

Butterflies in Cambodia

by Emily Wierenga

With the Dueck Family

*Dedicated to the memory of Renee Amaryah Lalani Dueck, who inspired
this story.*

www.reenedueck.com

Butterflies. Hundreds of them, coating the graveyard like a colourful blanket. They hover and dance over the Killing Fields, landing on flowers and grass and weaving amongst the children's graves.

Butterfly Girl
by Jaylene Johnson

Do you only remember the way you used to be?
Full of fear and doubt and insecurity
Taking things that people said
To build a web around you
Thinking you'd be safe in that place

I know you're frightened and your wings are frail
But summer's here and you've outgrown
Your silky veil
The walls of your cocoon
Have left no room for breathing
So break free
Break free

Butterfly girl
Don't you know you're beautiful by now?
Too long in hiding
Free to shine, girl
Time to spread your wings
And show your colours to the world
Butterfly girl

Don't you know that you're a precious miracle?
Suffering transformed to something wonderful
All the things that had you bound
Have only made you stronger
So trust me and fly
Trust me and fly

Metamorphosis

You may ask, how does a caterpillar become a butterfly?

When the caterpillar has eaten enough, it turns into a pupa. To do this, it stops eating and finds somewhere safe. Here it becomes very still; it then moults its skin. A lot of the caterpillar's old body dies. This rebuilding process is called 'histogenesis.' During this time, the insect is very vulnerable because it cannot run away. This is why insects try to choose somewhere safe to hide when they are going through this incredible change. I think you have to be very brave to become a butterfly.

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Chapter 1—Heaven

Today I watched as I was born.

I watched as the doctors told my parents I wouldn't live long. Maybe a few months. Just like my brothers.

Now I've come to plead with God. To beg him to let me live a while longer. For my parents' sake.

A single strand of hair clings to my forehead. I step into the throne room. The ceiling is glass. Through it, I can see sky. Gold floors reflect my footsteps. Before me—a room, splashed with yellow.

There is no sun; the land is lit by a holy glow.

Vines stretch across brick walls. Lilies and orchids, freesia, morning glory and hollyhocks erupt from the corners of the room, spilling across the floor like pails of paint. The air smells like honey.

I hear laughter; see Jesus. He's swinging a child around and around in the centre of the room. Dozens of little ones crowd close; dimpled hands grip his pant-leg. He doesn't seem to mind.

I run a hand through brown hair. Slide my tongue over dry lips, clear my throat. Look ahead.

God abides. I cannot see his face, only the light—like a candle, drawing me to its flame. I am torn, wanting both to run forward, and hide. The fear stems from the deepest place inside me. I've been here before, but only to observe. I've never come to talk, to plead, with *him*.

I drop to the ground. Shudder.

Angelic voices cry "Holy, Holy, Holy." The angels are like glass figurines, encircling the light. Their arms are raised; their hands form an umbrella. Rising up from the umbrella are thousands of butterflies, a steady stream of wing and colour.

I sit, transfixed by the butterflies: flashes of purple, red, yellow and blue. Something wet slides down my face.

Jesus sees; sets the child down, runs towards me.

I cover my face with my hands.

His hand is on my shoulder. His voice is gentle: "Don't worry, I'm here."

Suddenly I'm making strange noises. It sounds like a bird, squawking. My eyes won't stop dripping.

Jesus crouches behind, pulls me close. "Sshhh. Don't cry. It's going to be okay. You'll see."

Crying. That's what this is.

The children gather around. Poke fingers in the eye-water; taste it. "Salty," one says. Curling up on the floor, they look to Jesus for the right thing to say. He too is crying.

Time stands still in this place without clocks. I breathe deep; turn to Jesus.

He nods. "I know. Your heart is breaking. You've seen earth; you've seen your parents. Their pain has reached you. I've been watching; I know. They've lost two babies, and are about to lose you too."

