular child?

"I must be dreaming. This can't be real," said Sharon.

"I'm real. You aren't dreaming," screeched the thing from the moat, its eyes spinning and blinking and its random legs and arms kicking and shivering.

"How could you be real? It's impossible, just look at yourself. Things like you don't exist," said Sharon in a monotone voice.

"Impossible in this world," screeched the monster before struggling to refill its lungs. "But there are other worlds inside this one."

"This isn't real," said Sharon again, mostly to herself.

"Smell doesn't exist in the dream world half-sister."

Being called a half-sister by this disturbance of nature was a little unsettling. She thought about smelling in dreams and then realized, this had to be real, she never dreamed. Somewhere inside her twisted soul the words and ideas the monster had presented cried out with certainty and she quickly came to the conclusion that she had heard the truth. This beast was real and it was speaking again.

"You and we are linked by blood," exhaled Sharon's half-sister. "Though we were only newborn infants, being drowned by our own father ignited a need of revenge in our souls." There were no more dramatic pauses to breathe; the creature was speaking fluently while it breathed both in and out as it spoke its shrilly words. "Our need for revenge is what kept us alive, that and the warmth of the kitten's carcasses we hibernated in. As time passed we and the felines merged into this body." The heads all twisted to look at one another as these words skidded out from three of its mouths.

Sharon looked deeply at the beast and all its random blinking eyes, matted fur, whiskers, human and cat ears, heads and mouths.

"You have been living in the moat all these years?"

“Yes, but it is not the moat you see before you now,” spoke one of the heads.

Sharon’s half-sister paused for a moment and appeared to be thinking hard. Then another head continued. “When you look at a coin you see a top side and a bottom side,” the thing said while inhaling. “The coin exists because it has a top side and a bottom side,” another head said exhaling. “Without both sides it couldn’t exist. Think of the moat that you have always seen as the top side of the coin. We live on the bottom side of the coin because our shape doesn’t permit us to exist here in the realm of humans, the Realm of Mortals. Monsters like us live in a reality cloaked from the eyes of this dimension. You see, several different realities exist on the same ground.”

“So you live here except it’s not here its somewhere else,” said Sharon sarcastically.

“Just because you can’t see something doesn’t mean it’s not there.”

“Then how are you able to be here, talking to me now?” asked Sharon.

“We were able to manifest ourselves here, on this night only, under this wicked moon. This is our window, our only time to be seen and communicate to the beings of this realm.”

“Why did you come here?”

“You called to us. Called out. We heard and followed your voice.”

Sharon thought about this, about her attempt at laughter then said, “What do you want to speak to me about?”

The beast’s arms and legs stopped twitching. Its eyes stopped rolling and blinking and in rock like stillness it said softly, “Do you know how your parents met?”

“Of course I don’t,” said Sharon holding her typical low grade, flat tone. “Walter has never spoken to me and the only words my mother ever said to me were meant for the ears of a mop and bucket.”

Sharon’s half-sister described in immense detail the day Ubia dropped the anvil on her father’s head. Listening intensely to the outlandish story about flying fat men and something called love from a half-sister-moat-monster sent Sharon’s stomach into flutters. Her heart beat violently in her chest. The story had awakened a distant feeling she once knew as hatred. Revenge, vengeance, and the question why, were slamming against

her pulsating skull and this time when she spoke there were fluctuations in her voice.

With teeth clenched she moved only her lips. “Why didn’t the cherub come back when the love between my mother and Walter faltered? Why was there not another anvil dropped on both of their heads when they looked at me for the first time? Why was love forced onto their lives then ignored when it broke?”

The blood in her veins felt hot. Her skin crawled with anger. Hatred, pure and thick flooded every nook and crevice of her being. She clenched her jaw so tightly her gums began to bleed and her rotten teeth began making tiny cracking sounds as though they were made from ice meeting in the first part of spring.

“Why did you tell me this?” shouted Sharon.

A single head answered, “We are offering you a chance to take revenge on the one who did this to you. To take vengeance and rectify the wrongs put on to you,” then the other heads screeched, “and to us.”

“Tell me how? Just tell me what to do.”

“If you do this you will never be able to live as you have up to this moment.”

“What a tragic loss that would be.”

“Even this plane of existence you live on now, you will never be able to visit or see it in the way you do tonight. Everything will change...Even You!”

Sharon did not pause with her response, “I have nothing here, now what do I have to do?”

Fueled with excitement the creature spoke quickly. “We need blood, black blood from our father’s liver, which you will drink and then you will have to swear vengeance to the Creator of the universe while staring at the moon, this moon.” All of the beasts heads stared up toward the green sky and in unison screeched, “Tonight’s moon. After which we must then—” Again all mouths spoke in unison, “Drink our father’s blood. When his blood is in our belly and yours, you will then suckle from our nipples.”

Sharon looked down and stared at the nipples covered with moles, mud and red blotches looking as if they may spurt hot rotten fluid at any moment. “What happens after I do all these tasks?”

“You will change. Then you will be able to cross over into the world we live in. There you will not only see cherubs but you can talk to them...and touch them.”

Sharon thought about this then asked, “If you live in their world, why don’t you take revenge yourself?”

All of the beasts faces cringed. “This deed we are suggesting to you is an act of pure evil. We’re not capable of the Devil’s wickedness...but perhaps, you are?”

Sharon turned without delay. She did not drag her feet. She crossed over the bridge not looking down toward the moat or the creature next to it. Her eye was fixed forward. She quickened her pace upon entering her home and headed straight for Walter’s sleeping quarters. She clenched her hand around a wooden goblet stained red from years of holding wine before kicking his door open.

Walter sat naked on the floor with his left leg cocked in the air. He was licking the bottom of his foot. When Sharon burst into the room he farted and smiled at her. It was the first time in her life she had seen the dimples on his cheeks or the pupils in his eyes.

Sharon’s eye fell upon a table to her right. Burning atop was a candle whose light danced off the blade of a dull, slightly rusty, sickle shaped dagger. She looked at the man her half-sister called father then to the goblet in her hand and then back at the dagger. She allowed her hand to hover over the flame. She watched as the yellow orange light rippled along the old metal dagger while her hand began to sizzle and blister. The pain was good. Life had just gotten good. Looking back at Walter she thought, *too kind, the dagger was too kind*. Sharon snatched up the candle stick with her free hand.

She skipped; Sharon actually skipped over to her father and stood towering over his meek body. He had withered into a skinny, bony little man. The light from the candle bounced over the walls. He stared back innocently, incoherently and started to speak but before a word could float from his mouth Sharon swung her arm forward flicking the burning candle onto the bed where she had been conceived then thrust the candle stick into Walter’s liver. He screamed and squirmed. Sharon watched Walter flop in agony and enjoyed the show. But when he reached to pull the candlestick out she hurried over and leaned her body weight on it securing its place inside him. She enjoyed this moment. As

the flames grew higher Walter stopped squirming. It appeared he had found a position that alleviated some of the pain and stayed there. Sharon knelt down positioning herself next to Walter's back and allowed the goblet to fill with his blood. After the container was full she slapped her hands on his head and twisted his neck until his nose faced hers. She patiently waited for him to stop screaming. The bed was crackling sending up sparks. Smoke was filling the room. She stared into his eyes. It was not a painful or emotional moment for her, it was just a tiny taste of her new life's work; revenge. She then threw his head to the floor. It sounded like a watermelon breaking open. She walked away leaving her father to bleed, burn and die alone.

Walter's house took to flame as if fueled by the endless amounts of pain and suffering birthed inside its walls. Outside Sharon and her half-sister wasted no time. Sharon lifted the goblet of daddy's black blood to the sky, and to the Creator of all things she swore to rectify his mistake, the mistake of creating these neglectful wielders of love and put an end to their unjust existences. Then she took a large gulp. The goblet glowed red reflecting the fire eating Walters's home as black smoke boiled into the night sky. She handed the goblet to one of her half-sister's greedily awaiting paws and then, after getting on her hands and knees, pressed her lips against one of the monster's nipples and began to suck.

The blood of her father was warm, thick, and felt heavy in her belly. It tasted delicious compared to the liquid she now was syphoning from her half-sister. The fluid was cold, lumpy, and it would have been easier to suck the color from a rock. Try as she might the nipple only yielded a drop every few seconds. That was enough in her opinion. Her father's blood tasted like fine wine in comparison. As undesirable as the nipple juice was, it mattered not; she had been dead on the inside for most of her life and no matter how repulsive any of this was she would finish, then seek revenge on the ones who inspired her creation.

All eyes belonging to her half-sister were now fixated on the goblet. When the blood was consumed the monster threw the goblet aside and said in a dignified tone, "Delicious."

Sharon's eyes bulged and her teeth bent back slightly as she intensified her sucking

action on the warty nipple yielding, to this point, so little. *One more drop*, she thought, *and the spell*, she presumed, *would be complete*.

Then with a stuttering jerk the moat creature's spine contorted and her eyes began to flutter as they all rolled back and turned to white. The monster stiffened then began to sway, slightly at first. The large mass of her half-sister's body looming over Sharon's kneeling body was uncomfortable. The thought of being pinned under the beast's immense flesh was unsettling. Sharon began to move out from the shadow of her sister but couldn't as her lips seemed to be stuck to the nipple she had been nursing.

The monster began gagging and coughing while twisting into painful shapes making her fur, wet and matted as it was, stand on end. For several painful moments she convulsed while foaming from the mouth and gurgling. Then she crashed to the ground. Her flesh rippling from the initial contact of her belly. The foam from her mouths splattered out like white paint from a dropped bucket while her faces whipped around violently.

The beast then died. Her personal hell was finally over. She had passed her cursed existence onto her willing half-sister.

Had the beast fallen forward, her immense girth would have buried Sharon in a fat, heavy, inescapable blanket of blubber, but the beast fell backwards dragging Sharon, mouth first on top of her.

Throughout her half-sister's death, Sharon struggled feverishly to detach her lips from the nipple but their unison could not be broken. Their lip-lock was not to be interrupted by desire, or willpower or even by death. Her half-sister's contorting, vibrating body seemed to stimulate the velocity and volume of fluid from the nipple. Just moments before it was near impossible to extract, even a few drops, but now the teat erupted violently.

Ridiculous amounts of the goop shot into Sharon's mouth and physically, there was only a few places it could go. Most shot straight down her throat stretching her esophagus and stomach. Some escaped from her nostrils and small amounts pushed their way into her ear canals and lacrimal apparatus. Her eyes, good and bad, flashed around in a wild panic as she attempted everything in her power to pry her face away from the nipple, in-

cluding biting it off, but she was unsuccessful.

Horrible thoughts of disbelief and fear chopped through her brain as the relentless flow of fluid filled and stretched Sharon's belly to its limit. The voice in her head shouted, *I can't breathe, I can't breathe! I am going to drown. I'm going to die! This was all some kind of trick, some kind of horrible deception! This is a dream! This isn't real! This can't be real!* Her stomach, bladder and intestines all stretched to their limit and then ripped open. The goop, no longer contained to the digestive tract, was free to travel. It filled the whole of her body, crowding into every finger and every toe.

Locked inside an infinity of horrible thoughts, there was one that that burned radioactive fury into her soul; *I am going to die without having my revenge.* That thought was nearly powerful enough to save her from the expanding death.

“NOOOOOOOOOO!” she screamed, though her lips could not form the word.

Her body stretched and ripped her blouse to shreds. Her legs and fanny fattened, and in seconds disintegrated her skirt back into the threads they had originated from. It was only a matter of time before her skin must do the same. Her feet and hands transformed into balloons too heavy to float away. Her cheeks and forehead swelled, her ears bloated and then popped. Sharon's body grew three, five, and then seven times the mass it was previously, dwarfing the sister she lay on top of, threatening to squish the dead, and through it all the nipple kept firing. Finally the goop filled her eyelids and removed the world from her sight for the last time.

Sharon von Ceindume, the little girl born with a smile on her face was still conscience the moment her girth squashed her half-sister's body into black jelly. The nipple fired no more.

Sharon's last thought, alone in the darkness behind her swollen eyelids was, *I'm going to explode. I am about to die and I will never have my vengeance! I will never take my revenge.* Then she thought no more as Death's torn cloak enveloped and took her.

## The Kid with No Teeth

**1**

Porter Stebbins was raised six thousand paces outside the town of Cheese in the Land of Myth. There it was common to see at least one drunken giant snoring in the middle of the street on early mornings when the monkey-eating birds would sing. Flying reindeer with a craving for cat meat and sour oatmeal could be lured into town during the spring and summer months. Oafish trolls who carried noses far too large for, not only the size of their heads but the muscles in their necks, came out of the high country in the spring months, walking with their eyes looking towards the ground, crashing and bashing their way around town asking for handouts in the preferred form of sheep, in barrels, to eat. There were certain holidays when centaurs would ride on the backs of loudly protesting mules. Cherubs were seen flying, laughing and spreading love. And the townsfolk could always hear Willy the leprechaun ranting and raving about how his physic grandmother prophesied he would lose his pot of gold to the Tooth Fairy.

There was one school in the town of Cheese. It had one room, one teacher, and an immense diversity of body types, shapes, and colors. The school had been built over one of the flooded underground caves that pooled in the back right corner, so mermaids and fish people were able to attend. There were kids with donkey ears, and one with donkey teeth. There was a boy named Sebastian with the torso of a human, the body of a young colt and the penis of...well, everyone was sure he would grow with time. There was Billy of the Furry people, but at his age he was unable to grow any fur, so the kids called him Bald Billy. The Caterpillar sisters gushed with pride, relishing in the fact that one day soon they would flutter into school as the Butterfly sisters. The Kettle brothers were twin giants, and though they fit into the school house now they would eventually have to sit outside when they grew too large. Round holes circled the base of the roof so that the giants who had outgrown the schoolhouse would be able to put an earphone to one of the holes, and continue listening to the teachings of Miss Playfield.

Some kids were gigantic and some stood only as tall as a flower, some had beards and others had only one eye. Whether they called themselves dwarves, centaurs, serpents or Steve, the people in the schoolhouse were simply kids, and Porter was about to become

one of them, though he had perhaps the most unique body type of all.

Porter was eleven years old and roughly four feet tall. He was skinny but not scrawny and had wavy dirty blond hair on top of his head that made his hazel eyes seem to glow. He had ten fingers, ten toes, two eyes, one nose and one mouth containing no teeth.

As Porter strolled up to the schoolhouse for the first time he took note of the birds singing, the sun shining and on this, his very first day of school, he appreciated every moment of life, he was however, late. He had guessed wrong as to how much time it would take to get to the town of Cheese and once he was there he had to figure out where the school house was because he had never been. His Mother, a full blooded human, couldn't help him guess because she didn't know. She had never been to town either. His teacher Miss Playfield was up in front of the class speaking as Porter opened and strut through the front door. A monstrous looking kid named Harry pointed one of his clawed fingers toward Porter and through his sharp teeth laughed. When the other kids turned their heads to see what was so funny they all started laughing and pointing as well. Miss Playfield, a centaur with zebra stripes, stutter stepped backwards and squinted her eyes to see what exactly was so funny about this boy. Finally when she remembered to lift her spectacles to her eyes she began laughing as well.

Porter looked around the room of giggling faces attached to furry bodies, spotted skin, scaly hides and winged backs, and he felt weird.

He looked down to where all the watering eyes were staring and fingers pointing and saw that he was wearing two different colored socks on top of his shoes and his shoes were on the wrong feet.

Like the rest of the kids, Porter buckled over with laughter. He looked more elfish than Evan the Elf-kin, whose father was mostly too inebriated to bake a good cookie but held a nice singing voice nevertheless. As Porter laughed, all those staring, laughing faces suddenly stopped. Some even began to drool. Porter didn't know it at the time but his gums gave off waves of soothing energy. Peace radiated from his toothless smile.

He fixed his socks and shoes then sat down in what seemed to be a good seat. The day went on. He laughed, talked, made friends, played on the playground and swung across

the monkey bars while enjoying the warmth of the world. Inside the walls of the classroom he looked at some shapes that Miss Playfield called letters, practiced counting in threes, and he learned to skip which proved to be his second proudest moment of the school day.

At one point Miss Playfield took the new students to the front corner of the classroom. They sat at a round table with a globe placed upon it. Miss Playfield's voice was sultry and carried a ridiculously elongated accent.

"Now children," she began, "oouw many of ewe know just oouw special zhe town of Cheese es?" Eyebrows arched, shoulders shrugged, but no one spoke a word.

"Did ewe know children, zhat zhe town of Cheese es one of only thirteen town's en zhe entire world zhat as giants living in it?"

"Are they too big to fit into any other towns?" asked the Caterpillar sisters simultaneously.

"No dears," replied Miss Playfield through a repressed giggle. "It's not zhat zhey are doo big to fit into anoza town. It es because every ozher town en zhe world, except for a special thirteen, doesn't even know giants exist. Zhey don't know zhat zhere are Caterpillar sisters, or dwarfs, or centaurs like myself."

All the children looked as if they were told that when the Z line crosses the X and Y plane, the third dimension on a flat piece of parchment can be calculated. They were puzzled, and Miss Playfield was perfectly aware of it. She continued, "Most of zhe world whether it be flat or round es inhabited by people, mortals is vhat zhey are called."

"What's a mortal?" asked Linus, one of the Harry people who had prematurely grown most of his hair on the right side of his body while the left remained a bald and shiny.

"A mortal es a person who lives zheir lives devoid of magic or vonder. Zhey are people who ride horses rather zhan talk to zhem. When zhe wind blows on a mortal it just ruffles zheir hair instead of singing zhem songs. A mortal es like bread vithout cheese or jam on it."

"Where do they live?" asked Porter.

"Listen to me children." said Miss Playfield in a bold voice reeking of importance.

“There is one Earth. One planet we live on. On the planet Earth exists two worlds. One world is the one we live in, the Land of Myth. There is another world we do not see or hear but it is right on top of us and all around us. It is called the Realm of Mortals.” Miss Playfield waved her hands around. “Do you all see the school?” The children nodded. “The school exists here in the Land of Myth. This school however, is not existing in the Realm of Mortals. The ground the school is built on does however exist in the Realm of Mortals, understand?”

Blank looks were bounced from one youthful face to another.

“No, well then.” Miss Playfield turned slightly and pulled on a string revealing a wall map. “This is a map of our town. All the land our town is built on, exists in the Realm of Mortals. But instead of our school being here,” she pointed “there may be a big rock, or a pond, or another building. The Land of Myth is one dimension and the Realm of Mortals is another.” She continued by drawing two circles on the chalkboard labeling one “The Realm of Mortals” and the other, “The Land of Myth.”

“These circles are the two separate worlds, yes? Do we all understand that?”

The children all nodded their heads.

“Now picture the circles coming together and making one circle, one planet. The worlds are different but they are in fact the same planet.”

The kids' minds opened and they understood what Miss Playfield had been trying to convey.

“You see children, everything magical exists here in the Land of Myth while all that is not, exists in the Realm of Mortals.”

“What does a mortal look like?” asked John, the boy with donkey ears.

“Well John, it is not mortal, they are all called mortals and they have two legs and two arms like the Dwarves only they are much taller,” said Miss Playfield as she beamed over her first year students. “They've got—” and then she suddenly stopped describing the appearance of mortals and pointed a single finger. “Well children, they look exactly like,” she glanced at her role-call sheet. “They look exactly like Porter Stebbins.”

The class all turned and stared at him. Porter sat still, his head cocked to one side and

one of his eyebrows was involuntarily higher than the other. Every eye at the table, whether it belonged to the Caterpillar sisters, elf-kins, monsters or centaurs stared intently at him for the second time this day. As strange as the moment was, Porter did not flinch. After time rolled by and nobody spoke Porter decided that if he was going to be the center of attention, he was going to have a bit of fun. He skulked for a moment, then climbed on top of the table and after slowly rising to his feet he raised his hands in a ghoulish way and said, “Yes, it is true, I do...not look like you...And soon...I will turn you all into stew... and eat you!”

Every child’s eyes grew wide with fear. Even the kids with sharp teeth and claws looked scared. None of them knew for sure if this thing, this mortal looking creature was a mythological meat eater or not.

Chaos ensued. Some kids scrambled under the table for shelter, others hid behind their chairs and the rest just ran, squealing and screaming as if on fire. The only person who didn’t scuttle away was Miss Playfield, who unfortunately was sometimes a bit slow on the draw. Disoriented she watched with a puzzled look on her face, unable to grasp the situation.

After the students had all successfully saved themselves from Porter with hiding places the boy could surely never find, he started laughing and Miss Playfield joined him, finally understanding the situation. After wiping her eyes she sighed with joy, overwhelmed with the soft, soothing sensations of peace radiating from his toothless smile.

“Is he going to eat us?” fell out of an unknown mouth shaking under the table.

“I’m not going to eat you,’ said Porter, “I’m just playing.”

But there was no way the hiders were going near that possibly carnivorous, possibly mortal, possibly untrustworthy child until—

“Eeee es not going to eat ewe. Eeee as no teeth!” said Miss Playfield.

This bit of information jarred their terrified minds, at least enough for them to risk peeking back at the mortal child. Once they stared at Porter’s gums smiling back, all fear departed their nerves. It wasn’t that he didn’t have any teeth; it was that smile and those incredibly soothing, peace-creating, tranquil generating gums of his. The children felt

peace rush into their subconscious. Though he did not have a super-hero's cape, muscles, or a square chin, Porter seized the moment by placing his hands on his hips, taking the pose of a hero. He felt dynamic and pleased, not because he was the center of attention, but because he realized his great gift, his exceedingly unique feature. In that moment he became aware of the power of his gums and he felt like the luckiest being in both worlds. It made the moment more special because everyone else discovered this truth at the same time. Lights from heaven didn't shine down and angels didn't sing but in Porter's mind they might just as well have.

The class calmed down and order was restored. Porter was the topic of conversation for a while but soon things returned to normal, and then the school day ended. Porter bid farewell to almost everyone (having become an instant celebrity) then strolled upstream where his mother was waiting on the porch with a fishing pole in each hand.

# **Love is Magic is a Cherub**

The colors of sunset faded giving way to the first stars of night as Ubia, wielder of the anvil, returned home to the town of Cheese. Soft candlelight was glowing from most of the windows casting blurry shadows across the cobbled streets.

After touching down gently at the entrance of Calliba's Oasis, Ubia folded back his wings then pushed through the swinging doors that were big enough for a medium sized giant to squeeze through. The pub was bright. Some of it was illuminated with candles and lanterns sitting on top of the tables and hanging from hooks extending from twisting pillars. The section of the multi leveled ceilings that extended upwards into triangular cones were lit-up with torches casting crooked light in the pattern of wagon wheels. The Oasis had been built next to a rocky cliff where jagged stones extending outward made up the highest section of its ceiling. From these, water cascaded down into a deep misting pool linked with the flooded underground caves. Three gigantic chandeliers, all made from the aspen wood off the near side of Loon's Mountain hung from these rocks. This wood was special. It was the only known wood that wouldn't catch fire. In the later parts of the evening, when the candles held by them had burned low, the Loon aspen would heat up and glow a deep neon blue. That late night light was steady, unlike the wavering of fire light, and was considered by most to be the best part of the evening, the time of night a person hoped to stay up for.

Live music filled the air, compliments of Desorian the pianist who played when he felt like it. His fingers were long, as was the rest of his body. Whether he was walking or playing the piano, he moved with an exceptional amount of fluidity and grace.

The swinging doors squeaked loudly as they flapped shut behind Ubia's entrance. Almost every head in the place lifted up to look, but this was usual behavior as the residence in the town of Cheese all knew one another and were, generally speaking, happy to see one another. When they saw Ubia at the door they erupted with greetings as if he was standing victorious in the middle of a packed arena. "Ubia!"

Ubia was short, even for a cherub but the bar itself, at least part of it, was built for such heights. Some parts were built for even shorter people than he, such as leprechauns and fairy folk. Though Calliba's Oasis allowed indoor flying he chose to walk to the short

end of the bar. It gave him a chance to throw back all the hello's he had received, waving and smiling with a head nod here and there. Rarely did he see a face he didn't know and if he did he would introduce himself.

As he bellied up to the bar he was greeted with a smile from the bartender, Francos, who was already pouring a beer for him in a stein proportional to his size.

Francos wasn't a giant but he was tall, thick and sturdy. He possessed a broad, smooth forehead unmarked with the lines of stress and thick, black hair, and it was rumored that if he ever attempted to drag a comb through it, the bristles, even if they were forged from metal, would be destroyed in the battle. His fingers were broad and his chest barreled and when he laughed it filled the room, even on the loudest nights. He was the one who steadied or even carried out giants or centaurs after they had swallowed down too much mead and he always did it with a smile.

"Hello Ubia," said Francos in a deep smooth voice carrying an untraceable accent as he knelt down on one knee to serve the beer. "Me friend who serves the world love, has come ta get served a pint, how romantic."

Ubia smiled. Stretching his arms in the air and unfolding his wings he sang out, "Rooo...kaka..coooo" while flapping his tongue and rolling his eyes around and around not meaning to do any of it. It was just the natural way of cherub life. "We must be the luckiest people alive," said Ubia. "We help people. Yep, yep, yep, and we are all luck, luck, lucky to give!"

"Is that your way of askin me not ta charge ya fer the drink?" said Francos.

Ubia's eyebrows arched upwards into rainbows and his eyes bulged with fear. Francos laughter filled the Oasis. Then he said, "Ya know I'm only kiddin ya my little friend. Tell me what sort of a reptile I would be if I charged anythin ta those who make—" his hand went to his heart and his eyes fluttered looking upward, "ahhhhhhhhhhh—love enter the hearts of the worthy people of the world."

"He-he-haaaya, that's a good one," Ubia said laughing. He had no money, he never had any money. That sort of thing was not meant for his kind. He smiled back at Francos then using both his hands picked up his stein and with a stiff legged walk he maneuvered

over to a little round table with little square chairs where two of his co-workers were chatting and giggling away.

Xavier wielded an iron mace attached to a chain. He looked like a champion of old with a strong chiseled face, powerful green eyes and thick long brown hair that flowed over his shoulders. Across from him sat Zelux, the rock thrower whose satchel of love rocks lay at his feet. He was round in the face and rounder in the belly. His head was covered with tight, blond, curly springs for hair. His eyes were beady and blue. It all added up to a rather simple look but one that was undeniably likable.

“Hello fella’s,” said Ubia smiling and setting down his pint so his hands were free to pull up a stool.

“Kooka looca brother!” said Xavier and Zelux. “Your face is glowing with happiness this night Ubia, would you like to sing us a story?” asked Xavier as he bounced his eyebrows up and down. Zelux pulled his fat chin back into his neck with an open mouthed smile.

Ubia grinned at his friends as he sat down. Of course he wanted to share his adventures of casting the spells of love upon the people of the world. That’s what cherubs did.

And so he began telling them briefly, of how many people he had helped fall into love that day, but the story he shared, the one that got his friends giddy with excitement, took place in one of the smaller towns up north. There a young teenaged boy that kept mostly to himself, dubbed by the town’s children as the “Wagon Puller” (because he was always dragging a small wagon around with him wherever he went) was on this day, pulling his wagon back from the forest after a substantial rainfall.

Now some days the wagon was empty, but on this day there was something inside that no one could see because whatever it was, had been covered with old potato sacks that had been sewn together. The boy was slopping his way through the muddy streets when he, in plain sight of snickering eyes, slipped, lost his grip on the wagon, and fell face first into a vacuum of mud. He had fallen directly in front of a wart faced, plump woman with a patch over her eye and a pipe in her mouth. When he fell she laughed into her pipe and blew hot embers onto the potato sacks inside the wagon. As the Wagon Puller struggled

to free himself from the suction of the mud, the sacks were being digested by red embers and turned into black smoke. At last he freed himself and got back to his feet. He shook his muddy hands and scraped what mud he could from his eyes. Looking around he saw gaping mouths but heard nothing as his ears were packed with mud. The potato sacks cloaking power had disappeared under flame. The townsfolk gasped and a young maiden's knees buckled under the weight of Ubia's anvil.

Inside the wagon stood a life sized wooden sculpture of that young maiden whose beauty had inspired him away from the animals of the forest, of which he had sculpted nearly twenty, into his first human study. It was a good decision. The sculpture was nearly as beautiful as the maiden, who had just recovered and was being helped to her feet. Her head had been filled with drunken love-swirls.

The Wagon Puller saw his secret had been revealed and under the mud his faced glowed red with embarrassment. His humiliation was colossal and he would have run however, the soft touch of the young maidens hand, a woman's hand, his woman's hand, calmed his nerves as well as his heart. It was unknown if he intended to present the girl with the sculpture or if he intended to keep it for himself. However it was meant to be, Ubia the cherub helped yet another couple enter into the world of love.

He finished up by saying, "I looked back after I started to fly away and saw the two of them together next to the wagon. She was wiping the mud from his lips to give him loves first kiss."

His enthralled companions, cooed, hollered and slapped the table glowing with happiness. Afterwards they each shared their own day's adventures as the candles shortened and the night wore on.

## The Girl and the Fawn

### 1

Porter's Mother sat patiently on the swinging chair hanging from the elevated porch that circled her home. As she swayed back and forth she whistled an old tune from another

er time, in another world. When she saw her boy returning from school she bounced up and grabbed a couple of fishing rods. She gave him a fierce hug, careful not to damage the fishing poles, and said, “How was my sweet little man’s first day of school, you pumpkin-pot-pie faced boy of mine?”

Porter rattled off his recollections of the day starting with his socks and shoes and moved forward as best he could, in the choppy way kids talk, while his mother, nodding happily, directed him out into the forest.

There existed many fishing holes in the woods. Some people like to fish the same spots again and again but Porter and his mother liked walking to different places. It wasn’t the variation of the ponds themselves that they enjoyed, they just liked going on different walks while enjoying conversation and varying scenery.

Before long Porter rattled out the events of Miss Playfield, mortals and the threat of turning children into stew. He looked towards his mother thinking she would be every bit as amused as he, but she was not. She had stopped listening when Porter absently mentioned his looking like a mortal. Inside his chatter, she would have sworn that Porter had asked why he and she alone in this world looked like a mortals.

And so when Porter looked up, expecting to see her smiling, he instead saw his Mother’s forehead crumpled. Her eyes had turned red with unexpected strain and stress. Several drops of sweat trickled over the pulsating arteries on her brow. After the word mortal she heard nothing but the empty sound a seashell makes while pressed against an ear. She knew this would lead to a question, the one question she hoped she would never have to hear from anyone, including her son. Not that she spoke too or even knew anyone other than her son. Here in the Land of Myth she was forced to keep to herself.

The look alone was strange but not as strange as was her response to his fantastic tales about the first day of school which was, “That’s enough Porter.”

“But Mama, I didn’t tell you—”

“I am your Mother and that is enough.”

Dinner was caught as it was nearly every evening and the two of them enjoyed a meal together. Bedtime came and the question she believed Porter presented earlier that day

was still weighing heavily on her mind. She put him to bed and tucked him in so tightly the sheets could have been used as drums.

“Gingerbread head,” she said sitting next to him, “I’m going to tell you a bedtime story.”

There was nothing in the world he wanted more than to hear a story before bed. The excitement sent strong waves of energy electrifying his body. He was tucked in too tightly for his body to move, however his head, not being shackled by the sheets, snapped forward like a catapult. His mouth flung open and he drooled. Unintentional noises resembling a sea lion eked from the deep recesses of his throat and one of his eyes fell lazily. It wasn’t every night his Mother threw out an invitation for a story.

“Settle down noodle face,” she said gently shutting his mouth and placing a hand on his forehead and pushing his head back to the pillow. “How does this story start?” she said to herself. Tilting her head to the ceiling she breathed in softly and said good-bye to fear.

She looked at Porter and smiled. He smiled back.

## 2

“Not so long ago in the Realm of Mortals lived a little girl. She had brown curly hair, blue eyes, and a lot of beautiful dresses. Those dresses stayed beautiful because she never wore them. She loved the woods above all other places and spent as much time there as her parents allowed and the woods is no place to wear dresses. In the woods you wear boots and overalls.”

“Like us Mama.”

“That’s right,” she said smiling. “Rocks, plants, trees and grass are what all the animals of the forest liked, and what that little girl liked was the animals. Butterflies and grasshoppers were fun to catch. There were squirrels in the trees and raccoons in the water catching fish. Sometimes, if there were no foxes around, some of the bunnies allowed her to pet them, after she gave them a few carrots of course. There were moose and elk eating and beavers damming up ponds—”

“Mama,” Porter interrupted. “What’s an elk and what is a moose and what’s a—”

“Hold on you caramel-corn-cake sweetness of a boy of mine,” she said. She had forgotten her boy had only been introduced to the other world this very day.

After opening an old trunk and ruffling through it she returned with a picture book that Porter had never seen before. It was big but thin and titled, Animals of Your World. She opened it thumbing through the pages quickly then stopped and showed him a black and white drawing of an elk and then a moose. Porter had never seen beasts such as these in his forest and he almost started asking questions, but he was enjoying the story so much that he kept them to himself and allowed his mother to continue, knowing he could re-search them later.

“Where was I?” she said thinking for a moment.

“Beavers damming ponds,” answered Porter.

“Ah yes, there were beavers damming ponds, and the songs of birds, frogs, and crickets filling in the spaces the blue sky could not. This little girl was so happy just sitting and listening and watching it all.

“One early afternoon when the sun was midway through the sky she saw a boy, but he looked unlike anything she had ever seen before. He was a strange looking boy with little horns sticking out of his head. His legs and butt looked like that of a goat. He even had a tail, but the rest of him looked like a normal boy, a mortal boy.”

As she spoke she showed Porter a picture of a goat, but it wasn’t necessary, he knew what a goat was. That was one of the animals that lived in both worlds.

“He was a goat boy!” she exclaimed.

“Mama, that’s called a fawn. It’s not called a goat boy.”

“Right you are cupcake face. They are called fawns...but that little girl didn’t know it at the time. She was scared because she had never seen a creature like this before. She was very frightened, but did she run? Oh no, she did not. Instead she sat still with her back against a tree and watched, very quietly.

“The fawn trotted along with a walking stick and smiled up at the trees as he hummed very softly, very gently to himself.

“After a minute or two of watching this strange boy, the girl wasn’t afraid any more. She became curious about this creature, far more curious than she had been about any other animal she had ever seen before. She got up and followed him, careful to step only on rocks and clear dirt as not to make any sounds. If she made any noise he would surely scamper away,” She said all of this in an animated storytelling fashion, accompanied by hand gestures and great fluctuations in her voice.

“The fawn clopped around trying catching grasshoppers and butterflies and then he watched two squirrels playing in the trees as he giggled to himself. Then he turned around a thick tree and saw a moose drinking from a beaver pond just a few paces in front of him. He must have been terribly scared because he toppled backwards landing on his backside and scrambled away, startled to death as if he had never seen a moose before. ‘Oh, my back’, he said. The little girl couldn’t believe her ears. It spoke! The fawn could talk! He stayed on the ground and watched until the moose was done drinking and left. Then he went up to the pond and got a drink for himself.

“It was at this moment that the little girl wasn’t able to contain herself any longer. She was two arm lengths away from the fawn when she said, ‘Hello there.’

“The fawn was so startled by the unexpected voice that he leapt forward into the water and tried swimming away.”

Porter laughed as his mother imitated a swimming motion and she laughed back.

“Wait, the girl shouted, I didn’t mean to scare you, I just wanted to say hello and meet you. The fawn looked back, and then stopped swimming. The little girl shouted out her name, then he told his, it was Peter. They talked for a little bit, with Peter still out in the water, and the girl on land. After a while Peter swam back to her, they shook hands and became friends. Then they jumped back in the pond and swam with the turtles and fish for the rest of the afternoon.

“Peter told the girl that he lived in the forest and they were sure to see each other again. That little girl saw him the very next day and many days thereafter.

“Singing, playing, and watching the world was how they spent their entire summer together. Time passed and their friendship grew strong. One day the little girl became cu-

rious as to the where-a-bouts of Peter's home and asked him. When he wouldn't tell her she became frustrated but Peter still wouldn't tell.

"One late afternoon, when the sun was close to the horizon, the little girl and Peter said their good-byes then walked to their separate homes as always. Peter walked to his house but the little girl only pretended to walk to hers. Instead, she followed Peter into the woods. Deeper and deeper he went until the sky was full of sunset pinks and purples. Peter crouched towards the ground and then he began pulling twigs and leaves toward him, creating a pile."

Porter's Mother slipped off the side of the bed and pretended to pile up invisible leaves. "He had made a mound that was as wide as his hips and as tall as his knees." She continued acting. "He stood up, looked around in a cautious manor, and then, jumped into the pile. And then Porter, can you guess what happened?"

"No Mama what?"

"He disappeared."

"Wow," gasped Porter, "He disappeared?"

"He fell through that pile of leaves as if it were a hole in the ground instead of a mound of crunchy colors laying on the hard earth. The scared little girl's heart stopped beating and she gasped for air. What the heck just happened here she thought? The girl walked over to the spot Peter had jumped into. She stood looking over it. The world seemed cold. The leaves might just as well have turned from the pleasant autumn colors of yellow and orange into the cool, dismal colors, of being alone." She said this while wrapping her arms around her body.

Porter shuttered.

"She stood next to the leaves just staring at them, trying to see the hole that surly must be there. The hole that lead to Peter's home. She thought this was a curious door, and who but hobbit's live in holes in the ground? Couldn't Peter build a home in the trees or did his hooves prevent him from climbing? Maybe Peter was embarrassed of his home in the ground and that's why he didn't want to tell her where he lived. Either way she was too curious to leave. She found the nerve to drop to her knees and place her hand on the

top of the pile and when she pushed her arm in.... What do you think happened my sweet little man?"

"I think she tumbled into Peter's home under the ground and...he was mad at first but then...she met his mama and they had supper together and they all laughed and were friends." answered Porter, satisfied his ending to the story was as excellent as anyone could imagine.

"No," she mouthed, her lips as round as her eyes. "She thought her arm would disappear too, but there was no hole covered by the leaves, there was no emptiness, there was only the ground."

"What," said Porter baffled.

"A few days later she saw Peter in the woods. They played, frolicked and watched the world just as they had always done. Then toward the end of the day the little girl asked again, where is your home exactly? Again Peter refused to answer, so she followed Peter as she had before, and he did just as he had done before. He piled the leaves and twigs together but not in the same place. This was one hill over from the last spot she had followed him to."

"What," Porter said, amazed.

"After looking around he jumped in and disappeared from sight. And perhaps, just a little too curious for her own good, the girl sprinted up to the leaves without hesitation and jumped onto the pile right after him."

Porter's mouth dropped open. His mother had stopped acting the story out and continued her tale looking at the wall instead of her boy.

"I don't know what I expected to happen. I thought...I might land on the ground. I thought...maybe something else. I entered the very top of the pile. There were still bits of broken leaves floating down from when Peter jumped in. I braced my spine for a hard landing but it was soft. I didn't hit the ground. At first it felt like a dream. Like I was slipping or sliding, whatever it was...it was unique and somehow seemed like I was doing something wrong. Like it was...unnatural. My stomach felt like it had swapped places with my head, but it lasted just a second or two.

“I slipped downwards, into the ground...and then, I came out on the other side. It was scary and I screamed.”

Porter was befuddled, staring at his Mother’s wandering eyes.

“Peter heard the screaming and trotted back in my direction. When I saw his eyes looking down on my body lying limp on the ground... in the Land of Myth, it was easy to see his stomach fall to his feet. ‘Oh blessed lord! What are you doing here,’ he asked?”

“Mama.” said Porter.

She snapped out of her trance. She realized she was telling the story to herself now instead of her boy.

“Yes sweetie-cake-honey-bun teacup child of mine.”

“You are the little girl, aren’t you? In this story I mean.”

*He’s such a wise boy, so smart, so handsome, so tucked in,* she thought to herself. *He picks up on everything, my bright amazing son. Oh he’s such a remarkable thing. Joy!* She hadn’t realized she was using I instead of she.

“Yes bright-brain, I am the little girl in this story, and this story isn’t made-up. It is the truth and that’s not all. Peter, years later...Peter and I made you. Peter was your daddy.”

This was the first Porter had ever heard of his father. He never thought to ask. He had always assumed he was created somehow, somewhere and simply handed over to his mother. Maybe he needed some time to digest the revelation, but for now his mind stayed on a more simplistic path. “So my daddy is a fawn.”

“Yes baby. And he was the most wonderful man to grace either of these worlds.”

“You came from the other world?”

“Yes.”

“You are a mortal-girl child all grown up like my teacher said?”

She looked at her son with the eyes only a mother possesses and decided to speak freely. “Your father, Peter was his name, Peter and I fell in love. It is forbidden in this, World of Myth, for most to come in contact with the mortals, unless you are a cherub, or a sasquatch, or the Tooth Fairy that is.

“When we made you I had but one choice and that was to come here, to this world and

live. I did it for you Porter.” She paused for a moment, “I did it for me as well. I believed you couldn’t be like any other man-child.” She paused again calmly looking into his eyes. “Though I must admit, I thought you would look more like your father and not so much like you, like a mortal. But you are different from those children in that world and are much more adapted to this world Porter and these people. But we must be careful. I’m not supposed to be living here in this realm and if the people here find out then I might have to leave.”

Outside perched on a tree branch sat a cherub with a bow slung over his back. He enjoyed the story every bit as much as Porter but he wasn’t here to listen to stories. He was here working. Often he sat close to the Stebbins’s water tower and wondered how he was going to help this woman find love again.

### 3

The evening conversation ended with those words of wariness to Porter in keeping his Mother’s origins a secret. Sleep was taken and dreams were sewn until the next morning when Porter ventured off to school. In less than a weeks time, Porter’s mind began to wander into places some people may think of as unruly. His thoughts kept wandering back, to the Realm of Mortals.

The evening was cool and there were no clouds in the sky to accent the heavens last melody of a day. The trees were crooked and dark, and the sky was turning ultramarine blue when Porter Stebbins first piled old leaves and gnarled twigs into a mound. His mother warned him against following the path of his father but the shininess of the idea could not be ignored.

The ground was hard and the leaves next to it were wet and felt like durable paper. His heap of colored leaves and sharp twigs reminded him of sunrise, the dawning of a new day filled with a new adventure. Here before him was either a tangle of broken branches and wet leaves or a gateway into a new world. He felt nervous. He thought about backing out but knew wouldn’t. He had to at least try. This moment on the precipice of unimaginable excitement felt as if reality was clashing with a dream and the battle ground was his

heart and mind. He took a deep breath and then leapt feet first into the pile.

## **Sharon is Dead! Long Live Sheri**

### **1**

Underneath a black cloak, Death came to claim the souls of the moat creature and Sharon, but he left with only one. The body of Sharon von Ceindume had taken its last breath but her soul was not as easy to catch.

She lay dead, a giant blob on top of her squashed half-sister. Still no crickets, owls or insects dared make a sound. The only noises to be heard were the popping and crackling

sounds of fiery rubble that was once Walter's house. The night had moved on as the green moon sailed through the heavens. Clouds came and went and as dawn approached, life surged back into the blob once called Sharon.

As with all newborns her first instinct was to take a breath. Her lungs expanded but no oxygen was delivered. She gasped and gagged and gasped again, searching for air but there was none. Terror consumed her and she squirmed in desperation but her bloated body only jiggled slightly. Her panicked wiggling had however created a slight undulation that sent her circular mass into a slow roll toward the moat. Still gasping in confused horror she gently slipped into the water and slowly began to sink as so many kittens and newborns had done before.

On her descent she saw distorted fish swimming upside down and sideways amongst tangles of dark plants methodically dancing. She sank further and faster, pining for air. A faint glow seemed to be coming from the bottom of the moat. Time ticked by without a breath.

The glow intensified and when she finally hit bottom, instead of feeling mud and loose sediment she felt water breaking off her back and air touched her skin. Utilizing the momentum obtained with her initial bobbing motion, she managed to flop over exposing her belly and face to the sky. She gasped again, as hard as she could and this time the air fed her deprived lungs.

While effortlessly floating on the surface of the water and enjoying the simple pleasure of breathing, memories appeared. She remembered her home, her life, the Sad Lady, and then Walter. She then remembered killing Walter. And then she remembered the moat person, her half-sister who had strangely become her new mother, and the nipple goop. That disgusting sauce was still sticking to her cheeks and tongue.

She slowly opened her eyes. Land was a great deal farther away than she would have believed. This wasn't the moat. This body of water was much bigger.

She felt weak but managed to feebly kick her legs and was shocked at how easily she moved through the water. Again she kicked and this time swatted her hands and moved so quickly she left a wake behind her. With a few more kicks and swats she found herself

running up onto the bank like a whale beaching itself. There she laid still, resting with her head on the shore, not feeling the need to move the rest of her body out from the water just yet because she had so little energy.

She fell asleep.

She slept soundly, but at some point her mouth fell open and she began to snore. When this happened, the stench of the nipple goop attracted things. Creepy things like flies, spiders, ants and worms found their way into her mouth, but this did not wake her. She continued to sleep and snore. Birds attracted to the worms and insects flew into her mouth but this too did not wake her. What woke her was the instinct to swallow and in swallowing a curious thing happened, her eyes dipped inside her head, as if they were pushing the creepy crawlies into her belly. She casually opened her mouth again and let the worms wiggle, the bugs fly and the insects walk back into the hypnotizing stench where she again closed and swallowed.

Energy found its way back into her muscles. She managed to roll over and crawled sluggishly on hands and knees out of the water. Her body felt fat and tender as if she was made from jellyfish and even the dullest stones seemed as if they had the might to puncture her skin. She sat upright and continued opening and closing her mouth, each time collecting tremendous amounts of insects for her belly. It seemed perfectly natural.

After an hour or so of feeding she felt strong once more. Her belly was full. Satisfied and satiated she stretched upwards and began to stand but lost her balance and crashed to the ground. Bewildered by the fall and how bizarre her legs felt she rolled off her back with some effort and again steadied herself on hands and knees, this time directly above the water's reflecting power. There she saw her face and screamed out in horror.

She staggered back, away from the image that was her new self. She contemplated and breathed and then she leaned over the water yet again and excepted what she saw. The liquid held no tricks or illusions. What was looking back at her was just as she had seen before. Her stringy black hair was the same but everything else had changed. Her off colored eyes were gigantic and sat on top of her head which was now five times bigger than it had been. In this moment she realized what she was and rejoiced in the fact that the

transformation had been a success, thusly she was now existing in the land of the cherubs. She smiled a massive smile that stretched across her entire face. “No wonder those bugs tasted so good,” she said to herself staring down at a rippling reflection of a toad.

The toad pulled her knees to her belly, straightened her front legs, centered her new body on her hind quarters and belched. It was deep and long and vibrated her body shaking her rotten teeth from her new mouth. They sprinkled the ground like tiny tombstones marking the grave of her old life.

“Wa—what is it? Mama, what is that thing?” asked Porter.

“I don’t know but I think we should go fishing somewhere else. I think that toad’s croaking has scared every fish in this pond.”

“Mama, shouldn’t we go and say hello,” said Porter fascinated with the spectacle he and his Mother had witnessed. His Mother studied the massive toad, belching happily in the distance, and an uneasy feeling crept into her.

“No lemon face, I don’t think that would be a good idea. There is something wrong with that creature.” As she continued studying the toad her uneasiness grew. “Come on. We need to get out of here, quietly.” She grabbed Porter’s hand and together they left unseen. When they were at a safe distance, Porter’s Mother got on one knee and looked her son in the eyes. “Now listen to me Porter. There is something very wrong with that creature.”

“What?”

“I’m not sure, but I am sure of it, and I am your Mother so you need to do what I say, ok.”

“Ok.”

“If you ever see that toad again I want you avoid it. Don’t talk to it, don’t touch it and don’t look at it. Just stay away.” Then she ruffled his hair and smiled. “OK my beautiful toothless man.”

“Yes Mama,” said Porter smiling back. Off in the distance they could hear the toad still croaking.

She croaked in the Land of Myth, on the day of her birth, loudly as if proclaiming her presence or her perhaps her worth. As she belched forth her melodies she took pride in the fact she was drowning out the crickets and chirping birds. She could hear only herself and it sounded so good. But then, somewhere off in the far distance, a high pitched squealing cut in to her solo act.

Barely audible at first, the screeching sound grew, forcing the toad to stop croaking all together and scan the skies for the source of the wailing. She spotted a small dot in the distant sky that grew as it flew straight toward her, shrieking all the while.

## 2

The Tooth Fairy's wings stopped fluttering mid-flight because she was unexpectedly hit by some kind of etherial euphoria. As she fell from the sky she moaned and arched her back in ecstasy while crashing towards the ground. With curled toes and sweaty palms she attempted to regain control and suppress the electrifying tingles that had shorted out her nervous system.

She regained command of her wings and drunkenly sped toward the source of her ecstasy. There was no mistaking the cause of the spell. The magic had been cast from freshly fallen teeth, however this euphoric bludgeoning could not have possibly come from a single tooth. The sensation was far too powerful. It surely came from many teeth, fallen at the same time and in the same place. The effect was overwhelming to the point of nearly becoming painful.

Flying straighter she gained speed and started shrieking with excitement as she neared her target. The Tooth Fairy spied twenty, maybe thirty freshly fallen teeth with a scent so ripe it was impossible to fly fast enough. She couldn't wait to begin scooping up her prizes. Her shrilly voice intensified. Her eyes watered. Her wings buzzed furiously.

The five hundred and thirty pound toad nervously shuffled backwards as the screaming creature approached.

As fast as a lightning strike the Tooth Fairy hit the ground. The toad watched in amazement as the fairy trotted from tooth to tooth on her tippy-toes, giggling, like a child

during an easter egg hunt.

The tiny winged girl was like nothing she had ever seen before. Her clothes were tattered. Her hair was messy. Her face looked young and haggard at the same time, and her mouth bulged in the strangest of places as if she had the mumps. The fascinated toad continued to stare as the fairy managed to scoop up all the teeth into her tiny hands. Upon completion she held them up towards the heavens in victorious jubilation. She beamed at her new find. Lost in her own world, she sat giggling and carefully studied each tooth as if they were precious gems.

After the solo studies were completed, she held two teeth that had grown next to each other, and admired how perfectly their contours graced one another. She then held an upper tooth on the corresponding bottom tooth reveling in their connectivity. Her elation peaked. She squealed and cringed and couldn't help but to bring her knees up to her chest, grunting and panting and laughing all at the same time. She stood up and scattered the teeth onto the ground and then flipped over like a dog and wiggled around scratching her back on their sharp edges.

Then she laid still, in perfect bliss until she was pulled out of her fancy appreciations by a voice that said, "So...ooo, you must be the Tooth Fairy?"

The shocked Tooth Fairy had been unaware of the beast who had birthed the teeth. She scrambled, shoving them into a pouch to protect them. Once the teeth had been secured and she knew she could flee, she scanned the area to determine where the voice had come from and what might the situation be.

She was surprised to see such a massive creature, a toad no less, looming over her. She thought, *How could I have overlooked such a beast?* She straightened her spine and with her nose aimed up at what appeared to be the working eye of the monster, replied, "So...ooo, how did a freak like you learn to talk without a hillbilly's accent?"

"Funny, I must have lost it in my travels," said the toad without hesitation.

"Like these teeth," said the Tooth Fairy patting the pouch. "Finders keepers, losers weepers, but don't cry too hard sweetie. You might just get hurt."

"Believe me when I say, I am most definitely not weeping. Those teeth you have there

in your little purse, keep them. I have absolutely no use for them anymore.”

“I am so very pleased to hear that,” said the Tooth Fairy through a clenched grin that signified a fight was a welcome thing. “Because these here,” she said while patting the pouch, “are unequivocally mine. You shed them and I collected them and no trickery or fancy talk separates me from any fallen tooth.”

She had pointed a thumb at her chest and her chin was jutting forward however she, in her mind, was speaking as elegantly as a young princess attending the most important ball her father could have ever thrown. She reached into a pocket and threw a few coins at the feet of the toad saying, “There you go.”

The toad looked at the coins and started laughing.

“This is no joke,” said the Tooth Fairy.

The toad stopped laughing. Not because of the Tooth Fairy’s obvious anger but because she was still weak and laughing nearly caused her to fall.

“I know what you are thinking but you’re wrong,” continued the Tooth Fairy. “This constitutes as one transaction. Whether it be one tooth or fifty doesn’t matter. The price is always the same. So take the money because there is no way you are getting these teeth back.”