I nod. Squawk. "I... I just wanted to ask God if, well, if he would let me live with them for a little while—just until they find their way again. You know, until they're strong enough to do life on their own."

Silence. A flower begins to grow where my eye-water fell. It's blue. Shaped like a bell.

Jesus rises. “I will talk to the father.” He walks away, disappears into the circle of angels and light.

I stick my nose in the bluebell, sniff. It smells clean, like soap.

A bird flies into the room. Begins to sing, a sweet warbling tune. It triggers the memory of another song, from a long time ago. Or perhaps it’s from the future. In heaven, it makes no difference.

I close my eyes. Hear a voice crooning Eva Cassidy’s melody:

“For you, there’ll be no crying. For you, the sun will be shining. And the songbirds keep singing like they know the score; and I love you, I love you, I love you, like never before.”

Jesus returns; sits on the floor beside me. “I’ve been to earth. It is a place full of pain.” His voice breaks. “I don’t want to see you go through that. You were spared. So were your brothers.”

I nod. My brothers are gardeners. I like to sit, watch the seeds stretch into flowers and vegetables. My brothers have given me a section of dirt. It’s my secret place.

Jesus is talking.

“I see your parents. They’re bleeding. Their hearts call to me every hour. I’ve been waiting, for I knew this moment would come: that a flower would grow, and that you would ask to live.”

He leans forward. “But listen close: earth is hard. I wish to spare you, to keep you here. I can give you strength, but sin destroys. Unbelief erases our power, forces us to sit on the sidelines and watch. Things like disease and accidents.”

Jesus swallows. Looks down. “Your life will ease their pain, for now. But it will increase yours. And in the end, it won’t be any easier for them to let you go.”

I wonder at the way his shoulders shake.

“I don’t want to see you hurt. But, by living, you’ll bring hope.”

He takes my face in his hands. “So, you must live. Your spirit will both return, and remain. You will be on earth, and in heaven.”

I feel faint. “It can’t be that bad, can it?”

Jesus unfurls his palms; red scars zigzag across flesh. “Earth has its joys—and its sorrows,” he says. “Here, in heaven, we have light. There, darkness dictates. Sin has become ordinary. People are losing faith.”

His eyes search mine. “Let heaven be the place you run to. Avoid shadows. *Be* the light. And do not fear. God is in control.”

We sit in the hush of a holy room. The angels’ voices waver.

“Renee.” I look up.

“Your name is Renee—which means ‘reborn.’ In receiving life, you receive death. So live as if every moment were your last.”

A butterfly appears. Jesus speaks; it perches, unafraid, on his hand. Its wings are orange, paper-thin.

“The butterfly will follow you to earth,” Jesus says. “He is an angel, the symbol of hope: he will never leave you.”

This is my story.

PART 1: CATERPILLAR

Chapter 2—Birth
March 18, 1984

*I have nothing to offer
But this step of faith
This simple act of trust
I wear my heart on my sleeve
And with a sword in my hand
I'll make my stand (r.d.)*

An orange butterfly lands on a windowsill of Winnipeg's Grace Hospital under a frostbitten Manitoba sky.

It perches on the peeling ledge. Inside, a wrinkled newborn opens her lungs, belts forth screams so loud her mother ceases to breathe, just for a second.

"Renee," her mother whispers.

The baby stirs. Wrapped in morning light, she stretches her limbs. Her eyes crinkle, widen. She stares up at Jonathan and Angela VonDyke. Angela looks like she's about to cry; even when she smiles, her lips don't fully commit. Jonathan hovers over his wife, a broad-shouldered man.

Renee had been born with a knot in her umbilical cord; she wouldn't stop moving. They smiled, called her 'Twizzler.' Their hearts twisted and tied, knotting together with hers.

How long will this one last? Angela wonders.

Babies one and two had been lost to SCIDS—Severe Combined Immunodeficiency Syndrome. Born without immune systems, Jason and Kris had been defenceless. Missing memory cells. Unable to fight off

invaders. Unable to recognize disease or infection, they died before their first birthday.