The money meant nothing to the toad. The teeth meant nothing. To her they were at best a relic from a world she no longer needed and a person that no longer existed. This conversation however was like none she had ever had in her life. This fairy reeked with mental disease. She was clearly unbalanced and this appealed to the toad on a relatable level but it wasn’t just that. This fairy spoke to her honestly and with passion, not with the common fear and repressed angles of avoidance between she and the caretakers of Walter’s home. This was something she enjoyed. This was something she wanted to continue. She had decided that she rather liked this creature with her ratty hair and sleep deprived eyes.

“Keep the money my friend. I have no use for it,” said the toad.

“That’s not the way it works, friend. You take the money.” The Tooth Fairy mouthed these words clearly and slowly so there was no mistaking her meaning.

“But I have no need for money. It is as useless to me as rock.”

“That doesn’t matter to me. You take the money and then we are done. And that is the way it’s done. That is the way it has always been done.”

The toad couldn’t help but to stare and smile. This situation was so bizarre. Standing before her was the Tooth Fairy! And she was threatening her with violence if she didn’t take the money offered for the teeth that had rattled out of her new toad body. She shifted tactics not wanting this foul creature to flee.

“I will take the money, happily, if you stay and keep me company for a little while.”

The Tooth Fairy, looking puzzled, asked why. The toad’s only experience in conversation was manipulation, intimidation, lies and deceit and so she did what came naturally.

“Those teeth their,” she said while batting her long eyelashes, “are not good enough for you. They are hardly worth the money you have paid me. I simply feel awful for expecting such coin for such a poor quality of teeth. If you stayed, my company would aid in, compensation.”

The Tooth Fairy snarked and then snorted. “Firstly, these teeth are wonderful.” She said this not looking at the toad but at the pouch. She petted and caressed it as if it were a beloved animal. “Secondly, they are worth far more than the coins I have given you, at least to me they are worth far more. Thirdly, how can you put such a high value on your conversation? Who are you?”

The toad was taken aback. She could sense the fairy was about to fly away. She remembered the moat monster and thought about how their conversation had been direct and how it had been honest. It had been highly productive. She shifted tactics.

“I don’t know who I am. I just arrived here. I have no name, no home, I have nothing and thought that maybe you were sent here by some divine power to...I don’t know, help me...maybe?” She couldn’t help to lie at the end. Some habits are impossible to break.

The Tooth Fairy was taken aback. It had been a lifetime since somebody had appealed to her compassion and for a moment she remembered her old self. She remembered the fairy she once was before becoming the Tooth Fairy. Her aggressiveness departed. She looked at this monster and there was something about her, something so sad and pathetic,

something that she herself related to.

“All right, I suppose I can hang out here for a while.” After sitting down she leaned against a rock, pulled one of her newly collected teeth from the pouch and began sucking on it. She looked at the toad and then down to the coins scattered on the ground. The toad shifted her front foot to cover the coins. “So you really have no name?”

The toad carefully adjusted the rest of her body making sure she was not going to fall over, and then sat. Once she felt secure she said, “Yes that is correct. I have no name. I did once, but things are different now. I am different now.”

“How is that exactly?”

“Believe it or not I was just born today. This is my new body—,”

The toad continued to speak but the Tooth Fairy zoned out. It was not just the effects of having a newly fallen tooth in her mouth, it was what the toad had said. The words “born today” and “new body” shut her down and she in a flash remembered the day she had been created, the day she got her new body. She spit out the tooth as her stomach acid boiled. She began dry heaving.

The toad stopped talking and looked at the fairy with delight. Even though she liked this creature she still couldn't help but to enjoy other peoples pain. The fairy got on all fours and continued hacking, believing she may vomit, but didn't. She recovered and recaptured the tooth she had spit out.

She was about to pop it back in her mouth when the toad said, “Are you sure you want to put that back in your mouth? It appears as if you didn't take well to it the first time.” The toad was convinced it was the tooth that had caused the fit. It had after all been in her mouth for years and it must have soaked up some of her wickedness, or so she thought.

“Thanks, I'm fine by the way, and yes, I want to put this back in my mouth,” said the Tooth Fairy and so she did. Then she laid back against her rock and sucked vigorously while looking at the toad.

They both grinned at one another.

The Tooth Fairy wrapped her hands around the back of her head and continued, “Well first things first. Lets get you a name.” She paused and earnestly looked the toad up and

down then blurted out, "Good god there are endless possibilities, just look at you."

"Yes, I did that, in the water earlier. It was quite a shock."

"I'll bet." Again the Tooth Fairy remembered the first time she saw her reflection and said absently, "I couldn't pick my name. You can't just decide to call yourself Samantha or Rita when you're the Tooth Fairy. It wouldn't fly. People would never except it. You on the other hand can pick whatever you want. I'd go with Samantha. I always liked that name. Its pretty."

"Yes, it is pretty, but I, am not," said the toad gleefully.

"That is God's honest the truth. You really don't have much going on as far as prettiness or even ugliness for that matter. Good god, you are positively terrifying, and you're big. Maybe you could call yourself something like Gargantos or Bigithica, or Samanthamongus. Ohhh, Samanthamongus sounds good, you look like a Samanthamongus to me!"

"I think not."

"Well, what do you want to say about yourself? A name can go a long way in describing who you are or how you want to, project yourself to the world." Her last words faded and she began to slump.

"That is true, " said the toad sitting and thinking.

The Tooth Fairy tried her best to problem solve but the tooth she was sucking on was beginning to take action. She was slipping into the realm of beautiful, pain numbing intoxication.

"You reek of indecency," slurred the Tooth Fairy.

"Thank you."

"Maybe we can use that?"

They both sat quietly. Each attempted to think up a name but neither was having any success.

"Well do you have any ideas?" asked the Tooth Fairy.

"I'm thinking."

"Well, what was your old name? Maybe we can start there?"

The toad did not want to answer. She felt uninterested in who she used to be. She was

thinking about who she wanted to become. She was bouncing around ideas like Cherub-Killer or Cherub-Eater but these names were no good. It wasn't easy picking out a name.

"Comm-on," slurred the Tooth Fairy, "Wha, wha, what was your old name?"

"Sharon," answered the toad absently.

"Sharon! Yea, that name sucks. That name is definitely not you. You're more like a... Sheri. Yea, Sheri the Toad is what you should call yourself," said the fairy pointing a wobbly finger at the toad who was appearing in double vision. She closed one eye and the toad snapped back into focus just in time for the fairy to see her smile.

"Sheri," said the toad. "I like that. It is just a shade off my old name and it has a nasty sting to it. Yes, Sheri the Toad, I love it!"

"Yea, Sheri the Toad, that name suits you. It really suits you. So now that you have a name Sheri, what will you do with yourself?"

"Oh, I plan to pursue my interests."

"And what exactly interests you?"

Sheri had become comfortable with the fairy and nearly spat out, vengeance! But she stopped herself and instead looked down at the Tooth Fairy and wondered how such a creature would react if she told her the truth. She wondered if she could be trusted. She wondered if she had made her first friend.

## A Fairy's Tale

### 1

Just a few moments ago, in the bubbly green hills of the Goreagmac Mountains, below Crazy Woman Canyon, a red sun rose above the horizon and awoke a fairy. Her name was Lynnandra and she was a Toocom fairy, which is a small winged creature that specializes in dancing and singing for sick trees, plants, and water. She yawned while stretching her arms and legs and then, through sleepy blue eyes looked around and saw all the other fairies doing the same. The other fairies however took heed of the red sun and went back to bed, as it is well known that a rising red sun is a bad omen. Lynnandra

didn't ignore the red sun, she was just too excited to pay attention. Her mind was focused on the work of the day, the work she loved, the work she was born to do.

So she grabbed the tip of a leaf and pulled it down until it nearly touched her bottom lip. Dew drops rolled down the spine of leaf into her mouth. She gargled the first drop and drank the others then neglecting breakfast, fluttered off towards a Capriati tree that had been feeling sad since his neighbor had been struck by lightning and died. Lynnandra flew with little more grace than a butterfly mumbling "clickety-klue, clickety-kee, clickety-zoo, cluckety-zeeee," and after a wobbly flight landed on one of the trees lower branches.

His leaves shook, every so slightly, and since there was no wind it was obvious he was asleep and dreaming. She began singing softly and humming smoothly. She was attempting to deliver happiness before he awoke. Her singing had the power to alter his dreams and maneuver his subconscious into a happier place. She had done this every morning for the past week helping the tree slip back into a cheerful state of existence.

Her singing gradually grew louder and soon the tree awoke from its slumber. She danced on her tippy-toes and held the same soft soothing note for a spell, driving waves of healing power into the tree. The Capriati felt the sensation of regeneration and was lulled into dancing the way trees do, which is very slowly.

Lynnandra rejoiced as her dance and song had worked. The tree glowed with appreciation and was able to stop mourning his friends falling and instead embrace the good things of the world.

She saw the aura of the tree turn from blue to orange and satisfied with her work fluttered off in search of breakfast. Some fairies are very particular in what they eat. Many will go their whole lives eating just one fruit or nut but Lynnandra liked to experiment. She was very unlucky in this way as it would soon cause her irreparable damage.

She was fluttering in no particular direction when a smell so fantastic struck her nose she just about crashed. She couldn't fly, the smell was too wonderful so after dropping to her knees she breathed in as long and as hard as she could savoring the incredible aroma. It was hypnotic and she may have stayed there all day enjoying the fragrance but her

stomach growled as if commanding her to stop wasting time and find the source of this intoxication.

The aroma led her to a briar patch. Her nose told her that somewhere between the spaces of tangled thorns and needles was surely the source creating that delicious scent. Her stomach rumbled again demanding she push on but she could not fly, the briar patch was too thick, so after tucking her wings tightly to her back she carefully maneuvered over and through the harsh thistles. Light began to disappear as she ducked in and through, deeper inside the maze of sharp thorns. The deeper she crawled the darker it became. Finally, highlighted through the darkness, she saw a flower blooming from a single piece of fallen fruit. It was surely the source of the aroma.

Never before had her eyes beheld a blossom such as this. Though she was only a few steps away, the fruit was out of her reach. The briar patch had become ridiculously thick. Lynnandra continued circling the tangled chaos until, to her great relief, she uncovered a passageway. A perfectly clear tunnel, leading straight towards the flowering fruit, flowed forth with a steady wind pushing her golden hair back, away from her face. Without thought she ran forwards, nearly mad with excitement.

Lynnandra shivered when first touching the exotic petals whose texture was as soft and as cool to the touch as water on a dry throat. She reached her hand through the open flower and into the fruit. She took a nibble and her taste buds sang out with the might of a thousand song birds. Chocolate filled angels playing peanut butter harps on ribbons of marshmallow bacon could not have tasted better. She chewed quickly and took another bite nearly crying with ecstasy. She took another bite and then another and then, the world around her drooped and sagged and started spinning. She slid into a deep slumber.

She awoke with fuzzy memories, feeling groggy and weak. Her belly felt tight and sick and her skin was layered with a slimy sweat. Above all else she was thirsty. Struggling on her hands and knees she made her way to a pool of water and drank. Afterwards, looking around the heavy shadows, she could not for the life of her remember how she had gotten here. Shivering, she backed herself into a corner and curled up into a ball, physically weak and in pain.

When the pain finally subsided and her nerves calmed she remembered her morning, the tree, the smell and the fruit. That intoxicating aroma that had dumbfounded her good sense and marched her into a tangle of thorns so thick only a faint hint of light could penetrate its walls.

She cursed her stupidity and detested her situation, then she began looking for the way out. There was none to see. The tunnel she had used to enter this bizarre room had disappeared. She began walking the borders of the prickled webs, searching mostly with her hands. After circling the dark several times she became frantic. There was no way out. No space or gap was big enough for her body to squeeze through. She tried shouting but she had no voice. The fruit had taken her power of speech as well as put her to sleep. Panic now owned her and under its plague she began tugging, pulling and clawing at her cell. Thorns ripped through her flesh. It was for nothing. There was no breaking free from the cords of the briar. She was trapped.

After having battled and then surrendered to the walls of thorns she flopped onto the floor exhausted and frustrated and began to cry. With no voice, her tears fell silently.

Time passed. She drank the remainder of the water. She slept. Darkness came and went and came again. Finally a voice woke her. She thought it must be someone to help because the first words spoken were, "I'm so sorry my friend." And so she felt happiness, but that happiness died when the next words were spoken.

The earth violently shifted and the tangles of thorns fell away as she ascended. Light returned. She squinted her eyes and saw a blurry figure holding the cage she had been locked inside. When her eyes focused a fierce jolt of horror slammed into her psyche. She started hyperventilating. Her body flashed with heat. She knew her jailer. She knew something terrible was about to happen and there was nothing, nothing she could do to stop it. The voice said, "I am so sorry to tell you this but, I am the one, the one destined to deliver you to your own private ring of hell."

Lynnandra fainted.

In her dream she tried to fly but despite all her effort she moved so slowly. There was something in the sky coming for her. A terrible, inescapable thing was consuming the

world around her and all she could do was ineffectively flee.

## 2

When Lynnandra awoke she found herself in a very bright place. It was too bright to open her eyes without experiencing pain. She remained motionless inside a coma of fear. She heard footsteps, buzzing wings and a horrible hacking cough. Then she heard a voice, the voice of her jailer. It was the voice of the Dark Fairy, the one from which countless horror stories were told. The fairy whose sadness was said to bring about winter. The fairy who stole children in the night. The fairy who trapped adults during the day. The fairy, that had trapped her.

“Awake already. You’re strong. You—” The jailer burst out in a fit of coughing again. “You will do. My time has come at last.”

Lynnandra then heard noises of metal smashing against metal, scrapping wood, water boiling and glass breaking. At one point she heard her captor fall hard onto the floor during a coughing fit. Lynnandra had hoped she wouldn’t get up. Fighting the pain she strained to open her eyes and hopefully witness the monsters demise. In this moment she couldn’t help but to allowed herself a fantasy. She wished the monster would die and she would be left alone to starve to death, locked inside her cage, and thought how wonderful that fate would be compared to the horrors awaiting, but through her eyelashes, still barely touching, she saw her jailer’s silhouette rise.

Hope died, and a hollow sense of defeat gutted her.

Time passed, but how much was hard to tell for terror distorts its passage.

She believed she knew why the Dark Fairy had claimed her and wanted desperately to speak but her voice would not work. The fruit’s magic was still effective. It was obvious that the Dark Fairy was sick and probably thought a Toocom fairy would be able to sing and dance health back into her body. She wanted to tell her that her magic would work only on trees, plants, and water but her vocal cords refused to vibrate her plea.

A loud snap was followed by metal sliding across metal. The lock was being removed. Hinges squeaked as the door to freedom opened. Electrified power surged

through her body and with all her might she took to flight in what she knew was her last chance for freedom, and for a brief moment she was liberated.

“I’m sorry,” said the Dark Fairy snatching her before her toes left the cage. “I’m sorry for everything.” In her voice Lynnandra heard the warbling of sickness, truth, and regret.

She was laid on a table and held there by some unseen force. She felt more terrified than any creature on the planet at that moment.

Her captor began chanting, dancing and sprinkled her with powder or perhaps sand, she did not know because her eyes still couldn’t open. Then Lynnandra felt cool drops of liquid on her body and something soft like a feather being drug across her torso.

Suddenly, violently, her veins were filled with what felt like swords and fire and her head thumped with the hammering power of thunder. Her skull cracked open, literally. Still she couldn’t scream. She could barely breathe. Her jaw was clamped shut so tightly her teeth, all of them, exploded under the pressure. Her back arched and cracked loudly in several places as her spine stretched and grew. Her head started sliding away from her feet and her ribs expanded, snapping and popping as they quadrupled in size. She wanted to faint but couldn’t. She experienced every second of agony as her body grew.

Finally the pain stopped.

Her body felt different. Her mind felt different. The magic that held her in place was gone. She rolled off the table and fell to the floor and then vomited. The colorful fruit she had eaten was expelled. She felt her voice once more and used it, lashing out a horrifying screech until there was no air left in her lungs. Then she screamed and screamed and screamed and when she could scream no more, she cried.

Her head stopped swimming and when she looked around she was able to see the room clearly without strain on her eyes. Surprisingly, she recognized this room. She recognized everything in it though she had never been here before. The windows, the floors, a brown stain on the white table, a chip in a plate, the markings on a chair were all commonplace to her. There was only one thing out of place, a single thing that didn’t fit into her memory and that was the smiling corpse lying on the ground next to her. Though she didn’t recognize the dead body she knew exactly who it was, and she wished more than

anything that it was she lying dead on the floor instead. But that poorretch had served her time. It was now over, hence the smile.

The Toocom fairy was as dead as the smiling corpse, however the curse that had owned that body was still alive and thriving in the fairy formerly known as Lynnandra. From this day forward it was she who was cursed. Some would call her the Dark Fairy and others would call her the Huntress but her most famous name was, and would always be, the Tooth Fairy.

### 3

She stared at her reflection in a mirror made from polished molars and understood a simple truth about her new herself. The truth being, the Tooth Fairy is above all other things, a junky. She would no longer be content with a simplistic fairy existence of play and happiness because the life of a junky is dark and sullen. Already she was being driven mad by an unquenchable need for teeth, but for the moment she fought against it and continued to cry.

Teeth were now her sole focus. They were the titan governing every action of her life in one form or another. The idea of constantly gathering teeth, night after night with no end in sight was depressing. It was a feeling she had never known. She felt so very tired just imagining being hit constantly with waves of unending desire. The only true escape from her new addiction would be death, and with that realization she stopped crying and screamed. It was an angry scream.

The fairy next to her had died and when she did all possessions had been handed down. Books, outfits, wands, crowns, memories, knowledge, the Enchanted Forest of Dentin, the collection of teeth and the addiction were all hers now.

She stood just over one foot tall with a cute face and straight blond hair that, if memory served her, was worn in a variety of fashions. Some nights she might wear it up in a bun or in a French braid or perhaps pigtails, but the most common hair style worn by the Tooth Fairy was an uncombed tangled mess. Her eyes were an almost transparent blue and set well with her high cheekbones. Tears dripped onto her knobby knees as she

looked down upon her slender frame.

She was utterly alone. From now on her days would be spent sleeping and her nights working.

She dried her eyes and looked around at the tremendous collection of teeth that were gathered up over countless years. There were literally billions of them and she knew each tooth as well as a mother knows her own children's faces. Some were chipped or stained, some long, some short; each had a unique smell and taste. Being surrounded by every single baby tooth the planet has produced, as well as some special adult teeth, gave her pleasure, but it was the hollow pleasure of an addict. No matter how many teeth she collected, it would never be enough.

She searched her memory and in her mind's eye she saw acre upon acre of rolling green hills, beautiful flowers, bubbling brooks and fine looking trees all making up her kingdom known as the Enchanted Forest of Dentin, a forest most were too terrified to set foot in. On top of the tallest hill set many centuries of children's lost teeth which now, placed together, made up a castle, The Castle of Dentin.

Tooth Fairies weren't the best carpenters in the world so the castle looked like hundreds of melted marshmallows reflected in a funhouse mirror. Spiraling pillars of teeth jettied upwards resembling organ pipes that had been battered with a sledgehammer. The inside of the castle looked as awkward as the outside. The spiral staircases didn't follow the order of any circle or oval and not every room had four walls. Some had seven or ten and some only had three. The hallways varied in shapes and size, not just from each other, but as they went. The floors were flat in a few spots. Mostly, they looked like a white pond of water frozen on a windy day. This was her new home.

As the oranges and reds faded from the early evening sky, she dried her eyes, grabbed her pouch and took to flight. Night was upon her and the hunger beckoned.

# The Secret Pas- sageway

1

Porter was surrounded with sharp crackling sounds when his feet first began to pass through the doorway he had created. Transparent green stars popped, purple clovers

burst, and blue diamonds flashed and swirled letting loose potent smells of sulfur and garlic. Into the secret passageway he sank.

Porter had believed every single word of his Mama's story, everything from the two worlds, to his father, to the doorway, but in his fantasies he couldn't help but to wonder if the portal would actually work for him. His doubt slipped away as soon as he did. He had however imagined that jumping into a portal would be like a heavy stone sinking into water, but this was not the case. He oozed into his pile of foliage as if it was made of gelatinous marmalade.

He felt as if he were being swallowed alive and with that sensation came uncontrolled anxiety. He instantly regretted his decision. *What have I done, what have I done, what have I done*, hiccuped inside his head. Why hadn't he listened to his Mother? Why had he chosen to disobey her? He could be home with her right now, warm and cozy in his bed, falling fast asleep, but he was stuck in the clutches of his own curiosity and it was pulling him deeper and deeper into the earth. He struggled to free himself but his creation refused to let him go. His feet and knees were securely clasped and the earth was now ingesting his thighs.

He sank further down, deeper and deeper into the world until his chest and shoulders were consumed and then all he could do was hold his breath and close his eyes. The instant he felt the portal envelop his head the doorway shot him out the other side, feet first, as if he were an explosive bowel movement. There were even similar sounds.

He coughed and whimpered and as the shivering fear left him he accepted the fact that he was not dead. The panic abandoned him. As he sat on the ground covered with mud and relief, a sense of great adventure began pumping through his body. The portal had worked! He reached up to clean the muck from his eyes and looked around. The sun had long since set but the moon's radiance illuminated the landscape in dreamlike wonder.

*This place is fantastic* he thought looking at trees and their leaves, none of which he had ever seen before. Their bark and curving branches, the shape of their leaves shifting in the breeze was all so different and new. Then his head fell towards the plants on the ground and before they had a chance to amaze the naturalist Porter screamed and clawed

his way backwards in fear.

A snake (a beast of which he had never seen the likes of before) was swallowing a rabbit. He stared, first in fear then in amazement. He thought this thing was some type of gigantic worm that had wiggled up from the ground to feed. He thought, *Maybe when rabbits are swallowed by these gigantic worms it is a portal for them into my world, because the way that rabbit looks is just the way I felt a little bit ago.* He stood there with his mouth agape, and stared long enough for some of the mud to start drying before the snake slithered off, now with a bulge in his belly. *Not a portal,* thought Porter.

He then looked down at his portal and noticed the leaves and twigs from his world had come through the passageway with him. He wasn't sure if the leaves from this new world would take him back, so for now he stayed within a close radius. He began wandered in small circles keeping the doorway within sight.

Before long he noticed a soft orange glow coming from the east. It was the familiar glow of lanterns, many hundreds of lanterns shedding light. There was a mortal town in the same geographical spot as Cheese. He wanted to go have a look but did not dare leave the foliage of his home world. It was dark and he could very easily get lost, but the adrenaline inside kept thumping, pushing him, demanding he move forward and so he took a few steps. Curiosity kept nudging him, and so he took a few more steps.

As he edged away from the portal he worried about his doorway and the possibly of being trapped in this foreign land. What if he got lost? He did not know these woods. He did not know what dangers lurked in the darkness. Flashes of his mother, his home, and his new school friends zapped warnings into his belly, urging him to stop, to go back.

He looked over his shoulder towards the passageway and pondered, *just leaves and a few twigs, how fragile.* He thought about his dad and how his mother had watched him pile the leaves back together. What had his father done to protect them? Spread them out so if a wind came up they would not be so easily scattered? *No,* he thought, *that couldn't possibly keep them safe from a gust of wind, not out here.*

Porter gazed back at the beckoning orange glow of the mortal town and then, before it was too late, before curiosity got the better of him, he walked back to the leaves from his

world. After a few agonizing moments of debate he dropped to his knees and began to rapidly fill his pockets. It took only a few handfuls before his pockets were completely stuffed. Still there remained most of his home world's foliage scattered about on the ground. His pockets were much too small to hold all of them. Without thought Porter stood up and tore two slender, flexible branches from a sapling and tied one around each of his trousers at the ankles, then fell back to the ground and began stuffing himself.

When he was satisfied that he had packed every twig and leaf into the legs of his trousers he attempted to stand up. This proved far more difficult than he anticipated. He rocked back and forth and flopped around before finally rising, and though he was severely winded he couldn't help but to laugh hysterically when he saw his moonlit shadow. His newly constructed stuffed legs contrasted with his skinny torso making him look ridiculous, still he had accomplished his goal. The portal was now mobile and with that Porter began waddling through strange surroundings toward the summoning light of a town he had never seen before.

He stepped with his plump, unbendable legs through the forest for a long while before he came upon a field of wheat and barley. The stocks came up to his chin and though maneuvering with his stuffed trousers was difficult before, it had become nearly impossible to move through this area of land without damaging the crops. He did his best. And so he sidestepped for a distance at an agonizingly slow pace. Then he discovered he could hop, and so for a bit he bounced and before long the bouncing became a skipping game. "To-and-fro, to- and-fro," he sang to himself moving ever the closer to his destination.

He skidded to halt when out of the darkness appeared a man. Porter's eyes grew wide with fear when he saw a familiar straw hat and blue kerchief tied around the man's neck. He thought he had been caught by farmer Milford, a crabby old man who, for the most part, was best to avoid. Porter stood still with his eyes to the ground and said after an uncomfortable silence, "I'm terribly sorry farmer Milford."

There was no answer.

"I did my very best not to damage any of your crops. You can see for yourself."

There was only silence and in it Porter's mind sprinted with possible scenarios of his

doomed future. He could only take the torture for so long before he blabbered out, “Please don’t tell anyone I was here farmer Milford. I promise, I will never come back to this world if only you won’t tell anyone about me being here.”

Still he only received silence and what he assumed was a menacing stare as his shame kept him from looking up.

“Farmer Milford, are you all right?”

Porter peeked upwards and squinted trying to better his vision. Now it was he who did the staring. Farmer Milford looked odd. He was dressed in the same hat, red shirt and blue kerchief he always wore but he was much taller and stiffer and it appeared he was unable to move his arms from the outstretched position they were in. Porter waddled over to the farmers feet to get a better look, however when he got close enough he discovered, there were no feet.

In the silver glow of the moonlight he noticed that this was indeed a straw man, but it was not farmer Milford. This was somebody else and this somebody else was dead. *The towns people must have strung him up out here for poor behavior*, he thought. *Good golly did they tear his legs off before they killed him?*

“What kind of a town am I walking toward?” he said with serious concern. Now looking at the orange glow scared him a little. The light had changed from a siren song of curiosity to a deeper red hue of danger. He was on the border, the edge of what could be a terribly hostile place and he was just a boy. A boy with no real means of defending himself against these potential savages.

With the element of real danger on his mind he decided to empty his trousers and pockets next to the straw man, as he would be easy to locate if he indeed had to flee. He piled the leaves and twigs, most of which had been broken into small bits, and looked at it approvingly believing the surrounding crops would protect it should a gust of wind arise.

He turned towards the town and then back at his portal and hoped it would take him home. Part of him wanted to jump in right now and forget this place, if indeed the portal actually worked again. But he was here, now, and if he didn’t explore this world, the

world half of him belonged to, his curiosity would never let him rest. He had to see this place and he had to do it now.

Again Porter ventured toward the foreign settlement, this time with a heightened sense of dander and flexible knees.

## 2

On the outskirts of town, Porter stationed himself behind a heavily shadowed, thick wall of trees that he was sure would protect him from possible onlookers. Silently he sat and carefully examined what the moonlight unveiled. First and foremost there were no people to see but that was understandable, it was late. There was no need to remind himself that this might be a good thing, as the dead straw man lingered heavily on the forefront of his thoughts.

Cautiously he studied his surroundings. Before him sat a dozen or so dwellings that were obviously domiciles for mortal people. The buildings here looked similar enough to those in the town of Cheese. There were wooden roofs with chimneys fashioned from stone, doors with typical handles, hinges and knockers and there were windows, but the interiors of these dwellings was impossible to observe as the curtains were all drawn shut. He saw common things like wheelbarrows, brooms and shovels, stair steps and lofts. There were chickens, pigs and goats but they were not free to roam as he was used to seeing, instead they were all caged.

The most obvious difference was in the size of the buildings. In the Land of Myth the structures varied greatly in size, from the very small to very large but here, the structures were for the most part, the same size. The doors were all the same sizes, both in height and width, as were their handles and hinges. Everything here seemed to be the same size, generally speaking. Then Porter noticed something peculiar he hadn't recognize at first. Mounted on the outside of every single window were crisscrossed metal bars which seemed to him, to be a bad thing. Caged animals and caged mortals behind their metal bars and drawn curtains as well as the dead straw man all seemed to paint a picture of subtle warning. Again his gut beckoned him to leave. He stood up to do just that as he

thought out loud, “What sort of people must a place like this hold?”

Then thrills shot through Porter as he heard a voice directly behind him say, “Well, I can’t tell you about most of the people, but I myself am the finest of fellows you’ll find in this here town.”

His head nearly twisted off as he snapped around to see who had spoken. The unexpected voice sent a shock through his adolescent spine and mind scaring him white with terror. He was able to see a dark silhouette not more than six paces behind him. He wanted to run but the trees were blocking his way. The only way out was in the direction where the mortal stood, so Porter froze and instinctually stared at his feet.

“Don’t be afraid kid, I ain’t going to hurt you. My name is Paul, Paul Portsmouth. I live over yonder with my ma and pa.” He pointed over his shoulder though Porter couldn’t see. “They was arguing something fierce tonight so I slipped out of the house to find some more pleasant company. Don’t know if I found it or not,” then Paul paused squinting his eyes and did his best to see through the darkness, “but I’ll tell you what, I sure found me somebody who’s a whole lot dirtier than they was, even counting the filthy words commin out their mouths. How did ya get all that mud all over yourself?”

Porter’s chin was pressed against his throat, his mind filled with emotions. Paul stepped out of shadow and into the moonlight as Porter dared to look up at the first mortal he had ever laid eyes on.

“Well, can you talk or can’t ya?”

“I can.”

“So how did you get all that mud all over yourself?”

Nervously Porter spat out a lie. “I have never been to this town before. I thought it might be a place I wouldn’t want to be seen so I covered myself with mud to blend in with the night better.”

“That is one heck of an idea. I’ll tell you what, I barely saw you. Might have missed ya completely if ya hadn’t spoken out loud to yourself. My pa says people who talk to themselves is crazy but maybe that only counts for grown-ups. You ain’t crazy are ya?”

“I guess it depends who you’re asking, but I don’t think I’m crazy.”

Porter's words struck the two boys as funny and in that semi-awkward moment the two children shared their first laugh together and in that laugh the boys noticed they had something in common, Paul had very few teeth and Porter didn't have any.

Something neither of the boys noticed was that the power of Porter's gums was not felt by Paul. The night shielded their effects.

"So what are ya, some kind of wanderer?"

"Wanderer?" asked Porter confused.

"Yeah. Ya said you ain't never seen this town and there ain't nobody with ya, so I figure you might just be walkin across the world," said Paul.

Porter wasn't fond of lying though he had already done it once, but under the circumstances he didn't see any choice. "Yeah, I'm a wanderer all right. I set off by myself awhile ago to see what I could see."

"That must take some courage wandering across the world with no one except yourself for company. Not to mention no supplies except for a runt pigs weight worth of mud thrown across your body that is."

Both boys laughed again.

"I wasn't going to go for long but the world keeps changing and I keep seeing things I haven't ever seen before," said Porter.

"Well, I'm afraid you ain't found nothin special here. This is nothin but your run-of-the-mill sort of town. Nothin but normal folk and normal stuff."

*Normal*, thought Porter. "What do you call this town?" he asked.

"This here town is known as Heavenly though I can't for the life of me figure why it's called that. Must be wishful thinking on the original builders I guess," said Paul honestly pondering the name of his town.

"Must be," said Porter.

"Well I'll tell you what, this here town of Heavenly ain't goin to be anything you haven't seen before—"

"I doubt that very much," interrupted Porter.

"But if you want, you can come with me over to the horse pastures. We'll see if any of

those friendly fillies can help us out with some night riding. If you want to that is?"

"I would like that very much," said Porter. His mother had told him that in this world horses had a horse body and horse heads. A horse head was something Porter was looking forward to seeing.

"By the way, what's yer name kid?"

"Porter Stebbins is my name."

"Well that's a fine name Porter, a fine name indeed."

Porter followed the older, much taller kid through one of the less traveled paths on the outskirts of town. Porter did his best to wipe the mud (most of which had long since dried) off his body and clothes as he continued observing. Everyone in Heavenly was inside their homes and from the sounds of it they were all participating in the same nightly activity as Paul's parents. Dogs were barking, people were shouting, and at one moment Porter heard some glass breaking followed by a woman crying. The whole scene made him feel uneasy and the sense of magical anticipation he had felt before jumping into the portal had all but dissipated, however he had taken a liking to Paul.

As the boys neared the pasture the sounds of unhappy town's people trailed off and was replaced with hooting owls and the rustling of horses. Clouds had moved in and the moonlight was scant but Porter could make out the basic shapes of the horses. He felt a bit of disappointment as their appearance seemed perfectly natural to him. The heads of horses looked exactly like the heads of unicorns except without the horn. However Porter had never been this close to a unicorn. They were rarely seen.

He walked and stared at one of the horses lost inside his own thoughts not realizing he was no longer following Paul. There were no fences to coral anything in the Land of Myth and if Paul hadn't placed his hand on Porter's shoulder he would have walked straight into the barbed wire fence.

"Careful now, there is a fence here." Paul said as he scanned the area with his eyes and ears listening for any potential danger they may encounter. "You ever rode a horse bare-back before Porter?"

"No, I can't say that I have." In fact Porter had never ridden anything in his life except

for his mother's knee.

“Well, it's tricky business to say the least. Hell, I'll be lucky to get on the back of one of these horses, and I've done it loads of times. So I guess all I'm saying is, don't be put off if ya can't do it the first time.”

Paul placed one of his feet on the barbed wire closest to the ground then lifted the next line of wire as high up as he could and motioned Porter through the gap with his head. “Well hurry up now, we do have all night, but wasting time is never too good an idea,” said Paul.

Porter carefully slipped through the opening between the pointed lines of wire and then took his turn maintaining the gap so Paul could get through. There were many horses inside the pasture but a group of seven stood close to the two boys. Paul, a seasoned veteran in the art of joyriding, carefully walked up to the subdivision of the herd in the most silent and calming manors. With one hand extended and whispering softly, he successfully invaded the space bubble of the nearest of them. He slowly place a hand on the horses neck and petted him for a minuet then somehow, mystically to Porter's eyes, Paul pulled himself up onto the horse's back.

The look on Paul's face could not be mistaken for anything other than absolute satisfaction. “Did ya see how I did that Porter?” said Paul in a loud whisper. “Just walk up to one of them horses, all slow like. They're use to people riding em so it ain't as hard as all that. Then ya just grab hold of the mane and hoist yerself upon its back.” His eyes brightly reflected in the silver moonlight before he kicked the animal with his heels and said, “Heya!” Paul disappeared into the night leaving only the sound of the hooves to mark his whereabouts.

Porter felt off balanced and uncertain as Paul's words echoed in his head. ‘Use to people riding them.’ That was crazy. No flying horse or unicorn had ever let anything ride them, ever! Still, standing alone in this strange world he trusted and proceeded to follow Paul's instructions, gingerly walking up to the horse closest to him. It was a mostly white mare with speckled brown spots. She was the easiest to see in the moonlight. The animal was big and its power obvious. The horse snorted. Glistening snot and spittle covered her

muzzle. She drew one of her front hooves through the trampled grass.

A few paces closer and the mare seemed more like a giant beast rather than a means of joy and transportation. Porter froze. Fear was not merely swimming around his head but rather thrashed about in a waterlogged frenzy. Again he remembered Paul saying that the horses were used to being ridden.

“So approach it as if you have done this before,” he whispered to himself.

He got close enough to smell and then touch the mighty creature but she seemed uneasy. Her eyes were wary. Porter’s mind flashed back to the rabbit being swallowed by the gigantic worm and thought about the horses jaws opening up unnaturally, and biting him, perhaps even eating him alive.

“No, that’s nonsense, you wouldn’t hurt me, would you?” he said then smiled a wide grin. This time the moon illuminated his gums. The horse calmed down instantly. She didn’t neigh or move. Her breathing slowed. Porter felt as if a supernatural force was supporting his desire to sit atop this mighty creature.

He didn’t want to hurt the horse but he grabbed hold of the mane as Paul had told him and gave it a tug. Porter pulled but didn’t jump. The horse whinnied and rose up onto her hind legs as Porter fell backwards onto the ground. He held a defensive hand above him and bawled, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I promise, I didn’t mean to hurt you. I have never done this before.” He finished with nervous smile. The horse instantly stopped neighing and kicking. She walked gently, right up next to the boy, and then, something miraculous happened. The horse knelt down on all fours.

After a moment of surprise Porter got up, dusted himself off and gently climbed onto the horse’s back. She rose up. Porter squeezed with his legs as hard as he could. Being on horseback he felt out of control, but the horse did not kick or run, instead she walked carefully for a moment then stopped as the pounding hooves of Paul’s horse got louder and appeared out of the dark. The situation felt like a weird dream to Porter but his mare remained calm as Paul’s stud came galloping.

“What in the name of the holy lord did ya do to get that mare to kneel down like that Porter? I ain’t never seen anything like that in my life!” said Paul flabbergasted.

“I don’t know. I, I, I really don’t know. I tried to get on but fell down and then she just...kind of let me get on her back.” He said this looking nervous and unbalanced.

Paul saw his discomfort. “Don’t be nervous up on that mare Porter. You just relax and hold on. She will take good care of ya,” said Paul still shaking his head with confused amazement. “I ain’t never seen...even heard of a horse bowing down to let someone on its back.”

“Well,” said Porter feeling a little more steady, “I guess you have seen it now.”

“Common Porter, lets try ridin.”

The two horses walked slowly and after a little bit Porter got a little more comfortable. Paul made a clicking sound with his mouth and the two horses started trotting. After he got used to the bouncing, Porter liked trotting even more. When Paul gently kicked his horse it began galloping and Porter’s mare followed. Instantly the boy was consumed with the sensation of gliding.

“This feels like I’m flying,” he laughed at Paul.

“It’s great ain’t it,” Paul shouted back. The boys continued riding for ‘a spell’ as Paul put it, and before Porter knew it the moon had completed half of its line in the sky.

“Paul, I’ve got to be getting home,” he said panting.

“What home? I thought ya was a wandering dude.”

Under the whack-a-doodle brain tickling effects of horseback riding Porter had forgotten the tales he was leaning on.

“It’s getting late. I’ve got to be getting back to my camp. The sun will be coming up in a few hours.”

“We certainly have been out here for a spell, and I reckon my folks are all shouted out by now. I should be getting back myself. I got to go to school tomorrow.”

School! His Mama! Under these terrific circumstances Porter had forgotten his own world. “It has been great horseback riding with you Paul. I hope I get to see you again.”

“What, are ya going to be sticking around these parts for a spell?”

“I think I will.”

“Well, if-in-ya want to, meet me here again tomorrow night and we’ll see if ya can get

that old filly to bow down again. That's something I'll never forget Porter, I tell you what!"

"All right, tomorrow right here. The same time?"

"Same time as I met you earlier but I'll be here," said Paul. "Can you find this place again on your own?"

"Sure I can. See you tomorrow."

With that the two new friends departed.

Porter walked next to the edge of town the same way he had come. This time of night it seemed all the towns people had shouted and fought their way to sleep leaving only the crickets and bull frogs to be heard.

He made his way back to the dead man made of straw with no problems and to his delight, the portal was still intact. He looked at it needfully, hoping the magic would still work, this time taking him home. The thought of having to stay here in this world wasn't a pleasant one. He loved the horses and he really liked hanging out with Paul but still, there was a dead straw man mounted on a pike next to him and his walk with Paul had been filled with unhappy people yelling, screaming, and fighting. He wondered what in the world could make them all so upset. He thought that The Realm of Mortals was a lot for one little boy to handle but still he wanted to come back and would, if only the gateway worked again. He closed his eyes and sighed saying, "Please take me home." Then he jumped in.

# Cherub Life

## 1

The pub doors swung open and two cherubs waddled in. Everyone inside shouted out

greetings. Vincent was a shy, chubby cherub with yellow hair, thick and straight. It fell just above his shoulders. He leaned his lance against the wall at the front of the pub while Melca, the boomerang thrower, holstered his weapons, one on his left hip and the other on his right. Melca was thinner than most cherubs but strong. His short, tight brown curls bounced like springs as he walked.

They beat their wings and flew to the tall end of the bar where they perched, ordered a couple of pints, and then flew towards the table filled with other cherubs. The pub's patrons squinted their eyes as their hair shifted with the wind created from the flapping wings. A little mead splashed out from Vincent's stein as he waved frantically to his kin already seated. They expressed their greetings through, "Kooka looca's" and "Yeaooowwws," "Meows" and "Growls." Once the yelping and table drumming ceased, Melca took a big swill from his stein and began speaking.

"You cherubs will not believe what Vincent and I saw while flying home through that beautiful sunset just before we arrived here!"

Their eyes brightened.

"What was it?"

"Tell us."

"What did you see?"

Melca continued, "Vincent and I were taking the straight line home from the Southern Sweeps over the Sharp Mountains. There in the Planes of the Lost we spied a thirty foot cyclops running down a herd of Black Mane Unicorns."

"That cyclops was really drunk, and I was scared," said Vincent almost ashamed.

"It was scary," agreed Melca while nodding his head as his springy curls yo-yoed.

"Watching those Black Manes running for their lives...well I didn't know what to do. We didn't know what to do."

Vincent agreed with a head nod of his own.

"There we were, hovering forty feet or so above the ground...wondering what to do... because the herd was nearly below us and the cyclops was running toward us. It was like they thought we could help, and I wanted to help them, but I was confused. We were con-

fused, right Vincent?” asked Melca sincerely.

“I was scared, and, well I really had no ideas at all. I was kind of...just watching.”

Vincent took a nervous sip from his stein. The other cherubs exchanged looks of concern.

“Do we yell at him or fly in front of his eye to distract him, or...I couldn’t think of what to do,” said Melca shrugging his shoulders, then he too took a sip.

“I didn’t know what to do either,” said Vincent restating his claim. The other cherubs waited anxiously. Beneath furrowed brows their childish eyes bounced between the storytellers as their ears stayed tuned for the second leg of the story.

“I guess I did have one idea,” said Melca thoughtfully. “I thought about, well I had an idea of hitting him in the head with my boomerang.”

Every cherub shook their head disapprovingly.

“But it would be much worse for the unicorns if a drunk cyclops fell in love with them. He would never have left them alone if I had done that.”

They all nodded their heads in agreement.

“Some of the horses ran off to the sides so they were safe,” added Vincent.

“I remember seeing those. Oh I thanks goodness to the lucky spirits, I did feel good about that.” Melca looked at his friend Vincent as they both nodded their heads in thanks for that fine memory.

“He did keep on running after the most of them though,” said Melca returning his attentions to the listeners. “Then I had the idea to of tripping him by sticking Vincent’s lance into the ground where his legs moved, but—”

Vincent interrupted, “I would have been terribly frightened to do that.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Then what happened?” asked one of the other cherubs.

“Yea, what did you guys do?”

“Then the greatest thing happened!” bellowed Melca. “Out of nowhere one of the flying horses flew right over our heads!”

Vincent held his hand a few inches above his own head.

“I mean right over our heads,” continued Melca. “And she was going fast, heading

straight for the cyclops. All of a sudden she was right over his head and then she swooped in front of his face. I think she was trying to hold him up for a moment so the Black Manes could get some distance, but that crazy drunk cyclops nearly ran into her and then—wham.”

“Wham!” echoed Vincent loudly. The other cherubs jumped.

“She kicked the cyclops in the middle of his eye. Oh...It was awful. The sound of it. Oh the sound it made was terrible, and his screams...”

“He fell right away. First onto his knees and then his face, and he was close to some of the unicorns so I thought he might land on some of them, but he didn’t,” said Vincent.

“Yeah he fell right on his face, while he was running,” said Melca. “His hands were holding his eye when he hit the ground so he didn’t cushion his fall at all. He hit the dirt on his face and belly and skidded for a long ways. His back curled over and stretched out until his feet were hovering over his head. He looked like a scorpion sliding through the dirt! The dirt looked like water splashing over his head there was so much dust. The sound of the eye getting kicked was awful but...It was pretty neat to see!”

“The unicorns got away after that,” said Vincent before taking another sip.

“Yea they did get away,” said Melca looking at Vincent and nodding his head.

“That part was wonderful,” concluded Vincent.

The cherubs continued sharing the days events, the love they put into people’s hearts, flying maneuvers and the magic of existence. They ate, drank, paused to greet who ever walked into the pub and participated in songs.

After he finished his second stein of his favorite drink, Vincent stood up and bid his farewells saying, “I’m sleepy, I think I’ll go home now.”

A few of his friends didn’t want to lose his company just yet and tried talking him into staying awhile but he insisted on leaving saying, “No I can’t, or I mean I really don’t care to stay any longer. There are a couple of people I have been spying on for a twist of the sun, and I think tomorrow might be the correct time for them to fall in love. They will be riding ponies together in the early morning!”

Eventually they all said their good-byes and Vincent walked to the door, picked up his

lance and waddled out onto the street. Without wasting any time he flapped his powerful wings and took to the night sky. His eyes were drooping and he couldn't wait to get to sleep.

## 2

Vincent landed at his front door, nearly a story off the ground, wiped his bare feet then walked into his unlit home. Firstly, he placed his lance on the mantle over his fireplace. The fireplace was already stuffed with kindling and wood and all he did was blow on it to light the flame. The fire light glowed throughout his home illuminating the equivalent to a small museum's worth of paintings, sculptures, jewels and fine pottery.

Vincent's home was built around a very tall tree. Inside there were lanterns on his walls and candles on his tables. Beautiful rugs spread across the floor designed with imaginative colors and patterns. The windows were all circles, paned with glass and divided in fourths by wooden crosses. Elegant drapes and curtains hung over them. The roof was covered in straw and a crooked brick chimney stair-stepped its way up into the starry sky. Everything in his house, including the house itself, was a gift of thanks from various people Vincent had helped to fall in love.

The tree had thick branches that extended in all directions. They stopped abruptly when reaching a wall or the ceiling. In Vincent's mind it resembled a kaleidoscope, especially with the flickering light of the fire that was now radiating some needed heat. He looked up and thought how wonderful it was living inside a kaleidoscope.

Feeling satisfied the fire would heat his home for the rest of the night, Vincent flew up and perched himself on one of the thicker, lower branches. He pulled a cork out of the bottom of a cut vine. Water began dripping from it. He wetted his hands and unintentionally purred as he groomed his wings. He grabbed a flat piece of wood fashioned after a dragonfly's wing and scrapped his teeth and tongue clean. When he finished he flapped over to another branch that was close to the ceiling. There he planted his feet into a chunk of soft moss, squatted down, wiggled his butt, folded his wings around himself and went to sleep.

When morning came a ray of light found its way through one of the windows and splashed its warmth on Vincent's wings, lifting him gently from the dream world. He blinked and yawned and smiled then slipped off his perch. His wings popped open like an umbrella and he floated smoothly to the floor.

He sleepily tick-tocked his stiff legs to the back door and gathered an armful of firewood from his back porch and placed it in his fireplace to be burned in the evening. Yawning, stretching, and scratching he waddled over to the front door. There he found a cherub sized basket full of bananas, berries, nuts and fresh bread with honey and jam waiting to be spread. Sitting outside he ate, enjoying the colors bouncing off the clouds. He finished his food and washed it down with some freshly squeezed orange juice. The breakfast was all compliments of Susan Milford, formerly known as the Widow Charily; that is until Vincent ran his lance up through farmer Milford's straw ass and into his heart. This was Susan's way of saying thanks.

If it wasn't Susan climbing the ladder up to Vincent's porch to deliver food it was some other appreciative soul, on most days. Occasionally he would have to find breakfast on his own, which was no problem. On these rare days he would gather a couple of eggs off the chickens that pecked around his home and milk the goat that grazed under the tree.

Because he had juice, Vincent didn't have to milk the goat on this particular morning but he didn't want to ignore his friend. He flew over and played with his bearded pal cooing and laughing and swooping down close enough to drag his hand over the goat's horns and fur. Vincent touched down and gave the goat a big kiss on the mouth before saying, "You are a good goat. Have a good day friend." He went back inside and before grabbing his lance he looked at it with awe and admiration. Together they embarked on another day of work.

Vincent flapped his wings in the nonchalant way cherubs do and slipped from the World of Myth into the Realm of Mortals. Cherubs could create passages between worlds whenever and wherever they wanted with just a thought. He passed through the blue sky on his way toward a field he suspected would soon hold two young potentials, and he wanted to arrive before they did. It didn't take long for his wings to propel his chubby

body to the meadow.

The field was blanketed with Cyprus trees and knee high strands of wheat that bent like ocean waves with the wind. A stream snaked its way lazily through the yellow meadow and dirt paths separated the wheat from the trees. These were the paths where people walked and rode their horses. Like a swimmer treading water, Vincent held his spot in the clouded skies with his eyes pinned to the dirt trail. He got excited for a moment when saw a man and his two sons emerging from behind a row of heavily foliated trees, but they were there only to work and didn't put out the vibration of possible love. Vincent returned his attention toward the riding path.

Time rippled. He spied his prey and instinctively tightened his grip over his lance.

The two potential clients rode their ponies next to a stream smiling at one another, and flirting as young people on horseback do. Vincent did not move from his position in the sky. He let his anticipation build. Anxious as he was, he couldn't help but to love every moment of it. The young riders found a spot they both liked and dismounted. They sat next to one another with their bare feet scarcely touching, that way both of them could pretend they didn't realize there was contact...if the other person said something.

What their conversation was about, couldn't be any less interesting to Vincent. It wasn't the words people spoke that made a cherub act. None of the old trite lines like, "You're a really special person, and I think you're wonderful," or, "I really like you, do you want to kiss?" would send a cherub into action. It was instead the openings in the heart that would let loose a cherubs magic.

If their hearts sing out with honest adoration for each other, a vibration will pulse up through the sky into the heavens where cherub ears can hear. This vibration is the language of hearts and souls. If a cherub receives the chimes and they ring true, it will bring forth that cherub's talent. Today the language of the heart was spoken between the two youngsters, and it was true. Vincent heard those special vibrations and tingles shot up his spine.

Energy pulsed into his wings as he ascended higher into the sky. When he achieved an altitude adequate to achieve terminal velocity he began his approach. He spied his prey,

grimaced then tucked his wings. His cheeks jiggled and his eyelids lifted with the force of the wind as he descended. His hair pulled against his scalp as his speed increased. His wings vibrated under the tremendous velocity before their might leveled his trajectory from straight down to skimming directly over the tops of the wheatgrass. Their golden shafts bowed as he sped over them leaving behind a V shaped golden wake. The uneasy feeling of jubilation danced through his soul when he held out his lance aiming the tip towards the young man's left side.

As if being directed by the goddess of love herself the boy shifted his weight. His forearm lay flush on the ground and his chest and face were now mirroring his female companions. She turned toward him. A quick moving Vincent shifted his hold on the lance. His lips curled away from his teeth. His knuckles were white. Then the supersonic hunter was upon his prey and his aim as always, was perfect.

The tip of the lance began its penetration in the middle of the kid's back. The sharp point pierced through the skin and continued to burrow rapidly into his guts forcing the young man's chest to buck forward. His arms flailed and splashed to his backside as if they were wings of his own. Surprise reigned king in the boy's eyes while Vincent's reflected nothing but uninhibited pleasure. The rapid velocity of the cherub and his lance threw the man forward smashing him into his female companion. Their heads sounded hollow when they collided. Vincent's momentum kept the lance running through. It entered the woman's chest, just under her left breast. Her eyes popped wide open and her tongue flung out accompanied by a dry hollow sound as all the air was knocked out from her lungs. When the tip of the lance exposed itself from the woman's back, Vincent let go, twisted his weight and spiraled, avoiding the pierced victims. The entire incident only took only a fraction of a second.

The cherub was still moving with exceptional speed, and it took a great deal of wing strength to pull-up avoiding the trees in front of his line of flight. He shot straight up; parallel with a mighty Oak then arched his back and wings barely avoiding some of the horizontal branches. With his belly facing the sky he tilted his head back and looked at the two on the ground. They were impaled together kicking and grunting in agony. He

began laughing and cooing, clapping his hands and kicking his feet. The satisfaction was almost too much for the little guy to handle.

The newly shish kebabed couple on the ground were in too much pain to open their eyes, or continue groaning for long. After a bit all they could manage was to flex every muscle in their bodies with all their might and hope the pain would end. Vincent completed his loop-da-loop and touched down a step away from the handle of his lance. He grabbed hold with both hands and by running backwards slipped his weapon of love out of the brand new couple. It came out easily, much more easily than he had suspected. Vincent tumbled backwards into a crooked somersault through the wheat. The lance arched through the air then stuck in the ground. It bent back and forth under its own weight. Gleaming in the sun the lance showed no signs of blood; it was completely unsoiled from the impaling.