It's not right, Angela cries into the night. *I should have died first.*

I should have saved them, Jonathan screams when no one's listening. *How could I let them go?*

Darren wriggles in Jonathan's arms. Adopted at birth, he's now seven months. He stares at the scrunched-up face and pink booties: *sister*. Dark eyes leap. He smiles, just a little.

Angela sits, holding her daughter. Watching her hand wave in the air, conducting a silent symphony. A little finger curls around hers. Folds of pink flesh. Smell of baby-powder life. A teardrop falls, anointing the moment. Jonathan leans, kisses Angela's cheek. She smiles up through the haze. *This one will live.*

Renee's was an unexpected conception. A tangle of molecules and DNA finding order amongst chaos. The adoption papers had been signed, dated. And now, here she was: six pounds of overactive baby. Muscles tight with explosive energy.

"I love holding you," Angela says into tiny pink ears. "Can you feel me?" Renee's mouth curls up. Angela kisses her forehead.

If only she'd been able to keep holding onto her other babies. Tracing their skin with loving fingers. Then, maybe they would have lived. Instead, they were stolen. Placed in plastic bubbles, to die, alone.

Mother and daughter sit, basking in morning rays. Renee's face matches her sleeper—pink, like cotton candy. Outside, the icicles melt in hot butter sun.

Renee sleeps, eyelashes dark on her cheek. Angela tries to keep her eyes open—cannot. Finds her baby in her dreams, dancing.

They wake to the sound of staccato heels, click-clacking on hospital floors. Familiar footsteps. Renee wails, flails her arms. Angela feels like doing the same. Instead, she smoothes down her mouse-brown hair.

Jonathan is gone; won't return till evening, busy with lumberyard demands. He works for his father an hour from Winnipeg, in a town called Mennville. Angela's heart flinches. She misses Mennville with its farms patched together in acres of seeded space. Its snow piled high like plump white knees. The Sunday morning potlucks, the Mennonite church parking lot filled with old Chevs and station wagons rusting from winter wear. The lonely intersection, the co-op, the thrift store.

Silence. The footsteps have arrived. They call her 'The Shredder.' Dr. Shiller stands tall, hair tucked behind ears, perfect ears, pierced once. Angela shivers. Renee grows quiet. The moment stands at attention.

"Hello Angela," Shiller says. The icicles outside seem to stiffen, afraid to drip.

Angela hangs her head. "Hello." Renee hides in her arms, like a secret.

This one is different. This one will live.

"You're familiar with the procedure," Shiller says, holding her clipboard close to her chest.

Angela nods.

Shiller reaches out awkward arms. Angela pretends not to notice. Looks down at Renee. *Don't worry, baby. Everything is going to be okay.*

"Angela, we need to take her now. It's important she be tested for SCIDS immediately."

Angela releases Renee. Chides herself, silently. Her insides freeze over. "We'll have her back to you as soon as possible," Shiller says, gripping the baby like she does her clipboard.

Renee's eyes scrunch tight. Her hands curl up. The scream is loud, piercing; grows faint like a photograph in sunlight as Shiller takes her further and further away.

Angela makes a foetus position on the bed, touching chin to knees. The bed is soft. She prays.

She was raised to pray. Growing up in a shack with eight siblings, prayer was their bread and butter. The shack sat in the middle of Mennville, cradled by corn rows and potatoes. Prayer provided. Little ones dug daily in dirt for spuds to sell on roads leading out of town. Life consisted of hot biscuits and chicken, six girls piled into a single room, home-spun clothes and long solitary walks.

Prayer hasn't removed the pain of losing two children, but still, she believes. Her heart seizes, releases, contracting relentlessly.

She used to dream of love, as a little girl. As all little girls do. Picking potatoes in faded cotton-print dresses, with torn hems and dirty fingernails, she'd stare into fields fringed with animals and crops. Picture herself as a mother, in pretty blue gingham, nursing babies. Evenings found her tucked into a rocking chair made of wood. In her arms, a doll. She'd sing it to sleep, or read it stories.

She'd also dream of him, the man on a horse. The man called 'husband.' The man who would chop her firewood and tickle her when no one was looking.

Years spun their golden threads, and he came: with a spit of exhaust and a rumble of metal, he arrived in a pick-up truck. She'd known Jonathan for years, but had never noticed the way his head bowed when he laughed, or the way his hand felt in hers as Dad said grace at the dinner table. "Mrs. Angela VonDyke," she'd say to herself, trying it on for size.

Soon they were married lovers. Gravel roads led them into a home of their own. A home with an oak tree, hunched over like a wizened old man.

Then, the labour pains began, only to give way to grief. Nights of using Jonathan's flannel shirt to soak up her tears. Nights when sadness rocked their bungalow to sleep. No dolls would suffice; Angela longed for a child of her own.

The hospital is cloaked in black. Jonathan appears with the stars, again bearing Darren, clad in overalls. Behind him, Angela's mother, grey of hair and pink of cheek. Stout, with a smile, she wraps Angela in her pillow arms. Angela smells Mennville on her skin, hears the silence on her sweater, feels the wind in her hair.

Marie Guth smiles. Pulls out a brown paper bag; in it, chocolate chip cookies crumble, moist. Her life is engraved in the wrinkles on her brow. Her husband had been hardened, grim, but he is gone, and she remains. Her grey hair strays from the bun; she shoves it aside. Her dress is faded print, her shoes, leather loafers.

"Angela," she says in a voice thick with German, and Angela collapses. Marie's arms provide a holding place for her daughter. Jonathan sits, silent with Darren on his knee. The sky is black. Clouds play hopscotch with the moon.

Then, they hear the staccato shoes. A baby somewhere is crying. *My baby*. Angela sits up, pats her eyes dry. The doctor enters, severe of face.

Renee's face is a cranberry. Angela reaches out her arms, silently begging. Dr. Shiller shakes her head. Once.

The words are metal scraping metal. "She has SCIDS. Another one. Why? Why would you bring another one into the world?"

Angela's knuckles turn white. She grips the blanket like it can save her.

Then, Shiller hands over the baby, dusts off her palms, leaves on a click-clack of shoes.

Renee touches her mother's face. The pain wraps like a rope around Angela's throat. She feels Marie's hands on her shoulders. Soft hands veined from sun and work, worn with years in soil. Now, rendered useless. Unable to fix what is broken.

Angela folds up on Renee. Jonathan sits numb; watches his wife weep. His flannel shirt hangs dry, his hands feel floppy. The land, the sky are sandwiching him. He cannot move. *This one was supposed to be different.*

The babies are silent. Angela's voice turns penitent. "Lord, have mercy," is all she can muster.

Chapter 3—Reborn
March-July, 1984

*I cannot stand before you
Knowing I have come here
With unclean hands, unclean heart
I cannot stand before you
So I fall on my face Lord,
I am falling apart
And when I'm feeling like I can't go on
Like I have nothing left to give
You hold me so close
Your arms are so strong
Here in your presence I can live (r.d.)*

Along the road, trees stretch barren hands towards the sky.

The snow melts as it falls, splashing into creeks and streams. They drive for an hour, past soggy fields and withered animals. The air smells like spring.

They arrive home to find green buds on their poplars. Angela feels a quickening in her chest—tries to suppress it. Then she sees a yellow crocus peeking shyly from her flowerbed. Puts a hand to her chest. The hope is tangible.

She reaches for Renee who's gurgling in the car-seat, covered in blankets. Her mouth is dribbling. Angela tucks her close, runs indoors. Nothing would touch her baby. Germs could kill her.

Jonathan follows, bearing baggage and Darren. Angela makes a mental note to spend more time with her son.