With the pain suddenly gone the two soon to be lovers found themselves in each other's arms, compliments of Vincent's patented two-in-one-special. They opened their eyes, looked at one another, closed them and began to kiss. It was a sloppy unpracticed kiss but they didn't care much. They were both officially crazy in love now. Vincent stood up. His eyes weren't able to see over the wheat, so he climbed his lance and looked at the wonders he had created. He shouted out, "Kooka looca," as he flew into the sky.

Vincent was hungry and decided to head for the foot hills of Mountain Hope where the Blue Peaches were ripe and squirting up out of the ground. Along the way he spotted a middle age woman with a pretty face looking at a young man with low self-esteem. He heard what she was feeling and read the heart of the man with his head slumped toward the ground as he walked. Vincent swooped down and poked him in the butt. Such a mild abrasion would only last a few days, but he deemed it a good thing for both of them to share. He then continued his flight.

Melca took the biggest bite he could manage from a peach that was nearly too big to hold, when his eye spotted a black dot in the sky. The dot grew bigger as the peach squished, squeaked and squirted in between his choppers. He recognized Vincent by the way he flew. He looked like the silhouette of a fat angel. Melca giggled at the thought

and some juice escaped into his lungs. He was coughing while trying to keep his watery eyes on his friend who was now descending from the heavens. He couldn't help but to laugh again.

With a soft-footed touch Vincent landed looking like a graceful fat kid tippy-toeing across a balance beam. Vincent shouted "Kooka looca!" Melca tried shouting out his hello through his coughing fit but only managed to raise a hand with complete success. His words came out in an unrecognizable garble.

Vincent looked around admiring and laughing as the peaches popped out of the ground making farting sound. He took his time studying the fruit, found one he liked and then started eating next to his friend. Melca had stopped coughing, swallowed his fresh mouthful and said, "Good peach." Vincent nodded his head but said nothing. His mouth was too busy to be interrupted with conversation.

In a little while their faces, bellies, and chests were covered in excessive amounts of peach juice. They lay their flesh colored bodies on the dark green grass. One of them burped and they both sighed with satisfaction while staring up at the blue sky, now occupied with one lonely little cloud.

"How was your morning Vincent?"

"I shish kabobed some people next to a stream."

"No kidding, you managed to get both of them lined up?"

"Um-hum," replied Vincent with satisfaction.

"I spent most of the morning scouting, but I believe my afternoon should be most productive."

"Me too."

"Well, I'll see you later tonight in Calliba's Oasis right?"

"Oll korect," said Vincent and with that the friends parted ways.

### 3

Melca stood up and used two hands full of grass to wipe the juice from his face and belly. It was more of a smearing than a cleaning. He shifted his hips like a hoola-hooper

letting his boomerangs slap his thighs then shot off into the air shouting, “Blippety Zoom!” He headed straight for the lonely little cloud he had admired earlier.

He ascended quickly catching a warm updraft and positioned himself under the belly of the cloud then, he disappeared inside. There a million cold prickles of moisture stung his skin, essentially scraping him clean. With a poof, he exited out the other side and spun like a top to shed the water. He then slapped his hands together above his head, tucked his wings and dove down towards the ground at a fantastic speed before extending his wings and leveling out. Without flapping he rose back into the sky using the same warm updraft as before, laughing all the while. A flock of Tweeter birds was close by and he joined their V formation filling the last spot in the shorter of the two lines. Flapping his arms in time with his wings he whistled his best Tweeter bird impersonation and kept them company for a little while before twisting his spine and falling out of formation.

A few stories above the ground he leveled out and rapidly approached a swimming hole. Water splashed under the excitement of a bunch of rowdy kids and a few adult chaperones. He landed on a tree branch perfectly suited for a cherub on the prowl.

Off in the distance he smelled prey. In the deeper end of the pond, far away from the shore, swam an energetic young man. He chased a young woman who would be screaming for her life if she wasn't completely focused on using all her breath to swim. Furiously she kicked her legs and paddled her arms attempting to outdistance the boy, but he was much too strong. He caught her foot with an outstretched hand and yanked her underwater. The girl surfaced choking and coughing. The boy laughed but not as hard as Melca. Seeing her hacking up water and pleading for the boy to stop wasn't what tickled his fancy. It was the anticipation of what was to come next that sent him into a laughing fit. He laughed so hard he lost his balance and fell from the tree.

Again the boy pulled the girl under water and again she surfaced begging for him to stop, but he couldn't. He couldn't control himself. He was touching something he didn't understand. He was caressing the surface of an unknown desire, so soft, so smooth, so imperialistic on his psyche that he couldn't have stopped even if he gained back the senses that were now numb to him. And so he pulled again on this thing of beauty, and pulled

again on this being whom he had known since they were small children swinging off the rope into the water, splashing each other as kids, playing, but not like this, not like now.

As Melca was rolling around in the bushes and laughing, the boy tugged again at the foot of the girl, now desperately gasping for air. Again she went underwater. Again she came up coughing and choking. Some of the adults on shore who were mainly there to lifeguard the younger children took notice and started shouting at him to stop, but he couldn't hear them. He was uncontrollably hypnotized.

He tugged again but this time, the girl did not come up.

Melca caught his breath and stood.

The boy arose from his hypnotic state and found himself alone. The reality of the situation was clear to him for the first time. He stopped smiling and dove.

Melca licked his thumb and forefinger before grabbing the boomerang off his right hip. The pond was turbulent. Parents on shore shouted. Children oblivious to the situation screamed in play. The wind howled. Only Melca was calm, thoroughly engrossed in the ethereal waves of fetal love. He wound up by extending his left arm and left leg and cocking the boomerang behind his right ear. When the boy surfaced with the coughing girl he snapped his hips and let go. The boomerang whistled towards them. The girl coughed and gasped and gagged before regained her composure. She looked at the boy with anger, wanting to hit him, yell at him, slap him or something but she was weak and scared and it showed in her eyes. The boy saw the fear and instantly regretted what pain he had caused her and in that moment the boomerang struck his heart. The jolt visibly bumped both of them. In that moment the girl saw the look in his eyes change and now it was he who was sinking in more ways than one.

She tread water and watched as he fell further and further from the waters surface. She watched him as he descended and reveled in the anguish he was obviously suffering, but before his eyes disappeared into the murk completely, she was hit with a boomerang of her own. The pain was astounding.

She found herself underneath the surface of the water yet again, only this time she was not alone. This time she had a companion. They sank together, staring each other in they

eye, smiling, the pain of the boomerangs forgotten. The sinking and ever increasing coldness of the water was forgotten. Even the need for air was forgotten.

They continued staring at each other as two adults swam each of them to shore. Melca retrieved his boomerangs while they were being attended to, the girl in a caressing manner and the boy in a harsher method. Neither took their smiling eyes off one another.

#### 4

Soaring up into the sky Melca cackled while performing a massive loop-da-loop to begin his journey towards a neighboring town. His mind as always wandered, into the past and towards the future but always into the hearts of victims he might soon split open. He was so caught up in his imagination that he failed to notice the stalker flying above him.

Melca's daydreaming was cut short. Some dive-bomber had swooped above him, close enough to temporarily straighten his curly hair.

"Oh great heavens!" he blurted out. Goose bumps molded his skin into the texture of an avocado. His wings stuttered. A fearsome chill cocooned his body. Adrenaline raced from the top of his brow to the cuticles of his toenails.

After collecting himself he began scanning the sky for the force that so rudely took him from his fantasies. He saw nothing then, whoosh! He was bombed yet again, this time from behind. The force of the wind pushed him into multiple summersaults as he hollered, "Ahhhhhhh!"

When he stopped rolling he luckily caught a glimpse of his assailant. He flapped his wings as hard as he could in pursuit but the aggressor was too far gone for him to catch. Luckily the dive-bomber was turning around for another pass.

Melca swooshed into a smeary cloud and hovered there in its cover, waiting. He spied his assailant scanning the area, looking to make another dive-bomb. The boomerang master focused on his attacker. Before the dive-bomber passed by, Melca took off hard, in the same direction as his assailant, still under the cover of the cloud.

Out from the white vapors Melca emerged, directly behind the dive-bomber. The

hunter was now the hunted. The boomerang guru reached out and grabbed the pinkie toe of the dive-bomber and tugged.

“Eeeeeeeeeeeee!” The owner of the toe squealed pressing his flexed arms to his sides. Melca yelped with giddy delight. They slowed their flight and laughed with one another. Between winded breaths Melca spat out, “Boy...oh boy...did you scare me.” His face was red from laughing.

“I knew I would. When I spotted you I just couldn’t resist.”

“Did you see me hiding in the cloud as you went by for your third pass?” asked Melca.

“No. I was looking everywhere, but never saw you,” said the dive-bomber.

“Where are you flying to?”

“Over there I think, to that town.”

“Well, I wasn’t going anywhere in particular. Would you like some company?”

“I would love some.”

Melca smiled big and honestly to his friend Cupid the dive-bomber. They had been friends since the creator fashioned their species. All cherubs were friends and close, but the relationship between Melca and Cupid was something more. They thought like each other, could sometimes complete each other’s ideas and sentences. It was the effortless relationship shared between best friends.

Side by side they flew through blue skies then into a cloud where after a few moments of colorless flight they punched through the other side and focused their attention on the town below.

As they descended their eyes widened and giddiness peppered their skin. They each landed on a rounded wooden log sticking upright out of the ground, part of a pig pen. The oinking pigs inside the pen were covered in black mud. Outside of the pen the townsfolk were covered in smiles and spilled mead. Excessive merriment and song seemed to be the theme of the day. A celebration was afoot and every adult in town was blistered with exquisite happiness. The town’s people were drunk, most of them were very drunk. They were singing, dancing, and laughing while slurring their words and bumping into each

other.

Perched like a couple of friendly gargoyles, the cherubs reclaimed their breath. With a simple glimpse toward one another they acknowledged a single thought, one idea they both shared. They loved festivals. All cherubs loved festivals. With merriment in the air and alcohol in the blood stream, the chances for love to occur increased dramatically. To the cherubs alcohol was nothing shy of magic; magic that mortals had access to. Magic that has the power to relinquish inhibition, fear, harsh judgements of ones self and it just so happens to make everyone a great dancer.

The cherub's smiles and eyes grew until their faces could stretch no more. They nearly started dancing themselves but the waves of etherial energy demanded their attention. Having teamed up before and not needing to converse through words, they armed themselves. Cupid shifted his quiver and drew, placing an arrow on the forefinger of his outstretched hand. The wood of the shaft was cool and smooth as he drew it back. Melca stood armed with a single boomerang cocked behind his head. With one leg raised up he looked like a baseball pitcher on the mound.

Barely able to contain their glee the friends unleashed their weapons together. Melca's boomerang whistled. Cupid's arrow was gone in the blink of an eye and tasted the flesh of their first victim. An old man dancing with a slightly younger woman took an arrow through the chest and started dancing like he had never danced before. The woman, rather impressed with his vigor, tried mimicking his open mouthed wince and staggering new foot work but was interrupted. She was suddenly doing a jig of her own as Melca's boomerang lodged itself in her back. She screamed and reached for it but could not manage. They both moved in mysterious ways with and against one another.

The two friends could have laughed as cherubs so easily do, but they were studious professionals and too engrossed in their serious work to be distracted. Cupid drew another arrow and Melca unharnessed his second boomerang. They exchanged a quick glance and nod. Cupid fired. This time a middle aged widow fell out of the conga-line as if gravity had quadrupled. The man who delivered her firewood stepped out to help and Melca with his anticipatory eye threw his boomerang in a wide loping arc avoiding the crowd.

He took off and before his perfect throw struck his target he had reclaimed the first boomerang. He flew straight up into the air and pointed down. Cupid saw and nodded. They combined yet again for another one two combo. All in all six couples fell in love at that party.

After retrieving his arrows, a winded Cupid returned to the pig pin saying, “Ha ha ha... Whoa! Wow! Well, we showed them.”

“You,” sighed Melca, “whoa boy, that felt mighty.”

“That was a jolly good time,” sang Cupid and continued with, “Ohhhhhh...yes... a slash-slash here, a plunge-plunge there and a couple of la-de-da’s, that’s how the cherubs, lay down love, whenever there is the cause.”

Melca laughed then sang, “Ouch-ouch here, screams over there, and a couple of boo-hoo-hoo’s, that’s how we inflict, the love sick tick, in the merry ol’ land of fools.”

They both giggled then, after scanning over the results of their labor both of them grabbed their bellies and really started laughing. A man and a woman stood with their arms locked in a private huddle leaning against one another for balance. No words, only a bit of slobber escaped their mouths. Cupid pointed and was barely able to chuckle out, “Look at that one.” He was aiming his unsteady finger towards a lady flopping around like a dying fish caged on shore; legs bucking, chin snapping, it was too much for the two of them to handle. Their knees weakened and they toppled to the ground kicking and laughing so hard it was difficult to see, but they managed. Through watery eyes they saw a man get his legs vertical, but his head and arms remained flat on the ground. The two friends laughed themselves to silent convulsions. Few combinations were funnier than love and alcohol.

After they had laughed themselves into exhaustion, they confirmed a rendezvous later that evening in Calliba’s Oasis, then the two friends parted ways.

## 5

Cupid flew in the direction of a swamp containing a single house. He could have easily gotten there flying high but he chose a route that led him through an old apple orchard

whose twisted limbs left little room for birds to pass through, much less a cherub. Being ancient and having logged unthinkable hours of flight, he skillfully maneuvered through the clogged growth at an incredible pace weaving a tight line through tiny gaps of tree trunks and fallen branches. There were a few exceptionally athletic birds in the world that were able to fly as well as he, but no other cherub possessed his level of skill.

Exiting the orchard at top speed he dove over a cliff into a rocky ravine whooshing past boulders and pillars of stone. The ravine led to a river that he followed upstream into the swamp full of tall trees and fallen logs covered in velvet green carpets of moss and flowers. The swamp held snakes and alligators and long armed howler monkeys that whispered in eerie tones. There were an assortment of birds, hairy sloths and lizards amongst countless frogs filling the air with rapping belches. There was also Compa.

Compa was two and a half foot tall man that liked to walk on stilts in the cover of the deep swamp. He did this for two reasons. One, because it was fun and two, because he didn't want to be spotted by his tribe and ridiculed for wanting to be tall. He, like the rest of his tribe, was a dwarf living in the mortal world and Cupid knew that dwarfs were mythical folk expelled from the mythical world for sins long ago forgotten. But Cupid was not here for Compa. Cupid was here for a woman by the name of Jacquelyn Pasture although he never referred to her as Jacquelyn. He liked to call her the Dancer. She was the only oddity in his world. He was drawn to her years ago as the ethereal waves she emitted were the strangest he had ever encountered. He could not read them. Her heart was a complete mystery to him.

When Cupid arrived at her home he saw the Dancer reclining outside in a hammock picking away on a ukulele and sunning her teeth because she knew the sun is the secret to a white smile. He perched himself on a nearby tree branch and listened.

The strings of her instrument vibrated with lullaby softness filling the swamp. At first Cupid heard only Jacquelyn's ukulele but as he continued to listen, other sounds swept into his ears. He took notice of the wind and the water gently slapping against the base of trees. Crickets chirped and song birds sang their high pitched melodies against the vibrating wings of insects. It wasn't just the Dancer playing a song he realized, it was the entire

swamp.

Cupid rocked back and forth on his branch with the movements of the song. Without him knowing it, he too was now part of the symphony; creating a creaking moan with the movement of the branch.

Somewhere from the far off background a new sound began to emerge. It would have been impossible to hear, except for the pauses Jacquelyn started mixing in with her picking. She would pause and in those pauses Cupid began to hear a sloshing sound. The crickets would follow, the birds would change their high pitch accents slightly, then they would all come together jamming again, only to pause a moment later and repeat.

The rhythms quickened becoming more intense as the alien sloshing got louder and the power of the music grew and swelled and pulsated until the sloshing was right on top of them. Boom! The music swayed: thundering, pushing, moving and sliding.

Compa had been making his daily laps through the shelter of the swamp. The stilts he wore weren't just for walking above the water, or feeling tall, they were a gateway into his imagination. Today he was pretending a family lived inside his head, like it was a living room, and they peered out at the world through his eyes. He approached a fallen log and imagined the oldest daughter say, "Oh no Papa! Our gigantic man we live in will never be able to step over that log. It is far too big. We are all going to be stuck!"

As he stepped over the obstacle the father responded, "Do not worry my dear, he is more than capable of passing over such obstacles."

"Ohhhhh," swooned the daughter, "look at how long his legs are! I think we are going to make it! It's incredible! He's so tall. He stepped over the fallen log with ease. We'll never be in danger with this tall capable host. Oh isn't he the greatest. I think I'm in love!"

He giggled at this thought.

Off in the distance he heard the strumming of the ukulele. His imagination opened again, this time visualizing a half-harp half-lady; a harp-lady, playing a song for her rescuer's ears to follow. The echo in the trees sent him in zigzagging patterns here and there with thoughts of rescuing his harp-lady from her evil captors. He thought to himself, *it is*

*a good thing I am so tall or I would never reach her in time.* His chin and chest were sticking out a little farther than was natural as he mimicked what he thought a champion looked like.

The fantasy became more alive as he got closer to his destination. The music grew louder and faster. His steps matched the beat, note for note. The music and his imagination surged and pulsated ever greater as he advanced. At last he caught sight of the castle where the harp-lady was being held. He saw his enchanted harp-lady clearly. Except for her blurry hands she was lying perfectly still. Her eyes were closed and her lips were drawn back exposing a terrific smile. He abandoned his stilts where the swamp met her deck. With a splash, twang, buzz, and chirp, the song ended.

“I am here to save you Harp-lady. Now tell me where your captors are so I may dispose of them,” said Compa striking the pose of a fencer.

“They are inside and asleep,” said Jacquelyn sitting up from her hammock and showing terrific delight. “My strumming has rendered them weak with sleepiness. If you hurry they should be easy prey.”

Wasting no time Compa picked up a fork and spoon and stormed into the castle where he successfully defeated the evil captors. He returned with a chest puffed out and his head held high. “Fear not Harp-lady, I have done away with those menacing fools. It was not easy. They were very strong but not as strong as me. You are free to do as you will.”

Jacquelyn smiled and laughed, “Compa, your imagination is too wonderful. I’m so delighted to see you. But it is strange, you have never visited me so late in the day.”

“How could I stay away? The music you and the birds were playing was wonderful.”

“Your splashing added quite a bit of action to the song.”

“Of course it did. Those stilts are magic,” he said shining back on them with love.

“Could you hear the birds and crickets?” she asked more enthusiastically.

“Most of the time, but my splashing covered up some of the song, and a big fat bumble-bee buzzed close to my head, but I could hear the birds and crickets most of the time. I heard one bird better than the rest. She had a very loud voice.”

“Yes,” agreed Jacquelyn, “she does have talent.” She stood up and set her ukulele

against a tree growing through her deck then walked inside, grabbed a pitcher of sun tea and a platter of swirled cinnamon bread and offered them to her friend.

“Thank you,” he said. “I didn’t realize it but I’m famished.”

They both took a bite and chased it down with a gulp.

“I’m so happy you live out here. You not only give me my most lovely friendship but food and rest when I need it.”

“I love it when you come by Compa. After all, you are my only visitor.”

“That’s not surprising since it would be impossible for anyone else to know you are here. Why do you live out here all alone anyway?”

“It is nothing more than a habit these days. I originally built this house for protection. I was married to a man that gave me such a fright I feared that after I left him he would hunt me down and do something dreadful. So I fled and found myself here. Now I can’t imagine leaving.”

“But don’t you ever wish to dance again? I know things were shaky for you as a kid, with the others making fun of you and all, but you are so good. And from the stories you have told me, I’m not the only one who thinks it.”

“I sill dance, but these days I dance for myself and that is more than enough to satisfy.”

Compa took another bite then asked, “Was it fun being a dancer?” Jacquelyn looked at him queerly. “I mean having that as your work must have been magnificent, right?”

Jacquelyn sat silent for a moment looking down at her feet, remembering. Compa took another sip of his drink and regretted asking. She then grinned and looking back at him said, “It was the most wonderful work in the world.”

He breathed out satisfied.

Not wanting to dwell on her dancing any further she redirected the question to Compa and asked, “What work in this fine world would you most want to do?”

“I know what work I don’t want to do.”

“Oh, what’s that?”

“I don’t want to do what my father does,” he said softly as if ashamed.

“What does your father do?” asked Jacquelyn.

“I don’t want to say.”

Jacquelyn sat quietly looking at Compa with soft eyes. After a couple more nibbles off his bread he said, “It’s what my family has done for centuries. My father, his father, and his father before him have all…” he trailed off.

Jacquelyn sat confused. “What?”

“Let’s just say,” said Compa with a stern look, “they dabble in fairies, and I want no part of it.”

Jacquelyn burst out laughing believing him to be joking. Compa on the other hand held a straight face but gave way to a smile before she could see.

“Oh tall sir,” continued Jacquelyn on the note of their former game, “where does a hero of your size come from?”

Compa perked up and exclaimed, “I come from the Land of the Lengthy. We are tall …yes. We can walk very fast … yes. These things are true of me and my tribe but, there is a terrible falsehood surrounding us.”

“Oh my, what so ever are you talking about?” she asked playfully.

“Silence! I am revealing the truth about size.”

“Oh magnificent,” she said locking her fingers under her chin in anticipation. “One of those great legs, do tell.”

“Me and those who are very tall are not gifted when it comes to…let’s say…an intimate setting with a female.” He said this parading around with a finger above his head as if he were a great philosopher. “There aren’t beds or sofas long enough to suit our long bodies. And believe me, there isn’t a woman alive that can handle our…ourselves,” he drawled looking down at his crotch.

“What are you saying exactly, knowledgeable sir?”

“When it comes to the act of love, a beautiful woman such as yourself needs to find a shorter man; one with a…big heart.”

She laughed, “You’re such a dork.”

“I’m about the right size to be a dork but I can assure you I am not a talking whale pe-

nis,” and they both laughed at that.

The spoken word of humans sometimes confused Cupid, but laughter is always understood and contagious. He giggled along with them. Cupid had enjoyed Jacquelyn’s songs and dances many times before, but today was the first time he had ever witnessed her in the company of another. Obviously she and Compa knew each other for quite some time but Cupid had never seen him before.

He pondered as best a cherub can do while the two companions continued talking about music, art, and their pasts. He was confused as to what action if any to take. He could not read the Dancer’s ethereal waves but he was a cherub, and he was use to doing what cherubs do. So the thought of sinking an arrow into her chest was perfectly natural. Her little companion was certainly willing to receive love, that was easy to see, but never before had he put an arrow into the heart of someone he could not read. It was a conundrum no cherub was equipped to face. They were beings incapable of logical reasoning or problem solving of any kind. They were entities created to do one thing, and it was not critical thinking.

Emotions and desire compelled him to act.

He reached behind his back he drew an arrow while vaguely hearing something about a moat surrounding a castle and fleeing with a daughter in the night, but paid the words no mind. He ducked his head and freed his bow from his neck, slid the arrow into position, pulled back and aimed. The bow string twanged. His aim as always was true however the arrow, did not find purchase. To his disbelief it ricocheted.

It would have been less enigmatic to watch a chicken hatch from the moon, then fall to the earth and start eating people. Cupid stared slack jawed at his arrow laying next to the Dancer in disbelief. This was an impossibility; an incomprehensible, unfathomable possibility. He was incapable of movement for a long, frozen moment.

Dingy orange from the setting sun reflected off darkening waters before Cupid stopped staring at the Dancer in disbelief. His stomach rumbled. As he flew off with thoughts of drink and food he heard, “What was his name?”

“Who?”

“Your husband, the man that frightened you so.”

“Walter, his name was Walter.”

## 6

Inside of Calliba’s Oasis, the piano was being played, pints were being served and the crowd shouted out, “Cupid!” as he pushed through the swinging doors. Cupid jumped up and flapped his wings once to assist in his vertical bound, smiled and waved enthusiastically with both hands towards all occupants inside the waterhole then gently glided towards the floor. The incident between him and the Dancer felt like a dream now, not forgotten but suppressed.

He touched back down in typical superhero fashion with his chest out, chin held high, buttocks flexed, and arms cocked back like the last of the gunslingers ready to draw. The crowd laughed but none so loud as Judy of the Woods. Judy, the nine foot tall sasquatch was bent over and laughing so hard that she hacked out a fur ball.

“Hey baby,” she said with a huge smile revealing all four of her teeth, “come over here and give mama a hug.” Judy was from the woods as her name implied and her parents were from the deep woods. Nobody was sure if her parents were closely related or if they were just cousins but one thing was clear, Judy was the sweetest, kindest and slowest sasquatch in these parts.

“Oh Judy,” he said fluttering his eyes as he waddled over to her with his arms open wide, “wrap those big hairy arms around your little love maker and give me a kiss.”

Her hands were huge. She held him as if he were a sandwich. Her moist lips covered him from his chin to his temple and the sucking sound her kiss created hurt his ears a little, but he kept on smiling. She then cradled her little “man-bird” with one arm and swung him gently back and forth.

“Did you work hard today or were you hardly working?” she asked in typical fashion.

“Judy of the Woods,” said Cupid, “you know I don’t work, I pleasure. And as for how much I did today, I would say it was...nearly enough.”

“You look so cute in my arm, like a little hairless baby bird. Coochie coo,” she said

tickling his chin.

“Oh stop it you love queen you,” he said pushing the finger away.

Conversation wasn't a strong point for Judy. She put him on the ground with a touch of a loving mother, brushed her hand through his hair in an attempt to restore it to its previous condition and said, “You look so cute little man-bird.”

“I'm going to get some soup Judy of the Woods. I'll see you again, I'm sure,” said Cupid. Then Judy smiled and went on her way.

Cupid weeble-wobbled his way over to the tall side of the bar where Francos was serving up fish and bread to a man who wore long flowing robes, a crown of thorns and smelled like flowers. Cupid jumped up and grabbed the counter top and proceeded to do a pull-up, getting his eyes and nose above the wood framing the bar.

Francos smirked saying, “My goodness little Cupid, all this exercise and fer what? Ya know as well as I, cherubs can-na compete in the Olympics. It would be my guess that all this exercise is ta, impress a girl?”

Cupid laughed.

“Ya know,” continued Francos, “I once knew a mermaid whose scales would curl up at the mere sight of a big, bul-ky, mea-ty strong shouldered cherub such as yer self. Is she in here tonight I wonder?” He looked around wildly.

“Speaking of meaty shoulders,” grunted Cupid through strained tendons and veins in his neck. “What's the soup of tonight?”

“Three fingered camel toe,” he said. “I haven't served it in a moons rotation and with the temperature bein so cool I thought tonight would be the right night to do it.”

Cupid's fingers had turned white and his face red. “Ugh,” he grunted, “I'll take one bowl, a few slices of bread and my usual pint please.”

“Ya got it Cupid, but hey—” Francos leaned his mouth close to Cupid's ear. “What are ya doin holdin onto the bar like that? Have ya gone mad?” His eyes ticktocked from side to side as he spoke.

“No,” squeaked from Cupid's mouth, “I just wanted to know...what it would be like... to be tall...and order from this side of the bar.”

“Orderin’s orderin, no matter what part of the bar ya do it from, besides I’d rather be able ta fly than be tall.”

Cupid let go and used his wings to hover. “It was just a thought. I saw a short man that wanted to be tall today.”

“So what do you think about being tall?” asked Francos holding out a stein of mead.

“It’s a lot of work,” said Cupid holding out his hand and grabbing hold of the stein’s handle. “Thanks.”

“Maybe it’s a lot of work for people who were na meant to be tall,” Francos said lifting an eyebrow and pushing out his bottom lip. Cupid took a sip and nodded his head.

“Yep, that sounds about right. Are all bartenders as smart as you?”

“You’re a sweat talker with your smooth words my friend,” he said grinning and fluttering his eyelashes.

The crowd in the bar shouted out, “Greailud! Hello! Welcome! Heeya-woohoos!”

“Excuse me Cupid, business calls, I’ll bring ya soup when the bread is done warming. How’s that sound my friend?”

“Whatever you say Francos.”

Francos walked over to the recently defeated chess champion Greailud and made him feel as welcome as anyone could. In this case it was a shot of grain alcohol. Cupid softened his feathers and dropped to the floor without spilling a bead of his beverage. He glanced over and saw a few of his kin talking and laughing. He moseyed towards them like a bowlegged cowboy that had ridden horseback for a solid week. His wings tickled a few legs and arms along the way including one of the recently blinded cyclops.

The Oasis was busy and the noise level was large, but through it all cut a deafening voice from behind him. “Hey little feller, come speak with me for a moment please.” Cupid’s back stiffened with surprise. He turned around to see a very large cyclops with a large black eyepatch covering his eye. A single eye in the center of a face looks natural of course, but this eyepatch-wearing cyclops took the cherub by surprise. His face looked like some inexplicable frame encompassing a bottomless black hole. The sight was intoxicating to the little cherub who, in the back of his brain, couldn’t help but to see it as a

portal to...somewhere and all cherubs loved portals to anywhere, even in their off time.

“Are you talking to me?” asked Cupid reflexively. His attention fixated on the blackness of the eyepatch whose power held ninety-nine percent of his attention.

“I’m not for sure,” slurred the cyclops. “Who said that?”

“The little feller,” said Cupid bobbing back and forth in a muted trance, hypnotized by the black portal of the blind cyclops, who now sightless, more aptly filled the title of noclops or clopless.

“Yes, I am talking to you. Come over here please.”

Suddenly the thought that the eyepatch might be a special portal that showed itself once in a lifetime overwhelmed the cherub. He subconsciously stretched out his arms and hands towards the eyepatch and in a flash took to flight.

Cupid crashed into the eyepatch. The sound was horrible. A sloppy, squishing sound drilled its way into the noclops’s skull then, with a sickly echo bounced its way back out. The noclops erupted with pain. His hands swung up to his previously ruptured eyeball nearly crushing Cupid who had recovered quickly from the impact and was busy maneuvering his stein to catch the mead that had been jolted out. The energy from the impact sent the noclops tumbling over the back of his chair onto the floor.

“OH GOD THE PAIN!” shouted the noclops so loudly that everyone in the Oasis covered their ears.

After recovering most of his drink Cupid suddenly realized what he had done.

“Please...please,” he begged in-between screams. “Please don’t yell again. I’m here now.”

The Oasis had fallen completely silent. All eyes were fixed on the noclops, holding his face with his massive hands, curled up into a fetal position on the ground, struggling with the agony.

Luckily for the patrons inside, the race of cyclopes have a tremendous tolerances for pain. This one seemed to gain control over the agony after one explosive hollering session.

“All right, I’m here now,” repeated Cupid. “It’s the little feller and I can hear you just

fine.”

The noclops pawed the air looking for his chair. A troll and minotaur helped him back into a seated position. He sat crouched over, propping himself up with one arm and covering his face with the other hand. Blood and yellow pus seeped through his fingers. Cupid looked on feeling horrible. The Oasis remained silent.

“Did you fly into my eye just now?”

“Yes,” said Cupid. “I thought it might be a portal.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because it looks like a portal.”

“Oooh,” moaned the noclops. “How...how does it look like a portal?”

“It’s black,” said Cupid embarrassed. “It looks like a passageway.”

“I had better get a different colored eye-patch.”

“That’s an idea!” said Cupid genuinely excited over the thought. “Against that huge head of yours I would think it quite strange if I was the only one to think it was a portal. I’m really sorry I squished your eyeball.”

“It’s ok, it was already squished, besides you’re a cherub and everyone knows cherubs don’t mean to cause harm to anyone.” He bent further over in pain covering his face with both hands then continued. “What I wanted to ask you—” he trailed off.

Cupid took a substantial drink from his stein as the bleeding noclops began to snore. The patrons, now sure the situation was under control went back to their business of conversation and merriment. Finally Cupid asked loudly, “So what can I do for you?”

The noclops snapped out of his slumber and without missing a beat said, “Tell me something,” he said with a numb tongue, “what do you know about flying horses?”

“I’m not sure.” He thought for a bit then said with great confidence, “I know horses can’t fly without wings.”

The noclops lifted his head from his hands slightly frustrated and trying to gain clarity through his inebriated mind. It was known that cherubs lived in their own head space and it was sometimes difficult to communicate with them. “No, that’s not what I meant. A flying horse kicked me in my only eye. I was wondering if you knew where the flying hors-

es roamed or slept or where they might be.”

“I don’t know any flying horses personally,” Cupid answered honestly. “Why would you ask me, if I may ask you?”

“I asked because you’ve got wings, and those flying horses have wings. Thought maybe you winged creatures might pall around together.”

“Nope. Anyway, I’m sorry you lost your eye, but I know none of them, including the one that took your sight from you.”

“Thanks little feller.”

“That’s good enough for me,” said Cupid as he teeter-tottered away. Those in close vicinity to the loud speaking noclops were working their jaws up and down attempting to alleviate the ringing out of their ears. “That’s the way to do it,” approved Cupid nodding and smiling. Finally he made it over to the table where the cherubs resided.

“Kooka-looca brotherins,” Cupid said raising his stein as he sat. The six other cherubs raised their cups and clinked them together. Johan, the carrier of the torch, had it balanced upright in the middle of the table. Segfina was leaning back on his stool with his feet propped up on top the table. His helmet which he used to ram love into the hearts of men and women sat crooked upon his head. Logan, the wielder of the knives sat to his right, and Melmuse, a cherub who used a wire to strangle love into the hearts of mortals sat upright across the table next to Taciloch the hatchet master and Adalose the spear chucker.

Johan looked questioningly at Cupid. Though he had heard every word of the exchange between the noclops and Cupid, he was drunk, forgetful, and felt uneasy.

In a rapid beat he rattled off, “So did you to have a good conversation? Talk about anything important, or unimportant? Anything to do with me...Cupid?” He had a line of sweat building at the top of his brow.

“You couldn’t hear that?” asked Cupid pointing a thumb back at the noclops. There was no response other than an eager look in Johan’s eyes. “No, there was nothing about you,” said Cupid. Relief washed over Johan. His imagination burned as quickly as his torch.

Segfina who was still leaning back on his stool closed his eyes and drank deeply. His

adam's apple bobbed up and down like an elevator service delivering beer from the top floor to the bottom. His helmet slowly slipped from his head and would have hit the ground if not for his comrade sitting next to him. Melmuse saw the helmet slip off and nonchalantly caught it with his feet. The rest of the cherubs applauded and cheered the performance.

Segfina's dopey eyes opened when he heard the clapping and cheering. "What did I miss?" he said with a slurring lisp. More laughter climbed out of the cherubs.

"Does your head feel a little lighter than usual?" asked Taciloch.

"Yes...now that you mention it," said Segfina looking at his stein. "Wow! This is some fine brew." And with that the other cherubs spat out more laughter.

Segfina had a drunken confused look smeared over his numb and crooked mouth. Adalose gathered himself and said with watery eyes while pointing a finger, "Look behind you." Segfina cocked his head around the best he could to follow the pointing finger. He caught a glimpse of something shiny between Melmuse's feet before he lost his balance.

His legs jolted straight out and his arms started pin-wheeling while the tips of his wings vibrated against the top of his chair. Ever so slowly he fell backwards. The brown colored beer splashed out of his stein casting shadows across the ceiling refracting blue and orange light. Before he hit the ground, his head reunited with his helmet thanks to the quick moving feet of Melmuse and again the cherubs laughed.

Segfina lay flat on the floor with one pupil dilated more than the other. Not a single drop of his beer landed on the floor, instead it all had rainbowed over Johan's torch and splashed into Taciloch's lap.

Taciloch parted ways with his laughter and took up screaming instead. The shock from the cold beverage sent him off balance and he too fell backwards. His arms flailed out catching the shoulder of Adalose. Had Taciloch not been so fat and Adalose not been so skinny, they could have both stayed upright. After their collision with the floor they both started laughing again.

Segfina got back to his feet just in time to see his friends fall to the floor. He pointed a

finger and laughed. Up until that point the drunken little cherub had no idea what was happening. His head was full of the pops and whistles common with too much booze. The cherubs that hadn't lost their seats helped the others back to their chairs then they all sat and laughed until their aching stomach muscles refused any more.

"Well it's nice to see ya boys havin such a fine time this evening," said Francos holding Cupid's bowl of soup and buttered bread.

"Whoo my head feels like it's going to pop," said Johan wiping tears from his red cheeks.

"Well I tell ya," said Francos, "Ya have a face red enough ta be mistakin for the insides of the camel I used in this here soup. Here ya go Cupid, I hope ya like it." He handed it over as a mother would hand over mittens to her favorite child.

"Oh that smells good," said Cupid rubbing his hands together.

"May I use your towel there Francos?" said Taciloch pointing at a brown rag hanging from Francos's trousers. He used his other hand to point at his wet crotch.

"Pissin yerself?" said Francos. "Boys ya should-na laugh so hard. If it's pushin yer piss from yer bladder, ya gotta be squishin the rest of yer insides as well. Kidneys pushen against yer liver, an' heart, an' ribs ...AN' YER SPINE," he shouted. "Boys if ya laugh that hard yer runnin the risk of squishin yer stomach out of yer belly buttons. Laughin that hard...well, yer intestines could be forced out of yer bum hole!" He smiled and winked.

Even though their laughing muscles were exhausted, the cherubs laughed some more. Satisfied, Francos walked back towards the bar.

The sharp sounds of the piano got everyone's head bouncing, hands clapping and feet stomping. Steins were lifted and when the time was right everyone started singing. Creatures and legends entered and left the Oasis throughout the night. Songs were sang, brews were drank and at one point a phoenix ran rampant, screaming and clawing at everything in talons reach. It was just an ordinary evening at Caliba's Oasis.

# *A Toothless Epiphany*

One early morning, before the sun rose, the Tooth Fairy sat slumped, drooling as she listened to Sheri the Toad puzzle through various ideas of vengeance. She had already collected the worlds fallen teeth and was now able to relax and enjoy their intoxicating effects. Typically, if she finished work early, she liked to hang around other addicts; people under the spell of heroin, or cocaine or alcohol, but she found Sheri's addiction to revenge just as satiating. Her new friend was every bit as tortured a soul as any she had encountered. The Tooth Fairy enjoyed the company of anyone who could match her own anguish and despair.

While Sheri verbalized fantasies about skewering cherubs over an open flame and eating them as the others were forced to watch, the Tooth Fairy reached into her pouch of teeth and pulled a fresh one to replace another. After restoring her buzz to an acceptable level she mumbled, "How exactly are you going to capture all those cherubs? They aren't just going to line up and walk into a cage for you."

"That is true," sighed the toad. Then she smiled and looked down at her companion. "But I just so happen to know a master trapper."

"Who...who, who is that?" yawned the Tooth Fairy.

"Well, it is you my dear. Don't you recall, just a few days ago telling me about how you have to trap fairies for—" she trailed off. "Well, you didn't actually tell me why you trap fairies. Good gracious, do you eat them?"

"No, I don't eat them," said the Tooth Fairy in disgust.

The toad laughed with the idea of her little friend grinding helpless fairies between her mismatched teeth.

The Tooth Fairy continued, "I have to use them, for trade."

"Trade you say, oh well, I like the idea of you cannibalizing better than trading. You would make a far better cannibal than you would a trader, I'm sure."

"No thank you," she said, "cannibalism is disgusting. Fairies taste too much like glitter I suspect."

"Think about it, will you? And if you do decide to eat a fairy do stop by, I should love to see that."

“Speaking about trapping,” said the Tooth Fairy, wobbling as she stood, “I should go and check those traps before dawn. I may not have time tomorrow.”

She departed the toad with promises of future visits, minus any edible fairies, shortly before Porter popped back into the World of Myth.

He rejoiced at the portals functionality in a bare patch of the woods within ear shot of the Bluegreen stream, Sheri the Toad and Lady Luck. In this world of bizarre creatures Lady Luck was one of the most unusual. Other than her long black hair and purple dress, the lady’s features were undefinable as she glowed a bright yellow.

Ported forgot his elation. He forgot the portal and his adventure with Paul. Journeying to the Realm of Mortals was in itself extraordinary but to see Lady Luck for the first time in his life on the same night was overwhelming. He stared at her and realized she was here for a reason. The lady did not wander aimlessly. Her presence meant someone needed her. As he looked around he recognized it must him. He felt inclined to speak.

“It was lucky I didn’t come up into a tree or stone,” he said realizing the danger of traveling between the two worlds. “I had better be more careful. You might not be with me next time.”

The lady nodded at that. Then she began to flicker and moved side to side wildly. Her arms flared and her gown swished in a panicked dance and then she vanished before a mighty thud plopped onto the ground in her place.

Ported had been enveloped by Sheri’s monstrous shadow. She had tried to ambush Lady Luck, pin her to the ground and play an evil game, but luck would not exist around Sheri. Her very presence pushed luck away. Unfortunately her focus fell onto the boy.

“Very true my child,” said the toad batting her eyelashes and smiling at Porter who was falling backwards in nightmarish slow motion. “I may not be here next time and that, dear boy, would be a terrible shame for you.”

Porter scrambled backwards on the ground in a pathetically slow retreat until he bumped against a tree. He stared up at the monster.

The toad did not move. They shared silence. He wanted to ask who it was standing before him, but speaking seemed as impossible as disappearing. The toad adjusted her

posture.

“Just look at you boy,” said Sheri. “You are the filthiest child I have ever seen, and it seems you have a knack for appearing out of thin air.”

Upon that she smiled and Porter focused on her two discolored eyes. He pressed his head and neck into the bark of the tree and thought about the time it would take to scramble to his feet and start running.

“Now most creatures wouldn’t have a clue as to how a person might pop into existence out of thin air.” She thrust her face forward, stopping a fingers width away from Porter’s nose and said, “But I do!”

He remembered seeing this beast with his mother on a fishing trip maybe a week before. His mind raced: *What does the toad know? Has she been watching me? Does she know about the different worlds? Oh mercy the stench of her breath...I might puke. Can she somehow read my mind? Is she going to tell my mother? How fast is she? Is she going to hurt me? Should I run? Scream. Move!*

The thought of his mother initiated a reflexive response.

“My Mama said I’m not supposed to talk to you.”

With her face still pressing into his aura the toad began saturating Porter with her funky laden breath. “Now why would your mother say that I wonder? Has she ever spoken to me? Does she know me? Is she qualified to judge me with no information?” She paused theatrically. “These are important questions a child must begin to ask of their elders, especially when their elders are obviously wrong, but the most important question is this my child. Do you always do what your mother tells you to do?”

Sheri withdrew her face from Porter’s. Her features disappeared into a silhouette framed by half a moon. Her eyes, hair and smell lingered in his mind as he pondered her last question. *She knew*, he thought. Somehow this beast knew he had traveled into the Realm of Mortals. More importantly she knew his mother had forbid him to do so.

“You look scared boy.” With these words the toad paused and enjoyed the tangles of fear she had injected into the trembling child. Porter stared at the darkness where the beast’s face had recessed. The silence persisted. In those moments Porter suffered and the

toad devoured his suffering and digested it with her demented angle of joy.

Staring at the mud covered child Sheri realized her intensions had not been clear, even to herself. First the child popping up from the ground and then the glowing creature all somehow seemed like the world was handing her a couple of toys to play with and she instinctively pounced. But now there was only the child. Was he a thing to brutalize, an appetizer to warm up with before she stormed into the town of Cheese to take her vengeance?

Since her arrival to the Land of Myth Sheri had been weak. Adjusting to her new body had not been easy but she was stronger now and with that strength she wanted to hurt something and there just so happened to be a child before her. A defenseless child that could do nothing if she grabbed him and beat him, tortured him, swallowed him then vomited him back up and repeated. She delighted in the idea. A squeaky laugh escaped her.

She continued fantasizing down the logical path of action verses consequence. The people in the town of Cheese would go on high alert if a child went missing, so eating him was not an option. If she beat him to death they might find his body and go on the hunt for a murderer, unless she could make it look like a terrible fall or some other sort of tragic accident. She could dump his body into a distant pond if the beating went too far and an accident could not be faked, and perhaps they would not find him, but then he would be lost. They would search. They would hunt. They would find her and accuse her. She was new here and they would know. They would stop her before she could destroy the cherubs. She sighed at her rationalizations but took some joy in the consolation prize. Mental torture would have to suffice, for now. So she decided to play a game; a game she had played with her maids many times over, a game of friendship and betrayal.

She shifted to the side and allowed the moonlight to illuminate her physical form. She smiled and ended the silence in an exaggeratedly pleasant voice, "Don't worry my boy, though other's may be so inclined as to tell your mother you have used a portal to travel to the other world, I would never do anything of the sort. It is my belief that children should spend their time laughing, playing and exploring and I believe exploring is all you

were doing. Am I right?"

Porter did not respond.

"It is all right my friend, you are in no danger. I am not here to harm you and I am most certainly not here to tell on you. I live right over there next to that pond. As I was out enjoying the night I happened to see you, popping right out of the ground as it were. I saw that other person glowing and flickering in bizarre ways and thought about the possibility of danger, so I merely jumped over here to see if you were well."

Porter was naive, he was young, he was innocent, yet every instinct he possessed told him this was a dangerous being. She was huge and he determined that if he ran, she would catch him, so he stood up slowly and played the game. "I'm ok." He said displaying his arms and legs.

"You do seem to be just fine don't you," said the toad as pleasantly as she was able. "Children are so durable. It's really quite amazing isn't it? How very difficult it can be, to damage a child." She dropped her head slightly to hide her grimace.

"I guess so," said Porter staring at the monsters mouth and remembering stories about witches who ate children. He tried to steer the conversation in a relaxed casual way.

"Have you been living in that pond long? My mama and I have fished there a few times but I have never seen you before."

"I would be surprised if anybody around here had ever seen me before. You see child, I like to keep to myself because—of the way I look. Some people seem frightened by my appearance. So I just keep hopping around, from pond to pond seeing the world as it were." She finished with a laugh and fanned her face with one of her wart covered hands.

Porter took one step forward creating space between him and the tree at his back. "You don't look any weirder than anybody else around here. There is a town called Cheese way over there," he pointed without taking his eyes off her, "and there are a whole bunch of folks who wouldn't think twice—"

"Yes, I know all about the town of Cheese my little friend," interrupted Sheri, "If I'm not mistaken it is the home of the cherub's, is it not?"

The idea suddenly crossed her mind that this child might be of some use. It was her

first contact besides the Tooth Fairy. She knew there was no help to be found with a junky, but a boy from the town of the cherubs could be handy. Perhaps she could befriend him and use him to draw the cherubs to her. If she sent the boy with a message maybe she could lure them out. As her mind raced as to what she would say next, Porter's mind focused on the cherubs. The thought of them brought him happiness in the face of this negativity radiating beast. That negativity that had seeped into his psyche was now evaporating and with that came a reflex.

His mud covered lips parted way and the pink gums underneath shown out toward the toad in the sweetest smile. Her thoughts of manipulation and revenge quieted as she couldn't help but to take notice of Porter's toothless grin. Her gelatinous body relaxed. Porter took notice, realized what he was doing and kept smiling. His gums had seemed to relax those around him before, but this was something new. He wasn't among classmates or friends. This creature put off vibrations of danger. But here, alone in the dark, he understood the power of his gums could sooth, even the scariest of beasts.

Porter stepped to the side and the toad's gaze followed. He took a step backwards and the toad did not move. He took another and still the toad only looked on with dumb curiosity. Porter took another step into the shadow of the tree whose bark's impressions still tattooed the back of his neck. The toad still didn't move. He turned and ran. Sheri did not follow.

She sat still. Her mind bubbled. She had felt traces of Porter's power but not like the boy suspected. Perhaps it was because she and Porter were both half breeds. Perhaps she was too far down the rabbit hole of wickedness to be lulled by their energy. Perhaps it was because she herself had no teeth. Whatever the reason, it was unimportant. What Porter's toothless smile inspired was not a calming effect but a new idea, a new approach into the cherub's world. The gums had inspired and acted like her muse. She began to laugh at her own foolish fantasy's of going into Cheese and waging a frontal attack against her sworn enemies, all of them, at the same time. The idea was ludicrous. Even if she was stealthy and killed them one by one in their sleep she would never succeed in destroying them all.

“The gum’s,” she mused to herself. “I have to become the gums. I must be soft. I must be soothing. I must be gentle and above all else, I must appear to be good.”

# The Wooden Horse

## 1

Porter had ran and ran and was now sure he was free from the sinister shadow of the toad. “My gums saved me,” he panted as he slowed to a walk. With the toad incident behind him now, fading into memory, his mind jumped to more pressing matters. It was

only a couple of hours before dawn and he was caked in mud. With no time to form a better plan he held his breath and scrubbed vigorously in the Bluegreen stream with his clothes still on his back. After shaking like a dog he began running in circles pretending he was back on the horse again, drying off all the while.

Tiptoeing past his Mother sleeping on the couch, he successfully made it to bed and though it was comfortable and he was exhausted, his mind kept stirring with thoughts of the portal, the other world, the horses and his new friend Paul.

The next day at school Porter found himself in a sleep deprived daze. He was wishing, wanting, almost needing to tell somebody, anybody about the experience he had the night before, but for safety sake he dared not. If he told, bad things could happen, the worst of which would be exposing his mother for being a mortal. Whether daydreaming or napping through Mrs. Playfield's lecture, his mind tumbled around his adventure. He would tell no one of his thrills but he had decided one thing was for sure, he was going back.

The day seemed endless but finally school let out. Porter raced home and flew through the door where his mother had prepared a mincemeat sandwich and a glass of milk. He felt too excited to eat but an abrupt demand from his Mother calmed him down.

"Sit down and eat your sandwich Porter, and I mean now!"

And so he sat and ate and listened to his mother. "Did you have a good time last night pumpkin face?" She asked with her back toward her son as she finished cleaning the counter where she had prepared his meal.

"Yes Mama," he replied mid chew.

"Don't speak with your mouth full mush face. Girls don't like that sort of thing."

"Yes Mama," he said, this time after swallowing.

"What were you doing so late into the evening? I waited up for you but fell asleep on the couch before you came home. Probably not the best mothering I've ever done, but I was so tired."

"It's all right Mama, I was fine. I was just playing with some of my friends over in the great meadow."

"Are you sure that's all you were doing sweetie-puss?"

*Did she know? Had the toad visited her while he was at school and told because she was angry over his departure?* He hated lying but there was no other way to continue visiting the Realm of Mortals, so he remained stoic, held his best poker face and answered, “Yes Mama.”

“Porter, my sweet boy, I was a young person once before and I want to give you the freedom to be just that, young. But I need to know you are, all right? From now on I want to know where you are, who you’re with and I want to know when you will be home. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Mama. I’ll do what you ask.” He took another bite.

“That’s a good boy. I love you my son.”

He finished chewing his food and replied, “I love you too Mama, and the sandwich was delicious. Thank you.”

“Is your tummy all filled up?” she asked.

“Yes Mama.”

“Well then, let’s go fishing raisin face?”

Porter was in no mood. He was focused on going back to the Realm of Mortals as soon as possible, so for the first time in his life he said no. The disappointment on his Mother’s face hurt but his own wants had overruled her happiness. She chalked it up to her boy coming of age and assumed there was a girl involved. He gave her a big hug, kissed her on the cheek and after discussing a return time he bounded out the door.

Porter had made the decision to never to go back to that spot where the toad presented herself. This decision posed a couple of dilemmas. Firstly he needed some type of marker to find his way back to the portal and the man made of straw would no longer suit his needs because of the toad. Problem number two was water. He needed some type of water source to clean himself before returning home.

He scouted through the woods in the direction of Cheese making sure to stay well away from the toad’s pond. Eventually Porter climbed over a hill and on his descent he spied three large stones set in a triangular pattern. These three boulders each resembled an ice cream cone that had toppled to the ground. They were triangular in shape and

planted in a triangular pattern. *This is the spot*, he thought.

The tapered pillars of stone would be easy to locate in the future and if he built the portal in the center, nobody would accidentally see his reappearance into this world. True there was no water in direct contact with this area however, he could safely walk back over the hill where there was a pond deep enough to swim in. Bathing there would allow him plenty of time to dry off as he walked home.

Of course there was no guarantee as to what would be waiting for him on the other side, but he had decided to take the chance. It was a risk but traveling between worlds was always going to be risky. He could pop out into a forest fire or a herd of flesh eating beasts, anything was possible, but all possibilities of disaster faded with the thought of riding horses once again. Besides, if this spot here was perfect, hopefully the spot on the other side would be perfect as well.