The house is damp and cool, a grey reminder of things past. Angela flicks on some lights. Stands in her kitchen, breathing deep the scent of herbs and spices. The oven sits cold, untouched. Outside a bird flaps brown and yellow by the feeder.

My old life, she thinks. Spies her wooden chair by the window. Recalls sitting there, morning after morning, longing for little feet to pitter-patter on the linoleum.

Renee rubs her nose with the back of her hand. Angela tucks the blanket up high around her. A flannel fortress.

“So fragile,” Angela whispers. “You know nothing of sickness and pain. I hope you never have to...”

Jonathan is changing Darren in the nursery. He'll go down for a nap. She hears Darren talking to himself; smiles. The house seems to shift, to wake from its mourning. Young voices breathe life into ancient woodwork.

She relaxes into the arms of the chesterfield. Begins to nurse. Begs her body to produce an influx of antibodies. *Let my milk bring life, let it heal and restore*, she prays. *Make this little one well, for your sake. Amen.*

The sky is weeping, tears streaking windows. A kerosene lamp lights up the living room. Jonathan stokes the woodstove. Angela has barely moved save to change Renee's diaper. She runs a finger over her baby's fuzz of hair.

Her hands are worn, veined. They never rest. A ball of yarn lies expectant on the floor, reminding her of unfinished patterns. Apples sit plump and red in the basket, waiting to be turned into sauce. On the counter, a purple cabbage, relishing its turn in the cast iron pot. It will simmer, collide with sausage, onions and carrots. A sweater and shirt await mending on a chair.

But for now, she is still. Her goal: to sit and exist. To *be* with her daughter. *Who knows how long we have?*

Renee's eyelids sink, but even as sleep invades, her limbs stretch, grow. Her toes are ever pointing, her hands, ever waving. "My little ballerina," Angela says, her mind whirling. "Things will be okay. You can rest. Mommy's here."

The song starts quietly; Angela's voice is rusty, out of tune. Jonathan stops, listens from his office. "For you, there'll be no crying. For you, the sun will be shining. And the songbirds keep singing like they know the score; and I love you, I love you, I love you, like never before."

Renee's hands grow limp. Angela tucks her in beside a cushion; her eye catches a Reader's Digest sitting in clear plastic wrap. She tears it open, eager for distraction. Scanning the table of contents, an article pulls her in—a profile on a Dr. Richard O'Reilly.

Moments pass. Then, "Honey, can you come here?"

Jonathan joins her on the couch; Angela points to the page and reads, "Chief of paediatrics Dr. Richard O'Reilly is turning Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Centre into a beacon of hope for those needing bone marrow transplants. Patients as young as newborns are receiving stem cell transplants under the precise and caring eye of Dr. O'Reilly."

Angela pauses; her breath catches. "Of 89 infants who received bone marrow transplants between 1982 and 1998, survival rates were 100 per cent for the 12 recipients of HLA-identical marrow and 78 per cent for those given a T-cell depleted HLA-haploidentical marrow (in which the donor and recipient share only one of two possible HLA haplotypes)."

She and Jonathan continue to read in silence. The clock on the mantel ticks.

Angela breaks the quiet with, "The donor must closely match the patient's tissue type. The best donor is normally a matched sibling. Doctors may also use parent's tissues, which match half of the child's tissue type."

Angela sets the magazine aside. Then she fiddles with Renee's blankets. Jonathan clears his throat. "It would appear there's hope," he says.

Angela nods. "I can give her my stem cells..."

They stare out the window, as if seeking confirmation. Rain pelts, an angry mob of wet hands smacking the glass. Angela tucks her arm into Jonathan's. Feels safe.

"Let's pray," he says. And they bow, finding sacred ground in their humble home.

Today marks one month. One month of living at the Ronald McDonald House.

Manhattan is a madhouse. Taxis screech, voices yell, and corporations coddle. Angela hides behind her pillow, tries to dream of Mennville. But all she can see are billboards—fluorescent and shiny, like gaudy Christmas paper, wrapped around Times Square. *All it needs is a bow*, she thinks.

The room is large, empty. She likes space, but the kind filled with vast amounts of sky and wind. Here, she feels stifled. A king-sized bed seems small, a boat in the ocean of room. The lights are bright, flickering; the TV stares like an angry black eye, condemning.

But she is at peace. She knows, despite everything, that this is right. Ronald McDonald cares for 83 families a night, situated near 12 major cancer treatment centres. Even now, her baby is being healed. Loved, with needles and plastic gloves. And soon, they will go home. It's a refrain she speaks, over and over: Soon, we will go home.

She aches to hold her baby... to feel her growing plump. To make her giggle. The commute to the hospital takes half an hour—longer in

standstill traffic dotted with yellow taxis and colourful language. Angela puts head in hands, tries to feel thankful.

It is June; red and yellow roses strut brazenly across gardens, while trees humbly bow under the weight of full-grown leaves. Angela stands by her bedroom window, adores the summer scene in her housecoat.

It's a large window in a large building. The entranceway is domed with glass, the pavilion, like an outdoor court; everywhere, tall glass windows invite the world to observe private pain. Angela often studies her reflection in the 14-foot fish tank; behind the glass, swirls of colour ribbon across the water as fish play hide and seek. Sometimes she's distracted by whimpering, the sound of tails swishing; she turns to see therapeutic dogs, trained to love on children and adults. A child's face is nuzzled by a collie, gentle and golden. The child throws back his head and laughs. For a moment, earth and heaven collide.

Sometimes Angela sleeps at the hospital. When the hallway is dark and empty, she rises; tip-toes down the corridor, and stares at her daughter who seems too tiny, too still... what happened to Twizzler? Why isn't she moving? Then her tears begin to fall and the nurses urge her to lie back down.

Other nights, she'll slip into the chapel, shoulders bent, hair uncombed, to kneel before the crucifix and beg Jesus to descend, to work a miracle.

Jonathan rarely sleeps. Cell phone to ear, laptop in hand, he directs business from afar. She cannot blame him.

Darren distracts. At 11 months, he's squatting, stooping, standing and walking with wobbly legs. She crouches down—he makes a beeline towards her, smile stretched wide. Tumbles into her arms. Claps his hands. Turns and begins to walk away, falls. Her kisses mend tears, and then he's back, standing up on chubby legs, making his mark across the room.

She finds hope in his stubborn path. Prays Renee is just as determined.

Then, Angela donates her bone marrow. Finds herself under anaesthesia, stem cells being harvested from the iliac crest with a needle and syringe. She loses nearly two quarts of blood; she would do it again, just to help her daughter heal. It makes her feel useful. Makes the waiting easier.

So far, Renee's body is resilient. Holding fast against infection. Angela credits this to God. They've traveled twice to New York, once to get testing done, once for the transplant. And prior, they attended a wedding. There, hands were reaching, touching, holding her little one, marring her perfect skin with grimy fingers, smudging germs across her face. It was all Angela could do to keep from screaming. Instead, she'd claimed fatigue, then taken her to the bathroom and washed her body repeatedly with warm water, begging God to remove their fingerprints.

Angela is pale from losing blood. Weak from too little sleep, too much thought. Lies back on the bed. It's a firm mattress. She decides to trust it. Closes her eyes. Her memory drifts, a boat on the water of days gone by.

They'd arrived in a flurry of concern. Dr. O'Reilly had reassured them, taken Renee into his arms and stroked her cheek. Then she'd been forced, despite a wail and a kick—to undergo 'conditioning'—and they'd been forced to sit by and watch. She'd been poisoned with chemo; her pale body shaking, eyelashes falling out, fuzzy hair evaporating into thin air. Now she lies bald and skinny, awaiting the transplant.