## 2

The sun was still nearly two hand widths from the horizon when Porter entered the Realm of Mortals. He slipped out of the black earth and plopped down inside a perfectly sheltered ring of five rounded rocks, all taller than he. The positioning of his portal, as far as being disguised from prying eyes, could not have been more sensational, even if he had found a genie and had wished for it.

Porter ventured out, cautiously at first, stepping like a stealthy cat. Paul and he were not to meet for quite some time and that suited him just fine. He was a stranger in a strange land and needed time to explore his surroundings. He walked in the direction of Heavenly taking note of a large bald tree, bluffs in the distance and a long meadow. These were easy-to-spot markers that would help him find his way back to the gateway, even at night.

Porter was observant and alert for the sake self preservation but mostly he was entranced in a state of utter bliss. The night before was amazing but it had been dark, too dark to make anything out that well. To see this place now, in the daylight, was absolutely dreamy. Only the sky and water seemed to match his world. Everything else looked dif-

ferent, sounded different even smelled different. He saw his first dead tree, the marker, and thought it strange because all dead trees in his world spontaneously caught fire and burned to ash in the blink of an eye. On a lower branch he witnessed an owl that only hooted instead of speaking words of wisdom. Colors and shapes alike were distorted whether they be plant, animal or mineral.

He happened upon a pond and saw birds swimming on top of the water instead of submarining underneath it. There was a loud “slap” and Porter recognized it as a beaver from his mothers book. Staring into the pond he suddenly wished he was fishing. *Next time I'll bring my pole, he thought, and see whats underneath the water.*

He thought about jumping into the pond and washing but stopped with thoughts of creatures with sharp teeth that might be lurking under the waters reflection. Instead he peeled the muddy clothes from his body and cleaned them in an obviously shallow nook that could not possibly support monsters. He finished with his head and arms then reapplied his mostly clean clothes to his shivering body. A combination of his clean self and the fact of the sun, now only five fingers thick from the horizon, prompted him with some angst to venture into the town of Heavenly.

Curiosity drove him. There were people there. People like him (well mostly like him), that he had to see with his own eyes. He trotted away hoping to dry off before reaching town. Along the way he noticed the color of the wheat was not as red as he was used to seeing. The wheat here was yellow and brown. This would mean the color of the bread would be different. He started thinking about mortal food when he spied something in the sky that made him drop and take cover.

One of the cherubs had flown overhead and instead of playing his usual game, guessing which cherub it was, he squatted and threw his hands over his head hoping he hadn't been spotted. Cherubs spent most of their time in this world, because there were more people here, at least that is what he was told. He wondered if they would recognize him? Could they know? Their powers were observed by all but nobody understood how exactly they functioned. Here in the Realm of Mortals he would be the only person able to see them which might give him an advantage. But did he need to worry? Would they even

care that he didn't belong here? Some part of him thought he did belong here, at least the half of him that came from his mother. Even if they did see him, and knew him to be a half-breed, what would they do? Would they tell?

The cherub was in his line of sight for no more than an instant but the fear it put in him lasted much longer. After considerable thought, the boy with no teeth rooting around in wonderland decided to leave it in the hands of fate and moved forward.

A short time later he crouched on the outskirts of town second guessing the idea of simply strolling in and blending with the hodgepodge of citizens. Dark clouds rolled over the horizon. They looked cold. He couldn't ignore the countless voices screaming and shouting. He couldn't help to think that perhaps the mind of the universe was trying to tell him to stay away. He pondered his situation then said to himself, "I can either stay here and imagine what might happen, or I can go in for real." He thought about it no more and started in.

A fat, short lady with a brown apron covering her brown dress was tending garden. *At least she isn't yelling*, he thought to himself. She lifted her head and they locked eyes. *This is it*, thought Porter nervously. *Its daylight and I will either be seen as a mortal or something else*. He waved at her. She didn't wave back. He kept walking. It was the first time in his life common courtesy had been snubbed, but on the brighter side of things she didn't point and start screaming, "FREAK!"

Buildings surrounded Porter, some with straw roofs others had wooden shingles. He saw water trickling down both sides of a cobbled street. It was smelly water and he made sure not to step in it. He saw men and women walking and riding in carriages being pulled by horses. His heart skipped a beat when he saw them. One horse lifted its tail and released his bowels. *That must be where the smell comes from*, he thought, *at least some of it*. A door swung open nearly hitting him, then a tall woman dressed in rags stepped out onto the street and emptied a bucket of poop and pee adding to the trickling stream flowing through town. "That must be where the rest of it comes from," he said.

Porter continued walking, attempting to take in the sights of Heavenly but the continuing assault on his ears distracted his attention to the point of near madness, that is until he

turned a corner that opened up into the town's massive center square at which point the noise pollution doubled in strength, but turned fantastically jubilant. People were cheering with their hands in the air and some were even laughing and patting one another on the back. Others were hugging and shaking hands.

Their delight was infectious. Porter whipped his head back and laughed along with them. An older girl wearing a plaid red dress spinning around in dance bumped into him. She apologized with a laugh and hug then with magnificent energy spun out of their embrace. Porter twirled around with his hands in the air and cheered with the rest of them, and for what, it didn't matter. He felt rich with happiness, free and alive participating with people he was now starting to believe were just like him, happy and good.

Suddenly the crowd grew quiet. Everyone turned simultaneously and looked in the same direction. There was a man, a single voice hollering out but Porter couldn't quite make out the words. He looked around for something to climb as to get a better view but saw nothing. The happy energy seemed to have dissipated and was replaced with a hollow vacuum of anticipation, at least for the moment. Not wanting to ask a stranger if he could be lifted onto their shoulders to see exactly what was going on, he decided to keep on exploring this place that suddenly seemed far less frightening and much more wonderful than before. A short time after he departed the square he heard the muted cheers began again. He thought about returning to the festivities but decided to continue exploring.

The buildings for the most part looked similar to the structures in Cheese but they lacked the diversity he had been accustomed to. They were all basically the same size, (one or two stories tall) and shape, (mostly rectangular) and so too were the people, (no giants or dwarves thus far). They dressed the same, walked the same and from what he could hear talked the same. Up and down the streets he went, stopping and looking in the windows that held any sort of interest to his foreign eyes. There were restaurants, hotels, banks and shops displaying bizarre doodads and gadgets and sparkly knick-knacks. There was one window in particular that caught Porter's attention with shinny whistles, spinning tops and colorful bouncing balls but his darting eyes stalled when he saw several carvings of miniature horses. He ogled at the figurines, hypnotized by their brilliance and

was only drawn back into the real world when the steam from his pressed nose fogged the window. His hands slipped off the glass as he turned to enter the building of wonder.

It smelled good inside the store, like candy, and his eyes marveled over the brilliant toys and the wonderful strangeness of it all, but the wooden horses drew his focus. They were small. One looked like it was grazing, another was standing with one hove raised and yet another was standing on its back legs. There were twelve horses total. With his right thumb and forefinger Porter picked one up. The horse's mane was frozen like a thrashing ocean wave. Its tail sticking out straight behind his powerful hind legs carved into shapes equating to incredible speeds. Porter knelt down and started playing with it, pretending he was on its back, laughing and smiling with Paul racing behind. A tall man with a bowtie nearly as wide as his mustache said plainly, "You can't play with that unless you intend buy it my boy."

"Buy it?" said Porter still crouching on the floor.

"Yes," said the man matter-of-factly, "You must own it before you can play with it son."

"What do you want for it sir?"

"Well young fella, that there will cost you two cents."

Porter didn't know what a cent was and not wanting to stick out as the foreigner he was regretfully placed the horse back where he found it and said, "I'll ask my Mama if I can have two cents."

"Now that's a good boy, I'm about to close for the day but you come back tomorrow with some money and it will be yours to play with as long as you want," said the tall man spreading a sincere smile behind his whiskery mustache, "Now run along."

"Thank you sir, I will," said Porter absently shining his toothless smile at the man.

The smile under the mustache faded and was replaced by a look of dumbfounded glee as Porter turned to leave the shopkeepers domain.

"What did you say your name was son?"

"Porter sir, my name is Porter," he said still smiling.

The man stared. After a few seconds Porter closed his lips realizing what was happen-

ing and began to leave.

“I’ll tell you what my boy,” said the man rapidly. “If you promise to come back tomorrow with some money you can take that horse with you today.”

The idea of having that horse was beyond glorious but Porter knew he wouldn’t be able to get any cents. He also knew it was the power of his gums that inspired this unnatural generosity.

“I’m sorry sir but I can’t. I know my Mama wont have any cents for me and I can’t get any myself.”

“Then just take it son, you seem like a good boy and I want you to have it.”

“No sir, I can’t take it. It just wouldn’t be right.”

“Take the horse son,” said the shopkeeper as he glided over on his long legs. He plucked the horse off the shelf. “It has been sitting in this store for over a year now,” he said as he took a knee. “I can see how much you like it and I truly want you to have it. Just do me one favor.”

“What’s that sir?” responded Porter as the horse was being placed into his hand.

“Keep smiling that wonderful smile of yours. Will you please?”

“Yes sir,” said Porter feeling both guilty and thrilled. He flashed his gums one more time then strode out the door holding his treasure.

### 3

The afternoon had been exciting but now the sun’s ability to cast shadows was drawing to an end, bringing Paul and Porter’s meeting time ever nearer. Porter stood outside the shop door. Upon comprehending the time his first instinct was to run, but where? He had lost his way. These foreign streets resembled nothing if not a crooked maze.

Throughout his surrealistic wanderings he had neglected to pay attention as to where he had come from and more importantly, where he wanted to go. His eyes flashed to the left and then to the right attempting to ascertain any clue that could guide him onwards, but there was none. The only thing in sight that generated any idea to propel him forward occurred when he spied three children that seemed to be close to his own age hanging out

across the street. Having no lingering fear of being seen as something other than mortal, and as his time was short, he decided with little hesitation to ask for help. Porter pushed his horse as deeply into his pocket as it would go then, after assuring himself it was safe he walked over to the children and said, "Hello."

The kids stopped chatting amongst each other and turned slowly, before staring at the intruder.

"Sorry to interrupt," said Porter, "but I'm...new in town, and have lost my way." The kids did not respond with anything other than their continuous staring, so Porter continued, "Will one of you please direct me to...?" He paused. He had to stop and think. How was he going to describe where he needed to go? After a moment of contemplation he continued, "The side of town where a dead straw man has been nailed to a pike?" His eyebrows popped up into hopeful arches upon completion of his sentence.

The children, two boys and a girl, looked at one another with blank expressions, then, looking back at Porter, began laughing.

The tallest boy of the group spoke through his amusement. "The dead straw man you say?" The kids continued laughing and looking at one another both entertained and confused. Porter stared patiently, arms at his side and his face holding a closed lip smirk.

"Kid, that was one of the oddest sentences I have ever heard," said the tall boy as a tear rolled over his cheek.

"Me too," laughed the other, his face as round as his belly.

"He just walked up to three strangers and asked directions to a dead straw man," said the girl before she buried her freckled face in her hands. The three of them continued laughing, periodically looking at Porter while shaking their heads and slapping their knees.

The round boy caught his breath long enough to spit out, "What do you mean the dead straw man?"

Porter leaped at the chance to elaborate on his needs. As amusing as it was to watch other people laugh he was painfully aware of the time and its ever pressing passage. "The side of town I entered on had a dead straw man standing in the wheat fields. I need to get

back there.”

“What for?” Asked the tall boy.

“I’m supposed to meet my new friend near that place in a little while. I don’t want him think I didn’t care about showing up,” said Porter revealing a slim smile.

“What’s wrong with your mouth kid? It doesn’t look like you have any teeth,” asked the girl.

“I don’t have any teeth. I wasn’t born with any.”

They all started laughing again but this time they did it softly as their eyes were focused on Porter’s gums. The floating, happy sensations of Porter’s toothless mouth swept into their world and time moved slowly until, Porter closed his lips.

“Kid, you are funny. What’s your name?” asked the tall boy.

“Porter Stebbins.”

“Well then Porter Stebbins,” continued the boy with an even pace to his cadence. “This whole town is surrounded by wheat fields and they all have scarecrows, I mean, dead straw men in them.” The other two snickered. “Can you be a little more specific?”

“There is a beautiful forest next to this field.” Porter looked on hopefully but their faces looked blank. Porter pondered with his hand on his chin then elaborated as best he could, “And it seems to me like it’s higher than town. I’m almost sure I walked downhill to get here.”

“You must have entered Heavenly on the northern side of town, over in that direction,” said the girl pointing. Both her companions nodded in agreement.

“Yep,” said the tall boy, “You do have to walk uphill to get into the forest over there.”

“Sure do,” said the round boy feeling the need to say something. They all had the same strange desire to be liked by the strange, toothless kid.

“What are you going to do over there?” asked the girl.

“From over there I can find my way to where I need to go, and if Paul, my new friend, thinks it’s all right, I’m going to ride a horse again!”

The three kids looked at each other with a mutual, unspoken understanding, then the round boy spoke, “There is only one horse pasture near the northern side of town. The

Reverend's! Are you and your friend fixing to ride the Reverend Heat's horses?"

"I don't know," replied Porter honestly wondering for the first time whose horse it was that he had ridden the night before.

"It has got to be him," said the girl. "There are two more pastures on the southern side of town, but that's the only one on the north."

"I guess it must be the Reverend's horses then," said Porter. "Do you know how I can get there from here?"

"Do you mind...", began the round boy in a tentative tone, before pausing and looking at his companions. They looked back with raised eyebrows and bobbing heads. "...if we come with you?"

"That would be great," said Porter. "Company is always better than being alone I think."

"We don't need to get to the northern side of town then, I know the way to the Reverend's pastures from here. If we go this way we can save some time!" said the girl enthusiastically.

"That sounds good to me," said Porter. "But before we go may I ask, what are your names?"

"I'm Nathan," said the tall kid. "This is my little brother Opus and that's Kelly. She's my girlfriend."

"No I'm not you donkey butt."

"What? Am I not pretty enough for you? You don't like the way I sip my tea, or slurp down my noodles?"

"Yes, that's exactly the reason I'm not your girlfriend."

"She doesn't like your smile Nathan," snickered Opus.

"I must say, I much prefer Porters smile over your ugly grin," said Kelly.

As the children walked towards the horse pasture Porter reflected on his day, his horse and of the people in town. With slight trepidation he asked, "Why do all the people in this town scream at each other so much?"

None of them jumped on the question and had to ponder as to the exact meaning of the

query. To the three lifelong inhabitants of Heavenly, the ‘screaming’ or loud communication between people was as ordinary as flying cherubs were to Porter. After some pause Nathan asked shyly, “I don’t know what you mean Porter, not exactly that is?”

“Well,” started Porter, treading delicately, as he did not want to offend his new friends, “right now we are just talking, in a normal tone of voice, but—” He paused to think for the right wording, “When I was wandering around Heavenly today, I noticed most people would scream their words at one another, real loud like, like—, are they all hard of hearing?”

His three guides chuckled but seemed stumped. Finally Nathan pepped up and said, “People just get on each other’s nerves I guess. You never can tell, but I don’t think they mean nothing by it. People are just use to talking that way.”

“That seems strange,” said Porter. “Why don’t they all talk a little softer and then the town wouldn’t be so noisy anymore?”

“Hell Porter I don’t know. Why don’t you go up and ask them?” said Nathan.

Under the red clouds of sunset the children theorized as to why everyone shouted until, “Hi Paul,” said Porter waving enthusiastically. “I’m really glad you’re here. I’m really glad I’m here too!”

Paul seemed a little surprised to see Porter with other people. “I said I’d be here and here is where I am. Though I can’t say I’ve been here long enough to see if its safe yet.” Paul cautiously looked at the darkening landscape surrounding Reverend Heat’s horse pasture. “I’m not positive, but I think we’re alone. At any rate, the Reverend will be sitting down to supper in a little while. It’s probably best we wait until we see some signs of that. Anyway who are your friends?” he asked. Paul didn’t know the other children but as it is in most small towns, nearly everyones face is familiar to everyone else.

“I was wandering around town this afternoon and got lost. My new friends helped me find my way back here,” said Porter.

“You sure do make friends fast,” said Paul with a terrific sense of wellbeing rising up and over him. For what reason, he did not know. “So what do y’all call yer selves?” asked Paul.

The children exchanged greetings and as they waited Nathan asked Paul if he could answer Porter's questions as to why people yell at one another.

"Yellin', who cares about a person yellin'?" The others nodded with expressions of obviousness. "Yellin to me ain't no big deal. Hell, I'd probably get scared if people stopped yellin'. It'd be like the wind stopped blowin' or the sun didn't shine no more."

Porter looked around at his friends all nodding in agreement and said, "I guess I'm just not used to it is all, but I still think it's terrible."

"There are far worse things than screaming Porter," said Paul pointing. "Way over yonder, just outside of town, there used to be a house of horror where things happened that were much worse than yellin'!"

"The von Ceindume home," said Nathan in an ominous tone.

"That right," said Paul nearly whispering. "In that house Porter, there lived a girl, supposedly Mr. von Ceindume's first born. Anyway, she was an evil girl, so jealous and monstrous that she killed all her baby brothers and sisters, on the day they were born no less!"

"Nathan saw her once," said Opus in adoration of his brother's bravery. Nathan gulped dryly as Kelly scanned over him with a look of terror.

Paul continued. "Mr. von Ceindume, well, he had a whole bunch of wives, but they never stuck around long. They say Porter, that when the women of the house gave birth, that girl, she would slither in like a snake, with a knife in her teeth, and murder those babies, and if the mothers were too weak after givin' birth, she'd kill them too. If they weren't, they would run off never to return and then Mr. von Ceindume would go off looking fer another wife."

Porter sat petrified, his mouth agape.

"I heard the stories too," said Kelly shakily. "I heard some stories, stories of some older kids that went to that house, and they were supposed to touch the door or something like that, but all the kids that did, died."

"I don't know about any of that," said Paul, "but a few years back, I got dared into going with some kids."

Opus looked over at Paul with amazement.

“We all set out like we were brave and tough, but by the time we rolled over the hill and actually saw that castle, most ran off.”

“What did you do?” asked Nathan.

“In truth, I never did get that close to the house, there was a moat surrounding it anyway. But I did get close enough to see something. I ain’t fer sure, but I might have seen that girl. I saw something anyway, and...I heard something.”

“What was it?” Asked Opus through a mouth so dry his lips were sticking together.

“I think it was, I mean, well I can’t be sure, but it sounded like a girl screamin. I had to think about it fer a long time, but after I did, I didn’t think it actually was a girl. I think what I heard, was a rabbit screaming. It was dark, like it is now, so I couldn’t see nothin, not fer sure, but I believe I heard that evil little girl, torturing a rabbit and then—.” In truth none of the children wanted to hear the rest of the story but Paul continued, “Then I saw somethin’ take off, runnin’ real quick and low, and it was on fire. It was me thinkin back on the whole thing that made me realize it had to be a rabbit and not a girl, because of the way it ran ya see. But that rabbit was on fire, and runnin’ and screamin’ horribly. I ran away after that and I never went back.”

The children reflected quietly. No one spoke.

Finally Nathan broke the silence. “Don’t worry Porter, that house burned down just a couple of weeks ago.”

“Yep, that’s true. It did,” said Paul still distant.

“I think Mr. von Ceindume locked the door,” continued Opus. “What I mean is, I’ll bet he trapped that girl in some room and he knew the only way to get rid of her once and for all was to burn down that evil house, with her inside it!”

While the kids continued to theorize as to why the house burned down Porter, in an absolute state of unrefined horror, sat with his stomach turning and his head feeling a mix of pressure and distant floating. Finally, as if being rescued by an ethereal voice echoing through a long tunnel, he heard a horse neighing. In an automated, mechanized motion he slid his hand into his pocket and pinched his wooden horse, relishing in its solid form. He

slid his thumb over the smoothness of its torso and somehow the softness of the wood calmed him. He stroked the textured point of the tail and mane and felt even more relief. Slowly he came back from the world of horror stories and into reality and remembered why he was here. Before any of the others knew it, he was standing next to the same horse he had ridden the night before.

“You all have got to watch this,” said Paul upon realizing where his new friend was standing. “Have you ever seen anything like it in your whole lives?”

The four of them watched with astonishment having forgotten about the haunted house. Exactly as it happened the night before, Porter’s mare knelt down and allowed him to mount with minimal effort. The horse stood and Porter, through a muffled voice huffed back at his friends, “What are you waiting for? Get on, it’s easy.”

Feeling numb in the brain, they all stared at him and then at one another. “You sure make it look easy enough Porter,” said Kelly in a hushed tone. “Well, let’s go,” she said waving her hand forward and leading the way.

The four kids walked out as Porter and his horse friend took off trotting. With some effort the remaining four children mounted a horse of their own and joined in the fun. As before, Porter took it safe and easy letting the mare move under her own accord. The gleeful sensations were running so powerfully up and down his spine he thought he might burst with pleasure. He thought about yelling out or singing but didn’t know how good the Reverend’s hearing might be, so he compressed his joy down into squeaks and snorts. The other kids weren’t as cautious and soon their pleasures ended. The Reverend was in ear shot of their happy hooray’s and came out running with a pitchfork and torch. “Damn youz! Youz damn kids. Get off my horses and get over here. NOW, DAMN IT, NOW!”

Kelly and Nathan were closest to the Reverend Heat and when he started yelling they dismounted immediately. Opus saw his brother and thought about running but knew his parents would find out about his involvement and gave himself up convinced Nathan would rat him out anyway. He walked his horse over as gently and slowly as he could for three reasons: One; He didn’t mind being yelled at by the Reverend. It was far better to be yelled at by the Reverend than by his parents, so he enjoyed this tongue lashing while

he could. The next one from his father would not be as easy to cope with. Reason number two for walking so gingerly was pure caution. By the looks and gestures of the Reverend, it was quite possible he might be stabbed with the pitchfork if he moved any faster. Reason number three, it was a way to show the hot headed Reverend Heat, he meant no harm to his property.

Paul and Porter were on the far side of the pasture. Living in his own world of glee, Porter didn't see or hear the danger when it first presented itself. Paul rode up next to him and alerted him to the Reverend's presence.

"We're in trouble Porter," said Paul. "The owner of these here horses and land overheard us," he stopped to gasp for air, "and is out of his house waving a pitchfork and torch about. I can't get caught Porter. My folks don't seem to care what I do, so long as I don't get in any trouble."

Porter didn't speak. He had been jolted out of a cheerful world into a dark and grossly textured reality. Fear, shock and a dull heavy feeling were birthed in his belly and spread to his head.

"Porter," snapped Paul, "This here is trouble! Serious trouble!"

*I can't get in trouble, thought Porter. Not here in this world. This man will think I'm lying if I say I have no parents. What am I going to do? What would my Mama do? This can't happen. This cannot happen. What...* he was brought out of his thinking frenzy by Paul's voice.

"Porter I'm getting out of here, you commin' or what?"

"Yes, let's go," said Porter hurriedly, believing their next move to be a quick dismount followed by a wild sprint for the forest, but Paul had another idea. He took off on his horse bolting straight for the far fence and Porter's mare instinctively followed close behind. Upon her back Porter's levy of adrenalin broke. His grip tightened and his breathing accelerated. His stomach felt cold as all his blood seemed to rush to his head. Ruthless apprehension grew with his eyes as he was sure Paul and his horse were going to smash into the fence outlining the property they had invaded. A dreadful moan rattled from his drying throat before the disaster unfolded, and then, he and his horse would experience

one of their own, but to his disbelieving surprise, Paul and his horse rose up unexpectedly, and took to flight. Over the fence they soared as Porter watched. His dread had mutated into awe. An instant later he felt the sensation of his own horse abruptly vaulting from the earth as the Reverend Heat yelled, “COME BACK HERE WITH MY HORSES YOU DAMNED HORSE THEAVING SONS O’ BITCHES! WHEN I CATCH YOU KIDS I’M GOING TO KICK YOUR ASSES ALL THE WAY TO CINCINNATI!”

The Reverend’s voice faded. There was no sound now. There was only pure elation exploding in Porter’s heart and soul as his belly whipped around like his hair. All danger and negativity were left behind as if they were not permitted to accompany him on the miraculous elevation. He felt like one the cherubs, flying through the sky with the wind in his face. He closed his eyes anticipating increasing elevation, up to the moon perhaps, but his horse’s hooves touched back down and the world became scary and loud again.

He lost his grip as his momentum violently catapulted him forward. His chest impacted with a hollow thud against the horse’s neck knocking the wind out of him and whipping his head forward, barely avoiding a collision with the horse’s skull thwarting a busted lip, a black eye or possibly a smashed orbital socket. Gasping for air and leverage he flexed his left arm as he fell to the right. He squeezed his legs together attempting to clamp his bouncing body atop the beast, trying to avoid the thundering hooves below but felt himself sliding, his grip was too weak to keep his body mounted over the speeding animal.

Porter would have fallen but the mare, either sensing him slipping or perhaps it was just luck, adjusted her stride just enough to center his body on top of hers. They speed after Paul heading towards the woods with yellow moonlit dust marking their trail.

“Stop Paul, stop running,” he shouted over the heavy hooves finally having caught his friend and his breath.

Paul looked back over his shoulder then brought his horse to a halt. The boys looked at each other wild eyed and panting. “Paul we stole these horses. We can’t do that. I can’t do that!”

Paul took a second longer in catching his breath then forced out, “We ain’t stealing em

Porter.” He stopped to take a proper breath. “These animals will run back home the moment we dismount and slap em on their heinies.”

“Are you sure about that Paul, really sure? I need to know if —”

“Come back tomorrow or the next day and if they ain’t here I promise I’ll walk into that man’s home and turn myself in,” interrupted Paul pointing back the way they came. “Providing we don’t get caught tonight that is.”

“How are we going to get caught tonight? We are a long way away from him now.”

“He might just decide to get on one of those horses and try trackin us, or he might have some dogs to follow our scent. I don’t know Porter but I do know this, we need to get home, both of us, now! We need to get inside. We need to get out of here. You understand me Porter?”

He did and acknowledged with a hearty nod. A pursuit had not occurred to him but now that Paul had spelled it out it didn’t seem likely a man would simply allow people to willfully take his property. He would surely be hot on their trail, if not now, soon.

“What are you going to do?” Asked Porter.

“I’m goin to run this horse down this line of the forest, over to where I think I’ve got a good shot of runnin’ home. There is some water over there, a stream. I going through it, that way no dogs can trace my scent. What about you? You goin to be all right Porter?”

Porter looked around. It was dark but the moon lit up a familiar bluff. He searched his mind for all the markers he had committed to memory earlier that day. *Is it still the same day*, he thought stunned at how much had happened? “I’ll be fine,” he said believing he could find his way back from here.

“Porter I ain’t goin to come back to that pasture for a while. Probably a long while... but if-in ya want to, I’ll meet you where we first met, say three days from now?”

“That would be great,” said Porter flashing a big smile.

“See you then,” said Paul and he took off.

Porter did the same, heading off toward the bluff, slowly. He didn’t want to be caught but they were off trail now. Better to move about at a slow pace and listen for dogs.

He and his mare trotted along and he, with some effort found his way back to the

round rocks hiding his gateway. He dismounted and was surprised by the soreness of his legs and butt. He looked his horse in the eyes and as he stroked her cheeks he said, “Thank you. Thank you so very much for the incredible pleasure of riding you. I’ll never forget it...and...I don’t think we will be seeing each other again, at least not for a while. But for now, please go home, back to the man who yelled at me. I’ll miss you. Thank you for everything, but please go home.”

The horse neighed and drug her hoof twice. They rubbed faces and then she turned and took off in the direction they had come. Porter reached into his pocked and pulled out the wooden horse as he watched her disappear into the night. He glowed with love and adoration. From this moment forth he would carry that wooden horse with him as a reminder of all good things in the world. He took another wary look around to make sure he was alone. He then walked to the portal, held his breath, closed his eyes and jumped in.

# A Cherub’s Story

## 1

In the late evening blue light of Calliba’s Oasis sat Zelux, the rock thrower, slumped over a nearly empty stein of mead, his fourth of the evening. His eyes lifted lazily, and

not quite slurring his words he asked Xavier, a friend he believed to be wise and thoughtful, "What do you think it is like for them? The people we give love to, after we do our thing? What do you think it feels like?"

Xavier examined this thought in a far less inebriated state than his friend and after a meditative lull answered, "I have never thought about that before but, I think, in that moment, perhaps they realize they have met the best friend they'll ever have, and that realization must be, wonderful." He held the thought a second longer and said, "Really wonderful!"

"Yea, really wonderful!" added Zelux. They stared at one another, each as dumb in the face as Ubia, who heard not a word, he was lost in his own world, reflecting on the wonders related to love that he himself had helped create that day.

The pub doors swung open and what few patrons remained in the late hour shouted out, "Meacron!"

As the minotaur entered the cherubs smiled and waved their hellos then went back to reflecting on the one subject that interested them most.

"Will you tell us what else happened to you today Xavier?" requested Ubia after snapping out of his fantasy.

"Indeed I will," sang Xavier letting it become clear that he had a story worth sharing. He began, "I had been watching these two silly-hearts for about two days now. They grew up next to one another and have been friends since they were small children. They had played with one another, confided in one another, whether it be with smiling mouths or tears in their eyes. As I understand it, some time ago, the boy's feelings began to change and as it is with mortals, he didn't know what to think of their relationship any longer. The trees and wind alerted me of the changing vibrations so I investigated."

Ubia and Zelux looked at one another with crooked smiles and crinkled noses.

"On the outskirts of Oliville the vibrations called to me. I followed the signal and spied them walking with each other in a wheat field. The girl's vibrations were open and the boy's feelings were ready for direction. As I circled around looking for an angle of attack the girl clawed her way up an old pile of forgotten hay. She reached the top and

stretched one hand up towards the sun,” Xavier illustrated with his hands, “and placed the other on her heart.”

“Oh, that sounds so pretty,” exclaimed Zelux, his lips sagging with alcohol.

“Yes,” agreed Xavier, “But that is where the prettiness ended my friends.”

Confusion spread across his friends faces but relaxed when Xavier continued, “She started singing, at least I believe she was trying to sing. The terrible noises she made scared a flock of birds off course. I think I saw a dragonfly purposefully dart into the mouth of a frog before the frog jumped into the mouth of a fish. Her singing was dreadful and I too thought about fleeing, but then I looked at the silly-hearted boy, and saw his adoring eyes embracing every moment of it. Well, I knew what to do. I had to put a stop to the singing.

“Her head was up, chin exposed, and her mouth wide open to where I could almost see her crooked vocal cords screeching out, ‘Laaaaaaaaa!’”

Both Ubia and Zelux felt zapped as Xavier laughed at his imitation of the song, then he continued, “I fell from the sky as fast as I could. I was on her in a few seconds with my mace slung back over my head.” He continued telling the story animating his movements as he climbed on his chair, “And as I swung it around my left side I twisted my body around like a cork-screw.” Xavier spun off the back of his chair and fell to the ground, landing on his toes and one hand, his body parallel to the floorboards. He slowly looked up and stared at his friends, both now completely enamored in the tale. “My mace smashed into her chin and sent her body flying two or three times her height into the air.” With one flap of his wings Xavier soared ten feet into the air then arched his back and fell limply, head first toward to the floor. Before hitting he tucked into a tight ball and summersaulted backwards halting softly on one knee. Without missing a beat he went back into the story. “Her heels catapulted over her head as the rest of her body went limp. Oh my goodness it was beautiful.”

Zelux and Ubia cheered and cooed with their hands slapping the table, feet kicking and wings fluttering.

“It seemed like she was floating in the air forever before she finally hit the ground. I

hit her so hard she was knocked clean off the haystack.” With this said Xavier placed his hand over his heart and with a look of wrongdoing stated, “But I promise, I didn’t mean for her to land on the ground.” After this somewhat gloomy statement he continued on with the story in the same excited manner as before. “Once I made contact I spread my wings wide to slow myself down. I looked back over my shoulder and saw the boy rushing over to the girl squirming in agony on her back.” Xavier lowered his wings and his voice shook slightly with emotion. “He knelt and wrapped his arms around her. She stopped shaking. He pulled her body up to his. Their faces were close. I heard him say, ‘Are you all right?’ She opened her eyes and looked into his. Instead of speaking she kissed him.”

Zelux and Ubia simultaneously exhaled a sigh of love and relief. They sat in buttery silence as Meacron clopped his way over to the cherub’s table. His two cloven hooves were stained green with grass and his yellow eyes were glistening with traces of tears. As he stood over them, he took a large drink out of his silver stein.

“Kooka-looca,” said Ubia, the first to exit the romantic trance Xavier’s story had laid upon them. “Your coat is shining very nicely tonight Meacron. Egg yolks they say, make the coat soft and...shiny.”

“Yes my little friend,” said Meacron beaming. “It shines like my soul tonight. But I don’t think it’s the egg yolks, at least not on this particular occasion.”

“Why are you so weighted with happiness tonight Meacron?” asked Zelux.

“Yes, Meacron,” agreed Xavier, “you are really happy tonight it seems...,” he paused thinking with one eye closed, “I don’t think any of us have seen you with a smile in weeks.” The cherubs looked around at each other and agreed.

Meacron stiffened, his muscular pecks and shoulders tightened and with a slightly cocked head he began. “Today when I awoke, it was like all the recent days past. My eyes would open, and within moments, I would feel very sad and alone. The burdens of this life and some of my recent experiences had left me feeling hollow...and...I can admit it now my friends, now that its over, I felt like I had nothing to live for.”

The Cherubs all gasped and slid back in their chairs with their eyes as round as the

table they sat at. This sort of unpleasantness wasn't anything they were used to hearing.

"I'm sorry my little friends, I know you are unaccustomed to hearing such disagreeable happenings, but I can assure you its over now. Those feelings are gone."

"Why Meacron, what happened to you today that made this," Ubia looked from side to side without moving his head, "disagreeableness fly away? And where is it now?"

"It was the oddest thing," said Meacron pondering, his muscular neck rippling as he wobbled his massive horns in a shaky reflection of his day. "This morning, I awoke with such sadness, as it has been for many long days, however today, without a thought or a splash of water on my face I simply got up, and I mean the moment my eyes opened I got right out of bed." He said this looking down at the cherubs with elevated pitch in his voice. Then he looked back up with a dreamy gaze and continued, "I walked straight out my front door. I had no idea what I was doing. It was as if someone else was controlling my body, and my soul was too tired to reject it. The world seemed to be without color or smell, the hollowness was everywhere, yet there I was, as if I was witnessing my body walking toward the hills where I spent so much of my time as a youth. My legs were tired and heavy as if all my sadness and numbness had turned into lead and settled in my hooves. I was a fair distance out of town when I walked into the shadow of a great hill cast by the early morning sun. There on the ground in front of me was a sizable stone, a small boulder almost double the size of you Ubia."

Ubia withdrew into his double chin. His friends studied his size. Meacron continued, "Without thinking about what I was doing I squatted down and lifted it up from the ground. The stone was heavy, but with serious effort I was able to stabilize it in my arms. It was at this point I felt awakened, alert. I felt as if my consciousness sprung back into body and it was me who was in control of it now. With all the weight of that stone pushing on to me I began walking up the hill."

The cherubs looked quickly at one another exchanging smiles. They knew this story, rare as it was, their ancient selves knew it, and how it would end.

"It was almost instantly I began to feel as if something was happening to me, something right, something...good. Something...it was as if the world heard my pain and

somehow was there to help me correct it.

“Walking up that hill was not easy. I felt like the weight of the stone represented the weight I had been carrying around inside of me. I shifted it from one arm to the other, they were both so tired. Halfway up the hill I shifted it to my shoulder and my legs shook and I fell to one knee. The stone nearly fell but I managed to keep it off the ground. Somehow, I felt I couldn’t let that heavy burden fall back down, from where I had claimed it. I got back to my hooves and continued struggling up the hill. I fell again near the top but again I held onto the stone. The steepness of the hillside lessened and I was nearly to the top. The sun painted a thin line of yellow goodness across the top arc of that cold shadowy hill and it kept my attention, begging me to continue, willing me to enter into its warmth and leave the cold of the blue shadow behind. I stumbled forward, weaker now but somehow stronger, holding onto that stone all the while and focusing on the light. And then, I made it.”

The cherubs cheered and cooed holding their arms in the air and lightly fluttering their wings. Their cheers turned the heads of some of their neighbors and they too began to cheer.

“What happened then Meacron? What happened next?” asked Ubia.

“Atop that hill the world was lit up, and all mine. Up there it was very warm and the air seemed so very soft and welcoming. I had a sense of accomplishment but I also had that stone. That rock and I had been through too much for me to simply toss it anywhere, so I looked around that hill basking in the dawn’s light for a perfect resting spot for that stone of which I now thought of as the physical incarnate of my burdens. I walked to the edge of a cliff.”

“The hill was a cliff?” interrupted Zelux.

“Well, a part of that hill ended in a cliff,” said Meacron looking at Zelux who seemed very satisfied with that answer. “I walked within five paces of the cliff and lay the boulder down with thankfulness, yet somehow the deed did not seem done. I leaned backwards to stretch out my spine and when I did, the sun shown just right and I saw something shiny, blue and beautiful. It was another stone, a small one.”

“How small?” asked Ubia with a sincere curiosity felt by all cherubs listening to the story.

“And how blue?” asked Xavier leaning in closer to Meacron. His eyes were fixed firmly on his lips as not to mishear his answer.

“It easily fit into the palm of my hand and it was bluer than the sea or the sky. It was as blue as you can imagine,” he said closing his eyes and grinning. “I picked it up and felt its soft smooth texture between my first two fingers and thumb and a thought came to me, or perhaps was pushed into my head from the warm world around.

“I looked and found four other stones, all smaller than my boulder but larger than my soft blue stone. I placed these four new stones in a square around my boulder. It was then that I recognized the boulder, was my sadness.” Meacron looked around at the cherubs, his eyes and brow distressed. “I mean it wasn’t my sadness but, ...well...I think all my sadness was somehow transferred into the stone.” He looked to the cherub’s for some kind of acknowledgement or understanding.

“We understand,” said Ubia as the others nodded their heads enthusiastically. Meacron seemed relieved and continued his story on the verge of happy tears.

“Not knowing exactly what I was doing, I sat on it.”

“The ground?” asked Xavier.

“The blue stone?” asked Ubia.

“No” said Meacron calmly. “I sat on the boulder that held my sadness. I sat there for a long time rubbing that soft blue stone and thinking about all the things that had weighted my soul for so long. I sat for such a long time that the sun had nearly completely disappeared over the horizon before I was finished.

“I stood up and these old legs of mine cracked and popped. I felt the blood flowing back into them and my backside. I looked down at my hooves and imagined all the thoughts I had been thinking about were swimming around there, down there inside the perimeter of the four stones I had laid down.” He pointed to his hooves. “I very carefully stepped out of that magical square so I would not disturb the downtrodden thoughts I had left there. You see, that square around my burdened stone is the new home for all those

bad thoughts. It's beautiful next to that cliff with a view that would entertain any entity for a very long time. I realized those feelings were not happy living inside me and I was not happy with them either. They are much happier on that hill in the confines of the stones and I am happier without them in me."

The cherubs hollered in celebrated and drank from their steins.

"What happened to your blue stone Meacron?" asked Xavier.

"I held onto it for a while however, I lost it on the long walk home."

The cherubs looked somewhat disturbed when they heard this bit of the story. "Lost it you say?" lamented Ubia.

"Yes, I don't know what happened to it," answered Meacron, "but that is beside the point my friends, my sorrow filled heart is once again free and I feel wonderful!"

The cherubs got off their short stools and gathered around Meacron hugging his legs and looking happily into his smiling yellow eyes.

Before Meacron separated from the cherubs in pursuit of a drunken mermaid named Reaven, Xavier tugged on his hand beckoning him to bend down to the cherub's level.

"Meacron, did you see anything unusual on your journey home?"

"I saw a cloud wrap itself around the setting sun which to me looked like the eye of the creator."

"Anything else?"

"No... Oh, come to think of it I did see something strange. I saw a gigantic talking toad with stringy black hair."

## The Toad Croaks Her Spell

### 1

The pink light of dawn spread over the land and Xavier opened his eyes excitedly embracing the beginning of a new day. He jumped from his perch and fluttered down through a tangle of vaguely visual beams of light penetrating the circular windows of his home. After landing, he tucked his wings back and with a stiff legged weeble-wobbled

march, he made his way to the front door with his mouth watering in famished anticipation however, there was no breakfast basket awaiting him this day. Undaunted, he proceeded over to a nest belonging to an orange featherless bird who allowed him to take one of her eight-hundred or so eggs and a goat graciously allowed him some milk. Flowers opened, birds chirped and anticipation filled his mind as he ate.

“Today, today, what a wonderful day,” he sang between mouthfuls while swinging his head from side to side as he recalled and fantasied over the story of spiritual redemption his friend Meacron had shared the night before. The story, as pleasant as it was, covered him with happiness and gratefulness for his friend but that was not the source of his giddy mood. It was the small blue stone Meacron had held while excommunicating the negativity from his mind. Stones like this were rare. Only in the dustiest, rustiest legends were such things remembered. Cherubs were ancient creatures, having heard every story, myth and folktale ever told at one time or another and the three cherubs listening to Meacron’s saga knew it was no accident he had found such a stone on a day when he needed real magic in his life.

By the hand or the webbed claw of the creator, whatever he or she may have used, billions upon billions of souls carrying consciousness had been fashioned in the beginning of time. Planets throughout the universe were playgrounds where these conscious souls could inhabit various vessels. The vessels vary greatly. Some vessels are giants, trolls, dwarves, mortals, quacker ducks, wild chickens, horses, frogs, trees, blades of grass, dandelions, hummingbirds, fishes and even some stones.

Stones are perhaps the most scarce vessels a spirit may inhabit.

There are those who consider the planet itself a stone, and if this is true, then all vessels would therefore be existing within the gracious means of the scariest vessel, which would make it not so scare at all, if that were indeed true.

The stone Meacron found or rather was guided toward, happened to be just such a vessel. Xavier, ancient as he was, had only heard stories of such stones but he had never before seen one.

He chomped away on his egg thinking about it. *I wonder what kind of energy my heart*

would hear if I found that stone, he thought. "Maybe I can help it feel better if it's not feeling all right now," he said out loud.

"What did you say?"

"What!" Xavier looked up and saw Pintor flying overhead with his whip circling over his shoulder. "Zippety-kapow Pintor, how long have you been up there?"

"I just got here," said Pintor hovering. "But I must be off, my whip needs a work out."

"Oll korrekt by me," said Xavier as his friend flew off to do his best at spreading love about the world.

"I've got to get a moving myself," Xavier said inspired by his comrade's action.

"Can't waste the day a sitting around, people have got to fall in love!"

Soon he was swinging his mace into anyone that deserved it. Mid-afternoon came and Xavier found himself near the hill Meacron deemed the new home of his negative energy. Believing his mace had a fairly productive outing he slipped back into the World of Myth and listened for the calling of the stone, but heard nothing. The sun sank low as he flew back and forth between the town of Cheese and Meacron's dismissed energy. He flew figure eight's and criss-cross patterns. He flew as the waves slide through the sea but heard nothing. Then, it happened.

His ears focused in on the distant singing of a woman, and it was then he heard, or thought he might have heard a calling from the stone. Focusing in on the sounds, he flew down into a small gorge. There in the middle where water trickled past moss covered stones, fallen trees and thousands of pussy willows, sat a toad of grand proportions. She was dragging the hide of a dismantled occupine (which resembled a porcupine), through her stringy black hair and singing with her eyes closed. Though Xavier was a naturally beautiful and happy entity he was still shocked at the sight of such a being. In the two worlds he had visited he had never gazed across a gigantic green and gray toad covered in warts with long black hair growing atop its head, and singing no less. The toad opened her enormous eyes and looked directly at Xavier now standing before her. It took a great deal of control for the cherub not to jump back as he looked into her off colored eyes.

She continued to sing while staring, unblinking through Xavier's watering eyes. She

would smile and snort and occasionally swat her upper webbed foot in the direction of the listener attempting, he thought, to charm, although it would have been more charming had it come from a one-hundred year old prostitute with leprosy. Painful smells of rot stung his nose and reddened his eyes.

She broke eye contact and stopped singing to look the cherub up and down properly. Xavier smiled then opened his mouth to speak but before he pronounced a single syllable she started singing again, louder than before.

Her voice wasn't the prettiest voice in the world but it wasn't the worst and so, doing the best to enjoy every moment of his life, Xavier sat on a stone and listened. She stopped. He went to speak and she started singing again. This back and forth continued for longer than Xavier would have liked but as he was here, he felt obliged to stay. The sun had just began to disappear along the horizon before the toad allowed Xavier to speak.

"So tell me small one," she said batting her eyes, walking the line of flirtation. "What brings a cutie-pie like you around this particular watering hole?"

"I've come looking for a stone Meacron told me about. I heard it call out when I heard you singing. I thought you might have it. Do you have a stone with you?"

The toad looked around the ground in an alert, "I'm ready to help," sort of way. She shrugged her shoulders looked at the cherub and said, "There are a lot of stones around here. How is it exactly that I am to know which particular stone you are looking for?"

"It will be smooth and not that big. Oh and it will be blue," said Xavier using his hands to assist in the description.

"What color is it?"

"It's blue."

"And what does it look like exactly?"

"I do not know for sure, I have never seen it before."

"If you have never seen the stone before then how will you recognize it if your eyes happen to fall upon it?" asked Sheri.

"I can hear the voices of souls. This stone I'm looking for has a spirit in it!"

“A spirit you say. My goodness, that is something. Now tell me, can you hear anything from the stone now?”

“No, I only heard a peep out of it and then I flew down here. Since then I have only heard you.”

“Well, if you have heard me, then tell me what my soul is saying to you right now?”

Xavier started to explain that he heard her actual voice and not her soul but stopped himself when he realized he wasn't able to hear her soul at all. He stared into the off-colors of her perplexed eyes.

“It is very strange, but I cannot hear anything from you.”

“Then I must be ahead of the game if a cherub can't hear any dismay coming from my soul,” said the toad smirking.

“I don't think so. Each being's heart is always saying something. I don't think...I have ever come across a person whose soul I couldn't hear. Where does a gigantic frog like you come from? I have never seen one of your kind before.”

“I'm a toad sweetie, and I come from a place even you my gifted little friend can't go.”

“I can go a lot of places,” said Xavier, “but I don't like going under water. I'm not a strong swimmer and don't like holding my breath either.”

“That's something we have in common. I don't like holding my breath, at least not when it comes to waiting for things to happen. Do you let things happen or do you go out and make things happen little one?”

Xavier put his hand to his chin and thought about the question for a moment. “I have never thought about that before. I get up and do what a cherub does, that is all I can do.”

“I don't think you understand what I mean sweetness,” said the toad in an exaggeratedly compassionate tone as she batted a few kinked hairs that passed for eyelashes. “I'm asking you if you are the type of person to sit down all day and wait for things to happen or do you go out and make things happen?”

Xavier thought hard, “I suppose I make things happen,” he finally said in a reflective tone. “I fly around and smash my mace into anyone who needs it. I have to go out and

find the people that need my help. I can't wait for them to find me. They would never find me. I live I Cheese and most of the people I help live in the Realm of Mortals because that is where most of the people are."

"So we have another thing in common. I make things happen as well," said the toad. Her eye lit up over an unintentional smirk. "I love your mace by the way. It looks so big and heavy I'm surprised a little thing like you can carry it."

"It's not at all heavy for me," said Xavier admiring his tool of love. "This mace was forged in the great mountain of Nirvana. It was made just for me by the ancient crafters from the sky. We are like one, my mace and me, and that's why it's not heavy!"

"Tell me small one," said the toad, "are you hungry? Have you eaten your supper yet?"

"No, I haven't eaten. I was going to go to Calliba's Oasis and eat with my friends."

"Oh that must be very nice for you, to dine with your friends in such a comfortable place. Me on the other hand, I have no friends," said the toad.

"Why not," asked the cherub confused.

"I suppose it is because... Well I am a gigantic talking toad."

"What does that have to do with having friends?"

"Most creatures don't like gigantic talking toads," said Sheri elongating her words. "I think they are scared of me." She frowned.

"I don't know anyone, not a single person who wouldn't be friends with somebody just because they are a toad, even one as big as you. I have a friend that is a goat. He is a great guy. And his friend lets me get milk from her, and..." the cherub trailed off into reverie. "Maybe you could come down to the Oasis with me right now and I could introduce you to all the fine folks in there. They are all so very nice and I'm sure they would like you, if only you would give them a chance to do so."

"Oh no, I couldn't do that. You see I am a very shy toad," she said in the softest tone. "I don't like to be around a lot of people but, I do like being around you. Would you sit with me and eat here this evening? I have already caught some fish and was planning on making a fire. Will you eat with me, please?" asked Sheri looking as sad and needy as she

could.

“Of course I will...friend. My name is Xavier.”

“And I am Sheri the Toad,” she said bowing deeply while tucking her toad foot against one of her pustulous nipples erectly jetting forth from a sagging breast. Inside the abandoned footprint stamped on the muddied bank of the pond was a speck of brilliant blue, shiny enough to catch what insignificant light was left in the world and flash forthwith. She saw it, and with her head bent downwards grinned a wicked, unseen smile just as Xavier felt a shock of woe and whimpered.

“What is it friend?” said Sheri rising out of her genuflection and adjusting her stance.

“The stone,” said Xavier sniveling. “I heard the stone, just now, and it doesn’t feel good.”

Sheri looked down and acting surprised plucked the stone from its sequestered sojourn in the mud. “Is this the stone you are referring to little one?”

“Yes, yes that’s it!” exclaimed Xavier bursting with joy. His initial intensions on merely seeing the stone had been abandoned to the need of executing its woeful state and establishing a happier one. “May I have it, I want to help?”

“Help it, whatever do you mean?” asked Sheri.

Xavier proceeded, as best he could, in explaining to the toad the stones senescent state and his ability to permanently relieve its melancholy existence. Furthermore he, through a tangled, corrosive conversation with the toad had surmised its saddened state must have been caused by taking on too much of Meacron’s bad feelings. Finally, Sheri stated her position on the matter, as she was in possession of the stone and, according to her, its rightful owner now.

“I am truly sorry Xavier, but I have grown rather attached to this stone, but, I can compromise with a friend. This is what I can offer you. When you come and visit me, in fact, every time you come and visit me, you can help the stone then, how does that sound?”

Xavier had never, not once in his whole existence been forbidden to help any creature, but confused with conversation, shocked and baffled as he was, he accepted the toad’s

conditions.

## 2

The next day Xavier awoke with the dawning of the sun. He stretched cooed, sang songs and went about his business as usual. In the late afternoon, when work was done, dark clouds carrying rain breached the blue sky. As Xavier had promised, he returned to Sheri and the blue stone.

“Kooka looca Sheri the Toad,” he said as he flapped lightly to the muddied ground. The rain had stopped temporarily but the wind continued howling and the dark clouds continued swirling with menacing threats.

“Hey there handsome, you came back.”

“I said I would and here I am.” Xavier shook his head like a dog relieving some of the water. “Now then, what shall we do this cold evening?”

“I think the first thing we should do is catch us something to eat,” she said turning her back to him and looking out over the water. “You see, there is no food to eat because, well, I’m afraid I fell asleep when the rains came falling.”

Xavier stood there with his arms wrapped around his wet body. “Food sounds mighty fine but I don’t like standing out in this wind and it looks like it will start raining again soon. Rain makes me feel a little cold and wet.”

“My dear sweetheart of a little man, cold and wet is how the rain makes everybody feel, but you don’t hear me complaining.”

“I wasn’t complaining I was just telling you how I felt.”

“That is a good boy.”

“Sheri,” said Xavier just as a plump droplet of rain struck him on the forehead, “how about you hop down to Calliba’s Oasis with me? We can go inside where there is no rain and no wind and eat in there. I could introduce me, I mean you, to all the people I know. You could have friends in there. Friends are good. They’ll make you laugh and they’ll listen to you just like I’m doing now.”

“I’m not ready for that baby,” she said. Her voice rising and fading in the gusting

winds. “You are the first friend I’ve ever had and, I’m afraid I don’t move too quickly into change. I like being alone, and if I’m not alone, I like being with you.”

The rain had started again.

Xavier continued, “But you might like it in Calliba’s—”

“You are adorable you see,” interrupted the toad. “You have an appealing face and wings and are loved, not because of who you are, but because of what you look like. Pretty people do not understand this concept. Me on the other hand, I am ugly. I know that, I even saw it on your face when you first looked at me yesterday, that is why I kept singing. I know I’m not the best singer in the world but I thought it was a way I could show you I’m not, all ugly.” She finishing with, “But you know that now, don’t you, my friend, my very best friend in all of the worlds.”

With this Sheri turned her head just enough to see Xavier’s face transform. She turned away and smiled with great delight knowing she had pierced the cherubs psyche with something he had never experienced in all his years. Despite his long life Xavier had never experienced guilt. It had always been around of course, but guilt and Xavier had never before been acquainted. Guilt did not waste its opportunity. It burrowed deeply into its new host. Sheri watched Xavier’s stomach flex and his brow drop as the parasite nested and began feeding. *Her very best friend in the all the worlds, and I looked at her, and I did think she was ugly,* he thought as guilt and he began dancing, guilt leading of course.

Xavier did not ask Sheri to leave again and he did not question her solitude. He stayed outside with the wind, the rain, the toad, and the guilt.

The pond looked like a boiling pot of water. The fish seemed to jump at every drop of rain. The toad waded out into the thrashing pond and as a fish surfaced to bite she swatted it onto shore in front of Xavier to thump about and die. There was no chance of building a fire in this weather and though it was far from his favorite food, Xavier sat with his bottom in the mud and ate his fish raw.

Sheri smiled as he chewed. She turned back towards the water and swatted a fish up into the air for herself. The fish fell and she caught it in her mouth but she did not swallow. Xavier looked at her and she looked back with a long crooked smile that moved as

the fish's tail and body squirmed against her cheeks as she waded back onto shore. Between her lips decorated with yellow puss sacks, red sores, and brown warts the fish's head popped out. Xavier winced as he watched its gills fan out rapidly, desperately trying to pull what oxygen could be found in the rain. Without breaking eye contact the toad tilted her head slightly allowing the rain to enter its gills prolonging its life. Lightening flashed illuminating the tortured eyes of the fish.

Xavier, already racked with emotions he had never before felt was now dealing with the eyes of a scared fish forced to spend its last moments of life in terrified hopelessness. Sheri watched amusedly at his anxiety.

“Why don't you swallow your food Sheri?”

“My dear sweet friend,” she said sucking the fish back into her mouth and pocketing it in her cheek. “I like the way it feels in my mouth. It is a wonderful feeling.”

“But I don't think it is very nice to the fish, making him die in your mouth feeling so scared.”

“My dearest, darlingest, naivest Xavier, these fish are our food. It's what the creator wants us to do with them. They are not the same as you and me. They don't feel things the way the real creatures of the world do. We are the most important element of existence, not these stupid things.”

“But wouldn't it be nicer if you just bit down and ended it right away. I know we must all eat but this doesn't seem right to me,” said the cherub whose words were having difficulty moving through the high winds. Thunder rumbled through the sky hammering against his ears as lighting flashed shrinking his pupils to pin holes.

“You worry too much little one,” she said as the fish finally stopped wiggling. Then she swallowed.

“I do not. In fact I never worry. Cherubs can't worry, at least I don't think we can. It is not in our nature.”

“Well, worrying too much is a bad thing of course, but not worrying at all must be even worse,” belched the toad. “Since you are my very best friend in the whole world I am going to help you.”

“How are you going to help me?” asked Xavier.

“I am going to teach you the true nature of the worlds,” said the toad with a gushy smirk spreading across her eyes and polka-dotted mouth.

“The true nature of the world?”

“Yes, it has become very obvious to me that you have been sheltered from the truth, and I, Sheri the Toad, will help you to see the truth.”

The toad spoke for a lengthy period of time, through the winds and rain and the deafening claps of thunder. Xavier listened, and listened some more. The toad was a good talker. Her words were silky, smooth and confident. The certainty she expressed was infectious. She spoke of the world and all its wicked inhabitants focusing mainly on the brains of the evil corrupters. It made Xavier feel sick when he heard of all the lies, the manipulation, the fraud and narcissistic greed mortals were diseased with. He heard about governments lying to their people, children being abused in every conceivable way and then how they were used as slaves. He heard about human beings using other human beings to further themselves and their quests for control, money and power.

When she was finished she quickly, almost violently asked Xavier if he would like to see the troubled blue stone. Numb, not from the rain and wind but from her words, he instinctually he nodded. With all that had happened; the introduction to guilt, the evil doing mortals, child abuse, and the tortured fish, Xavier had completely forgotten about the stone.

Sheri lifted her foot exposing it.

“Now I am allowing you to try and help the stone but remember, its mine.”

The little cherub, who was now moved beyond the capacity for cogent thought, waddled over to the stone and dropped the chain attached to the mace. He held the round wet ball carefully not to poke himself with the spikes and gently tapped the blue stone once. He immediately felt the soul inside glow with goodness. Normally he would jump into the air and shout kooka-looca, then do a jig, but the spell he was under rendered him emotionless.

Sheri smiled.

She moved back to her original position and placed her foot over the blue stone. The orgasmic pleasures projecting from the stone were cut off.

Their eyes met.

“That seemed very pleasant for you,” said the toad stuttering and shaking slightly with near uncontrolled ecstasy.

“Yep,” was all Xavier could conjure.

“Will you come back tomorrow?” asked the toad pushing her bottom lip out.

He nodded his head slightly, feeling emptied.

“Good,” responded Sheri, “then it’s a date.”

Xavier left cold, tired and with a tornado of thoughts damaging his brain.

**Lynnandra is  
Dead! Long Live**

# the Tooth Fairy

## 1

The Tooth Fairy had heeded the calls of all the worlds fallen teeth long before the sun was ready to rise. She was quick, able to function in a frenzied pace only speed junkies and night cleaning crews can fully understand. With her pouch full of teeth she sped home anxious to introduce them to the Castle of Dentin.

She was desperate to show them that they were still wanted, still useful, and that their nomadic period in life had ended. She could burst with sadness imagining the sickening woe they were feeling. They were after all, recently rejected from their gummy homes; pushed into a vast world where they believed they no longer had value. She had to show them this wasn't true. She needed to prove to them they were loved, loved by her, their new mother. She would care for them. She could save them. This was her gift. The gift she alone could provide to the fallen, and it gave her some solace because she knew, it was a gift none could give to her.

Upon arrival she dipped her hands into the pouch and scooped as many of her new arrivals out as was possible. She then held them above her head and sang out, "Welcome to your new home!" then drew them close to her wild eyes and shouted, "Isn't it wonderful!" Squealing with delight she placed the teeth back into her pouch then fluttered up to a chandelier under construction that, at a glance, appeared to be hanging in thin air.

The Castle of Dentin was ever growing and her latest idea had been to build a chandelier. She had seen one in the bedroom of a child and was struck by its beauty. The chande-

lier she envisioned was huge and gorgeous and the excitement to begin construction overwhelmed her.

The chandelier, now weighing hundreds of pounds even at this unfinished stage, hung from a single column of teeth that resembled an upside-down capital L. In her over excitement to construct the chandelier she bypassed simple carpentry guidelines such as: the building of walls or a ceiling first. In a frenzy lacking foresight she cut to the chase by placing one single tooth on top of another, on top of another, on top of another until she thought it was high enough. She then stacked teeth, still only one by one, at a right angle until she deemed it far enough. Off the end of the upside-down L shape, she began building her version of a chandelier. Though unfinished, the chandelier was now colossal and looked far too heavy to be supported by such a thin chain of teeth. Nevertheless, there it hung and was now about to grow bigger, one tooth at a time.

The first step in construction was always the same. She had to begin by removing the teeth inside her mouth. Their ability to subdue her needs had ended. She plucked them out, one at a time and placed them onto the chandelier with magic, which was better than any cement or glue, and there they would remain for eternity.

Once her mouth was emptied she reached into the pouch and placed most of the newly collected teeth onto the chandelier, not with magic but with gravity only. There they would wait, not long, just a few days or so before she would need them. Just a few days before it was their turn to spend the night inside her mouth. Just a few days before they would be necessary to subdue her urges.

She finished and admired her work, but only for a moment. Only a few minutes of creative construction had passed but already her mouth had been devoid of teeth for too long. The hunger beckoned and the time for admiration had ended. She buzzed to the other side of the chandelier and plucked thirty-two teeth from their gravity held positions and set them, in no particular order, inside her needy gum-holes.

She breathed out heavily, quivered and slothfully fluttered down to the mosaic floor. Her eyes rolled back and showed nothing but white. A drool puddle formed below her sagging bottom lip. For a few minutes she felt nothing but absolute peace. She gave the

teeth a home and the teeth gave back. The gifts her teeth gave her could not be calculated and she was grateful for the relief, but like all creatures she need more than the company of teeth. She pushed herself up and wiped the drool from the side of her face then took to a slow paced flight toward companionship. It would be hours before the sun migrated to the horizon.

Recently she had been enjoying the company of Sheri the Toad but as much as she enjoyed the toad and her sinister companionship she longed for an old friend. With lazy eyes and sloshy muscles she flew like a butterfly through gusty winds. She was happy for the most part. She had her fix and she had a little free time and the village she intended to visit wouldn't take long to get to, despite her impaired flying.

She arrived and flew into the heart of one of the dirtiest suburbs where a string of tightly woven alleyways held most of the undesirables society had deemed, uncivilized. There was little law enforcement here and curiously enough, it was the one place a person could be free to do what they wanted, so long as you could hold your own against the rest of the ruffians.

The Tooth Fairy buzzed in zigzagging patterns until, in one of the more poorly lit alleyways, she spotted the person she had been looking for, someone she had known for a long time. Alex Maynard (or at least he used to be Alex Maynard before he was bitten) was feasting on a tired old prostitute. Old as she was, she had fight in her and was still kicking which meant Alex had only just sunk his fangs into her neck. The Tooth Fairy hovered and watched. She knew the prostitute would soon be completely paralyzed and numb, readied to enter the afterlife, and as much as her own death appealed to her, it didn't take away from the unbinding terror of it all.

The Tooth Fairy, not quite so buzzed as she was before, swooped down to the tragedy and stared at Alex. He was in a rather peculiar position sitting piggy-back on his victim who was alternating between swaying weakly on her feet to thrashing about.

Alex the vampire was slight, more than slight in fact, he was a dwarf. His fangs were bucked. His dark hair was always parted down the middle. He was dressed a loose fitting pin stripped jacket, red with white stripes and matching pants, pointed leather boots with

shiny buckles, and a polka dotted purple and white bowtie. His eyes were closed and his Adam's apple was bobbing up and down. The Tooth Fairy liked him because they had a great deal in common, not just the lack of height but the thirst as well. She enjoyed being around people who were small like her but she liked being around addicts more. Alex was the perfect combination.

She flew closer and flapped her wings as quickly as she could trying to fan up enough wind to get his attention. When that didn't work she moved even closer, clearing her throat with a loud, "Umm-hum," while narrowly avoiding the epileptic dancing gestures of the unfortunate hooker. Alex opened one of his eyes, saw her, but did not stop feeding. Instead he began slurping the blood loudly and began a series of exaggerated hand motions, caressing the thrashing neck and head of the dying woman.

Some might believe Alex needed the nourishment but the Tooth Fairy knew the greedy bastard must have drained more than a handful of the victim's prior to this moment. He simply loved overindulgence.

The girl finally lost all color, stopped swaying, then fell face first to the ground. Alex rode her all the way, smiling with his eyes locked on the Tooth Fairy's. Only after she hit the ground did he removed his bucked fangs from her neck. Still staring at the Tooth Fairy he stood, wiped the blood remaining from his bottom lip with a single finger, then looked at it and smiled. He slowly placed the finger in his mouth, sucked the blood from it and then removed it with a loud "Pop!"

"Hello sweetness," he said.

"Are you talking to me to simply giving thanks to the blood you ingested?" asked the Tooth Fairy.

"Perhaps it was a little of both; killing two birds with one rock as it were."

"I finished working—"

"And desired my debonair smooth company I'm assuming," he interrupted, adjusting his bowtie.

"Don't flatter yourself Alex. What I was going to say is I finished working and thought I might spend a little money on a good hooker. Unfortunately you just killed her

and now I shall have to spend the rest of my time sulking with my horny loins and unsatisfied heart.”

“Ha ha, little fairy, you have no loins and no way of feeling horny, this I know but I do appreciate your dark sense of humor. Incidentally, she’s not dead, not yet. I simply stopped drinking her to give you greetings. I shall have to finish up soon or this soul will become dammed just like me. That is unless you want to climb inside her and wet yourself first.”

“You are so sick. I knew you had a twisted soul but I never thought I would hear that kind of filth come from your mouth,” said the Tooth Fairy putting her finger down her throat and mimicking a gag reaction.

“Rubbish, you are every bit as sick as I am, perhaps even a little bit more so,” said the vampire raising one of his eyebrows.

“That is most likely true. Now then would you finish up so we can spend a little quality time together, before you are burnt to death by the sun?”

“Quiet your mouth and let me enjoy my meal, before it gets cold” said Alex.

Stillness flooded the alley. Old newspapers drifted in slow motion as small rodents stopped scavenging for food and sat still. The paralyzing effects of the bite transcended into the surrounding area numbing the minds or perhaps the emotions of all who were near. As Alex continued getting his fix, the Tooth Fairy took one of her new teeth out of her pocket. She stared at it feeling both love and hatred over her addiction. She removed a single tooth and replaced it with the new one and instantly felt its power. After slumping against her friends leg and drooling, she placed the old tooth safely in her pocket, then her eyes and spine went limp and her lungs slowed to a minimal pace. The night was cool and beautiful but the fairy had no comprehension of that. She was living inside her own head with only the numbing effects of her new tooth to keep her company.

It seemed like forever before Alex finished with the hooker but in moments like these, time stands still.

“You ready to leave this alley?” asked Alex licking his lips and shrugging.

The fairy smacked her lips together attempting to rustle up enough spit to talk.

“You know...there is nothing like the first time,” she said, lazily batting her eyes and speaking one syllable with every beat of her heart.

Alex, feeling very pleased himself, said in slow motion, “What do you mean little fairy?”

“The first time I put a new tooth in my gums, it is at full strength. It never has the same effect again. It never feels the same after the first time you stick it in.”

“It’s giving you its best shot, perhaps trying to make a good first impression.”

“That’s funny, but maybe you’re right,” said the Tooth Fairy, now speaking a little more fluidly. “I think it must be, that it’s fresh. It has been recently separated from its grower, its first mother. I become the mother after that, but...no you are right.”

“I believe it is quite possible that you, my little friend, may be too stoned to operate properly. So please, confide in this truth. I believe it imperative you stop sucking on those teeth so hard and let’s proceed three alleys down that way, to where the homeless junkies hang out.”

She looked up and saw his arm pointing overhead as she was still leaning against his leg. Then she lowered her head and squinted in the same direction.

“There we will be in fine company, away from the scurvy, away from the mind numbing sheep of this common place. You know, blend in and pretend we are just two more mortal dopers looking for the company of our own kind...and perhaps another hit.”

“You are truly a fiend,” she smiled, “sucker of the blood clots, crimson chugger, hemoglobin—.”

“Calm down now, I only drink the freshest of blood thank you, there are no clots or lumps in the meals I devour.”

The Tooth Fairy stuttered, “I, I, I,” trying to ascertain the line of thought she had moments before, but the thought was lost, so she continued, “I’m only a foot tall and have wings.” She leaned forward and fluttered them lightly as she forced a laugh. “I can’t blend in with anybody from this world.”

“You silly girl, haven’t you ever heard of hallucinating?”

“Yes, but what does—”

“Those foul degenerates will believe they are seeing things or at least that’s what they will convince themselves tomorrow morning when they wake-up. That is if I don’t kill them all first.”

“All right but I’m slipping under your jacket until we get there.”

Alex agreed then buttoned his coat with her inside. She was not longer than he was wide and so it was easy to stretch out and rest comfortably on his puffy stomach full of blood. It was warm inside there and soothing. She felt as snug and natural as a hand feels in a mitten and this feeling of comfort had unfortunately, become rare. She sucked on her teeth and felt sad for herself. Alex didn’t trouble her with conversation until their short journey had ended.

After the unbuttoning she peak her head out timidly and saw the other addicts slumped over in the calloused, unseen alleyway, and was reminded that she was completely and utterly alone in the invisible prison called addiction, just like all these deprived souls. Though she had the company of a real friend, her addiction, as always was her own.

In a strange way this place reminded her of the Enchanted Forest of Dentin, but instead of fallen trees covered in moss laying across brooks that meandered through shallow valleys, there were twenty or thirty fallen souls sprawled out across the trampled dirt and shallow pools of urine. Legs looked like shadowed logs covered with filth and grime accented by the stench of sickness, yet somehow being surrounded by all this disgust felt good and welcoming to the vampire and fairy.

They sat in-between two skinny unshaven men who, at some point, had handed the reigns of self-control off to a substance that gallivanted into an undisciplined world of misshapen mirrors, reflecting cracked images of their former selves. One of the men had a half empty bottle of rye. Alex took the bottle, snickered, then took a sip from it. He offered it over to his friend and she took a tiny slug then stuck out her tongue in disgust.

The Tooth Fairy whispered into Alex’s ear and he smiled. They stood up and he twisted an invisible mustache then bounced around on his feet like a boxer. He circled his fists round and round then stepped forward and delivered a pretend, yet convincing left hook to the face of the Tooth Fairy who snapped her head to the side and spit out most of her

teeth. She then began shaking and whimpering.

“That’s what you get trollop. Don’t talk back to me,” said Alex.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” said the fairy overacting her part. “I won’t do it anymore if you promise not to hit me again.” A few bloodshot eyes looked their way but nobody stirred. They both started laughing.

The Tooth Fairy picked up the teeth and examined them with a thoughtful eye. She replaced all but one, tucked it away, grabbed a freshie then took another swig from the bottle of rye. Alex took another swig, licked his lips distastefully and decided it wasn’t the right sustenance to satisfy. He turned and found himself eye level with the neck of the former owner of the bottle. Sinking his bucked fangs into the drunk’s neck felt good but it was like smoking a cigarette in a drunken stupor; he didn’t do it because he needed it but because it was there. The Tooth Fairy sat inebriated and watched the show.

Alex stopped and sat back down with a distant look in his eyes.

“Why must we do these things?” asked the Tooth Fairy without a trace of cynicism.

Alex thought for a moment then spoke. “I once heard a tale, whether it is folklore, myth, legend or even the truth, who really knows but it is a story never-the-less. After all we can only make assessments in our limited lifetimes about the worlds and their functions in the time and space before us. So my dear sweet girl, permit me to tell you a story.”

The Tooth Fairy snapped forward, out of her trance, and began to drool with euphoric waves of energy electrifying her body. “Oh please do,” she moaned. It wasn’t every night she was invited to be entertained with a story.

“Well, let me start by telling you it is not a pretty story, or a happy one, but it is a story relating to the worlds of ghouls and those cursed to live in it.”

“Ahhhhh, a story...what’s it called?”

“It is called...”

## **The Castration of Long Legs**

## 1

“There was once a society of dwarves, little people like you and me, well not like you but dwarves like me. They lived happy lives without anything ever happening unexpectedly or out of place. A comfortable world —”

“Wait a moment,” interrupted the Tooth Fairy at a stoned pace. “Where does this story come from, the Realm of Mortals, the Land of Myth?”

“It matters not. The story stands alone. It doesn’t require a specific place of origin.”

“Oh, good enough,” said the Tooth Fairy.

“As I was saying, it was a comfortable world, or place, or town, or dwelling as it were, where dwarves reined as kings and queens because that’s all there were, little people. Then under a blue moon was born a child, a child like none other born before him. Without being given a chance for a normal name like Titus Tweddle, or Stephan Salazar, this child was named Long Legs.”

The Tooth Fairy was about to speak but Alex continued quickly, “And yes, that was his first and last name, Long...Legs. And yes, he was called that because he had long legs, very long legs. He was born head first followed by a nonexistent neck and a normal torso but then came the legs, and the legs well, they kept coming and coming. The legs were so long that the mother ran out of birthing juice!”

“Amazing,” said the Tooth Fairy.

“Yes,” agreed Alex. “Long was born with long legs and that itself was the kernel of popcorn under the gums of the dwarves and their tradition of existence, a very small existence I believe.”

“Funny,” snickered the Tooth Fairy.

“The great council, the magnificent council, the council formed from the wisest of minds capable of leading, gathered together to discuss the inflammation in their town! ‘What to do with the poor creature known as Long Legs?’ they pondered.”

The Tooth Fairy, now completely engrossed in the tale, continued to listen while suckling and fondling her teeth with her fingers and tongue.

“Those extraordinary leaders,” continued Alex, “after much discussion over a period of weeks, decided not to kill the infant child. They all patted themselves on the back for their kindness and considerable compassion for life. They were however not through with utilizing their immense intellect. They knew something must be done with the unfortunate child born with such a horrible, defective disease. They realized that the flawed child would never be able to see life in its purest, very best fashion, which according to them is roughly three feet off the ground. Poor Long Legs would be forced to view everything from a lesser vantage point, a different vantage point than them, thus eliminating any chance for the disabled boy to gain the proper outlook on life.

“There was also the matter of the boy growing up into a man. And what do young men like to do? They like to plant their seed in girls. Now this foreseeable outrage, this unthinkable act could not possibly be allowed to happen! It was bad enough one life had to be cursed with those cumbersome legs but to allow it to spread into others was beyond inhumane. It was inconceivable. ‘This must not be allowed to happen’ roared the wise council!”

“Oh my goodness, please don’t tell me...”

“Aha but I must,” said Alex.

“Who elected these people to office?” asked the Tooth Fairy.

“They are leaders so I assume they elected themselves, and the non-leaders agreed in their arrogant, ignorant non-leadership way. But seriously who cares about government when the rest of the story has yet to be told? So on that note, may I please continue?”

“Yes, please do,” said the fairy in her politest voice.

“So with their bulky minds and let’s not forget, their correct ways of thinking, the council decided to castrate Long Legs.”

“So they castrated a little baby?”

“Not exactly, at least that’s not the way I heard the story.”

“So...what happened?”

“Well, the castration was put off until the boy entered puberty. They put a great stake in the middle of town for all to witness the saving, the salvation, the deliverance from the

cursed semen boiling up in the boys loins. They tied his hands behind his back then tied him to the stake so his feet were not touching the ground. They lit torches and planted them below him—”

“To set him on fire!”

“No, no, not to burn him, they were too intellectual for such barbarism. They did it to light things up for the show. They disrobed him and—”

“And all the ladies jaws dropped to the floor,” interjected the Tooth Fairy.

“Yes, I imagine their jaws did come unhinged,” laughed Alex. “So there the boy hung. The elected takers of the testicles took them right off. Then as an added bonus, they sawed his legs off halfway between the knee and hip and gave him a new pair of shoes, the end.”

There was stillness in the air as Alex stared at the Tooth Fairy stirring with a look of horror. “Why did they saw his legs off?” she finally asked.

“So he could see the world from the correct perspective.”

“Why did you tell me that awful story?” she questioned numbly.

“Don’t you see? Long Legs wasn’t a freak. He wasn’t abnormal, he wasn’t a mutant and he most certainly wasn’t diseased, he was simply different.”

Alex stared at her longly, willing her to understand but her blank expression said everything.

“You asked why we must do the things we do, me as a vampire and you as the collector of teeth. We must do them because that’s who we are. We don’t have any choice just as Long Legs had no choice in what he was. His environment was the majority, he was the minority and if the majority says you are a freak, then the majority believes it, but that doesn’t make them right. I don’t mind doing what I do and behaving as I am. You on the other hand my sweet little fairy friend, do. May I give you a tiny bit of advice?”

“Sure, what is it?” she said contemplating.

He placed his arm over her shoulder and squeezed. “Don’t try to be anything but who you are. There is only one Tooth Fairy in all the worlds, so you might as well show everyone who you really are, instead of spending your time beating yourself up and wish-

ing you could conform.”

## 2

The Tooth Fairy, doped up on teeth yet rattled from the tale, crouched forward and reflected on Alex’s story. She thought and contemplated and as she did a sensation, or a sense of intuition, like feeling the moment before an accident occurs, or having the inkling of a dream dreamt but not remembered, tapped at her psyche. As her focus fell from her teeth and herself she turned toward Alex and said in a distant tone, “That wasn’t just a story, was it?” She looked at him not caring what his verbal response might be; she was looking for a reaction.

Her friend met her gaze with blank eyes then quickly smiled. His voice cracked slightly, “I don’t know what you mean.”

“That story you told me,” continued the Tooth Fairy a little louder, her eyes shifting as if she was remembering something she had forgotten, “it’s old. It’s not just old, it is ancient. It reeks of truth...and wisdom and...” She glared at him, studied him and then asked, “How is it you know this story?”

“I know lots of stories dear fairy, as I’m sure you do too. As I’m sure all these fellows do as well.” He said this waving his arm about but not breaking eye contact.

“What exactly are you hiding? Why won’t you tell me?”

“There is nothing to tell,” laughed Alex.

“Why won’t you tell me?” asked the fairy again, this time in a voice less inquisitive and more demanding.

Alex sighed then looked down. He sat for a long moment then said, “It’s simply one of those things that isn’t at all important for you to know.”

“I don’t care. If it’s not for me to know you shouldn’t have told me the story.”

“I told you the story to help you my fairy friend. I told you the story to benefit you and your life and your relentlessly downtrodden state of mind.”

“And I appreciate it, I really do. It was a good story, but now I want to know how you

know this story, and I want to know why I know it is true.”

Alex sat silently staring at the ground, then he breathed out hard enough for his shoulders to fall and said, “You’re right. This poor chap Long Legs was real. The story’s real and every dwarf living in the Realm of Mortals knows it well because,” he paused as his watery eyes caught hers, “when that tribe of well-to-do brainiacs committed that atrocity against that poor boy, they were banished.” Alex’s voice held more than a trace of sadness. “Banished from the World of Myth forever and placed in this nearly magicless Realm of Mortals to suffer, or to live, however you wish to look at it.”

As if he had done nothing more than simply stated his favorite color, the Tooth Fairy spat out, “Nearly magicless?”

Alex felt amused at her child-like lack of focus. It rarely mattered what he said, she was always listening but her attention jumped around with the consistency of crackling fat in a skillet.

“Well, this world isn’t completely devoid of magic after all. In truth it’s everywhere, in birth and death and wind and cold. It’s just not the same type of magic, and we all feel it.”

“We?” asked the Tooth Fairy.

“All dwarves, every single one of us in this world is descended from that narrow minded, ignorant, narcissistic, cursed tribe.”

“You mean before Long Legs there were no dwarves in this world?”

“Of course not!” exclaimed Alex as if it were common knowledge. “All little people are magical and descended from magical places; Dwarves, Cherubs...and fairies.”

The Tooth Fairy either didn’t hear or didn’t listen and continued with, “What happened to you Alex? You’re a dwarf, but you’re a vampire.”

After a long inhale through the nose Alex blurted out, “I couldn’t stand living in that swamp with those self-righteous morons. I was born there you know.” He had abandoned his usual charming method of speaking and with his fist clenched he continued, “I knew the story and the more I thought about it the more it ate away at me. Even as a young child that loss of magic, that thing I could have had if I wasn’t birthed into that specific

tribe...was stolen from me. I dreamed of the magical life in that other dimension of myth...that life...I could have had such a different existence if only I hadn't been birthed under that idiot." His eyes widened and he quickly corrected himself, "Those idiots."

It was a slip of the tongue and one he hoped the Tooth Fairy wouldn't catch. He was thinking of his father, the so called king of the dwarves living in that swamp. The king who liked to be referred to as, the Dawn Trader. A man who, to this day had dealings with many fairies including direct dealings with the Tooth Fairy herself, however Alex had no desire for her to be made aware of this fact.

On their first encounter as adults Alex thought she would recognize him from his youth as she had seen him many times, fortunately he supposed, she didn't and he wanted it to stay that way. He didn't want her to think poorly of him. He used to love playing with the fairies his father held prisoner in their castle and didn't want his friendship with her now to be misconstrued with his childhood fascination. He studied her quickly. Her eyes showed no interest in his tongue's betrayal and so he continued.

"So I left home in search of magic." He hoped he would never have to tell her that the true reason he left home was because he didn't want to follow in his father's footsteps. The idea of paying for fairies and holding them prisoner to appease that lost need for magic was reprehensible to his morals.

He continued with his usual charming speaking method, "When the conventional ways didn't satisfy me I sought out a vampire...to change me, and that's exactly what happened. I asked to be bitten. It's not the magical life I dreamed about as a kid, but it is better than nothing."

The Tooth Fairy was speechless. She had never considered why Alex was a vampire, she had simply accepted it as truth and moved on from there.

He continued, "Perhaps that's why I feed so often...and so much. Perhaps in the deepest recesses of my mind I think I can squeeze out a little bit more magic with another pint of blood. In truth, I'm just like the rest of these retches," he said this scowling at the other drunks and junkies in the alley.

The Tooth Fairy sat quietly for a moment out of respect. She hadn't meant to drag

such harsh truths out from her friend. Alex had always been kind and excepting of her and she regretted forcing such sadness from him, but after a few long seconds she couldn't help herself, and started up again with the questions.

“What were the conventional things you tried?”

“Pardon me?”

“You said after you left home you sought out magic in the conventional ways dwarves do here.”

“Ah, yes,” he said with a nod, “All dwarves in this realm are seeking magic in one form or another. It's as if we were birthed on a planet that has a little bit of air to breath but not as much as our genes are accustomed too.” His mood shifted from somber to pleasant. “Some dwarves become performers seeking to get a laugh from a crowd to make up for that loss—”

“Laughter,” said the Tooth Fairy in a subconsciously sarcastic tone.

“Laughter is powerful magic,” said Alex in a serious tone. “It can change people's moods and minds. It penetrates on levels words and even music are jealous of. It is the language of the soul. Laughter is quite possibly the most magical thing in this world. Most would argue in favor of love but believe me it is a close, very close competition.”

The wheels in the Tooth Fairy's head began to turn on this provocative idea as Alex continued. “Some with meatier backs become miners, seeking to possess the magic of jewels and conform to a lifestyle of living inside mountains. Some become metal workers forging swords and rings—”

“If dwarves are not magical,” interrupted the Tooth Fairy, “then how much better could the swords and rings be than any ordinary sword made from a normal mortal?”

Alex laughed. “It's belief. In the deepest recesses of their subconscious, mortals believe dwarves to be magical, and if you concentrate that belief into a ring or something else, then the magic becomes real. But to sew up this idea, basically it doesn't matter what a dwarf does to achieve that feeling of being magical; all dwarves, whether they know it or not, are seeking that lost sensation of being something more than a simple mortal.”

“So every dwarf in this world is wandering around looking for magic,” said the Tooth Fairy reflectively.

“No, not all of them.” Alex said this with sadness and scorn. “The one’s that remain in the swamp aren’t looking for magic. In their mind’s they have all the magic in the world, all the magic in the universe.”

“What magic?” asked the Tooth Fairy confused.

“What magic indeed! Their magic is delusion.” His eyes glinted as he enjoyed the confused look on the Tooth Fairy’s face. Her puzzlement amused him on a level that was almost cruel. The same level where teasing a child is funny. Her face twisted and her eyebrows nearly convulsed with wonderment then, just before she was about to speak he continued.

“It’s the same concept as dwarves making a magical ring or sword. It’s about belief.”

“Oh!” said the Tooth Fairy relieved yet still lacking understanding.

“I will tell you what,” said Alex shaking his head, “all those dwarves who still live in the swamp where I grew up.” He paused again and made a face, “Those townies who refused to leave, are some of the worst people in this world, and they are heavy hitters when it comes to the power of belief. Even after the banishment, even after being stripped of everything we are, those chuckleheads haven’t changed. They still march around with the faith that God, or the Source, or the Creator or whatever you want to call it, loves them better than any other beings on the planet. In their minds the Creator holds them in the highest regards. They are the most special, most amazing, greatest thing on the planet. They think they are superior in every way to every other person on this world. But they don’t just think it, they know it, and it makes them not only stupid but dangerous.”

The Tooth Fairy wasn’t really listening. She had noticed the skies brightening with the coming sun and had other questions she wanted answered. So she pretended to listen and waited to talk. When she had her opening she asked, “How did I know that story was true?”

Alex turned his head toward the heavens and saw color begin to soak into the dark-

ness, “The reason you know the story of Long Legs is true is because you are a fairy.”

“So what?”

“So look how small you are, how small every fairy is. Do you think that is just by chance? Do you think its simple coincidence that fairies are so small? You are all related to dwarves and we to you.”

“What? That doesn’t make any sense. Fairies are much smaller than any dwarf and we have wings.”

“Every dog is descended from wolves, even a pug or a toy poodle’s ancient ancestors were wolves. They simply mutated over time and breeding, well, not simply I suppose. You know the story of Long Legs somewhere in your genetic coding or fascia or I don’t know where, but all history is handed down from parents to children, parents to children, parents to children, and so on and so on.”

The two friends stood up as the sun nearly broke the horizon and were about to part ways when the Tooth Fairy asked her final question. “Do you ever think about going back? To the swamp I mean. To your home. You must have family there?”

Alex chuckled lightly reflecting on his father and then stopped. The smile left his face and he said, “You are on a roll tonight my little fairy. I can’t remember the last time I have had so many painful memories brought up, up to the surface I mean.”

“I’m sorry,” she said and nearly flew away but Alex continued.

“I haven’t been gone that long you know. Just thirteen or fourteen years is all, or is it more? I don’t miss anything about that place, except one, my little brother.” Alex looked down sadly as shadows were beginning to form under the breaking sun. “I miss little Compa. He was such a sweet kid.”

## Sequestered Infections

## 1

Time passed and seasons changed. The warmth of summer had given way to fall and then winter. The Tooth Fairy continued buying teeth from sleeping children, Xavier kept meeting with Sheri, and Sheri with the Tooth Fairy.

Porter continued slipping from one dimension to the next but far less frequently because when the ponds froze over, he had no place to clean up and his mothers questions as to how a child could get so dirty this time of year began to raise suspicions.

As winter rotated into spring, Porter's trips increased although they were primarily spent in the forest as the town held far less interest and much more stress than he cared to endure. Though he almost never went into town he was able to meet quite a few other children. Paul had made a habit of telling kids about the rebellious juvenile with no teeth who ran away from home and had been living in the forest. The strange story had struck the interest of many children and, as if a piper were blowing on a silent whistle, they came to him.

"Hello Porter Stebbins," said a small voice. He had been sitting on a mossy log next to a dammed stream with his fishing line in the water.

"Hello to you Sally Nelson," said Porter to a cute little girl walking his way with her fishing pole in hand. "Where is your brother today?"

"He had to stay home because he's grounded," she said.

"What does that mean?"

"Grounded? It means he got into a fight with my father and can't play outside for a long while."

"What were they fighting about?"

"I'm not sure," she said sitting next to him and dropping her line in the water. "But I think it had something to do with daddy's friend. She's a girl."

"Why do you think that?"

"I walked in the house last night and saw my mama crying. My brother was yelling at my father and he mentioned his lady friend, which made my mama cry, even harder than she was before. My dad hit him and said he couldn't come out of his room for a long

time, or something like that. I'm not for sure because I had to go straight to my room and was only listening."

Porter nearly dropped his fishing rod when he heard that Sally's father had struck her brother. "Why on Earth, (a saying he had learned from Paul) would your dad strike him?"

"My daddy does that sort of thing all the time. Hitting people is just another way he communicates his feelings, that is what he says. At least that's what he told my mama one night after he communicated with her. His favorite saying is, 'Love is a fist.'"

Porter's face had turned pale, he felt lightheaded and as always he instinctively reached into his pocket and grabbed hold of his wooden horse.

"Porter," she said with concern, "are you all right?"

"I'm all right but could we talk about something else, something nice like the sun setting over the mountains or a bird song."

"Porter," said Sally "why are you like that?"

"Like what."

"Well, it seems sometimes when we're just talking, you start acting funny."

"I just don't like hearing about fighting and yelling and people treating other people in such terrible ways."

"I guess, but it's not that big of a deal. That's just the way things are," said Sally matter-of-factly while snapping her line back, thinking she had caught a fish. It was only a snag.

"Why is that the way things are?"

"That is just the way the world is. That's the way people are. All people are that way Porter, all of them. That is just the reality of things."

"I was taught that a person defines their own reality."

"Well then, I guess reality is defined by the biggest person in the room. At home my father defines our reality."

Porter started to feel the color come back into his flesh and he chose to take his own advice. "It sure is a beautiful day, isn't it?" He said forcing a smile across his face.

"Porter I absolutely love your smile. It seems so odd that you don't have a single tooth

in your mouth but once I got used to it...well I sure do like looking at it. It makes me feel good.”

“I’m glad for that.”

The two friends continued to fish and were joined by a few other children. The colors of the setting sun filled the sky and then beams from the moon slipped through the sparse cloud cover before Porter left for home.

## 2

The same sunset cast its glow on Sheri the Toad and Xavier. Not only did he feel obligated to spend a little time each day with the one who continuously called him “My best friend in the whole world,” but there was also the blue stone.

“So you see Xavier, not all creatures are created the same. Some of us are blessed with the correct way of thinking, while others are stumbling around in a mindset of false truths.”

“I don’t understand how a person like my good buddy Vincent could be wrong. He’s a wonderful cherub who does beautiful things every single day of his existence. He’s both warm and kind.”

“I’m not saying he isn’t beautiful in his heart but what I am saying is he, isn’t doing things the, how do I put this, the right way.” She elongated the last two words. “You, on the other hand, do everything perfectly.”

“Why don’t you let me bring him out here to meet you? Then you can see for yourself just how wonderful he really is! I know—”

“No Xavier! You know I don’t like being around anybody, anybody that is, but you. You are my best friend in the whole world and I don’t want anyone to interfere with our time together.”

“Yes but—”

“But nothing! My friend. Now please listen to me and respect my wishes.”

“All right Sheri. I didn’t mean to upset you. Please continue.”

“As I was saying, there are some entities with the correct way of thinking, and all the

others are wrong, whether they know it or not. Tell me something, when you strike a person with your mace, how does it feel?”

“Oh Sheri I don’t know if I can put it into words. It feels really good, really, really good! It feels like the whole world is singing the most beautiful song I’ve ever heard, all at once, and I can feel every note in all of my bones.”

“And how do you think it feels for your friend Vincent when he stabs somebody with his lance?”

“It must be the same for him.”

“Are you sure?”

“I have heard him speak of it many times and it sounds to me like he feels the same things,” said Xavier nodding enthusiastically.

“How could it possibly feel the same to him as it feels to you? He uses a lance and you use a mace.”

“Yes, but he is the carrier of the lance. It was the tool chosen for him to use. It is just as good as my mace at helping people fall in love.”

“But a lance is a very different tool than a mace, is it not?”

“I guess so.”

“Your mace looks different. It is used differently, it makes a different sound when it connects with a person. Does it not?”

“Yes, that is true, I suppose.”

“Has the thought never crossed your mind that a person struck with your mace falls into a different type of love than a person stabbed by a lance or hit with a boomerang?”

“No, that has never...I mean...” Xavier fell silent. His eyes showed something no cherubs eyes had ever shown before, doubt. Sheri saw the look and relished the moment.

“Sweetness,” she said in her most soothing of tones, “has it ever occurred to you that a person struck with your mace falls in true love rather than a love that is, most likely incomplete. What I mean to say is, love’s blow delivered from you is absolutely pure and perfect but, can you be sure love delivered from one of the other cherubs and their so called weapons of love, is the same?”

Xavier stared at the ground listening with his mouth slightly open.

“Sweetness, it’s all right. That’s why I’m here. That’s what I can do for you. I can show you the right way and tell you about the wrong ways. You are a very good soul but you need a little guidance.”

“Do you really think people fall in a different kind of love when they are touched by different cherubs?”

“There is no doubt about it,” said the toad straightening her posture. “I’m positive, and I’ll tell you something else, I...am...positive the love coming from your mace, is the best! I know it is a far superior tool to any of the other cherub’s weapons of love.”

Xavier didn’t want to hear any more. He told the toad he was hungry and flew away. As his wings carried him off the toad smiled then a laugh started deep inside her belly. She lifted her foot and held the blue stone up to her eye. It was the very first time in all of Xavier’s visits that he’d forgotten to ask if he could tap it with his mace. When she was done laughing and snorting and feeling very good about herself, she dove into the pond with the blue stone in her mouth and swam a victory lap.

### 3

With sleepy eyes the Tooth Fairy stretched and yawned looking as cute as a two-eyed puppy. She smiled and admired her surroundings as she flicked her tongue against the teeth temporarily housed in her malleable gums before carefully grabbing them one by one and plucking them out, as their magic had been depleted. She placed them inside the pocket of the dress she had slept in, then fluttered upwards singing, “clickety klue, clickety klee, clickety que, clickety zeeee!” a habit that had been carried over from her previous life. She took the teeth from her dress and placed them in their permanent position in the Castle of Dentin.

With fresh teeth inside her gums she flew sluggishly to a brook where the water was shallow and warm. There she bathed. Afterwards, when the potency of the teeth had lessened, she dried herself off, changed dresses and used a hairbrush constructed long ago where the roots of molars acted like bristles. She stroked the tangles out of her hair while

gazing at her reflection. Her face had not changed. It looked the same as it had when she was a simple Toocom fairy, and the memories of her old life popped in front of her mind's eye, but she allowed them in for only a moment. Night had fallen and the threat of hunger beckoned her to flight. She headed North through violent spring winds and a touch of rain until she arrived at a quaint cottage at the edge of a small town.

There she swooped down from the skies toward an orange glow pushing out from a bedroom window with worn shutters. Like a lustful peeping-tom she looked through the window of a little girl's room hoping to see her sleeping. Her hopes were vanquished; a peeping-tom she would have to remain, at least for a few more moments.

The little girl walked slowly behind her large mother jiggling into the sleeping room. Mama gathered her little angel into her arms and sat on her bed. The child was holding her very first fallen tooth.

"Look at it sweetheart," said Mama.

"It's my tooth," said the cutest thing you've ever seen.

"It sure is," replied Mama in a soft yet excited voice. "Now if you want, you can tuck that tooth of yours under your pillow tonight—"

"Because it will be safe there?" interrupted the little cutie.

"Yes, it will be safe there, as safe as a tooth can be. But if you put it under your pillow tonight, it won't be there in the morning."

The child looked horrified hearing these words. This information did not match her understanding of the word safety. She was about to speak when her Mama finished.

"Instead of your tooth you'll find money under the pillow tomorrow morning."

"What happened to my tooth Mama?"

"Well," said Mama looking excited, "the Tooth Fairy will come and take your tooth to her Tooth Fairy kingdom and leave you money as a trade-off." The child looked a bit confused so her Mama continued. "That way your tooth can be around other teeth and be happy forever. The Tooth Fairy will leave you money and that way you'll be happy too. So what do you want to do my sweet little angel?" said Mama in an urging sort of way.

The conversation was driving the Tooth Fairy's patience far, far away, and quickly.

She wanted that tooth and she meant to have it, however this little person was taking much too much time in debating the value of solid money to a fallen tooth.

*Once they fell out kids didn't need them anymore,* thought the Tooth Fairy. *They are going to grow new ones anyway.* This sort of thinking made her mad. Her lips were pressed tightly shut and her hand was clamped, sweating around the coins she intended to buy the tooth with. "Take the money kid," she whispered to herself. "Take the money you little brat, you simple minded little—"

"I want the money Mama," said the sweet little angel. The Tooth Fairy's eyes widened in unabated glee. She smiled an awkward grin because none of the teeth in her mouth were remotely close to being the same size. "No," corrected the child, "I mean I want to keep my tooth."

The Tooth Fairy's heart dropped to her stomach. She became angry and panic stricken. The hunger she felt for that tooth raged forth with a might far exceeding a teenager's hormones. She smelled other teeth on the wind, but it was seeing this particular tooth and knowing it was so close to being hers that cemented her desires and prevented her from leaving. All she needed was for the child to lie down and the candles to be blown out for her to rescue that beautiful tooth from its loneliness.

"What are you going to do with a tooth, you don't need anymore?" questioned Mama.

*That's a great question,* thought the Tooth Fairy who had just become a big fan of Mama and her logic. "Yeah, that's right you little...kid," said the Tooth Fairy through a clenched jaw. "Listen to your mother. Listen to your wise, very wise mother. You don't need it anymore. You want it, but I'm the one who really needs it. What could you possibly do with it? You'll just lose it. I need it. I need it you little squat. You only want it but it's necessary for me, for me to possess. Take the money kid. Take it, love it, spend it... and help a fairy out." She was gritting her teeth, tasted blood in her mouth and veins stood out on her neck and forehead. Her ears burned hot. The Tooth Fairy was well on her way of spiraling out of control.

"I don't need money either Mama," answered the child. "And what if my other teeth's miss the one that falled out?"

Mama was a single parent, and was looking forward to a little extra money, so she continued, “Your teeth don’t like that tooth anymore pumpkin.” She said this with gentle kindness. “That’s why it fell out sweetheart, or...was it pushed out by the other teeth?”

“But it’s my tooth and I want it. I want to keep it!”

The next few seconds took place in slow motion for the mother and daughter but to the Tooth Fairy it seemed only an instant.

The bedroom window and frame exploded into the house. The noise caused Mama to jump and instinctively shield her child. Glass and wood from the splintered frame pelted her arm and side as the room filled with high pitched banshee shrieks skidding from the Tooth Fairy’s vocal cords.

The Tooth Fairy dove into the bedroom, eyebrows down, lips drawn back, and her knuckles bleeding from the glass they had just punched through. Mama’s hands swiftly picked up her child and buried her face into her bosom. She then turned and started running out of the bedroom into the next room. Though mama was full of adrenaline her large hips and jelly filled legs couldn’t carry the two of them off fast enough. The child’s muffled screams could not be heard over the shrieking of the Tooth Fairy.

The fairy had closed her eyes when she broke through the glass but now they scanned the room with a monstrous fire. She saw mama heading out of the room holding the child who possessed her prize. Fueled by rage the Tooth Fairy flew hard, then, after lowering her head, she rammed Mama directly in the rump. Her big body went crashing to the floor as her arms flared out sending that sweet little angel arching through the air. The child’s back lead the way of her flight. She saw her mother’s body fall and like curtains parting, revealed the Tooth Fairy screaming and flying like a miniature demon toward her as her mother’s body splashed onto the floor and jiggled.

The child’s flight came to a dramatic halt as her bottom landed softly in a chair with two pillows. Mama had been an excellent aim under pressure. The Tooth Fairy’s full attention was on the plump little hand still holding her tooth. The fairy rocketed toward it tasting victory in the flickering candle lit air.

She raised her open left hand then slapped it down on the child’s knuckles. It sent out

a smack any nun with a ruler would have been proud of. The tooth was knocked free from the child's hand who was now howling at the top of her lungs. Her nose pointed to the ceiling and her red eyes leaked tears. The Tooth Fairy finally stopped shrieking as she snatched up the tooth from the floor. At last she possessed the object of her obsession. While holding the tooth in her hand, waves of soft calm feelings took over and the world felt as if nothing was wrong or matter. She stared into its white blocky perfection. Her wings buzzed lifting her within inches of the ceiling.

Mama scuttled across the floor, snatched her child from the chair and wrapped her arms around her baby. Her folds muffled the child's cries. They laid in a fetal position under the Tooth Fairy hovering narcissistically above them. She seemed to glow while gazing into her new tooth. As she stared, the world around her stood still. She was unaware of the candles flicker or the whimpering child. There was no noise to be heard and the two witnesses of her sinister act were not moving, petrified beyond the point of trembling. After a long selfish embrace the Tooth Fairy fell from her trance and awakened to her surroundings. She looked below her, saw the child's eyes peeking through Mama's protective embrace, and began to speak.

"Stop crying," said the fairy in a soft tone feeling much better than she had an instant before. "Shhhhhhhhh, now stop it. Stop your crying."

The child heard her and stopped the noise and tears immediately, inspired by the terrifying conjectures of what might come next.

It was when the fairy began to speak that Mama entered into the early stages of cardiogenic shock. She now realized who the monster was that had attacked her and her child.

"Let's not let this happen again shall we," continued the Tooth Fairy looking directly into the child's eyes while shaking a finger. "I don't know any of the secrets of the universe, but I do know this one thing. When you lose a tooth kid, it belongs to me. Do you understand?"

The child nodded her head as best she could in Mama's weakening embrace, careful not making the slightest peep. The fairy tossed a few coins on the floor in front of her.

“Now take your money you silly little goose.” She threw down some more coins as she looked at all the glass on the floor and said, “Sorry about the damages, this should take care of it.”

Her mission was complete and she retreated out the window. She caressed her new tooth with her fingers but resisting the temptation to lick it with her tongue. Its tranquilizing properties must not be tapped, not yet at least. For the moment, she was drenched in satisfactory bliss. Her victims were not so lucky. It’s very difficult to cope with an almost imaginary creature delivering the evils of hell into the bedroom of a child, but it was only a matter of seconds before the Tooth Fairy’s bliss was interrupted. The reality of her actions, as if in a delayed echo chamber, slapped her in the face. She lost focus and crashed to the ground as images of her behavior toward mother and child flashed in her mind. There she laid, full of sickness, not wanting to get up. She shook and jerked and felt cold with the memories. She pleading with herself, begged to be woken up from this horrifying dream that was her life. She wished she could run away from herself but knowing that was impossible, she began wailing out in deep long sobs fueled by remorse and self-hatred, or was it the hatred of her addiction, that force that overruled all logic and decency.

“I’m a disease,” she shouted, acknowledging to the world that she was a terrible person. “I’m a cursed, wicked, rancid creature. I am nature’s first mistake,” she bellowed.

She cried on her back for a long time then sat up and sobbed, but nothing lasted long for the Tooth Fairy. The reality that she needed more teeth to carry her through the next day gouged her brain and she was able to gather her senses. She clenched her fists, her knuckles still covered in dry blood, and flew away quickly using a new-found energy birthed from rage. Fury and immense sadness pumped through her veins willing her to continue. She cried, not because of the evil act she had committed and not because of who she was; she cried because she had no choice in the matter of what she was.

## They All Fall Down

Porter sprinted out the school doors and scurried across spring green hills towards home to be with his mother. For the first time in his life she wasn't there. The water tower looked and smelled as it always had, but without the presence of his beloved mother, it seemed hollow.

He went outside and hollered but heard no answer. He then ran inside and climbed the spiral stair case to the top of their home and shouted some more. "Mama I'm home, where are you? Mama it's me Porter, your little ginger bread head, where are you? Mama!"

He continued to call out frantically with beads of sweat forming on his nervous brow but an answer he did not receive. He stopped. His legs felt weak as he slumped down on the bottom stair. Perhaps it was the exposure to the Realm of Mortals that made the worst possible scenarios scamper through his head or maybe just the fact that he had always known where his mother was and now, for the first time in his life, he didn't.

There were no sandwiches or milk prepared for him, there was no warm hug, no kiss, no conversation, there was only himself alone in a home that seemed much bigger and colder than it had ever felt before. In his panicked state of mind he twisted and began to run but instead tripped and fell hard on the floor scraping the skin off his knee. He sat there holding the palm of his hand on the fresh flowing blood crying, not because of the pain but because for the first time in his life, he felt truly alone.

Through his blurry, tear filled eyes, he noticed something else missing from home. Her fishing pole was gone. *Of course, she was out fishing. That had to be it, but where?*

He thought about running out with his own pole to try and find her but when all the different holes they had fished together swam through his head he thought it to be a waste of time. He breathed easier and decided he would write her a note.

*Dear sweet mama,*

*I really missed you when I got home from school. I was really scared. I see your fishing rod is gone so I feel better now. I will be home before the suns color leaves the sky so I can be with you. Love Porter*

He set out to his usual spot in the forest and gathered what he needed to make his portal. It wasn't easy this time of year. Spring was filled with new growth and most of the old had dissolved into fertilizer. He had to rely mainly on newly formed moss, wet leaves and twigs muddied by winter's melted snow. He had discovered that if he wrapped himself in a burlap sack he could avoid the muck of interdimensional travel.

He arrived on the other side free from any mess, rolled up the burlap sack and stashed it, then proceeded to walk over to the meeting spot where he and Paul typically rendezvous. As he walked he raced his wooden horse up the sides of trees and over branches pretending it was leaping incredible distances and running at unbelievable speeds, lost in his own world until he saw Paul planted on a boulder, fishing as usual.

"Hello there Paul," said Porter.

"And how ya doin Porter?" said Paul looking over his shoulder. "Say, where's your rod?"

With all the confusion of his absent mother, Porter had forgotten to bring it with him.

"I forgot it at home."

"Ya ain't got no home Porter."

"I left it at the place I sleep."

"Well that ain't no good. We both can't fish with the same rod, it ain't no fun that way. Can you run back and get it?"

"No, but it's fine. I'm happy enough just sitting here and listening to the birds. We can just talk for a while and wait for some of our friends to show up."

"That's fine by me but I don't think anybody else is goin to show up today. There's a big hoopla goin down in the town square. Most all the town of Heavenly will be there."

"That's a shame," said Porter.

Paul locked his rod under his leg as he turned towards Porter and said, "Well the way I see it we have two choices. One is we could sit here and alternate my rod watching each other catch fish, or we could walk into town and join in the festivities."

The idea of going into Heavenly wasn't what Porter would call a desirable alternative to sitting pole-less in the woods. He might be spotted by one of the cherubs or whiteness

a shouting match or see somebody hit another person, but with a little persuasion from Paul, Porter decided to go anyway.

He and Paul began walking over to his parent's house to drop off the fishing rod. They walked around the outskirts of town, not out of fear but because both of them preferred to be as close to nature as possible.

It had been over two winters since Porter walked into town and from his memories and the stories he heard from his friends he was expecting to hear the usual commotion however he was pleasantly surprised.

The entire walk was quiet. He didn't hear any negativity being flung out of the mouths of its inhabitants. In fact he didn't hear anything but a few dogs barking.

"It's so quiet," said Porter.

"Ya don't hear nothing Porter because there ain't nobody in these houses," said Paul slightly laughing at his friend. "Like I said everybody's down in the town square."

They arrived at the beaten down shack Paul called home.

"Ya want to come in Porter? I can make you a quick something to eat if you are hungry."

Porter hesitated then said, "Do you want me to?"

"Don't matter to me, I'm goin' to throw my rod down then head right back out unless you is hungry. I think I could use somethin to eat myself."

Porter felt somewhat guilty for not coming in right away and questioning his friend's hospitality. It was the appearance of the house with its cracked windows, sagging roof, broken chimney and ignored wall sheathings that made him feel uneasy, but his tummy was rumbling and he was feeling peckish having not eaten since breakfast, so he agreed.

"Well come on in then," said Paul with a little pep in his voice.

The only light in the Portsmouth household slipped through spaces between warped roof boards and raggedy curtains draped over cracked glass. Paul pulled out a rustic, splintered chair, obviously repaired time and time again and directed Porter to sit before walking into a separate room with his fishing rod in hand. As Porter's eyes adjusted to the low light it became clear he was inside a house that was dirty to a degree he hadn't seen,

nor even heard of before. Flies circled and small white worms squirmed over bits of rotten, forgotten food in and around a waste bin and on the counter, both top and down the sides. A single beam of light, typically associated with angelic beauty, illuminated a spittoon in a corner filled to the brim with black goo and chunks of tobacco. The walls around it were stained with spit that had missed the mark. Where there were not clothes strung about there was a mess of assorted trash that covered most of the floor and seemed to be the main source of homemade smells unique to Porter's nose.

Paul emerged from the dark and waded through clutter on his way to the kitchen. "Is a sandwich all right with you Porter?"

The house has turned his rumbling stomach queasy but he could not explain his change of mind at this point. "Sounds good to me," said Porter as he continued to looking around careful not to move his head. Porter suddenly felt very lucky and grateful for his clean water tower and somehow sad for Paul, though his friend didn't seem to mind in the least.

Paul used his hand to clear a spot on the counter then prepared a couple of sandwiches. Porter could not bring himself to watch. He smiled as he took the sandwich and was relieved when Paul suggested they eat along the way. Together the two friends ate bologna, lettuce, tomato and ketchup sandwiches while walking down the vacant streets.

"This must be some great thing happening in the town square," said Porter inquisitively.

"I ain't fer sur if it's great, but it is very entertaining."

The volume steadily increased and so did the stench created by the two trickling streams of excrement and urine on either side of the street as they neared their destination. The garbled racket grew louder and eventually erupted into a volcanic roar when they turned a final corner and the town square opened before them. Porter recognized it as he had been here before on his second day of exploration. The shop that he had acquired his wooden horse from was around here somewhere, he was sure of it. He pulled the horse from his pocket and squeezed it in his ketchup stained fist for mental support because the energy of the crowd, laughing and shouting cheers as if a conductor was

waving a wand telling them what noises to make and when, had become overwhelming.

There were vendors selling everything from cooked meat on a stick to puppets on strings. Men and women walking around on stilts and riding unicycles were being chased by small children laughing and hollering. A man was throwing torches in the air and catching them behind his back while shouting “Hey ya, oh here we go, come on now!” Couples were holding hands and laughing with one another and everybody seemed to be having an incredibly good time. A smile crept across Porter’s face as he and Paul mingled.

“I really misjudged this place,” he said after having relaxed and accepted the festivities.

“What did ya say?”

“Nothing,” said Porter a little louder, “I was just thinking out loud. This is a wonderful party.”

“This is nothing,” said Paul. “The real show is over here and it’s just about time it started.”

The two of them squirmed through the crowd of dancing legs and laughter when Porter began thinking things might not be so very different from his world after all. The two friends sifted through the crowd and emerged in front of a wooden stage unlike any Porter had ever seen in his world. It seemed to have been slapped together by drunken carpenters fully aware of its makeshift existence. There were no back drops or props for the performers to use. There were no colorful curtains hanging off the front of the stage to hide the barely sufficient beams and pillars constructing its foundation.

“This is where the real show is?” shouted Porter as to be heard over the masses.

“Yep, this is where all the action is goin ta happen. I don’t think it will be long now,” said Paul leaning into Porter’s ear.

The cheers grew louder as the show began with two dwarves climbing over each other as they struggled to get on stage. Though the boy’s heads were below the stage they could see well enough. The dwarves were flamboyantly dressed from the bells on their shoes to the funny hats strapped on their heads. One had grabbed a stick and was pretending to hit

the other as he fled to the other side of the stage where he found a bigger stick which he used to impose his own beating. They kept going back and forth this way, increasing the girth of the stick until finally one grabbed a huge man holding a huge stick. The crowd laughed. Porter hooted and hollered with the rest of them, fully immersed in the antics of the entertainers.

“This is wonderful,” he shouted at Paul. “These two are superstars!”

“No, nawt a bit. These two are the warmup act!”

Porter’s heart raced with anticipation thinking, *if these two geniuses were the warmup act, the main show must be incredible.*

The crowd suddenly fell silent. Even the two little actors on stage stopped what they were doing. All heads turned in one direction as a low murmur began to vibrate through the crowd. The two friends were too short and too close to the stage to see exactly what was happening. With mystery running through his head Porter frantically looked around to see if there was something he could climb as to gain a better view. He saw none to his left and as he turned to scan for any available climbing posts on his right the crowd burst out with hisses and boos.

A heat wave flashed through his torso into his head and as he stiffened he squeezed the horse in his fist a little harder.

“Porter you need to relax,” said Paul “You’ll see em soon enough. Trust me, we are in perfect position for the show.”

He was right. Within moments Porter saw a black pointed hood rising up from the crowd. The enormous man wearing it ascended unseen stairs, seeming to float up and out of a sea of hollering heads and shaking fists. Once on stage, Porter was able to see him clearly. The man wore black pants to match the hood but wore no shirt. His belly trembled as he walked. In one hand he held a rope attached to the torsos of three men with bound hands. Their heads hung low. Behind them was another large man dressed the same as the first. He swatted at the dwarves as they fled off the stage.

The crowd was going crazy now that the real show was about to start. The three bound men walked across the platform and took their marks standing side by side, facing the

turbulent audience.

Then the crowd's tone turned ominous as another man came up onto the stage wearing red robes that shown bright as the setting sun against to his scraggly white beard. He had liver spots on his hands and forehead and his face was covered in varying shades of pink blotches. Black circles surrounded his deeply set eyes. Porter was beside himself with anticipation. Paul shouted something at him but he couldn't hear the words over the mob. He nodded his head and smiled his toothless grin.

The noise dropped many decibels but was not fully quiet when the red robed man threw up his hands, palms out, then spoke in a hollow voice, "My friends! We are gathered here today in the name of justice!"

The audience exploded full force again. The man continued to speak a few words but Porter didn't hear as he strained his neck upwards, his focus on the three performers with bound hands, no more than five paces in front of him. Their faces were solemn and they had been dressed to appear as if they had been beaten and tortured. One of them was weeping softly and looking at his feet. *His acting is sublime*, thought Porter as there was no halt in the tears dripping off the tip his nose.

One of the hooded men began putting ropes around each of their necks as the other unbound their torsos. The actors were playing their parts well as the one in the center began to scream wildly. This started the other two shaking and looking around with desperation in their eyes. A huge hand swished out from one of the black hooded men and smacked the screaming man. The sound not only shook Porter where he stood but stopped the man from screaming. The crowd laughed and booed. The other black hooded man tugged on the ropes attached to a single beam above, while the one that did the slapping positioned himself to the far right side of the stage.

A theatrical performance such as this, Porter had never witnessed. *Strange* he thought, *there is a red mark on the man's face where the other pretended to slap him. How did they do that?* He forgot the thought as his mind raced around trying to decipher where this story was going.

"What words if any would you like to speak?" said the man in red robes to the three

actors with ropes around their necks. All three remained silent. The crowd howled.

*That was a wasted opportunity for drama* thought Porter. “What kind of actors are these?” said Porter to Paul. “I mean, they’re great but the writer could have done a little something there.” But Paul was shaking his head and pointing at his ear. He turned back towards the stage grinning.

The man in red then shouted out towards the crowd, “And what do you think about that my friends?”

The audience booed and hissed louder than they had all day and began throwing tomatoes, rotten lettuce heads and even rocks at the three men. The man in red shielded himself with his robes and skittered out of the line of fire before hiding behind the black hooded man grasping a wooden lever. The noise levels inspired Porter to cover his ears. The palm of his left hand was flat, effectively muffling the noise, but his right was cupped, making space for his wooden horse. His hands helped to muffle the sounds a little, but it did not help with his confusion. *Why*, he thought *would these people be throwing tomatoes and even rocks at actors? What in the worlds am I watching? Why—?* His thought was cut short. Suddenly the black hooded man thrust his body forward and yanked on the lever. Three separate trap doors opened under the performers. The ropes tighten as their body’s fell.

Horror shot through Porter. His stomach twisted and groaned as terror somehow stopped him from hearing. The stage, roughly a foot thick, separated the men’s lower part of their body from the upper with a thick brown line of weathered wood. One pair of feet hung motionless, the man’s eyes and tongue bulged from his face. The man on the other side kicked furiously. The cords on his neck standing out as his face turned red and then purple. In hindsight, these two people hardly bothered Porter’s psyche at all. It was the third man, the man that hung in the middle that would haunt his dreams for years to come. When his rope stretched Porter saw one foot twitch and the other jerk as his body stopped falling temporarily, but only temporarily.

Porter stopped breathing, his pupils closed to nearly nothing. As if the world slowed and nearly stopped the body of the man in the middle slowly, very slowly it seemed,

touched the earth then collapsed limply onto it, minus the head. The dust the limp body kicked up, rose gently as did Porter's eyes. Up and up they went past the brown barrier of the stage and when his eyes finally met the top of the stage he saw another pair of eyes looking back into his. He had locked eyes with the decapitated stare of a dead man, but for only a moment as the head continued rolling forward. It tumbled off the wooden stage and completed one full frontal rotation before touching the ground. Hypnotized, Porter watched its entire journey. As the head hit the ground, the eyelids dropped down then sprung back open before it bounced and began rolling again. The head's forward progress ceased at Porter's feet. The hair on the head was messy, his cheeks were dirty, his tongue was hanging out and his eyes were again locked with Porter's.

The boy couldn't break eye contact. He couldn't move. He could only stand there looking at the decapitated head, looking back at him.

In the numerous dreams that followed, the head would wink at him or smile but the worst was when it spoke to him. "Why Porter? Why did you come to watch me die?"

Time passed or maybe it didn't, Porter couldn't tell. He was knocked from his trance by Paul who slapped a hand on his shoulder. Sound flashed in and out and his legs felt weak and unstable. Porter looked at his friend pointing and laughing at the head. He could not move and could not breathe. His stomach muscles flexed forcing the sandwich up and out. He coughed tasting thick bile and ketchup, then vomited again.

The last time Porter saw Paul, he was laughing and slapping his knee. It was not the way Porter chose to remember his comrade but the visions of Paul's watering eyes, beat red face and his horribly dark laugh lingered in the back of his mind. It surfaced every now and then as the seasons passed by, mostly when he smelled ketchup.

Porter staggered backwards through the crowd made up of the pushing and laughing citizens of Heavenly. The horror took him. He began to blackout. When he fell he reopened the cut on his knee sustained at home while searching for his missing mother. Oh how he longed for her presence now, how desperately he needed her love and comfort. The pain cleared his mind. He scrambled to his feet and bumped his way through the entertained residents not bothering to look at any faces but focusing on where he was step-

ping next. Finally he made it through the jamboree, then with great effort he made his way through the unknown maze of town. He stumbled and cried and longed for peace and eventually, thankfully, he found the portal.

Porter neglected his burlap sack and dove in head first. He raced through the forest in the World of Myth without bothering to clean the mud from his body and clothes. He wanted to get home. He wanted his mother. He spent the rest of the evening curled up in her arm's crying and sometimes screaming in terror as he told her everything.

Throughout his confession he believed beyond a shadow of any doubt that he was done with the Realm of Mortals and would never use the magical gateway again. He was however, mistaken. Porter, now changed forever, was destined to go through the portal, one last time.

# Tapping the Mind of a

# Dancer

## 1

Cupid's morning and mid-day were spent piercing as many willing hearts as were made available to his flight path. Now that the afternoon sun had fallen closer to the horizon he headed home. There he removed the quiver containing the arrows suitable for most beings and replaced it with one he made specifically to sheath a new arrow created especially for the Dancer.

Cupid had decorated the quiver with ethereal stones and red vines he had collected near the base of the Olaf Mountains. After seemingly endless months of searching he finally found a stone, on the highest peak of the highest mountain, that was strong enough, he hoped, to penetrate the heart of the Dancer. He had spent countless evenings chipping the red stone into a perfectly shaped heart. He had carefully placed three golden goose feathers at the base of the shaft to complete the most powerful arrow of love ever created. Upon completion he took his new creation to the magical waters where the mightiest sword ever created was kept, and asked the Lady of the Lake to bless it. This he hoped would be the extra bit of magic needed to pierce that heart shielded by considerable layers of scar tissue.

He held the arrow in front of his eyes and hoped with all his heart it would be successful in its prodigious flight. After placing the arrow into the quiver he fastened it over his shoulder and around his chest then ran out the door and leaped into the air shouting "Kooka looca!" He flew out over the trees, down through the canyon and into the center of the swamp where Jacquelyn lived. There, music echoed off the trees.

His intention was to sink the arrow into her chest immediately upon arrival but, as always, he was lulled into distraction. The sounds of the world and vibrating strings hypnotized him, transforming his eagerness into a tranquil state of awe.

She was in the company of her smitten friend Compa whom, upon Cupid's arrival,

was hooting loudly, "Sing baby sing!" in tune with the rhythms of the world.

The Dancer kept strumming but did not sing. Instead she looked at her little friend and shook her head.

"Please," he begged again and again, attempting to project sweetness and adorability, but again, she shook her head. When Compa prompted her one more time, she spoke only one word.

"No." But she did do it in a singsongy way.

After that last "no," Compa did the only thing he could think of, and started dancing. He would have been a tremendous dancer if only he had the slightest understanding of rhythm. The whole experience was great for Cupid who couldn't take his eyes off the Dancer. The song she was playing reminded him of bubbles in a wind storm.

Jacquelyn was staring at Compa's comical dancing style and though Cupid didn't know it, she was directing more of her energy into not laughing rather than playing. It was a futile effort. She ended her song with a long belly laugh. Her laugh, Cupid thought, was arguably more beautiful than any strumming or dancing she had ever done in her whole life.

Compa kept dancing, although the song had ended, preferring the sound of Jacquelyn's laughter over her playing. He finished up by attempting to slide on his knees toward her with his arms out, unfortunately his pants caught a snag and he flopped face first on the wooden deck.

Jacquelyn kept laughing while getting to her feet to help her fallen friend.

"Oh my goodness Compa, are you all right?" she said with a sprinkling of concern and a dash of amusement.

"No," he said in a strained voice. "I'm terribly thirsty."

"Oh get up you dancing fool. Come on now," she said tugging on his arms. "Would you like something to drink?"

"I would thanks. It takes a lot out of me," he panted, "dancing on such a high level of brilliance."

"It most defiantly was brilliant, in a very, very special way."

“Why thank you very much,” he said. “You know it’s not easy.”

“What’s not easy?” said Jacquelyn from indoors where she was pouring two cups of swamp juice.

“Contorting my arms and legs that way,” he continued. “My dancing moves are considered in some parts of the world, to be as brilliant as yours; very original.”

“What parts of the world might that be?”

“The parts where people are both blind and stupid.”

She laughed. “Where do you come up with this stuff? Do you sit up at night thinking them up and waiting for the perfect time to say them?”

“No, they just come out. It’s a gift.”

“It most certainly is,” she said handing a cup to him and sitting down.

“Tell me something, would you?” Compa asked, before taking a large gulp.

“Anything.”

“Why is it, even when a dear friend asks you to, you always refuse to sing?”

“Well, it’s for one main reason.”

“Oh this ought to be good,” he said.

“It is my belief that it is better to listen than to hear the sound of your own voice. If I sang it would drown out all the other sounds happening around me. I would only hear the sound of my own voice and that is a very poor way to conduct one’s self.”

Compa finished off his juice with two impressive swallows and set his cup down. He then asked, “Where do you come up with such wisdom? Do you sit at home at night and think this stuff up?”

“In fact,” she laughed, “that is exactly what I do.”

As she laughed, a large snake slithered its way onto the wooden porch and was making its way towards the two of them. Compa, who over time, had become comfortable with the way the Dancer felt about snakes and all creatures, had at this moment, lost all tolerance upon seeing this particularly deformed creature. He quickly lifted his feet and pointed to the reptile shouting, “Snake, snake!”

Jacquelyn turned her head looking in the direction of Compa’s finger. Even she

jumped at first glance. The reptile had four eyes, two tongues and two heads.

“My goodness,” she said to the snake “Where in the world did you come from? I’m surprised I haven’t seen this old man before. Look at the size of him Compa.”

“I’m looking, believe me I’m looking,” said Compa.

“A snake that big must have been living for a long time. It’s strange I haven’t seen him before.”

“Is it Jacquelyn? Is it really? Maybe he’s not all that old. He does have two heads and that means he has twice the eating power.” Compa said this while holding his knees to his chest but readying himself to move hastily if necessary. “He could have grown this big in just a single summer, and maybe he’s here to grow a little bigger!”

“Will you relax. This snake isn’t going to hurt you,” replied Jacquelyn.

“How do you know?”

“As big as he is Compa, the both of us are too large to be considered food. It’s late in the afternoon and he probably wants to get out of the water to warm himself.”

Sure enough the two-headed serpent ignored Compa and Jacquelyn and slithered up a tree growing up through her porch.

“How do you do it Jacquelyn? How do you tolerate things like that?” asked Compa.

“It’s just a snake.”

“I wish I was more like that. Even in my own tribe there are people I avoid. There is this one person, named Harin, that wears a ring in his nose and is covered in tattoos. He’s ugly and scares me.”

“Oh come now,” she said.

“There are people that avoid me as well,” he said in a defensive tone.

“Compa you should never condemn someone for being different. Inside every type of body there is a soul and that soul might not be so scary or ugly as you may believe it to be. Look at the world with soft eyes.”

“Yeah but what if they are mean?”

“If you witness someone behaving poorly, try and feel love and forgiveness towards them.”

“That’s almost impossible to do,” he said.

“I’m not saying it’s easy but if you don’t, you are letting the spirits of ghouls suck the energy right out of you.”

“Ghouls?” he asked.

“Believe me when I say this isn’t the only world there is Compa.” He snorted and nodded. She was speaking spiritually but he knew all too well there was at least one other world out there. She continued, “There are lots of worlds and places we can’t see, but they exist just the same. Somewhere out there are negative spirits that want nothing more than your energy to turn negative. They feed off of it. They need it to survive.”

“Where did you come up with that wild idea?”

“I came up with it through living, and by paying attention to my life and my behavior in it. There was a point in my life when I was younger, a point that I learned to hate people that had hurt me. I became angry...no, I was fuming mad, and wanted nothing more than to see those people punished for their ridiculously selfish behavior. But as time passed I was able to look back on those moments and see that my inner self was becoming like them. I realized then, I was letting the ghouls feed on me.”

“My-oh-my Jacquelyn!” said Compa taken aback.

“Yes, well I felt myself on a downward spiral. All of my thoughts had been spent thinking of nothing but the wrong doings whipping and slashing across my heart and soul. I couldn’t think of anything else. Believe me when you are on a downward spiral it’s hard to stop. But with some practice I was able to.”

“Do you regret it?”

“Regret what?”

“All those people, all those bad things they did to you. And you letting them do it.”

“Absolutely not,” she said emphatically. “It was because of those people and those experiences I was able to see the world and all the creatures in it as part of the beautiful clicking of the universe. Because of those experiences I am now able to look at the world with soft eyes.”

“Those people that hurt you, they were the men in your life that pretended to like you,

pretended to love you, to be with you?"

"Perhaps they didn't pretend. Perhaps that is the nature of people, but yes, those were the people that gave me my lessons to learn from. I think of them as my greatest teachers, those who blessed me with the lessons on life I needed to learn."

"Jacquelyn, you know how I feel about you, don't you?" He did not wait for a response. "But as your friend I have to say, you are full of it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you let those men win. They knocked all the love out of you. To this day you are too afraid to let love into your life for fear of being hurt."

The word love knocked Cupid out of his sit-down-and-listen trance. He believed and sided with Compa. He believed he had the answer to all of Jacquelyn's problems on his back. Cupid's mind raced to the joy he would experience helping Jacquelyn to feel love again. He lifted his bow from his back, and then slid the arrow from the quiver. A beam of sunshine refracted through the heart shaped stone spreading red light into a starburst around him. He had lost himself in Jacquelyn's music and been entertained with their conversation for too long. He was here to work as a cherub was meant too, nothing more. The moment he had been anticipating for many nights was upon him. An eager smile bloomed across his face.

"The middle ground between love and loveless-ness is self-realization," continued Jacquelyn. "I didn't lose love Compa."

Cupid fitted the nock of the arrow on the string of his bow.

"Then why don't you love? Don't you want love in your life?" asked Compa, his voice rising an octave.

The muscles in Cupid's cheeks strained pulling his lips over his teeth as he began to drag the oversized arrow back. His chubby arms and legs trembled under the tension.

"I have love in my life," continued Jacquelin with softness.

The bow creaked as the string stretched further than it had ever before. He closed one eye and took aim on the scar covered heart of the Dancer.

"Love isn't found through another person Compa," stated Jacquelyn. "It's not this un-

obtainable thing that a certain someone is walking around with, and whom you have to find so that they can give it to you. Love is inside of everything and everyone. You have to open up the deepest parts of your soul and listen to it sing. It's always singing. Love is always there, in your heart and in your life. Just give it to everything around you whether it's another person, a tree, a two headed serpent or a rock and they will give it back to you. Love is everywhere and in everything Compa. Love simply is, everything."

Deep in the back of Cupid's mind he felt something pop. It was truth and in that truth he realized love doesn't magically appear when an arrow pierces the heart. It's always there. All the shot arrows, thrown boomerangs, dropped anvils and other weapons used by the cherubs simply brought love up to the surface of the cluttered hearts of normal people. Inside this realization, he relaxed his bow and relished in truth. Today was a special day, a day to remember; today was the day a human of all creatures taught a cherub about love.

Compa looked deep into the eyes of Jacquelyn and for the first time he fully realized her genius, her immense beauty and why he constantly desired her presence. She was simply magic.

In time Cupid came to understand that Jacquelyn was drawn to her home in the swamp, or rather her energy was drawn there, as a balance to the energy of the ego driven dwarves in Compa's village. Together their energies stabilized the region.

Cupid returned to the swamp many times thereafter, listening to the songs and conversations about life, but never again did he try sinking an arrow into the heart of the Dancer. He realized two things on that perfect day: One, she was not the Dancer but had at some point transformed herself into a goddess, and two, she didn't need love from another to fulfill her existence. She was, in its most purest of forms, the embodiment of love.

# Subterfuge

## 1

Xavier was cold, wet and hungry, but mostly he was cold. It wasn't the rain and wind that chilled his essence, it was the last words his very good friend Sheri the Toad spoke to him. As he pushed through the swinging doors of Calliba's Oasis, roars of greetings rush past him, however he felt nothing. He instinctively belted out a couple of low tone, "Kooka looca's," then sauntered feebly towards the short side of the serving bar.

Francos was smiling as he gave a merman a pint and some pretzels. He held the same warm grin while pouring a small pint and striding over to the distant cherub.

"Hello there Xavier, I haven't seen ya here in..." he paused and pondered, "wow, it has been a long while," said Francos kneeling down.

"Lately I've been spending my mealtime with a friend," said Xavier absently.

"A friend ay, do I know em?"

"No, nobody but me knows her."

"Er...why es that?"

"She just doesn't care to be around other people," said Xavier not meaning to sound short but managing it just the same.

"Why in the good world not?" asked Francos honestly startled.

"She doesn't feel comfortable around people."

"That's the most sorrowful thing I've heard all day, perhaps all week. Come to think of it, maybe all month!"

"Then you are the lucky one," said Xavier.

Francos, taken aback, didn't know how to respond. Cherubs had never been anything but cheerful so to call him flabbergasted would be missing the mark. He spat out instinctively, "Why is that?"

"I don't know...I guess that there are a lot of things in the world," he paused, "that are not right. If that is the worst thing you have heard, then you are lucky, really lucky."

“Hummm, I’ll tell ya somethin my winged friend, there are a lot of not so good things that exist in the world but in my opinion, if they do na’ got nothing ta do with ya directly, then they aren’t for ya ta worry about,” said Francos nodding his head and hoping Xavier would snap into normal cherub behavior.

“I don’t think that’s a good thing to say at all,” said Xavier dripping with sorrowful eyes. “There are a lot of bad things in the world and I never had any idea that such things existed.”

Francos struggled for something hopeful, anything helpful, to say to Xavier. All he could come up with was, “You’re a cherub, are ya not?”

“Yes.”

“And every day ya do your best to spread love across the land. Es that not true?”

“Yes.”

“Then in my opinion ya are doing everything ya can as an individual ta make the world a better place. Are ya not?”

“I use to think so, but I don’t know any more.”

“Trust me,” whispered Francos as he leaned in, “ya do more than most.”

“I’m not so sure that is enough.”

“Why do ya think this now? Has this friend of yers been putting thoughts inta that handsome head?”

“She has brought things into my head I have never thought about before, if that is what you mean.”

“Who es this friend ya’ve been spendin yer time with?” asked Francos suspiciously and with a tinge of malice in his voice.

“I cannot say, I think she would disapprove. She likes her privacy,” said Xavier nervously.

“I’ll tell ya what,” said Francos. “Now granted I have never met this person, do na’ believe I’ve even heard about her before now, but I’ll tell ya, I do na’t think this person is good for ya. Just look at yerself! Nobody would even notice that yer soakin wet, not with those sad eyes and a face pushin’ out inta’ the world. Not to mention no smile, it’s not

natural for a cherub to be this way. It is unlike all the other cherubs and so unlike yer normal self.”

“Maybe all the other cherubs have got it wrong. Maybe what the toad—”

“The toad?” said Francos surprised.

Xavier continued without missing a beat. “Maybe what I have been hearing is the truth and maybe I’ve been living with blinders over my eyes for an eternity.”

“Firstly Xavier,” said Francos in a sharper tongue than he meant, “in all my days I have never heard such words come from a cherub’s mouth. Ya’ve got to stop second guessing yerself and simply do what comes natural to ya. Secondly, tell me who this toad is.”

The bartender pushed the drink closer towards Xavier who in turn pushed it back.

“I don’t think I want this anymore.” And with that, Xavier walked through the swinging doors and took to flight in the cold wet Land of Myth. He flew directly to the pond he and Sheri had met so many times before, but the toad was nowhere to be found.

“Sheri, Sheri the Toad, where are you?” he shouted over the thunder and rain.

Lightning flashed throughout the sky and the winds continued to blow and finally, when his vocal cords were about to give out, the toad’s eyes emerged from the water, ever so slowly. Even through the turbulent weather she could see the distress in his woeful green eyes and she, with a grin larger than she had ever smiled before, watched silently, gleefully, evilly until Xavier’s eyes locked with hers. Only then did she rise out from the black water.

“Why, what is it my very best friend in the whole world? What ails you? I heard your cries echoing through the waters and came to answer them, just as fast as I could.”

“Sheri what do I do about all the other cherubs spreading the wrong kind of love throughout the worlds? I’m feeling awful in my tummy.”

“You know what you must do,” said the toad in a tone so low Xavier could barley hear. “Deep in your heart you must know what the answer is.”

“I don’t, I swear I don’t,” cried the cherub. “Please,” he begged, “help me to understand as you have done so well in the past.”

“Since you are my very best friend in the whole world, I will help, though it goes against my better judgment to interfere in other peoples affairs.” Her eye twitched.

“What is it? Please I must know what to do,” wailed Xavier. “With so many bad things happening in the world I need to know how I can help. Please help me! Help me! Help me!” he said falling to his knees.

“If you truly wish to preserve the well-being of the purest love, the right love, the only correct love, you must...”

## 2

A rooster crowed marking the dawn of a new day as the sun cast light over the darkness. The light however could not penetrate the seedling of darkness planted in the mind of Xavier who was already standing on the doorstep of another cherub’s home. The wielder of the mace was getting ready to embark on the greatest love spreading mission of his life. The excitement had kept him up all night anticipating the sunrise which took forever to come. He promised himself he wouldn’t knock on the door until dawn’s light broke the horizon.

He knocked. There was no answer. He knocked louder and waited, then knocked again.

The front door opened revealing a puffy-eyed Pintor rubbing sleep from his eyes and stretching his wings. “Wha—what, Xavier, I haven’t seen you in a very long time,” he yawned. “How have you been my friend?” he asked hugging him. “What brings you here so very early in the morning?”

There was no hello, no Kooka looca or even a wave. The only greeting Xavier had for his lifelong friend was an excited, “Have you heard the good word?”

“The good word? What...what do you mean Xavier?” asked Pintor through another yawn.

“The good word, have you heard the good word?”

“Do you mean please?”

“No, not that word. That’s the magic word. I asked you if you’ve heard the good

word.”

“I guess not. What is the good word?” said Pintor with growing excitement.

“It’s the good word of the mace!” He said this holding his mace high above his head, thrilled with pride.

“Have I heard the good word of the mace?” The words stretched from Pintor while he smacked his lips. “Xavier...what are you talking about? Have you been drinking all night? Where have you been all this time?”

“My friend you’ve got to hear the good word! You’ve got to hear all about the good word of the mace. May I come in?”

“Yes, please do. Where are my manners? It is just so very early in the morning and my head is swimming around in the leftovers of the dreams I had last night.” A funny look came over Pintor’s face, and then it turned into excitement. “Oh my goodness I had the weirdest dream last night. Can I tell you about it? I was—”

“Not now Pintor,” said Xavier in the slowed and authoritative voice he had picked up from Sheri. “I have to share the wonderful news. It is very important you hear about the good word.”

Pintor’s eyes slipped past Xavier and spied a breakfast basket outside waiting for him. “Would you like to share some breakfast with me?” he asked.

In a hurry-hurry manor Xavier declined with a swatting of the air and a grunt. He went inside and sat down placing his mace at his feet. Pintor grabbed the basket and followed him inside with his eyes hungering over its contents. They sat across from one another.

“Look at my feet Pintor,” said Xavier. “What do you see?”

“I see...your feet!”

Xavier looked disappointed.

Pintor tried again. “I see...your toes! Your toe nails...your ankles ...your feet!”

“Do you see my mace?”

Pintor looked relieved and nodded his head. “Yes...I see your mace and might I say it is a fine mace, um-hum.”

“You like it do you?”

“Oh yes very much,” said Pintor grabbing a muffin. He was beginning to like the strange game Xavier had designed for them to play before work.

“It doesn’t surprise me you are fond of my mace,” continued Xavier, closely following the planned speech Sheri had laid out for him the night before. “Do you know about this mace and where it comes from?”

“No,” said Pintor with a mouthful of muffin. “Yummy, raisin’s.”

“This mace was forged by the great manipulators of steel that came from the sky to the Mountain of Mattia. There they were able to use the liquid fires from within the mountain to forge this!” he said caressing his mace. Pintor looked at the mace then at Xavier then back at the mace.

“It is very nice Xavier.”

“It is better than nice, it is perfect. What if I was to tell you,” he said slowly lifting an eyebrow “that there was only one way to make people truly fall in love.”

“I don’t know. What?”

“Pintor this is important, you have got to listen.”

“Oh but I am listening Xavier. I think it is a wonderful story!”

Xavier sighed, “Are you listening?”

“Um-hum,” nodded Pintor with a fresh mouthful of muffin and his hand clutching a hollowed-out orange filled with juice.

“This mace, this beautiful mace is the only way people can truly fall in love.”

Pintor nodded and chewed gleefully. Xavier repeated the sentence more forcefully. Pintor squinted his eyes as the muffin slid down his throat.

“What are you saying Xavier? What do you mean?”

“What I mean is every time you strike your whip across a person’s torso they don’t really fall in love. Not the right love anyway.”

“What?”

“There are false methods of bringing people into the state of love my friend. One of those false methods is your whip. Every time you have used it, it only seems as if people are falling in love, but really they aren’t!”

Pintor put down the juice and said happily, "Yes they are. I've seen it. I have felt it and I know its love coming through my whip."

"No my friend, you have got to listen to me," said Xavier, sounding more and more like Sheri with every passing sentence. "It only appears as if they are falling in love."

"So what you are saying is, my whip does not work?"

"That is exactly what I'm saying!" said Xavier, enthusiastically, convinced Sheri's carefully planed speech had worked. Pintor had understood!

"I'm sorry Xavier but you are wrong. My whip works!"

"No it doesn't," said Xavier, disappointed.

"Yes it does," said Pintor.

"No it doesn't!"

"Yes it does."

This back and forth continued until, "Trust me Pintor, it does not work."

"It does work Xavier. Besides, how would you even know? I don't care what you say, my whip works."

"It only seems to work," said Xavier patiently, now sounding exactly like the toad.

"Trust me Xavier, my whip, my beautiful whip works just as good as your mace."

"Now just wait one moment!" exclaimed Xavier, insulted to the core.

"I think you should wait one moment," said Pintor. "I don't know if you got yourself into some swamp gas that is bad for your brain but you are being very silly; yes, very silly indeed. My whip and I rose from the tree gardens of Wolfgang the Kind. I was born from the richest, blackest soil in all the lands, under the tallest thickest tree, my mother. From the same rich black soil I grabbed hold of a root poking out of the ground. That root wasn't a root at all but my beautiful whip. I laid for many moons in those warm summer nights drinking the sap from my mother and holding my whip knowing I would spend eternity using it for love. That was my first thought and has been the most important thing on my mind and in my heart ever since!"

"I know you, my friend, and I love you, and I know your heart is in the right place, but I know through the teachings of a great being, that your whip, is a false weapon, and the

love it spreads is tainted with impurities.” This was the most important sentence Sheri had him memorize, assuring him it would come in handy.

“Hold on a moment Xavier, you are saying that unless I use a mace, I am doing no good out there? I am not spreading love!”

“Yes.”

“That is silly, who is this person that put these silly ideas in your head?”

“I ca not tell you,” said Xavier, again using the same condescending tone of Sheri.

“I think it would be a good thing for you to stay away from this person. Xavier, we are cherubs, we are created to help people fall in love. That is all we do.”

“Yes but—”

Pintor stood up and tottered to the door. “I’m sorry my friend but I really must be getting on with my day. There are several people I think I can help.” Pintor said this smiling with the idea. “Kooka looca,” he said as he took his whip from the wall. “Zippety bang,” he shouted as he took to flight.

Xavier picked his mace up off the ground and waddled to the door. He took to flight and spent his day the way a cherub should, smashing people with his mace for the sake of love. When the sun stood three fingers off the horizon he flapped his way back to the pond where the toad was waiting.

She spoke first. “How did it go today?”

“Do you mean with the people I struck or with Pintor?”

“I know everything went well with your duties to love you silly-billy, I was talking about Pintor of course.”

“I did what you said but he didn’t listen.”

“You must not have tried hard enough.”

“I did my very bestest but Pintor loves his whip as much as I love my mace. He wouldn’t listen to me.”

“If he didn’t listen to you today, perhaps the right thing to do would be to try again tomorrow.”

“You think I should go again tomorrow?”

“Don’t you think that would be the best thing you could do for your friend, not to mention the whole of humanity? You mustn’t give up on them Xavier, you are the only hope for saving true love. You are important! You are special! Do you believe me?”

“I suppose so.”

“You suppose so! I wonder Xavier, are you really up to the task. It doesn’t sound like you have it in you.” She sighed and looked away. “I suppose all of man-kind will have to suffer because you couldn’t help your friend to see the truth.”

“Please don’t say that Sheri, I know I can do it. Yes, I will go back tomorrow and this time I am sure I can make him listen.”

“That’s the spirit,” sounded the toad through a smile.

She began to sing, not words but la,la,la’s. It was the same song she sang when Xavier had first met her but he didn’t notice as his mind stretched out into too many directions, one of which pressed him to say, “I wish you could come to Calliba’s Oasis with me.” He said these words quietly but not so quietly as not to be heard. “Desorian could play the piano while you sing.”

Sheri smiled so big she could barely hold her off-key pitch because, for the first time, the cherub had attempted his own manipulation. She kept her glee to herself then, in-between la-la-la’s responded, “I don’t like music sweetie.”

“But you sing,” said Xavier as she belted out other noises. She spoke quickly between verses.

“I love to sing, I love the sound of my own voice, but I don’t like music.” She continued to sing at the top of her lungs as not to be interrupted again.

When she was done the cherub looked at the ground and spoke timidly. “Um, Sheri.”

“Yes my very best friend in the whole world.”

“Um, Pintor asked if he could meet you.”

“Meet me,” laughed the Toad, “My dear Xavier, he wants to meet me?”

“He wants to know where I have gotten the ideas about my mace and it’s superiority, you know, over all the other cherub’s love tools. I think that would be a good idea because you are a much better talker than me and you know more stuff too.”

“You know how I feel about other people,” she said dismissively. But then, quickly, her mind shifted gears.

“I know, I know,” said the cherub downtrodden. “but I just thought this would be the best way to convince Pintor.”

Sheri smiled, fluttered her eyes and appeared to meditate deeply. Finally she said, “You are right my very, very best friend in the whole wide world!”

Xavier’s eyes grew in surprise.

“You’re right, it would be best.” She looked off into the distance. “Once I told you I would never meet with anyone but you, however, because of my love for you, I have changed my mind. I will do you this favor, for you, because you are so special, and special to me. But I want you to know that if it were anybody else, anybody in the whole world, I would say no.”

“Oh Sheri, thank you for being so nice and good to me!”

“You are welcome. Now then, tell Pintor I will speak to him, but only once. Do you understand that? Only once. It must be tomorrow. In the morning or in the evening, I don’t care. I shall be here all day.”

### 3

The following day the sun refused to shine. After a few echoing raps from knuckle to wood Pintor awoke and opened the door. With puffy eyes and wild hair he shined out, “Kooka looca Xavier. How is your good self this fine morning?”

“Have you heard the good word?”

“Is it the same good word as yesterday?”

“Yep, it’s the—”

They spoke simultaneously, “Good word of the mace.”

“Yes, I know all about the good word of the mace, and I think it is a good word and a good mace, but Xavier I don’t want to play the same game we played yesterday morning. I didn’t like that game very much,” he said, sticking his tongue out.

“But it is really important!” said Xavier believing his words with all his heart. His

friend looked him in the eye, then after a moment of thought invited him in. Xavier had brought with him some of his morning breakfast basket as well as some freshly squeezed goat's milk. "Want some?"

"Yes please," said Pintor with smiling eyes. "It looks wonderful and my tummy is very lonely."

They both ate a little something before Xavier started in with his pitch. "Now then shall we get started?"

"All right, let us."

"Now yesterday we spoke a little bit about my mace. Today let's compare my mace to your whip."

"All right," said Pintor with a crumb covered smile. He leaned back in his chair to get comfortable.

"There are some very different things between my mace and your whip. One of them is that my mace," he put his hand on his beloved tool. "My mace is made out of metal and steel. They are the strongest things in the wide world you know! Your whip on the other hand is flimsy and not as strong."

"Aye but my whip is graceful and is elegant as water while your mace might be looked at as blunt and clumsy. There is not as much charm in throwing a mace around as their might be flicking a whip too and fro."

"There is plenty of grace to be used with throwing a mace around," defended Xavier. "You do not know because you have never used one before."

"And you have never used a whip before," said Pintor still smiling, still playing.

At that moment the two friends had the same idea of switching weapons for one day however in the next moment, both decided it would be a waste of time. It would be pointless to embark on a day of love making with an inferior tool. Without knowing it, Xavier had planted the same seed in Pintor's mind that had been planted in his.

The cherub's conversation followed the same pattern as the day before with one difference, Xavier told Pintor about his great mentor Sheri the Toad and where to find her.

Pintor lived his day as he had for many lifetimes, whipping and thrashing mortals into

a state of love. He worked until the sun was the width of his pointer finger off the horizon before he flapped his wings back to the World of Myth and sought out the infamous toad. He did this, not out of curiosity but out of respect for his friend believing nothing special or life changing could possibly occur. He followed the directions Xavier had given him.

He heard singing before he saw the blob creating the sound. Landing on the ground and facing the vocalist his reaction was close to the one Xavier had seeing the toad for the first time. Pintor was barely able to restrain himself from jerking his head to the side in disgust. His tummy felt weird and when his eyes met with the toad's he nearly stumbled backwards out of shock. They seemed dead. Even creatures with beady eyes held some hint of a soul, but not these.

Pintor, like nearly every cherub, was bursting with happiness inside his soul so he was able to hold his ground and smile. He began to voice a greeting but Sheri sung all the louder drowning out his voice. Patiently he waited for the end of the song then waved and tried to speak but the toad started up again. He politely smiled and sat on a boulder and continued waiting for the toad to stop, which she eventually did, well after the sun had set.

"You must be the great Pintor I have heard so much about. You are even more beautiful than Xavier described. My name is Sheri, Sheri the Toad," she said with a curtsy.

"Kooka looca Sheri the Toad," said Pintor with a wave and a smile.

"Well...what did you think?" asked Sheri.

"What about?"

"About my song silly."

"I thought it was wonderful," responded Pintor out of politeness. "I think I have heard children singing a song like that before. Is that where you heard it?"

"Oh no, I don't like children and I don't like their singing. And I don't like dogs either!"

"How come you don't like children?"

The toad had forgotten herself. She was used to talking with Xavier who she had trained not to question her about anything. Quickly she thought of an answer suitable for

deception. "I don't like children because they make me feel sad," said the toad pushing her bottom out and sniffing. "My heart bleeds when I am around them."

This was something the cherub had never heard before. "Why do they bring sadness to you Sheri the Toad?"

"You know about children and the terrible lives they endure, don't you."

"All the children I see are happy and playing with each other. They are as giddy as new born ponies," said Pintor instantly imagining ponies at play.

"You cherubs are all alike," said the toad. "You only see what you want to see and let the rest slip on by without a second glance. Children are only happy for very short periods of a day, if at all. Most of them don't have enough to eat, they get sick, and they're yelled at by adults that feel like yelling, and some of them, the most unfortunate ones are abused, physically and mentally and even...sexually."

"I don't know what those words mean," said the cherub with his palms up.

"It means adults ball their hands into fists and hit them, they scream and yell at them and tell them they are no good and...I am sorry to be the one to tell you this but some adults have sex with them."

A massive pressure filled Pintor's head as if he were suddenly transported many fathoms under water. There was an audible "Pop!" His eyes turned back showing only white. Pintor half-way fainted and fell backwards. The toad was there to prevent his body from hitting the ground. She held him like a baby, rocking him back and forth.

"I am sorry little cherub," she said, "I didn't mean to send such a shock through your body. If I could take those words back I surely would knowing the effect they had on you, but they are the truth and the truth should be known."

Pintor was unable to talk. His wings vibrated, his body seized and a small trickle of spinal fluid dripped from his ears. Snot leaked down to the corner of his open mouth.

"There, there little one, have some water, it always makes me feel better," said Sheri in a voice she always imagined "the Sad Lady" would have spoken to her if not for her insanity. The toad cradled and rocked the wielder of the whip until his world came back into focus. He spoke quietly, as he now had a terrible headache.

“Those things you said to me just now, they are not real, right?”

“I am afraid they are as real as the sun, the moon and all the stars in the heavens.” Pintor nearly fainted again as her rancid breath engulfed him.

“Why...I don’t understand,” he said confused and sick to his stomach.

“You know, Xavier felt the same way. I believe it is the greatest flaw in your kind. You cherubs think the worlds are happy-go-lucky places where everything is right as rain. You all seem to lack the perception of reality.”

“How...Why...” His words were not flowing well. His heart had beat too rapidly and for too long and was not supplying oxygen to his organs in an effective method. No cherub had ever experienced such shock.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen,” said the toad. “I only wanted to meet with you. I had to know the great Pintor, the wielder of the finest weapon of love known to all the cherubs.”

“But I though...Xavier told me...”

“I know sweetie, he told you he possessed the weapon of choice, the weapon that would define and rule the cherub world.”

“I think...it was something like that.”

“Please my special little friend, try not to be so blind in the future. Don’t you know why I told him to go to your house first? Isn’t it obvious why I asked him to convert the mighty Pintor before all others? Tell me something. Has Xavier gone to any other cherub and told them why the mace is the purest, the most correct weapon of love to use?”

“I don’t—”

“No he hasn’t. And do you know why?” asked Sheri rocking him slower and wider in her arms. “Because you are the one I really needed to talk to Pintor; beautiful, magnificent, special Pintor. You are the one. You and your whip are the chosen ones, the ones who will bring an end to all the dreadful misinterpretations and perverse misrepresentations of love! Isn’t it wonderful? Isn’t it glorious? Isn’t it about time?”

“Wha...wa...what? What are you saying?” asked Pintor. The trauma inflicted on his nervous system began to lessen and Sheri’s words somehow began to make sense.

“Do you really think it is possible to beat love, real love, and real sense into the minds of the mortals with an iron mace?”

“It’s not iron it’s—”

“It’s impossible is what it is. To fully affect the hearts and the minds of these crooked-hearted mortals you need a weapon of delicate grace, not one of brute force! I needed Xavier to get to you Pintor. Xavier was the one that found me and talked to me. He was my only contact. I had to convince him to speak to you so I could meet you. You are the one. You are special. Do you hear me Pintor? You are special. You, Pintor, are the chosen one. Xavier believes he carries the weapon that can save the human race but he is wrong. It is you and you alone that must save the human race from all the evil that runs rampant through the world. You and your whip provide the only true path to love. There is no other. You must convince Xavier and all the other cherubs of this truth. The children are depending on you, magnificent one.”

Perhaps it was his leaking spinal column or his exhausted heart or maybe the moon was in line with Venus and the migration of grasshoppers coincided with the turning of the lakes; whatever the reason, Sheri’s words soaked in. They felt true. Pintor left the toad with a mission. The next day he took to knocking on the door of another cherub to spread the good word. Not for his sake but for the sake of all cherubs and that of all human kind; it was, after all, the only way the human race was going to have their souls saved.

Time passed and the good word did spread, but not as Xavier or Pintor had hoped. Only Sheri the Toad was sinister enough to foresee the mind-set of perceiving one’s self as being special or being the chosen one or possessing the secular knowledge to goodness and eternal truth.

# Overture

## 1

In the center of his water tower, with only piles of dirt as furniture, Porter sat with the roaches and ants. Except for a few clean lines meandering from the corners of his eyes over his cheeks and streaking for his chin, he was covered in filth from the top hairs on his head to the tips of his unattended toenails. The overalls he wore hadn't left his backside for many moons, and the moon was all Porter saw in the heavens these days. His skin, white as it could be, hadn't felt sunshine in nearly three years.

Porter had grown into an eighteen year old man with big feet and an even bigger head. His beady, brown eyes were crooked, yet to look at him it was hard to tell just how. His arms and back were big and he most definitely was fat. A pelt of hair darkened his shoulders, arms and neck while his head was completely bald except for one thick tuft of hair sprouting upwards off the top. Porter might have been thought of as unpleasant to look at. He might even scare children in their nightmares years after they had seen him. Some might even say that Porter didn't have anything physically pleasant about him what so ever, nevertheless, some would be wrong. Underneath all that hair, and sweat, and dirt, and blubber, Porter Stebbins had the world's most perfect teeth.

It was as if all those years his teeth held themselves deep inside his magical gums, perfecting themselves, like a pearl in an oyster shell, only Porters teeth put any pearl that was or ever would be to shame. They were as white as the blinding light seen after death and as straight as an ocean's horizon. They were not too round and not too square, not too long and not too thick. No ruby, opal, or diamond could begin to compete with a single tooth's beauty. The eyes of kings and queens, emperors and collectors of fine jewels and fine art have seen nothing...compared to witnessing the world's first sun set, which is nothing, compared to watching the dawn of the solar system, which is nothing, compared to catching a glimpse of the unimaginable, untouchable, unobtainable brilliance of just one tooth. Seekers of such inaccessible brilliance would have gladly committed every sin

under heaven's authority to possess a single tooth had they known of their existence, however not a single soul other than Porter knew of them.

# A Cold Dark Winter

## 1

Uller, the god of snow, whipped his cape across the heavens rousing white flakes that floated down in a calm onslaught of peacefulness, resembling the mindset of the waking cherubs. After they awoke, stoked their fires and ate, the cherubs went to work but instead of taking to flight and inflicting wounds of love they congregated in the streets of Cheese preaching and barking, “Have you heard the good word?”

Each and every cherub had become convinced their weapon was the only true path to love and because they desired so very much to help their misguided kin out of the darkness and into the light of truth, their precious time could be spent in no other way but attempting to inject enlightenment into the other’s thick skulls. There was only one cherub still flying the skies during these gloomy days. Cupid flew fast and recklessly spreading as much love as was possible.

One late afternoon Cupid waddled into Calliba’s Oasis and heard the usual greetings. He grabbed a cup of tea and soup to help him warm up then listened to conversations that had grown more and more common in recent years.

“You two have got to listen to the words coming out of my mouth. I’m not trying to trick you,” said Melca. There was still happiness in his voice but it was accompanied by an uncommon hint of irritation.

“I know you are not trying to trick me,” said Adalose clutching his spear. “I also know you are lost in some weird state of mind where you believe boomerangs are—”

“What’s the matter here is your clumsy long spear has weighted you down for so long your mind doesn’t work well anymore,” said Melca behind a glare.

“He’s partly right Adalose,” said Mulmuse. “But if you want to get down to it, your boomerangs are too heavy as well.”

“Are you crazy?” cried Melca.

“Compared to my wire both of your weapons are much too heavy to be useful,” said

Mulmuse looking back and forth between the two. “If we are going to help the men and women of the worlds fall in love we must use a tool that is both light and good.”

“You are comparing your wire to my spear. You have to be close to strangle love into your victims. A person needs to be struck hard with a weapon to fall in true love. Your wire is obviously an inferior weapon.”

“Inferior!”

“With my spear I can hit a person up close or far away,” reasoned Adalose.

“Yeah, he’s right I can hit people from a great distance as well. I don’t know how you can possibly think a wire can contend with my boomerangs,” spat Melca.

“Or my spear,” continued Adalose.

“You two need to get with the program and listen to what I am telling you about the wire,” argued Mulmuse.

“Wait one moment you two,” said Melca. “I can throw two boomerangs at the same time and they always come back to me. You have but one spear Adalose. When you throw it you have to go and retrieve it.”

“So what?” said Adalose balling his fist and squinting his eyes as he turned his head slowly from Mulmuse to Melca.

“So dogs retrieve. Don’t you see how much ground we could cover if we all united under the one true way of making people fall in love, and cover the mortal world with boomerangs?”

Cupid had been standing in the background with wide eyes and an open mouth experiencing what could be considered as mild trauma. He heard the conversation between Melca, Mulmuse, and Adalose but that wasn’t the only conversation buzzing through his body and numbing his head. Next to those three there was Segfina sitting with Taciloch and Johan, having the same argument.

“You two have got to listen to me. There is nothing more pure than fire, in this world or the next,” Johan said holding his torch high and proud.

“You two don’t understand the deep satisfaction and intense love people experience after being rammed with my helmet,” declared Segfina. He continued with a finger

pressed against it as if this gesture would drive his point into the brains of his friends.

“The rest of the weapons we see around us are all very violent weapons. I’ve seen blood because of them. They burn if they are unfortunate enough to come in contact with you Johan and you Taciloch, sinking a hatchet into them, that’s most unfortunate, most unfortunate indeed!” He said this shaking his head back and forth disapprovingly. “My helmet gets the job done without all the unnecessary violence the rest of you—”

“People need penetration to fall in love. A simple head-butt couldn’t possibly inject a proper dose of love into a body,” fretted Taciloch, his voice rising slightly.

As Cupid looked around he saw tables upon tables of cherubs, no longer sharing stories of love with smiles and laughter but sitting and arguing with one another over love of all things. His world couldn’t have been more surreal if the moon rose with blue flames to warm the night. He sipped his soup quietly, alone, staring at the frowns and menacing sneers. He longed for song and music and storytelling but they had been replaced with dark debating.

Just before he finished his last spoonful, Melca caught his eye and waved him over with the wrist action of a fisherman. Cupid, slow to move, saw the wave again under the influence of irritated impatience and reluctantly waddled over. He didn’t think it possible but as he got closer, the arguing seemed to grow in intensity and viciousness. When he arrived he hardly recognized his dearest friend Melca, with his pinched eyebrows and his clenched jaw. When Melca spoke he did it with head nods and hand gestures resembling an aristocrat arguing for his wellbeing.

“Cupid will you please tell these clowns how much better my boomerangs are than a wire or a spear?”

“Well,” said Cupid slowly and timidly, “I don’t think I can do that.”

“Ha, ha, ha,” laughed Mulmuse. “You see, your boomerangs are not better than my wire.”

“Why are you, my friends, talking this way to one another? What is all this about?” asked Cupid.

“The Realm of Mortals is not a good one,” answered Melca matter-of-factly, “and we

need to fix it.”

“But to do that,” said Adalose. “We need to unite the cherubs under one weapon, the chosen weapon, the right weapon, and do things the right way. Only then can we save the world. Only then can people fall in true love!”

“But none of these cherubs are listening to reason,” explained Mulmuse.

“Listening to reason,” mocked Melca “It is you who won’t listen to reason. For the sake of goodness in both the world’s why don’t you two listen to reason?”

Their yammering added to the rest of the loud, verbal mind abrasions swirling round and round the room of compounding negativity. Cupid listened quietly for a moment and then listened some more before he couldn’t hold back any longer. This sort of ignorance, arrogance and complete lacks of understanding were some of the things he had heard Jacquelyn the Dancer speak of. It was in her words Cupid found the knowledge and courage to speak his own. He flew upwards, perched on one of the chandeliers and with a loud whistle, drew the attention of his brothers.

“I don’t understand why you are arguing with one another,” he roared just below a shouting volume. “All of us were given a weapon at birth. It was the tool we were supposed to use to make people fall in love. Making people fall in love is the most important thing we can do, the only thing we are supposed to be doing. It doesn’t matter how love happens just so long as it happens.” There was a low murmur amongst the crowd. He continued, “This arguing is wasting a good day. You should all be out making people fall in love rather than sitting here talking about how to do it.”

There wasn’t but a second that passed before Mulmuse snapped out, “Cupid, you shouldn’t talk if you don’t know what you are talking about. The way things used to be done, didn’t work. The Realm of Mortals is full of bad things. We are the only ones who can help. It doesn’t matter how we did things in the past. The future is now and we must save it. We must save the world! We must save their souls!”

The room erupted with a loud, “Yea!”

The others nodded their heads up and down agreeing with the logic, then Mulmuse continued, “But I know the only way to save these poor souls is if every cherub picks up

the wire—”

And with that the agreeing ended, and the quarreling began again. Cupid looked down on the turmoil. He whistled again and though the roar did not die down completely, it died down enough for him to speak. “May I ask you all a question?” If you all do agree to unite under one weapon, where will you get them?”

The room went quiet. “Get what exactly Cupid?” asked Melca.

“The other weapons of course. For example, if it is agreed that your boomerangs Melca, are the only weapon to make mortals fall in true love, where will you find more? They were given to you specifically when you were born, so where will you find all the other boomerangs for the rest of us?”

A dumbfounded expression smeared over the up-tilted faces. After a few quiet seconds Melca stammered, “W-we can do that after we decide which weapon we are going to use.”

“This is silly,” said Cupid. “My lunch break is over fellas. Would any of you like to fly with me the rest of the day? Love is out there, and waiting for us to come and help it bloom.”

“Haven’t you heard anything we have been saying?” retorted Adalose. “We can’t waste our time out there trying to make people fall in love. We have more important business to take care of right here, right now!”

“But you believe your spear is the right weapon to make people fall in love,” said Cupid.

“Yes that’s right,” said Adalose matter-of-factly and looking around to his peers.

“Then aren’t you doing the wrong thing, sitting here, talking when there are people out there that need to feel your spear?”

The cherub looked childlike and perplexed but only for a fraction of a moment. “If I were out there then who would be in here speaking on behalf of the magnificence of the spear?”

“Your spear is not as magnificent as my wire!”

And the arguing continued. Cupid wobbled out of the Oasis. The winter wind and

snow didn't feel as cold as the energy flowing out of his friends. With a heavy heart he went back to work.

Cupid didn't return to Calliba's Oasis for some time, afraid of what he might hear, afraid of seeing his friends in their darkened state. It was unfortunate for all he didn't. His words of reason and selflessness would have at least slowed down the decaying minds of his brothers. In the end, there was probably nothing he could have done to stop the process once Sheri had planted the initial seed. Soon ignorance's furry would alter the worlds of Myth and Mortals forever more.

# The White Night- mare

## 1

Once puberty hatched inside Porter, a hideous revolution, both mentally and physically stormed the cells of his body. Mentally the playful little boy withered under the mutiny of change. His former self deteriorated as the “poor-me-syndrome” took its place. Intense self-loathing loomed. His well of cheerfulness had run dry.

His body had changed as well. All of his hair fell out, save for one tuft of terrific tangle growing straight up from his bald head. Many combs entered the chaos of hair to fight, but none survived to tell the tale. His once brilliant life-filled eyes were now small, black and dwarfed by the girth of his head. His nose was bulbous and pitted and his jawline was crooked. He was fat. His man-boobs pointed to an oversized hairy belly which seemed to produce an unending source of gas making his bushy backside tender and often raw. His legs were as white and lumpy as cauliflower. His feet and toes were covered by hair so abundant they could easily be mistaken for slippers. His toenails were thick, yellow, long and strong enough to withstand a hacksaw’s assault. But the entirety of his repugnant body was completely overshadowed by, the white nightmare.

When he first became aware of the tooth sticking out of his once perfect gums he went into fierce denial. He had hoped it was nothing more than a bad dream and tried with all his might to wakeup. His white growth was embarrassing and prompted him to wrap his lip around it when he spoke that day in school. It made his words sound funny and his face look goofy and this encouraged people to become suspicious of his behavior. He was scared and had not a single idea of what to do about the tooth until he overheard a

schoolmate telling his girlfriend that sugar was a tooth's mightiest enemy.

In the beginning Porter was sure he would be able to rot this pure evil out of his once perfect mouth with a steady attack of sugar. Consuming a little less than a pound a day, all his faith was placed in the legendary crystals dissolving power. Spooning the tenderizing magic into his mouth and then holding it there while visualizing his tooth decaying into nothingness, was how Porter Stebbins used most of his time. Soon, day in and day out wasn't enough time to wage the war on the contamination. He began biting down on blocks of taffy then filling the tooth's impression with sugar and reinserting it before bedtime, thus actively waging war at night as well as during the day.

Days and nights of battle turned into weeks, turned into months, turned into the realization that it wasn't enough. In fact, not only did the tooth seem unaffected by the sticky rot of sugar, but the rest of the tooth's family moved in as well.

Porter's schoolwork decreased as his obsession with the white curse increased. He started skipping school, not only to hide the embarrassing growths, but also because of the unyielding teasing from the other children over his new appearance and speech impediment.

His mother was sympathetic toward his situation yet insisted his education continued. Porter would get up in the early mornings and with his book bag thrown over his shoulder wave to his mama then follow the stream toward school. Once he was out of sight he would simply wander into the forest and hang out with Mother Nature. He didn't like spending time next to water for fear he may catch a glimpse of the awful white color plaguing his mouth. He enjoyed listening to the birds but no longer liked looking at them. He couldn't help but to feel jealous of their toothless mouths and was convinced this was their inspiration for singing such sweet and happy songs.

As time passed he became angry, cursing the entirety of the universe. During one particular anger spell he ripped a branch from a tree which sparked the idea to put the piece of wood in his mouth and bite down hard, trying to force the white demon back into his once perfect gums. He spent the day straining his jaw muscles upon the wood, but that idea failed.

He then lay in bed for days and bargained with whatever god would listen to relieve him of the infection. In the end, when the energy to fight had diminished, he sunk willingly into depression.

Though Porter never brushed and ate an amazing amount of sweets, his teeth remained the definition of perfection.

Seasons changed and his school skipping days were no longer necessary since his mother fell into a sink hole leaving only her fishing rod as a marker to her grave. Porter was left completely alone with no one to share his pain. His embarrassments kept him away from all.

He spent less and less time in the sunshine and mostly stayed inside just sitting, depressed and lonely. After the sunlight evaporated from the land he would make his way outside and collect wild berries and check his snake traps for whatever serpent was kind enough to slither in. If the snake had fangs he would let it go. Porter refused to eat any animal with teeth fearing they were infected with something awful, just like him. He would fish when he had to but no longer took pleasure in it because looking into those oversized fish mouths, absent of teeth, made him feel sad and envious. Only when the waters were at their darkest would he go frog hunting as it was far too easy to see his reflection. When the moon gave him enough light he would tend to his garden. He was forced to give up sugar because trips to town were no longer an option as questions would surely arise. He had also come to the conclusion that sugar had no power over the white nightmare.

Porter never liked violence. It confused him, sent him off balanced and made him feel sick. Violence seemed barbaric and a less than civilized method of dealing with feelings and emotions, so the idea of physically aborting his already constructed white-wall-of-evil had never occurred to him...until one day.

When the thought first cracked a gateway into his mind he almost passed out. Though the idea of extracting his teeth only grazed his mind for nothing more than a mere fraction of a second, it hit him like a needle to the eye, physically distorting his vision. With his eyes still open, blackness covered the world and what looked like sparkling white

gnats blinked in and out of existence. His guts tightened and his colon loosened. Before he hit the ground, powerful convulsions started jerking throughout his body. His eyes rolled to the back of his skull and a frothy white spittle bubbled from his mouth. When his head cleared he couldn't believe what had happened, and so he didn't.

After a few moments of reflection he forgot what had happened, wiped the saliva from his face and disposed of his pooped overalls and made believe that the whole thing hadn't occurred. When the full moon transitioned, nearing the new moon, the idea gave a tingle and presented itself once again. Porter shooed it away as quickly as he could, but it was there long enough to leave an impression. That impression was enough for an idea to form. The idea, like a ghost that learned to take a slightly opaque form, now had the power to return more frequently and stay for longer periods of time, force-feeding visions into his mind. When it first started happening, Porter became petrified like a tranquilized animal, but as it is with all things in life, he got used to it after awhile. That idea turned into a thought and that thought turned into a fantasy and the more he fantasized the more plausible and acceptable the whole thing seemed.

Midway through winter's chill, Porter sat with the ants, roaches, and the wild fantasy of teeth extraction. His eyes were glazed over reflecting almost none of the pain his heart and soul shared. As he laid on his earthy furniture the sun set, numbness and desperation rose and crazy time came with them. Deep depression, like a demon, possessed his mind. And so he sat, and so he thought, and after the long shadows of the trees were consumed by night he rose to his feet.

Porter walked away from the sanctuary of his water tower, his bare feet punching holes in the snow. Methodically he moved closer to the icy shore of the stream. Though the water held the power to reflect his unbearable appearance, it was still his favorite sound in all the world. It beckoned him, that sound of moving water singing out with soothing qualities of peace and calmness. That sound that massaged his battered and tired mind with the possibility that he too, may one day be again at peace, called to him.

The moon was now two nights from full and spread a soft yellow light over the land that radiated within all surrounding masses. One lump lying on the ground seemed to

glow slightly more than the rest. As he neared the neon shape he stooped down, getting as close to the ground as was possible to avoid seeing his reflection in the water. His floppy belly squished between his bent legs and his powerful chest.

The luminous object was nothing but a stone polished to a round, smooth perfection by countless years of water pushing past its edges. It seemed to call to him. Unable to resist, Porter reached out and picked the rock from the snow. He rubbed his thumb and first two fingers back and forth over the stone. His body heat melted the ice from it. White breath rolled slowly out of his nose. His only thought was that the round stone felt every bit as smooth as it looked in the romantic moonlight. He crouched for an unknown amount of time. As he stared and rubbed he became calmer and more distant.

Dreamlike, Porter finally stood up no longer worrying about the possibility of seeing his reflection. His knees popped and blood rushed back through his pinched arteries. His beady eyes began to leak tears of anger. His colossal back flexed and veins popped out of his forearms. His hand tightened around the polished rock. He clenched his jaw. His head vibrated from the tension in his straining neck as he forced his lips to slide over his perfect teeth fully exposing them to the world for the first time. He looked as vicious as a scared wolverine. Fast and hard with the hip thrust of a good golfer he whipped the stone into his mouth.

Crystallized pain exploded throughout his face, down to his toes and back again. He staggered. The fiery pain engulfed his world. His legs faltered. He then fell to a knee. When the pain diminished enough for him to think once more he used his tongue to assess the damage. To his great surprise his teeth were still there, completely intact! He had knocked none of them out. They sustained not a single microscopic chip. They weren't even cracked. They remained perfect.

Enraged and flooded with newfound determination as well as neglect for the oncoming agony he snatched up a softball sized rock he spied through his watery eyes. It was jagged, sharp, heavy and still covered with snow and frozen dirt. Without hesitation, he curled his bloody lips back and with all his might smashed the stone into his exposed teeth.

The rock, solid as it was, exploded on impact. The pain was immediate and intense. Steam rose from the blood and bits of meat escaping from his damaged skin. Porter fell to the ground wincing in a pain that was too real, too intense and all too gratifying. His screams thrashed through the silence of the night. While rolling around on the cold snow, trying to master the pain, Porter realized it had all been for nothing. His teeth remained unscathed, unscratched, unmarked. As he consciously accepted this reality the physical pain vanished. It was replaced with the sickening, gut twisting pain felt not with nerve endings but with his ethereal self.

Porter's heart pumped with swelling self-pity, that rapidly mutated into hatred of the purest kind. The wickedest entity ever imagined would have been shocked, even threatened as Porter gave birth to unnatural, fierce, uncut hatred directed at his perfect teeth.

Dark negative energy detonated inside Porter with the power of an exploding star. The energy shook the Earth. He got back to his feet, a gladiator of the highest caliber desperate for a fight. Blood drizzled from his mincemeat lips. His crazy eyes searched and fell upon a stone of grand proportions partially buried in the earth. He stomped over, swatted off its snowy toupee then arching his back as he hugged the boulder he pulled the rock from the Earth. He fell to one knee and then the other. He then maneuvered onto his back, the stones weight threatening to crush his chest. Porter strained and pushed the massive weight up until his trembling arms were straight and his elbows locked, then without pause he let the boulder slip free. With an open lip smile he acknowledged the likely possibility that the oncoming girth would most likely crush his skull.

## 2

Porter opened a single eye and saw colored clouds floating dreamily in the sunset. He could only open one eye. The other had been welded shut by a quarter of an inch of blood mostly spilling from his nose, which to call it broken would do no justice in describing the bone splintering carnage. Porter had been unconscious for nearly twenty-four hours. His bare arms and face that had been exposed to the sun were as red as lava. A colony of blisters tattooed his tender skin.

For an instant he delighted over the colors in the sky. His attention had been snagged by the brilliance of the sunset, but then he saw the boulder that must have rolled or perhaps bounced off his head and the question of what he was doing outside during the day and why he hurt so badly allowed his last experience to return. With some hope and apprehension he slowly, ever so slowly, pushed his tongue forward but his teeth remained in their state of irrefutable perfection and with that, Porter wept.

His crying was silent, pure and lasted long enough for the salty solution of tears to break down the bloody patch over his eye. His heart was completely broken.

Happiness was nothing but a memory, and the memory of his happiness was too painful to want to remember. Hopeless was now his only companion. The fantasy of freedom from the white nightmare was lost with the ineffectiveness of the smashing boulder. If it couldn't remove his teeth, nothing could. Utterly defeated, Porter collapsed into sleep.

### 3

The following day he awoke with the rising sun. His skull, other than his nose remained undamaged. His overalls were wet and muddy. His face was stained in camouflaged crimson and white; the red where the sun had burned and the white where scabs had covered then flaked away with tears. There was no desire to clean himself off. He had no desire to do anything; even rolling over to relieve his back from the cold ground required energy he no longer possessed. He thought about crying but even that required too much energy, so he willfully lay there with his tongue recessed as not to touch the wicked growths in his dirty mouth. Numb and spiritually broken he volunteered for a slow death of either exposure or starvation. His thoughts rusted and slowed to childlike coherence.

As the sun began to cook him for the second time in two days, he began to wonder if a person was allowed only so much happiness in a lifetime and if so, had he used all his up in the years before puberty? He began to think about all the other people on this small planet and wondered how they were able to cope with white walls planted behind their

lips. How could they possibly be happy excepting them as part of their body? How? How? How?

Then something clicked inside him, and clicked loudly, so loudly in-fact he actually heard it and even felt it snap throughout his body. It was the sound of an epiphany and the undeniable truth bestowed to him was this: The human race wasn't happy.

The human race was sad. So sad in fact they constantly yelled, screamed and fought with one another. Why was this? It was because they were always striving for peace and happiness that few ever reached, and for the few who did, the happiness and peace was short lived...which must mean...it wasn't real. Happiness for the human spirit was based on a false pretense. The human race was constantly struggling with itself because they were so sad.

As this line of thinking flourished and evolved, his energy began to return. Porter found the will to sit up. Then with an open-eyed awareness and excitement he stood up, stretched his arms wide and did something he hadn't done since he was a kid. Porter Stebbins smiled. Its glory rivaled that of the stars and moon and for one untamable moment everything from the smallest grain of sand to the complex hearts of mankind radiated with its power.

Excitement and delight took the place of misery and for the first time in his adult life the world held promise for the future. He didn't have much, certainly not a solution to his problem, but he did have an idea. It was a magnificent, once-in-a-lifetime idea, and he, Porter Stebbins, had the power to become a champion.

#### 4

Now focused on destiny, Porter took the first steps on his new quest. His tortured head was blissfully swimming in pools of wonderment believing this to be the reason he had been born into such an unusual body on such a beautifully cruel planet. He now had purpose. He now believed he was special.

He strode toward his home mightily with the gait of a hero. His purpose was pure, that of a savior. As a visionary he now knew exactly what must be done and just how to do it.

Porter treaded through the snow past his water tower and headed straight for the work shed.

His monstrous body glided up to a door that hadn't been opened for years. He grabbed hold of its handle and pulled, but the door would not open. He had forgotten it was sealed with a ring of iron and the whereabouts of key that would unlock it, was nowhere in his memory. His inspiration had no time to be sidetracked. He wrapped his mutant hand around the padlock and with little effort twisted the metal and listened to its short lived cries of being torn apart.

The door swung open with a rusty creek revealing a dark sparkling universe of dust particles and cobwebs. Smells of weathered wood and forgotten grime penetrated his bloody nostrils. He stood silhouetted in the doorway, and as his eyes adjusted to the darkness he spotted what he was looking for. There on a workbench laid a large ball peen hammer. Porter beamed as if gazing at his true love for the first time. He timidly approached then shyly, respectfully, stretched out his hand. The wooden shaft was hard, smooth and fit his enormous paw perfectly.

Outside in the light Porter was able to fully appreciate his new friend. The hammer's head was caked in rust and spiderwebs that drifted with the breeze. Porter took several large breaths then, with a growing sense of giddiness, he suddenly spun with the speed of a striking snake and smashed the hammer into one of the corner beams of the shed. The impact was colossal but the hammer was strong. Most of the rust and cobwebs flew free from its head. Porter then twisted around and smashed the hammer into the other side of the shed, successfully relieving it from the remainder of rust. The quivering shed creaked and sprinkled down dust and debris as Porter lifted the hammer up to his face and exposed the universes greatest smile to his fated companion. In that moment of overwhelming beauty, the hammer seemed to take to life, and smile back. Then together as a team, with one more spinning strike, Porter sent his hammer smashing into the shed, toppling it to the ground.

Porter had a plan for his hammer. Together they were the cure for the human race. Their destiny was established and in this moment of certainty his mind wandered for a

moment, thinking that the hammer might have the power to rid him of his teeth. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and held the hammer with both hands. His eyes circled round and round in delusional anticipation. His muscles rippled and flexed when suddenly he froze, remembering the pain and damage the rocks had caused. He thought better of it and decided to get drunk first.

Porter sat naked as his overalls dried over the fire. He drank a concoction his mother use to make as he polished his new best friend.

Lightning crackled throughout the sky and thunder sang his baritone song as Porter polished and drank, feeling for the first time in his post-pubescent life, actual joy, as did the ball peen hammer which he named Pooper Bean or Poo-Bean for short.

The next morning Porter awoke happy. The night before, he had been so consumed with a sense of purpose and the power of destiny that he decided not to try and extract his teeth with Poo-Bean. His teeth did not matter anymore. The nightmare had finally ended. He had come to the conclusion that these teeth were the catalyst necessary to save the human race. They had done their job and done it well, besides, he did not want Poo-Bean to be unsuccessful in his first attempt of at knocking someones teeth out.

Porter, after having washed off the remainder of crusted blood, looked like a person wearing a white and red camouflage mask with a disturbingly crooked nose but it mattered not, destiny awaited. He strapped on his favorite blue overalls, lovingly took up Poo-Bean and walked out the front door into the forest to a spot he used to know all too well. There he dug through the snowpack to the frozen ground and gathered up icy twigs and broken leaves.

He did not leap but instead stepped into the portal and as he sank, a full moon began to rise. It wouldn't take long to get to the town of Heavenly.

# The Dawn Trader

## 1

The Tooth Fairy was exhausted.

It wasn't work or hanging out with vampires or even Sheri that had run her into the ground, depleting her of ordered cognitive thought, so much as it was the relentless, everlasting beckoning of her addiction. She was too tired and broken down to dream of being left alone, free of its weight for a day or even a single hour and so, as the last sliver of sun slipped under the horizon she opened her eyes and continued drudging along, with that unseen whip lashing her into motion. Reddened puffy sacks under her eyes made her look as if she had been crying in her sleep. She rubbed them with the back of one hand and instinctively reached into her pouch with the other. After pulling the old from her elastic gums and replacing them with the new, she readied herself for another night's work.

It's a strange thing when a person wakes from sleep. You never know what the day might bring. Perhaps you'll get rich, or find true love or lose an arm, for the Tooth Fairy this night would be unforgettable and change her life forever.

She followed her nose to a few houses and traded money for teeth. It was the same old song and dance she had lived with since losing the name Lynnandra. If the night was to be divided into quarters, it was still the first when she reached into her coin purse and found nothing there.

She had stretched herself too thin, had lost sleep, and her wits to boot. For the first time in all the history of the Tooth Fairies, she had neglected to bring enough money. Four homes were visited before she ran out of her trading coins. Her purse was complete-

ly empty except for a small ball of lint with a broken fingernail stuck through the middle. She needed more teeth but without money it was impossible. She could not simply steal the teeth. She was bound by magic.

Reluctantly, the Tooth Fairy replaced the tooth under the pillow of the sleeping child. She trembled as she did so. Her eyes reflected the pain of holding a tooth and then having to give it back. The situation was painfully unnatural.

“I’ll be back for you,” she whispered.

She flew as fast as she could to the Goreagmac Mountains, cursing her negligence, knowing full well she could have prevented this situation. The setback would take time from her evening, and her tentative plans to catch up on sleep would have to wait. This was not her only concern however, there was a chance that, upon arrival, there would be nothing there. This stress was yet another of the remarkable gifts bestowed onto the Tooth Fairy, for despite all her abilities, she did not possess the power to conjure money out of thin air, she had to work for it. Thus, hidden within tangled roots throughout those mountains were traps she had laid a quarter of a moon ago. Woven together from the bark of a Feelow Rubber Tree they were strong enough to contain a badger, however she was not trapping badgers, or beavers or salamanders or bears, she was trapping fairies. Being a fairy herself was a terribly unfair advantage.

Eight traps were waiting to be checked and after finding the first three empty, her stress was finally alleviated. In the fourth, sixth and seventh traps she found to her delight, Wood fairies with their bark-like skin and big yellow eyes staring up at her. She consolidated the fairies into one small cage and looked at them fondly, seeing them not as people but as money, and money equaled teeth. A single fairy, whether it be Toocom, Wood or Healfix, would sustain her with enough tradable coin for many a moon. As she stared into those big yellow eyes, pleading, weeping, round and scared, a memory of a little girl with her mother slipped into her head. “Pumpkin,” she whispered. *Is that what the mother called her child, Pumpkin?*

Her stomach twisted, beckoning her to collapse onto her hands knees, and there, face to face with the weeping fairies, she too began to cry. Then something happened that

hadn't happened for a very long time. Her mood must have softened or weakened her because in that moment of despair and self loathing, the Tooth Fairy heard something she hadn't been able to hear since her first capture. She heard the tiny little voices of the fairies blathering out in terror.

"Please let us go," said one of the Wood fairies.

"We don't want to die," said another.

"Let us free," pleaded the last.

The Tooth Fairy pulled the cage up closer to her watering eyes and said through a veil of snot and spittle, "My God, what am I?"

One cried out, "You are the Huntress."

The Tooth Fairy's lips contorted and her cries silenced in an awful face of pain and sorrow. Her tears increased in intensity and she blurted out, "I am the Huntress." She continued to weep. "That is how fairies all over the world know me. I am the Huntress." She sat back on her bottom and screamed, "I'm the Huntress!"

For a brief moment the captured fairies went silent as she wept. Between sniffing and staggering gasps she then said, "You, and all the other fairies, around the world, see me, as the monster I, once feared." Her lips quivered. "I use to be like you." Her eyes and stomach clenched. "Then, I, was ripped from my life, and forced to evolve, into, this." She pointed a single shaking finger at herself and cried, "I know your fear."

"Please, don't take us away," pleaded one of the imprisoned fairy between sobs.

"You don't have to do this," blabbed out another.

Then, the Tooth Fairy's emotions flash froze and without wiping away the tears that had suddenly stopped flowing she said in a cold, distant tone, "Yes I do. In fact, I have absolutely no choice in this matter."

Without guilt or remorse she took to flight heading west, frantically fluttering through the moon-lit skies. With her now flightless and fear-filled companions the Tooth Fairy's thoughts were a jumbled collaboration of good and evil. She believed she had a dark soul and hated herself for it. Knowing she had no choice in the matter of capturing the innocent for her own sinister doings added to the sick feeling in her gut. She was hopelessly

evil, a wretched junkie and dangerous. While guilt battered her brain one of the stars in the sky decided to fall to the ground. She closed her eyes and made a wish.

## 2

It was just before midnight when the Tooth Fairy and her three passengers approached a black castle hidden deep in a swamp. Its walls were high and strong. The palace belonged to a person that went by the name of the Dawn Trader. A man the Tooth Fairy did not like but appreciated. He held the coins she needed.

The castle was tightly secured, not only with barred windows and locked doors but by a troop of armed guards, however that meant nothing to the Tooth Fairy who was not only welcome in the Dawn Traders palace, but her visits were highly anticipated. She could have knocked on the front door but that was not her way. Instead she circled the black walls looking for an accessible window. The window she found not only drove out the bad mood she was in, but replaced it with giddy astonishment.

She spied the Dawn Trader's three foot nine inch frame getting swooped up off the ground by a large Amazonian woman who then proceeded to rock him to and fro as she babbled baby talk through pursed lips.

Watching The Dawn Trader get rocked back and forth as he bubbled forth with cooing delight was too much to take. The Tooth Fairy covered her mouth with her free hand and laughed. It was a gift she had not expected. She remembered Alex defining laughter as magical and realized now, there could be no doubt he was right.

Finally she wiped the tears from her eyes then slipped through the window and floated inside still giddy with the viewing delights appreciated by all peeping toms.

"Good evening," she said approaching the two from behind. "I brought you something."

Surprised, the Amazonian quickly and fluidly put the Dawn Trader down and turned alertly taking an offensive stance. Before she could attack the Dawn Trader spoke.

"Well, well, well, if it ain't da Dooth Fairy. Youz really outta use da front door next dime."

His Amazon queen relaxed her stance slightly keeping herself between the fairy and the Dawn Trader as he teetered over to a miniature oak desk where most of his business took place. On top sat a box of cigars cut in half as to not dwarf his body. He bit the end off and spit it towards the ceiling. It arced and came down in the center of a small trash bin being maneuvered about by the left hand of his Amazon queen, still staring down the Tooth Fairy. With her right, she lit his cigar.

Through a ring of smoke he continued. "Not dat I minds youz commin in howz eva youz wants, hell youz da Dooth Fairy. It's just dat, I installed a brand new front door a few days ago. It's bee-uit-e-ful. It's got dis red-brown stain covering it all, except for da trim which is green and shaped in deezs swirly triangles." He said this making looping gestures with his cigar. "I'm telling ya, it's quite an entrance. French no less!"

"How is it as an exit? I could use it on my way out," she said while fluttering over to set the imprisoned fairies down on his desk.

"Na, it's all steel on da inside. It becons youz ta enta on da outside, then once youz inside, youz know youz ain't neva leavin less I sayz so." The Dawn Trader was smiling as he spoke waving his index finger back and forth. "Except for youz of course. Thea ain't nothing dat can bring lock and key over youz."

"If that were true I wouldn't be here in your fortress right now. I was born into a prison and it looks like death is the one holding the key to my release."

"Dats so sad fairy. Dare is only one dhing I can dooze fa youz my friend and dat is ta give youz a great price on ya merchandise there."

The Tooth Fairy looked at the prisoners in the cage and then to the person who would now master their once free spirits. She knew she was stealing their innocence, just as hers was stolen from her. "And the cycle of injustice continues," she said under her breath.

*It wouldn't be so bad, she thought. They would be put into a gigantic cage with real trees and flowing water with all the other fairies she had caught. They would be well feed and sung to and...* it was all a lie. She knew when people did bad things they would always find a way to justify it, thus easing their conscience and making it easy to pretend what they were doing was not for them but for the greater good. She pushed the cage to

the far side of the desk.

“Dese fairies are so skinny. Hello in dhere,” he said tapping the cage with his forefinger. “Youz pretty little dings don eat enough.” The Dawn Trader snapped his fingers in a well-practiced fashion and his Amazonian queen responded.

“Dake dhese fairies to the terrarium an shows em what a Dawn Trada meatball dastes like.”

“Hold it,” said the Tooth Fairy. “I need to know what I’m getting for the fairies.”

“A bag a piece my friend, da same as always. Whatz youz thinking? Youz know I always treat my people with honorability.”

“I’m sorry,” said the Tooth Fairy, “I’ve been on edge all night and after all, a lady alone in this big scary world has got to look after herself.”

“When youz dealin wit me, youz ain’t got nothing ta worry about,” said the Dawn Trader before pulling another drag from his cigar. “Besides I am honored ta be doin business wit a super natural bein wit such a beautiful face and rump. Youz eava thought of us doin a little more dan just business? We almost da same height, simila interests. Youz know I got a thing fa faries, but the ones I got is do small ta do anything but look at.”

“Wow! You’re a real smooth talker. Has anyone ever told you that? That poetry following so silkily from you is more than enough to woo any creature into sharing a night of pleasure with you. But I’m a working girl. Hell it’s more than work really. I’d even go as far as to say I’m a career girl. My job forces me to travel a lot and I’ve got a one track min—”

The Tooth Fairy stopped suddenly and slapped her hands over her ears. She dropped to her knees then started screaming at the top of her lungs.

“What is dis? Youz say no but youz actions tell me dhere is a great deal of struggle inside. Sayz yes and perha—”

The Dawn Traders words fell from earshot as the Tooth Fairy quickly smashed through the castle’s walls and bolted into the night leaving behind her cage, her money and the conversation. She flew as fast as she could toward what, she could only describe as tremendous pain.

# The Cherub War

## 1

Cupid's bow string slipped from the tip of his finger sending his last arrow through the brisk auburn sky. His shoulders slumped and his bow-arm fell weakly to his side as the needle sharp point of the arrowhead easily parted the skin and sunk with a thud into the heart of the second to last man he would make fall in love this day.

Cupid did not celebrate. As the last of the working cherubs he had no time for self-indulgence. He was exhausted. The days were relentless and recoup time with drinks and friends no longer existed. There was no time to unwind at night. His increased workload demanded he create more arrows than had ever been required in his lifetime. Half his nights were spent forging new ones. The threat of running out was not only a steady source of stress but that being compounded by his lack of sleep had severely debilitated all facets of his existence.

His body hung limp as he weakly flapped his wings home. Upon arrival he lit a fire and fell into a chair. Not the coziest chair in his cluttered house but a chair he could work from more easily. Before the fire began putting out heat he began forging new arrows. He did not smile. He did not coo. He worked. He was lonely. His mind too fatigued to wander.

## 2

Falling snow collected upon a toad of grand proportions. Though she did not smile

there was a twinkle, an evil twinkle of pleasure dancing around her one good eye. She sat perfectly still as the frigid air enabled sounds of wicked despair to travel great distances. From the town of Cheese she could hear the bickering noise spewing from the mouths of cherubs. Though not a single word could be understood or a phrase deciphered, she, with her cold heart could taste the clamor of conflict.

She fantasized as the sun dipped below the horizon. The moon rose full emitting unexplainable compulsions. As the giant orb distanced itself from the horizon, Sheri's fantasies explored catacombs of devilish delight. She marveled inside the satisfaction she felt, having successfully implemented her will on those who were responsible for causing her existence. Sharing that pain and hearing its voice in the roar of the cherub's conflict filled her with bliss she could have never imagined existed. Her seduction and nepotism had destroyed their way of life. They were now lost and engulfed in misery. Victoriously she planned to spend the rest of her unnatural life here in the pond just outside Cheese, within ears-shot of their squabbling, content on listening to the corruption she had instilled in their minds. She virtually glowed with her version of happiness.

Yet this night was a strange night. The energy of the moon was potent. She felt nervous. She felt anxious. She felt like she deserved a bit more, an extra treat perhaps.

*Perhaps, she thought, a visual might aid in my pleasure.*

Her regal stillness was broken with a blink causing the collected snow to fall from her eyes. She licked her toad lips, grabbed her toad breasts, and farted a toad's lunch. In her frozen throat she grumbled a baritone song. "Giddy giddy delight, oh isn't it wonderful, destroying the cherub's life."

*This night, she thought, I might just hop to the town of Cheese and perhaps get a glimpse of their squabble. To see their mouths shape the anger, spew the filth, to see their eyes glazed over with narcissistic righteousness would be a fine aid in enjoying my retirement.*

She pushed herself up off the ground and shuffled about looking around and around trying to spy...and there it was. The blue stone that drew Xavier to her so long ago lay in the packed snow. "Without you my little friend," she said, "the doorway into their lives

would not have been opened so easily.” She stared at its color and shape. It looked beautifully sad lying in her frozen indentation. Her tongue hit the stone and drew it back into her mouth. She tucked it under her bottom lip and then spat. The saliva froze mid-flight. “Pa-ting,” it ricocheted off the surface of her pond. Her lips twisted into a grin and then, with a darkened version of glee, she sprung high into the air. Her legs stretched, her wart covered breasts flapped and flopped before she peaked and fell, smashing through four inches of frozen pond. Near the bottom Sheri opened her mouth feeding on fish like a baleen whale feeds on krill before kicking hard towards the surface. She erupted through the icy wall. Calliba’s Oasis was her destination.

### 3

Flanked between his lonely dark shadow and the fire, Cupid sat constructing arrows. Though physically and mentally fatigued and focused on work he couldn’t help but to hear the rumbling sounds of his arguing brothers bouncing off the sharp night air and falling snowflakes. It was impossible to ignore. Subtly, under the muted roar, he began to hear the faint sounds of Desorian’s piano.

As he worked he listened. As he listened his mind wandered and in its wandering an idea presented itself. He stopped working. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. His head lifted as did his eyebrows. Through his sleep deprived eyes he stared above the mantle. There, mounted on the wall was the oversized, overly potent arrow he had constructed for the heart of the Dancer. He had placed it there long ago as a reminder; a reminder as to what she had taught him about love. The arrow, along with the muted sounds of Desorian’s beautiful music struggling to be heard through the barrage of arguing cherubs, was inspirational.

In an almost out-of-body-experience he set aside the arrow he was constructing, stood up and walked over to the mantle. He removed the arrow from the wall and looked down upon it with admiration. The arrow had done for him what it was meant to do. It had reminded him of love.

Cupid placed the arrow in the oversized quiver and slung it over his back, then out of

habit, he inserted the few arrows he had constructed that evening. He proceeded to open the door and began to step out into the cold world, but stopped. He felt incomplete without his bow. Turning he snatched it up and then waddled out the door leaving the fire to entertain itself.

The storm was blowing strong as the full moon appeared and disappeared behind blown clouds. Cupid moved slowly down the street not wanting to get to the Oasis too quickly. He wanted a little time to think. He needed a little time to prepare. It had been awhile since he had seen or even spoken to his brothers. He felt intimidated nearing their boisterous quibblings.

Outside of Calliba's Oasis in the blowing snow, Cupid stood face to face with the heavy wooden door that replaced the saloon style doors during the winter months. He hesitated to enter. He could hear the sharp voices of his friends shouting at one another and second guessed his idea. *Should I go inside? Should I say anything at all?*

Cupid attempted to turn and walk away because the nerves in his belly squirmed like a nest of active worms. His torso turned but his feet wouldn't move. He breathed in deeply through his nose and contemplated. Weakly he turned back to the door, lifted his overly heavy arm and pushed his way inside.

Upon entry he realized how much he had missed the ambiance of the Oasis. It was yet early however the blue chandeliers glowed. Cupid moseyed over to the short side of the bar and waited for Francos to take notice. He looked around and saw Meacron laughing up a storm with a couple of friendly ladies, one of which was Judy of the Woods. Her pelt, like all sasquatch this time of year, was long and shaggy. He spied the blind cyclops chugging rapidly from an oversized stein. All manors of creatures seemed to be jolly and having a good time, all except for the tables framed with the flesh of cherubs who were slamming fists and pointing hostile fingers into each other's faces. There looked to be fifteen or twenty small round tables with forty or so square chairs supporting the entirety of the cherub race. They filled the entire west side of Calliba's Oasis.

"Well hello there Cupid. I have-na seen ya in here for quite a spell. Gracious you look awful. Where have ya've been?" said Francos.

“I’ve been working,” said Cupid weakly. He looked over his shoulder to the west side of the Oasis.

Francos said with a voice laced with pity, “Not a pretty thing a happenin over there with yer kin, is it?”

“I don’t know why they are all talking the way they are Francos,” admitted Cupid with a worried look. “Cherubs feel everything, or at least that’s the way things used to be. Now, well I don’t know what to think.”

“Yer right Cupid,” said Francos. “Cherubs, well, fer as long as I can remember, felt everything. Now a days it seems feelins have gone south fer the winter leavin only clutter-some emotions behind.”

“Emotions are different than feelings?” asked Cupid.

“Why certainly they are,” said Francos pushing a pint in front of the arrow slinger. “Feelins, they’re pure. They’re unaffected by the mind. They’re born in the heart and that’s where they stay, right inside the heart.” He said this tapping his chest with two of his fingers. “Emotions on the other hand, well I’m not sayin they aren’t pure, but they carry loads of rubbish with em. Emotions are clammy, they get enta’ the mind and leave the heart alone fer the most part. They live inside yer brain, pushin again yer skull makin it hard ta see or think clearly. It seems yer friends have gotten caught in the sticky webs of emotions. Their all stuck inside their own pressure filled heads.”

“I feel sad when I look at them yelling at one another,” said Cupid.

“It makes all of us sad ta see them behaving that way,” said Francos.

The strings of Desorian’s piano paused leaving the roar of the Oasis to live companionless. It was enough time for Cupid to pick up a few words shared between his fellow cherubs.

“You ignorant wham-blobber, what in the world are you talking about?”

“Shut-up buns-hole and listen to someone with more than a half of brain.”

“This endless dysentery isn’t getting us anywhere. When are you dumb-founded-dip-craps going to wake up to reality? I can’t stand this much longer. I’m running hot, real hot!”

Faces were red. Knuckles were white. Veins were popping from all insight.

The music started up again. The song was a soft, loving, tender melody that sent waves of soothing sensations throughout the room. It wasn't enough to combat the hostility verbalized by the whole of cherub kind. The slanderous, hate-filled words continued to echo throughout the room.

"Keep it down over there you winged devils," shouted the Noclops. "There are people in here doing their best to enjoy life."

"Keep quiet you blind jackass, we're solving the world's problems over here," hollered Yeshua holding his hammer high overhead.

"Yeah you stupid blind bastard," shouted Gautama holding his two sais crossed in front of his face.

"At least two of them agreed on something," whispered Francos standing at the side of the Noclops. He continued with two more inaudible sentences. Whatever he said, the Noclops laughed and held his tongue, then kept to himself.

Cupid took his stein in hand and chugged down its contents. He hoped the drink would give him some fuel as his task was going to require more energy than his tired self possessed. He placed the empty stein on the bar and wiped his lips with the back of his forearm then teeter-tottered into the verbal-puke of arguing cherubs.

The shouts, rants, and cruel spiels created noise that rivaled that of mountains crumbling into the sea. Cupid didn't bother listening to the arguments, he knew them already. He was here to do his best to put a stop to this intolerable display of selfish arrogance. Flapping his wings he ascended to the top of the Oasis then fluttered down positioning himself in the center of the argument. Standing with his wings and arms spread wide on top of a table he shouted, "My friends, my brothers, please stop your fighting for one moment and let me say a few words."

Not one cherub took notice of him. The cherubs sitting at the table he landed on leaned around his legs to keep eye contact with the ones they were spitting wickedness towards.

"MY BROTHERS, I BEG YOU TO LISTEN TO ME, PLEASE...PLEASE..."

PLEASE. LISTEN TO ME,” shouted Cupid.

“Everybody here is goin ta have ta lower their voices or I’m goin ta have ta ask ya ta leave,” hollered Francos with a gravely potent burst.

Magically, all the little mouths shut and their attention fell on the bartender. “Now ya know I love ya all, as do the rest of the people in here, but ya little fellas have tumbled into a dark place. This isn’t the way ya should be behavin ta anybody, much less ta each other. Now lower ya voices and listen ta what Cupid has ta say. It’s my opinion he’s the only one thinking clearly out of all of ya.”

Cupid wasted no time knowing the silence would not last for long. “My friends, I have been listening to you all for some time now, arguing with one another about what weapon is best for making people fall in love.”

“True love,” one of them shouted.

“Yes, yes, true love, however you wish to look at it, but please do look at it with an open mind. While you all have been spending your days in here and out on the streets arguing with one another, there are countless men and women out there lacking love. None of you have taken to flight in so long I have lost track of the days. You are talking about saving the world but talking isn’t the way to do it. You have got to get back out there. Do what you were born to do. Let’s be the way we once were. Good and fun and friendly is the way cherubs are supposed to be. Not like this.”

“We can’t help anybody until we unite!” one of them hollered.

“We are united, as cherubs,” replied Cupid. “We are united under love. As a whole we function as one consciousness. You have all been speaking about the right way to fall in love but you have forgotten that love is, simply love. It doesn’t matter how people get to the glorious state of love, so long as they have it in their hearts.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about Cupid!”

“Yea dummy!”

“This is a time of choice my brothers,” said Cupid. “We can choose to fight or we can choose to get along and except each other’s differences. We are united as a species, we must stick together to ensure our survival. Only through love and seeing ourselves as a

single unit are we able to put aside our differences and live.”

“You’re a blind fool Cupid. You’ve been shooting your arrows for so long you can see nothing but those damn inferior sticks of yours. You haven’t the slightest clue about what you’re saying,” said one of his kin.

“I do,” he said as he slipped the oversized arrow from his satchel. “I built this arrow for one reason, for one person, but before I used it I learned something about love and the human heart and what divine knowledge is all about.”

“What the hell are you doing? Why are you building bigger arrows Cupid? Do you think you are better than us?”

“Yeah Cupid, you are the one who is lost, you are the one that doesn’t understand love.”

“My friends,” said Cupid trying to remembering something he had heard the Dancer say. “There are two types of people in the world: Those who seek power and those who seek knowledge. What one do you all wish to be? Knowledge is the—”

“Put a cork in it Cupid, you dumb duck cunnis,” shouted out Vincent as spittle splashed from his mouth.

“Don’t talk to him that way,” shouted Melca standing quickly and cocking one of his boomerangs. “Cupid doesn’t understand what we are trying to do here but he is still my best friend.”

“Slap yourself in the mouth with that boomerang Melca until your lips are too swollen to talk anymore,” shouted Dihomaim squeezing his oversized club. His hands honey-combed with veins.

The cherubs exploded with shouts of anger and detest toward whatever stupid cherub wasn’t willing to listen to their truth. Francos lowered his head and walked slowly back to the west side of the Oasis, his shoulders slumping with heavy disappointment.

“That’s enough,” he yelled. “All of ya’ve got ta get out of here, now!”

Not a single cherub flinched. The decibel of intolerance rose. Cupid stood atop the table frantically looking around before Sigfina stood and pushed him hard in the belly sending him off balance, forcing him to take to flight. Instantly six other cherubs pushed

away from their chairs and took to the air.

Candles flickered in the Oasis as wind from their wings pushed around hair and clothing and sent ripples across the tops of all full steins. Desorian stopped playing. Uneasiness flooded the patrons of the Oasis. Xavier stood violently clenching the chain of his mace then took to the air. Francos who was standing next to him grab his leg with the intension of escorting him outside believing Xavier would be the first of many cherubs he would have to chaperon out this evening, but before he took a step, the bartender was smashed in the face with Xavier's mace.

He went down to the ground, a place he had never visited from a blow before. Xavier watched him fall and for the first time in a long time he smiled, not with happiness but with sadistic satisfaction. His gums bled from the pressure of his teeth grinding against one another.

Judy of the Woods sent out a scream a banshee would have been jealous of and ran to Francos's side as the rest of the Oasis's patrons ducked under their tables or chairs.

Francos was fine of course. He lay sprawled out on the ground with something between love and lust waiting to flood out of his soul.

On the ethereal plane, something vicious sank its fangs into Xavier's brain, injecting a venom of twisted logic. To him it sounded righteous. If words were not going to work on his fellow cherubs then action must. If he struck all his friends with the mace, then they would surely see the light, the truth, the right way to love, the only way to truly love. The idea was born, analyzed and accepted instantaneously.

He kept the velocity his mace held from the swing on Francos and twisted his body as he extended his arms. He flipped his wrists and brought the mace down on his closest neighbor, David, who seemed unaffected by the incident and was still yelling and pointing across the table at another cherub.

The mace connected with the top of David's head. The effect wasn't what Xavier had in mind. David's head exploded sending fragments of skull and brain across the faces of his neighboring cherubs.

With his mace still embedded on the remains of David's now headless body Xavier,

sickened with regret and nausea, fell back to the table.

“You son-of-a-trollop,” spat out Segfina as a large chunk of brain fell from his cheek. His helmet was stationed atop his head. Before anyone could blink, he was in the air and charging and shouting, “Your mace will never rule the kingdom of love!” His face was red, as if the skin had been pulled off. It was obvious what Segfina intended to do. His helmet flashed in the blue light of the chandeliers.

Xavier heard his cry and snapped out from under his crippled state, hearing only “the kingdom of love!” Remorse left him. *If this was the way it was going to be*, he thought, *so be it*. He started this fight and now it was time for him to finish it. Xavier flapped his wings as hard as he could lifting himself up into the air letting the ramming helmet of Segfina zip under his toes.

Cupid looked around in horror to see every cherub except for David who lay headless, take to arms.

The cherub war had begun.

There was only one pair of happy eyes in the vicinity of Calliba’s Oasis. They belonged to Sheri, blissfully watching the horror unfolding through one of the open shutters.

#### 4

One hundred large paces outside the town of Heavenly, Porter stopped in his tracks. The last sliver of sun shimmered below the horizon giving closure to the day and birth to the night. He saw it as the last triumphant song of a day that waited an eternity to exist, and now it was saying good-bye.

Before him the sky glowed red. Behind him, the full moon was on the rise and dark clouds holding wind and snow were blowing in fast. An emotional Porter reflected on the beauty of the heavens and his place in the world. He took a deep breath, gripped Poo-Bean a little tighter and marched into town, righteously holding his head high.

Among the frozen buildings Porter saw people bundled up in their winter clothes. They seemed to scurry from here to there. He imagined unhappiness filling the void

where their souls should be. He could hear the inner pain they had been oblivious to their entire lives. He could smell their internal rot.

He had the idea to begin eradicating the pain of the human race on the first person he saw, but being a thoughtful man, sweet and kind as he was, he believed one should do unto others as you would have them do unto you, so he headed toward the local pub. A saloon would hold perfect candidates to begin his one-man march in liberating the human race. Milton's Oasis had been the local's favorite tavern since Porter was a boy.

A pub was a place people went to fill a void he thought, or at least drown out bad feelings for a spell. These were the people that needed his attention first. He opened the door and squeezed his monstrous frame through the door jamb while ducking his bulbous head.

The first thing he noticed was how smoky and loud it was inside the walls of Milton's Oasis. Standing for a moment he scanned the room taking in the sights of a pub which he had never seen in his life. Milton's was lit with torches mounted to the walls and support beams at different heights and candles on every table. There was a lengthy fellow playing a piano. The ceiling was multifaceted and high and two gigantic metal chandeliers hung from the middle section.

Some of the people he recognized from his school days. He saw Jimmie Gillespie who once found a coyote that had been dead long enough to become stiff yet remained uneaten. Jimmy took it to school and set it upright in Mrs. Aphid's chair much to her shock and the classroom's delight. When he and Paul heard the story they laughed uncontrollably. Porter felt sad as he looked at the man who used to be a clever kid. The poor slob was too drunk to stand and had puke in his beard and clothes.

Porter spied something blue, the eyes of Teal Montgomery who had been amazingly beautiful in her youth. She was still attractive but those blue eyes didn't hold the life they had once upon a time. It was almost as if they had fallen inward leaving pretty yet lifeless marbles in their place. One man's arm was draped over her shoulder as he handed her a drink while another man, Porter recognized him as Jessie Centennial, the fastest runner in school said his old friend Paul, was squeezing her butt. She didn't seem to mind.

Porter wasn't looking around long before people started noticing him. It wasn't easy to blend in, he towered at least a foot over everyone. His burned, splotched face might have served as good camouflage in a fire or on the sun but here it made him stand out all the more, not to mention he was frowning and holding a hammer instead of a drink. There was a tap-tap-tap on his arm. He looked down. Next to him was a round unshaven man with a lazy eye. Porter didn't recognize him.

"Porter Stebbins. Ya-ya your Porter Stebbins ain't ya? Does you remember me?" slurred the man with awful breath. He pushed his chest outward and brought a thumb to it as he said, "I'm Mickey Short, son of Brian Short. My dad helped build this beautiful watering hole." He was teetering back and forth holding on to Porter for support. "So what do you say? Do you remember me or not and more to the point, since my dad built this place I figure you owe me a drink?"

A few more eyes shifted their way.

The man whom Porter didn't remember kept on talking but his words faded into the background. Porter was for the moment, caught off guard. For the longest time he hadn't spoken a single word out loud. There was no need to speak while living alone in isolation all those years, and Porter Stebbins wasn't the type of person to talk to himself. He'd heard about people like that. They were crazy.

Now how this man recognized him was a mystery but the stench of whisky accompanied by a steady spray of spittle coming from Mickey was beginning to annoy him.

More people looked his way.

Words, words, words, bla, bla, bla, Mickey said.

Porter then chose to end this one-sided conversation. He snapped out of his stupor and when he did the cosmic mood of Heavenly was altered. Inside the saloon the piano player stopped playing and the people stopped talking. Some of its occupants who saw the birth of this shocking force mustered up enough consciousness to blink or close their gaping mouths. Some of the others with their backs to the action would lie years later saying they saw the first blow the legendary Porter Stebbins delivered. At least those whose faces and jaws healed well enough to speak again.

Porter's left hand held Poo-Bean. The hammer was speckled with crimson originating from the mouth of the man that just wouldn't shut up. The son of Brian Short was holding his hands to his bloody orifice shouting out distorted howls of pain. The strike was clean. There wasn't a single tooth left in that stinky mouth.

This marked the beginning, the first lucky man had been purified on Porter and Poo-Bean's crusade. Porter felt a little jealous, wishing it was his mouth that had been rendered toothless, but mostly he felt dignified. After the first strike, Porter became the definition of focus. He was functioning on another plane, like a great athlete surpassing his natural abilities. To the onlookers he appeared to be moving with the whirling speed of a tornado.

He tossed Poo-Bean to his right hand. Ducking and spinning to his left he delivered a fierce upper-cut into a lady's lower jaw sending her bottom teeth shattering into her top, unfortunately taking a bit of her tongue off as well. Porter watched, captivated by the bits of teeth and tongue sprinkling the altered atmosphere of Milton's Oasis. The tongue was an accident. Porter didn't want that to happen, but he was too caught up in his work to care. She was after all, toothless now and could finally live a happy life. The guy she had been talking to opened his mouth just in time for Porter to thrust a fencing pop, sending those damned teeth to the back of his throat. He spun around arching Poo-Bean up then down crashing into another infected mouth. The blow took all but one tooth out which Porter quickly remedied with a well-placed jab from his own knuckle. He was a natural and well attuned with the energy of the unpredictable universe. He flowed with it as easily as river water flows downhill.

Within the time it takes a drunk to chug a beer after last call and order another, Porter had relieved twelve people of their teeth. It felt good. He sang out with a voice that hadn't been heard in years. It sounded rusty, choppy and old. It was perfectly horrifying.

While his mouth was open a few people caught a glimpse of his teeth and fell under a spell of awe, excitement, and greed. These few just stood there watching Porter swing his red-soaked hammer as if it was a machete and the people's teeth were vines in an overgrown jungle. Porter took notice of the few staring at him and thought it odd that they

didn't try to run with the rest of the herd. Their teeth were smashed out by one burly swing.

Three large drunks and one alcoholic stood from their table and charged Porter whose back was turned. Porter was truly enjoying watching shards of white spray through this environment he had created until he was hit hard in the back of the head. It didn't hurt. It just took away from the flowing grace he was getting used to. He was too big and his head too thick to be hurt by a fist or a kick supplied by a mere mortal. He turned to face his aggressors without hate or anger. He was simply going to help these four men before he helped anyone else. With one backhand Poo-Bean eradicated two mouths of their illness. Then the echoing forehand hit the other two jaws.

The bartender's face was sprayed with fragments of jagged teeth but he didn't notice. He was one of the people who saw Porter's teeth when he sang out in joy. He looked at Porter and asked "May I see your teeth again plea—"

Porter sent Poo-Bean flying into that man's mouth before he could finish saying the magic word. He was the nucleus of this arena and control of the situation was effortless.

In all the chaos and confusion of people running, shouting and pushing, the few who weren't moving at all stuck out clearly. Jabbing and swinging his way through the crowd with perfect accuracy Porter found himself a few steps away from one of the gapers.

"Your teeth," one lady said. "Might I look at them one more time?"

Porter understood.

He quickly popped her teeth out then sprinted to the exit to block the remaining inhabitants from leaving and shouted out, "Look at me!" These words struck Porter as a tragically funny rebirth of his verbal powers. It was bizarre to insist people look at him when he wouldn't even look at himself.

His voice, though unpracticed was powerful. All eyes, panicked and full of terror flashed his way. His body was fat, his face was blotchy, broken and ugly but he stood smiling. His teeth lit the room with a vibrancy unrivaled by rainbows or the sun. Instantly the noise and fright fell absently and the terror-stricken people were thrust into peaceful astonishment. They stood still. Even the tears streaming down their cheeks seemed to

cease dribbling.

Shockingly Porter's theory proved to be factual. His teeth hypnotized all who gazed upon them. This he thought, was simply more proof that he had found his purpose in the world and had the tools to fulfill his destiny. This realization was instant. The acceptance of this realization was also instantaneous and not wanting to waste any time with an in-depth reflection or purposeful analytical philosophy, he did what he was destined to do and commenced to smash the teeth from all those lucky enough to be in his presence.

As he passed, people were dropping to their knees, pain or praise it was all the same. He was there to help and helping people he realized was its own reward. He felt fantastic knowing that in a short amount of time and with a little work, some spilled blood and many thousands of teeth fragments, these people would be happy and free.

Some people had escaped the saloon prior to him showing his teeth and went through the streets shrieking a warning to all within ear shot.

Victorious on the battlefield Porter stood alone. At his feet lay the whimpering and crying recipients of his kindness. The first leg of his crusade had been a complete success. He tiptoed his way through the crowd with blood sticking to his sandaled feet and headed out the doors into the waiting world.

Alone in the middle of the frozen street Porter stood, a slightly different version of his former self. He was happy. The air was freezing and refreshing. Falling snow melted on his steaming brow. He saw three kids across the street trying to catch a glimpse of the unexpected commotion. They were young and probably hadn't lost their baby teeth yet so Porter left them alone, for now.

"You there" someone shouted, "Drop that hammer and surrender yerself to the law or we gona be forced to put ya down." Porter turned. They were at least twenty armed men thirty paces away, all on horseback.

Porter immediately recognized the leader of the mob as his old fishing pal Paul Portsmouth. The wind blew hard and the cold white breath pushing from Paul's mouth carried his familiar voice on the wind. Hearing it triggered lost feelings and memories of the past.

“Throw down the hammer Porter, I know it’s you,” shouted Paul through the flurries. “I also know you ain’t the violent type, now you disarm yourself and we can talk about this some. What do ya say to that Porter?”

Lined up behind his old friend sat the posse atop of their horses, their manes rippling and snapping with the wind. Porter’s beady hazel eyes locked with the eyes of a brown and white speckled mare of which Paul sat on top. The horse lowered her head and slightly bent her left knee. Porter flashed back to the first time he had ever met a horse. He remembered the peace, the freedom, the vibrating energy of what it was like to be a happy kid. Lost in thought and remembering feelings of old Porter forgot about his great quest and let Poo-Bean slip from his fingers.

“That’s a way ta do it,” said Paul. He and his troops made tracks towards Porter standing still in the snow, eyes locked with the mares. Some of the men were shouting cruel but warranted remarks to the man that spread so much chaos moments before but Porter paid them no mind.

Paul dismounted.

They stood facing one another.

“Hello Porter,” said Paul with his chin pointed nearly straight up. Though slouching Porter was still two feet taller than his now fully grown friend. “It’s been a long time. I had always hoped I’d see ya again. Not exactly like this. Certainly not like this!”

Porter stood motionless. The melting snow hitting his brow looked like a combination of sweat and tears.

“You sure look a whole lot different than I remember, but their ain’t no mistaking you Porter. You just have some type of magic about ya. God damn you got big. Where the hell have you been all this time?”

Porter said nothing. He was lost in a kaleidoscope of memories.

“I really hate ta do this but—,” Paul stopped and turned looking over his shoulder. “Shut up you men.” They did. He turned his attention back to Porter. “Ya know, I got somethin of yer’s. Ya dropped it all them years ago, at the hangin. I felt real bad about that fer a long time but, I always thought you’d come back and I’d run into ya. I guess I

got used to carrying it with me. Guess ya could say it's my oldest habit. It's been livin in my pocket for the last few years now."

Paul held out his open hand and revealed the wooden horse the shopkeeper had given Porter in a time when he had no teeth. In a perfect place lost in the past where he took for granted happiness, freedom, and his beautiful, wonderful, perfect gums. The horse looked as he had remembered it.

"I'm afraid I've got to take you in old pal." Paul looked at Porter then smiled. It was the same smile he had when he was a kid. It was a grin that was lacking some teeth.

Porter stared at Paul's mouth and somewhere deep inside his psyche a grin of his own was starting to grow. Now it was clear why he and Paul got along so well as kids. Paul was a halfway good person because he only had half his teeth left inside that half rotten mouth. He was only halfway affected with the cursed white nightmare.

Porter beamed down at his forgotten pal and said, "I'm here to help you my old friend." Then he armed himself with a smile; not a smile, but the smile. His perfect teeth shined through the wind and snow penetrating the minds of Paul and the mob. It seemed the world stopped, started, stopped, and then started again. One guy crapped his pants, another felt a bulge in his. Paul kept on smiling, hypnotized by the perfection displayed in Porter's mouth. The posy dropped their weapons to the ground and their jaws fell open gasping for air while looking at the wonders of Porter's teeth.

Porter bent down and picked Poo-Bean up from the snow being sure to keep his smile in plain sight. He stared directly in the face of Paul. Reaching out he plucked his wooden horse from Paul's numb hand. It felt smooth and familiar and he was glad to have it again. The smile wasn't merely meant to paralyze the troops, it was a real heart-felt smile directed to his once best friend.

"When did ya get those pretty teeth Porter?" slurred Paul.

Porter answered with a sharp swipe. It was easy smashing for him and Poo-Bean. The shards of teeth from Paul's now clean mouth blended in with the flying snow that evening. Porter's heart jumped with glee. Freeing Paul made him happier than he could have believed possible. There was no one more worthy of his touch than his old pal Paul,

now a fully good person.

He and Poo-Bean marched forward toward greatness, on to liberate the entire human race from the clever spell they had been placed under. To rot and suffer was no longer humanity's fate because of Poo-Bean, Porter and his wonderful teeth.

## 5

Blood decorated Calliba's Oasis. None of it flowed from the veins of paying customers. If one of the guests happened to get in the way of a boomerang, knife or other weapon carried by a cherub they did the inevitable and fell in love or lust or something to the nature of extreme liking. Unfortunately when a cherub was struck with a weapon by another, the result was horrifyingly mortal. Every drop of crimson spread in the Oasis came from the winged love makers. They would have all lived forever, immortal, immune to age, to time, to death itself if only Ubia's anvil had missed Walter von Ceindume's head that fateful day.

When the battle broke out every cherub except for Cupid grabbed for their weapons in anger, intolerance and a sense of self-righteousness. Desorian's music was stifled and replaced with shrills inside the electrifying vacuum of war. The panicked patrons of the Oasis gasped for air to fuel their screams. They scurried in a chaotic whirlwind. Some rushed into the twisted pile of fighting cherubs in an attempt to end the carnage before it went any further. When a hand grabbed hold or arms were wrapped around a cherub, that cherub would simply slap them with a boomerang, or butt them with the handle of a sword or whip and the would-be-peacemaker couldn't help but to fall into some dumb-founded state of mind. The cherub war could not be stopped by any pacifist.

Flapping wings extinguished the fires of the torches and candles. They generated powerful circling winds accented with feathers, saliva and bits of flesh and blood all glowing in the eerie blue light cast from the chandeliers.

The screaming and chaos was overshadowed for a brief moment as the battle smashed its way through the ceiling and into the night sending debris and one of the blushing blue

chandlers crashing downwards. The bone splintering mass would have crushed Francos and others rolling around in enamored bliss had it not been for the blind Cyclops. As inebriated as he was he heard it whistling downwards and stopped its descent with one lucky hand, snatching it cleanly and taking the brunt of its mass on his back and shoulder. Its velocity forced him down onto a knee but nobody was seriously hurt.

The cherubs that weren't dead were viciously fighting with one another, all except for Cupid. He stood on the same table shouting, begging, pleading to the others to stop. They did not. They were lost in the fight and heard nothing. They had all fully embraced the violence. Those endless days of arguing with one another, trying to spread their unique insight on "the good word," had built up to a breaking point. Eliminating the competition was now the only way of securing their weapons survival and the survival of pure love.

Being creatures of the air they all naturally took to flight. A tornado of battling cherubs circled up and out of the hole in the ceiling with weapons flashing, hate peaking, and a sense of "I'm right, I'm good, I...I... I..." dominating their thoughts.

Cupid sheathed his oversized arrow and followed them out. He thought of the Dancer and all the words of love she understood so well. If only she were here right now perhaps she could help, but deep down he knew nothing would be able to salvage this catastrophe.

Still he tried.

A thrilling Tarzan like howl pierced through the sounds of battle. Cupid looked down and saw a horrifying toad as tall as a man, smiling so hard her lips were tearing in spots leaving dark bloody cracks. Her sickening green and gray color was enhanced next to the moon-lit blowing snow. She was leaping up and down screaming primordial cries of happiness or distress, he could not tell. He saw her for a second before a dead cherub fell through his line of sight. He looked back to the fight then flew into the self-inflicted genocide.

His ears perked up hearing the cracking of a whip behind him. It was a sharp and familiar sound. Without turning to confirm with his eyes he tucked his wings to his back and dove straight down. Pintor had just missed with his sharp whip that would have snapped Cupid's head clean from his neck. Cupid flew and Pintor perused.

Pintor was fast, very fast. He was faster than Cupid who had been overworked and exhausted for far too long. Though Cupid zigged and zagged Pintor closed the gap. He meant to have Cupid's head. Again Cupid heard the sound of a whip being drawn back. He knew Pintor would have him. He knew he was about to die.

Cupid hadn't been drinking, he wasn't distracted with anger and this semi-calm warrior state of mind allowed him to think. He flapped hard, one last time and disappeared. Pintor's whip flew forward and hit nothing but snowflakes. Cupid reappeared in the Realm of Mortals, did a tight loop-da-loop then re-entered the World of Myth directly on top of Pintor.

Cupid wrapped his arms around the body and arms of his friend rendering Pintor's wings useless. Pintor was faster but Cupid was stronger. As they fell Cupid kept shouting, "Think about what you're doing," over and over again keeping Pintor's legs, arms and wings pinned as they fell. Before they hit the ground Cupid spread his wings as far as they would go, leveled out and pushed his feet off of Pintor's back sending him crashing onto the ground. He landed hard and summer-salted across the snow into a drift with his whip firmly in hand. Cupid left him to peruse some of the others and shouting as loud as he could, "Think about what you are doing Pintor," hoping with all his heart the rest would hear.

Squinting against the snow Cupid looked up in time to see Ubia's anvil fall from his hands and rip the wings clean off Zelux. The rock thrower fell from the snowy heavens to the ground, his arms and hair flapping with the stiff winds and his wings helicoptered slowly after him. The satchel he wore fell from his waist and the stones inside scattered across the blanket of snow.

He lived. Perhaps the softness of winter's fallen crop cushioned his fall, or perhaps it was because he was immortal, either way the rock thrower was wingless but still active and dangerous.

Sheri watched his decent and bound over to get a closer look, not at the fallen cherub without wings, but at the anvil lying near him. She knew the name Ubia before she even truly believed in cherubs.

“He’s the one,” she said though her words were lost to the wind. “He’s the worst of them all!” she snarled. Her increasing heart rate made her body pulse. Her eyes, both of them, reflected all the bitterness, all the hatred, all the fierce resentment that had been boiling in her veins throughout her dark life.

The anvil covered in blood and snow and perverse shininess was the device responsible for her existence. She stared at it, hypnotized by its realness. Memories of the monster from the moat scraped across her twisting brain rummaging up ancient hatred that inspired her to become this thing, to become the toad. Flashes of her father and the Sad Lady and their cold brutal existence filled her black heart and soul with more negative energy than even she was meant to handle. Her body vibrated all the more.

Ubia descended from the heavens to retrieve his anvil and saw Sheri for the first time. He felt mad. He was angry, ready to kill all of his brothers, but when his eyes locked with hers, a freezing cold shiver of paralysis seized his muscles and mind and he did something he had never done in his life; he lost control of his wings and hit the ground.

Sheri took one gigantic leap and landed next to him. Her breathing was hard and her jaw muscles clinched. Ubia pulled his head from the snow and got to his hands and knees as Zelux, now destined to live the rest of his days earth bound, rose to his feet. Blood was squirting from the stumps on his back matching every beat of his heart. He staggered toward his fallen enemy and the toad.

“You, you are the one, you caused all of this,” said the toad towering over Ubia who now stood trembling in the stench of Sheri’s breath. “Your lack of attention, your useless act of this imaginary thing you call love created me, created this shell of thick, black pain and suffering!”

She cocked one of her hind legs and unloaded on Ubia breaking some ribs and knocking the wind out of him. He zipped through the air then skidded on his back as Sheri bounded after. She sat over him and patiently waited for him to open his eyes. He stared into Sheri’s eyes and felt the evil that soaked every cell in her body.

Still lying on his back Ubia coughed up blood then through red bubbings and gurglings he grunted, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The blood ran down his

cheeks turning the snow packed into his ears red.

“You are the one that made my father fall in love with my mother...but you never came back! You never thought to see what happened to them afterwards. You acted in your clumsy, dumbfounded, ignorant ways and then moved on without another thought of the consequences of your actions! What insolence, what outrageousness,” she hollered then slapped him as hard as she could in his face. She had fantasized about this moment but did not believe it would ever come to fruition. She hit him again. “You awful little thing,” she said through a clinched jaw. “They would have been better off not having loved at all. I would have been better off never having been born at all!”

Fury, as if it existed as an entity, all on its own, came into her body as a demon possession. It consumed her. Sheri let go of all control and beat him with violence rivaling that of a sun flare. Her triumphant screams fit in nicely with the windy winter night harboring murder. The blue stone tucked under her bottom lip rattled out in the turbulent beating.

Somewhere around the five minuet mark of the thrashing, Sheri glimpsed Zelux tottering weakly next to her. His eyes and mannerisms made it obvious he wasn't all together in the head. He stood wobbling with blue lips and ghostly white skin staring down at the blue stone, hypnotized by its power. The blood that had formerly been squirting out of his wing stumps now only dribbled out.

Sheri stopped the beating. Her chugging chest pushed puffs of steam rapidly from her mouth obscuring her sight. Her webbed fore feet dripped with Ubia's blood. She looked from Zelux to Ubia and smiled an awful smile, then said, “Pick it up.”

Zelux, weak from blood loss, was barely able to bend over and pull the stone from the snow. He straightened his back and stared happily into it, lost in its magnificence.

“You know what to do now,” said Sheri.

Zelux looked down at the cherub pulp under the shadow of Sheri's heaving body. Zelux drew the blue stone back and lifted one leg as a baseball pitcher would. He eyed his brother, his ex-friend, his enemy and paused for a moment. The stone was trying to heal him but it had become so weak under Sheri's touch. Zelux went into the motion that

was uniquely his. His aim as always was perfect.

It was the last stone to fly from the rock thrower's hand. He released the stone with a momentum that brought him down as well. He followed his arm's motion, falling face first to the ground, and died. Sheri didn't see him, she was fixated on Ubia. The carrier of the anvil lay dead with the blue stone buried in his skull like an undersized tombstone.

Justice had been served. All her lies and manipulation had worked. Ubia the cruel was at long last dead.

Elsewhere, Xavier sent his mace through the midsection of Neumo cutting him in half. His nunchuks fell to the ground as did both sides of his body. His mouth still held the scowl reflecting his last thoughts, his last emotions on this plane of existence.

Xavier was keen and cunning, he too thought of using both worlds as his battling fields. He flapped his wings from one world to the next, getting a jump on the ones he was trying to kill, the ones trying to kill him.

On the other side, in the dimension of the mortals, people in the streets running hysterically from Poo-Bean and Porter saw him. It may have been the anger infecting the cherubs or it could have been fact that they were dying that made them visible to the men and women never able to see them before.

"Look up there in the sky sugar pie," said a man to his wife as they ran for their lives.

Others looked up. "They look like children, angle children."

"They must be here to protect us from him," shouted the man's wife, doing her best to out run her husband.

"What's happening? What in the good world is happening on this frightful night?" shouted someone else.

"What are they waiting for?"

"Why don't they fly down and save us?"

"If they are here to protect us why aren't they doing anything?"

Behind them Porter continued swinging Poo-bean to and fro as they continued their immaculate crusade toward the emancipation of the human race.

## 6

The Tooth Fairy shot through the sky flying faster than she or any of her predecessors had ever before. Her skull felt like cracking under the pressure pulsing from her beating heart. She held her breath and pushed harder. Her wings buzzed in a blur as she hurried toward hundreds, perhaps thousands of teeth screaming out their energy in one last burst as they were smashed into useless shards under the punishment of Porter and Poo-Bean. All those teeth shattering at nearly the same time sent out supersonic shrieks she alone could hear. Never before in all the Tooth Fairy's existences was such tremendous anguish known.

She didn't need to think about where she was going, she followed the shock waves and as she drew closer, the screams of the teeth intensified. Every time Poo-Bean collided with a set of teeth, scorching pain seared her brain and sent acid sickness into her gut causing periodic dry heaving. Her delirious flight seemed infinite.

Porter worked up a mean sweat running, dancing and swinging Poo-Bean around. He hadn't been this active since he was a kid. He twirled around and snapped Poo-Bean into the mouth of a man cowering next to a horse trough half full of frozen water. Porter paused. He straightened up and stretched his arms, pointing them to the sky. He shimied and twisted then dipped a knee and brought his fist down, punching through the ice into the trough, then scooped a few handfuls of water into his mouth to quench his thirst. He was moving with the fluidity of a practiced ballerina and was having fun doing so.

He had gotten use to the screams of the people. They no longer seemed out of place, but as he drank a sound in the distance rippled his ear drums. The Tooth Fairy was shrieking at the top of her lungs when she flew into Heavenly. Porter looked around to identify the noise but he saw nothing.

The Tooth Fairy flew firstly into Milton's Oasis where the smell of broken teeth and blood hung thick in the air. She gleaned the floor for any teeth that remained whole. They were adult teeth, and thus not meant for her to have, but the love she felt for all teeth brought out her maternal sympathy. This place was a place of horrific sorrow. She followed the trail of chips, shards, and blood until she was staring across the street at the

man behind the pain.

Porter Stebbins lifted his head from the water trough and acknowledged the winged fairy. It was an awkward moment for both of them. Porter had only heard stories of the infamous Tooth Fairy. He had never seen her before, didn't even know if she truly existed. The Tooth Fairy fluttered in the blowing snow dumbfounded. She had looked at every single person's face in this dimension and the next while trading money for teeth, but she had never laid eyes on this man before.

The cold winds of Valhalla blew her hair back and pushed her dress against her body. Porter had stepped away from the trough and stood in the middle of the street with his legs spread wide and Poo-Bean in hand. They were the only two beings still standing. Many toothless people laying in the street, formerly consumed with pain and fear, sensed the eerie collaboration of these strange creatures staring at one another. Distracted from their pain and the fighting cherubs above, their eyes darted back and forth between Porter and the Tooth Fairy. People occupying nearby homes and places of business peaked through curtains or cracked their doors to catch a glimpse of the two figures. Children hushed their parents, a dog stepped on a cat purring too loud, the trees blowing back and forth seemed to stop creaking, even the wind seemed to be more quiet.

The Tooth Fairy saw the blood dripping from Poo-Bean and smelled the enamel on its head. She lost control, and charged in a blur. Her rage fueled her flight and before Porter had a clue as to what was going on she smashed into his fat belly knocking him flat on his keister. He slid spraying up snow until he smashed into the corner of a building. The people inside were knocked to the floor but jumped to their feet to resume watching.

She kept on top of him smashing her fists into his ear, his nose, his chin, his mouth. Porter was knocked stupid. The damage he sustained from himself the day before with the rocks and hammer had softened him up a bit. Mortal men didn't have the capability to hurt him but the Tooth Fairy was no mortal man. His damaged brain began to wander. He knew he was in a fight but thought he was standing up with his back turned while being assaulted from behind. In reality he lay on his back, arms limp at his sides while his bulbous head was knocked from one shoulder to the other and back again in the blink of an

eye. Another neck would have snapped under the assault, perhaps the head knocked clean off, but there was too much muscle and blubber solidifying his monstrous frame. His red and white camouflaged face began to bruise and bleed. It was the shrieking screams belting from the Tooth Fairy's vocal cords that brought him out of his daze and back into reality.

He swatted his beastly hand sending the Tooth Fairy away. The teeth she had temporarily planted in her elastic gums were knocked out and disappeared into the storm. She didn't care. Her rage dismissed her need. Porter stood and shook his head attempting to clear his mind and vision. He had become accustomed to running through the townsfolk with such little effort that the shellacking from a small fairy was shocking. He had underestimated the Tooth Fairy but that mistake was now a memory.

He stared through the blowing force of snow and spotted his newfound enemy who was now streaking back at him still screaming. He quickly wiped blood from his eye, adjusted his feet, clenched Poo-Bean and when the time was right struck the Tooth Fairy square on top of her head with a might so fierce she broke the sound barrier before hitting the ground, only to bounce right back up with an upper-cut splitting Porter's chin open as his feet left the ground.

The townsfolk gasped at the sight of all that girth composed of muscle and lard leaving the ground. Porter flew up into the air maxing out at around three and a half stories before he started his decent to the ground, all the while the Tooth Fairy continued throwing her knuckles into any part of him she could reach.

Ba-boom! Porter hit the ground with a force that shook the Earth. The surrounding buildings rumbled, dishes fell, paintings rattled, and dust was jarred loose from the door jams. It was in this moment that he got mad.

For the first time in his life Porter became truly angry. His hand flashed grabbing hold of the Tooth Fairy's torso. She tried muscling her way out but Porter's grip was too powerful. As if she was a knife, he repeatedly stabbed her head into a building composed of stone. Over and over and over again he smashed her until the building crumbled. The Tooth Fairy was hurt. For the first time in her existence she was physically damaged.

Porter shifted his grip onto her legs and began swinging her onto the pile of rubble. She was like a limp rag-doll whose stuffing remained intact. Then he let Poo-Bean have a go at her.

That hammer, fueled under the power of Porter could smash boulders, splinter massive trees, even give John Henry a run for his money but somehow the Tooth Fairy stayed in one piece. Her tiny little head refused to splatter under the combined might of Poo-Bean and Porter.

The Tooth Fairy's mind was far from sound but she was an animal and her instincts kicked in. She tried biting the hand that held her but she had no teeth. She tried slipping out the bottom of the hand lock but it was too strong. Finally she grabbed hold of the hammer after it hit her for the umpteenth time and used Porter's own strength against him. The hammer pulled her free. She let go of Poo-Bean at the top of its ark and let herself be slung down the street behind them. Porter was unaware the fairy had freed herself. With Poo-Bean's next strike the bones in his gargantuan paw shattered into splinters. He felt no pain. The fingers lay limp, the hand was no good to him anymore.

The Tooth Fairy lay still. Her dress was torn, her face and body were covered in blood and she was toothless. It was the lack of teeth in her elastic gums that got her back to her feet; that gnawing power of addiction. Suddenly she was back in the mood to destroy the destroyer of teeth, and then she would scavenge the streets for a fix.

She shrieked again giving her position away, Porter turned to face the evil one that had come to stifle mankind's liberation; the wicked protector of teeth.

Porter swung Poo-Bean and the Tooth Fairy swung her fists as the cherub war raged above.

## 7

Many cherubs lay dead. The few that survived were doing everything they could to complete the genocide. They went from this dimension to that, using every flying trick and bit of cunning to outmaneuver and destroy their enemies. Their differences had been forgotten. They were all lost in the mindset of battle.

Johan's torch being the only artificial light in the sky put him at a great disadvantage,

but he was as clever as the rest. He flew up into a dark snow cloud to hide the light glowing from his torch, occasionally poking his head out to spy on his next victim. Below Logan and Taciloch were in knife to hatchet combat.

Logan thrust his knife toward Taciloch's throat but missed as Tachiloch blocked it with his free arm then swung his hatchet downward attempting to rip open Logan's belly. Logan sucked his fat tummy inwards and thrust again with his knife. They locked their free arms and continued trying to kill one another.

Johan had been watching the two and opted to give up his cover for a sneak attack on the entangled cherubs believing he could take them both out simultaneously. He tucked his wings and exited the storm cloud. The torch's flame held in his outstretched hand licked his forearm and threatened to singe his eyelashes. Surprise was the key and he waited until the last possible second before opening his wings. He quickly stopped his plunge, not more than a body length away from the two warring cherubs, inverted his torch and thrust it downwards. When he did his hair whipped around in front of his eyes blocking his vision. He only hit half his intended mark. The torch collided with Taciloch's head lighting it on fire. The force of the collision broke the violent embrace between he and Logan. Taciloch screamed with pain as the fire spread across his face and onto his body.

Jolted from battle Logan turned his attention to the temporarily blinded torch carrier, swung his arm and buried his knife in the back of Johan's neck. A gust of wind parted Johan's hair as if it were two sides of a stage curtain. His eyes rolled back white as the torch fell from his hand. Moments later it landed in the snow, forever extinguished.

Logan pulled his knife out and watched Johan fall from the skies until he landed on the ground not far from the smoldering remains of Taciloch, his charred hand still holding tight to his hatchet.

A short way away Dihomaim held his club with both hands over his head flying fast and meaning to attack Xavier from the behind. Adalose was flying close by and saw the oncoming attack, as did Cupid. Adalose arched his back, stretched his throwing arm behind him, then sprung forward releasing his spear hoping his timing was precise and he

would be able to take both Xavier and Dihomaim down with one skewering blow.

Dihomiam was nearly on top of Xavier. As he began swinging his club downward, Xavier, sensing the blind-sided attack, disappeared into the Realm of Mortals. In a flash he twisted his shoulders and spine generating power behind his mace. He then reappeared to the left of Dihomaim, his mace targeted on his enemies face.

Cupid focused on the flying spear. With a jolt of his body he successfully ejected one of the smaller arrows from his quiver, snatched it, and locked it in his bow before letting it fly. His aim, despite the storm was true. It intersected Adalose's spear deflecting it downward just before it connected with Xavier's ribs.

Dihomaim caught Xavier out of the corner of his eye and attempted to alter the path of his swinging club while avoiding the mace traveling at his head. He shifted into a tight front flip avoiding Xavier's mace by a fingernails width but missing Xavier with his club in the process. They continued to fight.

Adalose looked over his shoulder and saw Cupid. He spun around and raced toward his spear desperately wanting to rearm himself. The spear, in its altered trajectory, was now falling toward the ground. Adalose zigged and zagged hoping to avoid being stuck with one of Cupid's arrows, as he was sure he was being fired upon. Had he flown straight he could have caught it mid-fall, turned and hunted Cupid down, however his attempts to avoid arrows existing only in his mind slowed his descent.

His spear did not hit the ground. Instead it sunk into the shoulder and pierced the heart of the Clopless who had been drunkenly waving his fists and shouting at the top of his lungs for the fighters to stop. The spear's effect was far from typical.

The Noclops had no sight. There was no one for him to fixate on, no one to fall in love with. The power was phenomenal. Because of Adalose's spear he learned what Cupid's dancer knew so well.

The middle ground between love and loveless-ness is self-realization.

Adalose retrieved his spear and reentered the fight.

The Noclops's inebriated state was nullified. He entered into a world of unabated bliss based on blind love. He staggered about bathing in copious amounts of love filtering

through him from the mind of the universe.

It may have been coincidence. It might have been written. It might be that opposites attract. Whatever the reason, the euphoric Noclops staggered in one direction and eventually lost his balance and fell just behind Sheri the Toad. She did not notice. Hypnotized, she was still towering over the corps of Ubia, smiling. The Noclops's arm was last to fall. A single finger settled in the snow barely touching a toe of the Toad. Then...

No face to be seen. No voice to be heard.

He literally fell in love without her saying a word.

Falling onto the ground, he entered her life.

No judgment, no shame, they shared the purest light.

His arms limp, finger touched toe, nothing had to be said for love took over the show.

He loved not with his eye, but with his mind, because in the purest sense,

True love is blind.

Unconcealed, love entered through a toe,

A love so pure, it disrupted her soul.

Previously lost, in hateful glee,

She felt nothing but bliss towards her fallen adversary.

The cherub so cruel, unjust and untamed lay there dead, and now,

She felt shame.

Her toe started to tingle and then to burn. The cells of her body began to turn.

Her whole life had been set in a membrane of hell,

Now she ruptured under an aching swell.

Her cells lysed, one at a time.

In a most painful way, Sheri, began to die.

For as her body slowly burst from bottom to top, her mind began to see life through an unfiltered mirrored swap.

It wasn't the cherub that had done her wrong.

It was in fact she, who saw life as a sad song.

Biting her lip, she could not speak.

It mattered not, for her eyes shown the sorrow of having corrupted something so sweet.

She died regretting what she had done.

Alas Sheri's life was spent,

No more time under the Earth's sun.

## 8

After pulling his knife from the back of Johan's neck Logan turned his attention to Adalose. He didn't know Cupid's arrow had deflected the spears trajectory, but he had heard the sound of the two colliding and it placed his attention on the unarmed cherub chasing after his falling spear.

He pursued Adalose, saw him pull the spear from the Noclops, anticipated his flight and threw one of his knives and then watched as it whistled toward his target. Unfortunately for him he was being hunted as well.

As he was watching his knife spinning toward the place Adalose's head would be in a second, one of Melca's boomerangs connected with his neck. The impact separated his head from his body before he could watch his knife sink into the back of Adalose's head.

Logan's brain was still switched on as gravity took his head. Utterly confused he wondered why the world started spinning and why he was falling towards the ground. His head hit the snow. His eyes remained open. His headless body gave two more flaps before seizing up and falling from grace. Before his brain consumed the last molecules of oxygen he saw his headless body hit the ground. A sliver of a moment before death he acknowledged a hand white knuckling a knife, and he realized the body was his.

The spinning boomerang threw off the blood and circled back to its owner's hand. Melca was positioned in the center of the war. His focus was incredible. He slipped on-coming attacks while his arms tirelessly heaved his boomerangs left, right, up and down from both hands, killing more cherubs than all the rest. It was a glorious sensation. Not only was he eliminating the delinquent competition but the proof of knowing his boomerangs were undoubtedly the perfect weapons of true love broadcast intense satis-

faction of righteousness. He didn't flap from one dimension to the next like the others. He held his ground, killing at will. The wrath, the anger, the love for murdering consumed him. *Kill them all*, was his only thought.

Cupid was defending his life from a blurry attack from Gautama and his sai's. He held an arrow in each of his hands blocking every blow Gautama threw. "Die Cupid, die! Die," he shouted with every thrust. He spat the word, "Die!" one last time trying to sink one of his sai's into Cupid's belly. Cupid defended himself, locking an arrow into the sai and pushing it aside, then Gautama found himself in a loving embrace. Cupid's arms were wrapped around his body with a warm hug. Surprised Gautama's placed a hand on Cupid's shoulder and pushed his himself back enough for them to lock eyes. Gautama's eyebrows shifted from an angry V shape to bushy rainbows of surprise.

His strength left his body. His hands fell weakly to his sides dropping both sai's. He tried to speak but blood instead of words fell from his lips. Gautama slowly slipped from Cupid's arms and fell to the ground with a boomerang embedded in center of his upper back.

Cupid saw a smile smeared across Melca's face hovering in the sky. Bewildered Cupid was incapable of words or thought. It was the first time in a long time he saw his friend smile. Then through the blowing snow he heard Melca shout, "Cupid, I'm coming for you!" And with that he hurtled a boomerang, then pursued.

Dihomaim ducked under the swinging mace of Xavier while counter attacking with his club. The club whistled through the flaky air and hit Xavier in the knee popping the kneecap out of his skin. Xavier twisted with the blow to his knee and sent his mace into the shoulder blade of the arm holding his club. The arm blasted off of Dihomaim's body. The blow was too much to handle and Dihomaim passed out and fell. He was dead before he hit the ground. His club had separated from his hand in the blast. It landed upright in the snow, as if waiting for another warrior to claim it.

A short distance away, in flight, Yeshua, flexing every band of muscle to its maximum capacity, used the handle of his mallet to hold Mulmuse's wire a fingers width away from his neck. Melmuse, positioned behind him, stared at the Adam's apple bobbing up and

down so close to his neck-lusting wire. They were locked in the standoff from the beginning of the war. Melmuse dug his knees into Yeshua's back pulling as hard as he could, determined to strangle the life from his foe. Both of their arms were strained and tired. Their standoff ended suddenly.

Segfina flew straight down from the peppered heavens fighting against the topsy-turvy snow targeting Melmuse and Yeshua. Neither saw him coming. His helmet connected with the top of Melmuse's head creating a blooming flower-like splash. Of the two locked in arms, Melmuse was the easiest to hit.

Though Sigfina carried tremendous speed the impact stunted his flight. He was jolted to a halt. Feathers flew from his jerked wings on impact and Yeshua, though tired and surprised, took full advantage. He swung his mallet and struck Segfina under the chin. It sent his bottom teeth shattering into his top. Yeshua continued to cork-screw, bringing his mallet into Segfina's groin with all his pent-up might. The momentum continued until his mallet reached the guts behind Segfina's belly button, smashing through his pelvis and shattering his spine in the process. Segfina fell. He lay on the ground hemorrhaging and died alone in the cold shortly thereafter.

Cupid flew with all his strength against the blowing snow in the hopes it would throw Melca's boomerangs off course. Melca believed he was doing right. If he could kill Cupid, the rest would be easy to defeat. He pursued with all his strength sending boomerangs chasing after Cupid hoping for some contact to slow him enough to finish the job. Cupid's strategy of flying directly into the wind worked, sending Melca's boomerangs off course just enough to keep him alive. The wind prevented the boomerangs from returning to Melca's hands and he was forced to end the chase and collect his stray boomerangs. Cupid retreated into the Realm of Mortals to hide.

Vincent who had now shed his shy ways and swapped them for a self-righteous will-to-kill targeted his lance upon Yeshua shortly after the cherub had dispensed with Segfina. While attempting to catch his breath Yeshua scanned the skies and had spotted Vincent, moments before his lance would have impaled him. Yeshua turned, flew upward with a powerful flap of his wings and shifted dimensions. Vincent, realizing the oncom-

ing sneak attack, anticipated the maneuver and dove down then quickly circled into a tight forward loop before following Yeshua into the Realm of Mortals. His strategy worked. When he reappeared he caught Yeshua by surprise. The tip of his lance drove into Yeshua's left butt cheek and came out his shoulder. When Yeshua felt the lance penetrate his body he hurtled his mallet in a desperate attempt to avenge his own demise. It smashed into the top of Vincent's head cracking his skull wide open. The two cherubs fell as one, locked together by lance. While falling they re-entered the Realm of Myth. Their corpses splattered red across the land.

Meanwhile, Xavier's mace was ripped from his hands with a well placed snap from Pintor's whip. The mace fell. Pintor smiled, believing he had the upper hand and log rolled away from Xavier having faith his foe would be defeated with the next thrashing crack of his whip, but this was not the case. Xavier was so strong and fast he was on Pintor mid-roll, just as he began congratulating himself for disarming the mighty Xavier. His windpipe no longer worked due to the death grip of Xavier's hands squeezing his neck. Pintor's tongue stuck out and his face turned blue, all the while Xavier was thinking how agonizing time is while waiting for someone to be strangled to death. But time did pass and Pinter finally died. Without remorse Xavier scanned the skies for another cherub and saw none. He looked down to where he thought his mace might have landed, then things went black and he fell.

Melca had forced him into retirement.

Melca arched his wings circling in the sky. He alone ruled the heavens. He caught his boomerang tattooed in Xavier's blood behind his back then shouted, "CUUPPPPPID, FACE ME!" He continued shouting, "FACE ME! FACE ME!...FACE MEEEEEEEEEE!" He kept circling, kept searching, and kept shouting without another to challenge, unaware he and Cupid were the last of the cherubs.

## 9

*Daises were sweet...*

*or red; and circular were...they were...*

*Some thin...something thin...No,                      No, My Mamar says...  
 when brown blossoms and goes to hair    ...and I said, you're,  
 No...you are...*

These were the spotty flashes of stuttering thoughts staggering through the mind of a battered, barely conscious Porter Stebbins. His world was dreamlike. He was stooped over, barely able to keep on his feet, and swinging Poo-Bean in crisscrossing loops with no concept that these were his actions. The broken, pale fingers in his other hand, looked like neighboring wind socks lined with blood. Before him the Tooth Fairy fluttered unbalanced, corkscrewing as one set of wings was flapping faster than the other. She heard nothing and saw only blackness though her eyes were open.

They were at a standoff, but not a Mexican standoff where both participants are alert and armed. This was a deaf, dumb, and blind standoff. They swung inches from each other's faces, with heavy arms, hitting only air.

Nearby in the darkness, ankle deep in snow, shook Cupid. Earlier he had been horrified and now, alone in the blackness, reflecting on the snarling face of war, his mind had entered into a numb place of sickening detachment, just beyond the borders of disbelief. Standing naked in the cold snow he shivered from fright. His head, looking towards the sky, jerked in sharp ticking motions trying to catch a glimpse of the next one of his kind looking for another kill. He saw none. His knees knocked. His jaw shook uncontrollably. He began to cry but forced himself to stop out of dread. There he stood, with spastic muscle twitches, while pointing the oversized arrow locked in the string of his bow in every direction. He seesawed between fatigue begging for sleep, and electric panic jolting the back of his brain with rousing despair.

Fear owned him.

Melca had searched high and low and found nothing but the dead scattered across the World of Myth. He felt no remorse.

The hunt owned him.

Convinced there was no one left to kill in his world he left and entered the heavens of the mortals. Firstly he saw Porter and the Tooth Fairy battling. Undistracted he quickly

scanned the darkness for an attack. There was none. He then went on the offensive and within minutes felt frustrated because there was no one left to fight. He held his position in the sky searching. At the luckiest of moments the clumsy brawl below caught his attention.

Porter's face jiggled and splattered blood as a lucky front kick from the Tooth Fairy connected. As Porter spun with the momentum, Poo-Bean grazed a metal fence which sent sparks shooting into the blackness on a direct path toward Cupid. Melca caught a glimmer of Cupid's arrow shimmering in the moonlight. At first he wasn't sure if he was dead or alive, then he saw Cupid twitching to the rhythm of his horror dance. Melca's eyes widened, his heart pounded fiercely, his ears and face reddened with excitement. He shifted his weight, took aim, and let one of his blood covered boomerangs fly.

Cupid never saw Melca. The boomerang swooshed down through the air. Its owner, overwhelmed with anticipation, unwillingly released an uncontrolled squeak from the depths of his soul. A gust of wind carried his squeak off into the distance, away from Cupid, but Melca released another boomerang upon the premise that his enemy had heard it, and would react. That same wind shifted the trajectory of the first boomerang enough to save Cupid's life. It scathed his shoulder then planted itself in the snow. Cupid turned wildly, full of fear, consumed in terror and released his last arrow. He did not aim, he didn't even look, he just let go. Melca was nowhere its flight path.

The second boomerang whistled toward Cupid's position on the ground while Melca followed thinking that if it came down to it, he would just chop Cupid's head off holding a boomerang with his hand in a ground fight. It would be easy because Cupid was laying on his back. As he release the Dancer's arrow, its girth had pushed him backwards and onto the ground. He was helpless.

The Tooth Fairy had regained her sight and was punching Porter repeatedly in the face. He was inept, completely discombobulated and she sensed victory was near. She finished the fury with a hard, straight left that sent Porter falling backwards, as if he were a mighty tree that had been sawed down. He fell as if in slow motion to a 45 degree angle, but there he suddenly stopped and whooshed forward. The final blow had placed him

in the path of Cupid's last arrow. It plunged into Porter's back forcing his body to surge forward. The shock sent the air whooshing from his lungs.

The Tooth Fairy, confused and furious, continued beating him but Porter didn't care. Pure emotion exploded throughout his body forcing the wounds suffered in battle far away. His vision came back with a colorful explosion and through swollen bruised eyes he saw the top of the Tooth Fairy's head as she threw punch after punch into his belly. Unabated love consumed him. It wasn't just her hair, or her perfect technique in throwing a punch, or her little legs with perfect bruises covering them, it wasn't even her sparkling wings; it was everything that made her so lovely, so beautiful, thrashing away at his gut.

The furious Tooth Fairy hunted for victory with a finishing uppercut, however as she looked up to target Porter's chin she met his smiling face beaming down at hers. Instantly the wickedness evaporated as she saw between the fat busted lips of her enemy, the teeth beyond imagination. The sensation she felt upon seeing them far surpassed the magic cast from a cherub, or love, or laughter.

The world stopped turning while Porter stared at the Tooth Fairy and she stared at his teeth. She relaxed her fists, placed her hands upon his cheeks, forcing him to pucker-up. It was Porter's first kiss. A blinding light shot from where their lips met flooding the world with a light ten times as brighter than the sun.

Cupid had seen Melca's approach and already shut his eyes and turned his head accepting defeat. The light cast from that perfect kiss blinded all in the vicinity, Melca included. He stopped his descent, holding his position in the sky to shield his eyes from the intense white light. Nobody could see his boomerang miss Cupid as he lay on his back in the snow.

The anticipation of his boomerang's return was natural to Melca. He never had to think about it. It was automatically calculated upon every release for centuries, however his abrupt stoppage mid-flight disintegrated that calculation and his attention, taken from the moment, caused serious consequences. Melca's boomerang circled around but his hand was not there to receive it. His head was.

Melca the mighty had fallen by his own hand, and reluctantly, remorsefully, regret-

tably, Cupid the meek, had inherited the Earth.

The kiss between Porter and the Tooth Fairy was literally magic. The teeth, cursed by Porter so many times, began to melt like mercury and in their liquid state slithered their way from his mouth to hers, solidifying in her gums.

The Tooth Fairy pulled her bruised, bloody face from Porter's and looking into his bloodshot eyes, smiled her first real smile.

The teeth, her teeth, grown in the mouth of a half-breed, shined and glimmered and radiated in intangible brilliance. A smitten Porter smiled back with his perfect gums. His toothless grin had lost none of its radiance. When their lips parted the light faded.

Removing the arm that shielded his face Cupid looked around wondering why he was not dead and saw his friend falling out of the sky with a boomerang buried between his eyes. Melca nearly landed on top of him. Cupid, far beyond distraught turned onto his side and looked at his friend. Melca's eyes had rolled into the back of his head. Blood spewed onto the snow.

"Melca?" Was all Cupid's tight throat was able to squeak out. The lonely cherub managed to wiggle his way to his companion. He slipped a hand under Melca's head and shed tears of woe onto the forehead of his friend and whimpered. It would have been easy to curse the Creator in this moment but he was emotionally drained. He cried himself to sleep in the coldness of the world, alone, as he would be until the end of time. The Tooth Fairy and Porter's curses ended just as Cupid's had begun.

# Endings are Beginnings are Endings are Beginnings are Endings are...

## 1

The world moved on. The horrors of that tragic day had been numbed by the harsh tempo of time, for most that is. Cupid finished another day's work. For many moons he had gone from work to home and back again. The destitute cherub, now buried in sorrow of losing the entirety of his own kind had slipped out of sight. Nobody saw him anymore. Leaving well before the sun came up and returning home long after sunset, only the flames from his fireplace kept him company. This evening however, he stood for the first time since that fateful night, outside the doors of the restored Calliba's Oasis.

It was nice. Desorian was tapping out colorful melodies on his piano. He could hear people laughing. He heard Francos chatting away, undoubtedly pouring beers and serving food. The world had moved on for all but Cupid and it was this evening he finally took his first step to alleviating that cursed state of existence.

He walked into silence. When eyes caught his presence there was only stillness to be heard.

Cupid stood uneasy then began to turn when Francos shouted out, "Cupid!" In unison the rest of the patrons shouted, "Cupid!" He was rushed by nearly every person in the Oasis extending a hand, patting him on the back, hugging and kissing him singing their praises. Only a few stayed in their seats. After everyone had taken a turn the crowd settled back into their chairs. Cupid then waddled over to the short end of the bar and took a seat.

“Hello Cupid,” smiled Francos.

“Hello Francos.”

“Care fer a stein of me new brew? It’s been a big hit thus far.”

“That sounds very nice.”

“How’s yer heart and soul these days me friend?”

Cupid paused staring intensely at the shapes of the wood grain buried under layers of lacquer making up the bar then replied, “Happiness has not visited me in a long time.”

“I’m sorry Cupid. From every part of me heart I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right. I feel fine during the day so long as I’m sticking people with my arrows, but at night...at night I feel lonely.”

“I know somethin that may make ya feel better right now.”

Cupid took a sip and then smiled. “Yes, it’s very good.”

“Why thank ya, but that wasn’t what I was talkin about. Look over there, in the middle of the room.”

Cupid twisted his head and body and looked to where Francos had been staring. At one of the square tables sat the bulbous body of Porter Stebbins. He was facing towards Cupid. Across from him sat the Tooth Fairy on top of several large books. They were sharing a game of chess. They spotted Cupid, waved and smiled. The power of his gums and her teeth nearly knocked him from his stool in a weakened, awe inspired trance. Cupid gasped for air with his hand over his heart. The Tooth Fairy and Porter zipped their lips and went back to their game. After catching his breath he turned back toward Francos.

“Oh my heavens,” said Cupid out of breath. “Oh, that was incredible!” And with that Francos laughed.

Porter move a knight and then smiled his toothless grin. Peace washed over half the Oasis, their heads swirling with pleasure. The Tooth Fairy then moved a rook and smiled and the other side of the Oasis was splashed with awe.

“When those two are in here me boy,” said Francos, “things get weird. This place gets a lot happier.”

“I see what you mean. My muscles feel like water,” said Cupid doing his best to straighten up on his stool.

“Those two are ta-gether all the time these days. Best friends those two are. Nothin sexual ya see, but it’s love never-the-less.”

Cupid took another drink unable to fight off the smile Porter and the Tooth Fairy had given him and said, “It was a good arrow I sunk into that big fella. The biggest one I ever made.” He looked into his stein and caught the reflection of his face smiling back and remembered it wasn’t so long ago he was sitting in this place and would see the likeness of his face in all his brothers and friends. Now his face and body type was the most unique in all the lands.

The thought made him sad. He drank until his cup was empty then politely asked for another, and then another, basking in the sorrow, refusing to look towards Porter and the Tooth Fairy, even when a ruckus broke out.

The Tooth Fairy, like a statue pondered her next move as the onlookers, anticipating her smile sat patiently. Suddenly, before she moved her piece, she shot off her seat and did something nobody had ever been able to do in recorded history. She caught a leprechaun.

She flew around the room holding Willy the Leprechaun with both arms around the waste as he kicked his feet and wiggled around in a drunken protest slurring his words as he shouted, “Me grandmother prophesied the Tooth Fairy would steal me gold! The Tooth Fairy was hooting and singing how she would never have to trap and sell another fairy ever again, but none of it shifted Cupid staring at his sad reflection in his beer.

As he started sipping his fourth pint, Francos leaned on an elbow and whispered, “It’s not yer fault ya know.”

“I know,” responded Cupid. “How did things get so bad? I just don’t understand how things got so bad.”

“Look out that window Cupid,” said Francos leaning closer and pointing.

“Do ya see it?” asked Francos.

“I see a window,” said Cupid.

“What do ya see outside?” asked Francos.

Through the window Cupid saw only the darkness of night, then he noticed one glowing window hovering in the blackness, attached to an unseen house across the street.

“The only thing ya can see is that lit window across the way,” said Francos. “Do ya see it?” Cupid nodded. “That is how yer friends came ta see the world.”

“Through a window?” asked Cupid.

“Sort of,” said Francos. “Ya see, there is a whole wide world out there, but all we can see right now es that one single lit window. We see just a piece of what’s out there. The rest es covered in darkness. Xavier saw one piece and Adalose saw another piece and they focused on it so hard they forgot there might be other pieces out there. They all saw one little piece of the world and believed there could be nothin else, and if there was, it wasn’t as good as the piece they could see.”

“And that’s bad?”

“Ya bet. Ya saw the affect. Their problem was that they believed the little piece shown to them was divine.”

“What’s that mean?” asked Cupid.

“It means they thought they were supremely good. Better than all the rest.”

“That’s why they were mean to each other.”

“That’s right Cupid, because if ya believe ya are supremely good, than anyone who says different than ya must be supremely evil. It’s a mistake every person focused on their ideologies can make. I’m only sorry ya are the one made to suffer the most fer their inept thoughts.”

Cupid finished his drink, thanked Francos then waved happily to all before staggering out the door and walking home.

The lonely cherub stood in front of his fireplace. As it warmed him he stared up to the location the Dancers arrow used to hang. Now one of Melca’s boomerangs hung in its place, a reminder of his past and perhaps someday a teacher as to why love and understanding between mankind has forever been diminished due to the massacre of the Cherub War.

**The End**