Creak—the door opens. Jonathan enters, drawn of face. Darren is crying, flopped over his shoulder. His arms flail, like Styrofoam noodles. Angela sits up, feels the blood rush, puts a hand to her forehead. Jonathan drops down beside her. They feel old, used.

Remember? Remember when we used to laugh? she wants to ask, but it's not the right time.

Darren reaches for Angela; she takes him, holds him close. Feels his heart beating against his chest, begging for someone to notice. She holds him until it stops battering. Until it begins to beat with normal rhythm.

His head is heavy; she lies back down, letting him rest on her. Darren tucks a thumb into his mouth; eyelashes shadow his cheek, and soon, he is asleep.

Jonathan sighs. It's deep, weighted with burdens far too heavy. Turns, kisses Angela on the cheek.

"I'm going to get some coffee," he says. "Do you want anything?"

She wants *him*. Beside her, holding her. But she's too shy. Shakes her head. "I'm okay, thanks."

And he leaves, shutting the door behind him.

The marrow is infused through an IV while Angela holds Renee close.

Then they sit in the waiting room, Angela and Jonathan, legs crossed, until their mouths are dry and their eyelids, heavy. Darren plays at their feet with a red Tonka truck.

Finally Dr. O'Reilly appears, a white-robed angel. Startles them with a firm handshake. "It's finished," he says, as if it's that easy.

They rise, in a stupor. The air seems fuzzy.

"Really? That's it?" Angela asks.

"That's it," he says. "I have to warn you, she has a bit of a rash. But don't be alarmed—she should be alright."

Angela mumbles something. Hopes it sounds grateful. Takes off running.

Renee's white skin is splattered with red, like strawberry jam. Angela wants to clean it off with a washcloth, to make her baby pretty again. *One day. One day soon.*

His voice is unexpected, undeniable: "I have a plan. I will take care of her." The words calm her, make her blink twice and believe.

She bows her head over the bassinet. Entrusts her baby to the One who gave her life.

Chapter 4—Learning to Walk

1984-‘89

*Feet bared in the sunlight
Grass staining, shedding skin
Shedding caution and pretension
The trees are growing, reaching
Some unknown height of wonder
And I feel more me
Than I ever have before (r.d.)*

Renee is confined at the hospital, alone in a bubble.

Tiny, shivering, isolated.

Angela reaches out, touches her, lets her know *Mommy’s here. It’s going to be okay.* Renee sings to herself, scribbling pictures on the air with her fingers and wriggling in her pastel sleeper. Then she cries herself to sleep where dreams keep her company.

Dreams in which she is older, living in heaven, walking with Jesus.
Dreams in which she runs in gardens, plays hop-scotch with her brothers and catches a ride on a baby elephant.

But then she wakes in the body of an infant, a body writhing in pain.
Welcome to the world, little one, she hears Jesus whisper.

Four months pass, and then, mother and daughter can go home.

Home to outpatient visits and medications, to midnight feedings and afternoon stroller rides.

As the corn stretches high, kernels ripening like dozens of yellow teeth, Renee’s skin turns into a Macintosh apple and her belly extends, round and soft.

Angela’s fingernails fill with garden-soil. She digs deep, makes vegetables sprout and flowers stretch bobbing heads. Renee and Darren play on the grass, cooing, exchanging handfuls of grass, clucking at the birds in the air, sleeping in the shade of an apple tree.

Jonathan drives home in twilight hours, on dusky roads, to find supper on the table and two little ones peering at him over bibs. His heart swells, and the skin around his eyes begins to crinkle with laughter lines. He watches his wife when she’s unaware: how her voice takes on characters in story books, how she cradles her babies and touches their noses, how she sings in her off-key voice then tucks them to sleep. It makes him want to make her smile.

Summer turns to autumn with its sunset-coloured leaves. Renee is crawling, trying to walk. Watching Darren round-eyed, moving her mouth as if memorizing his steps, she toddles upwards, gripping the edge of the couch and taking one step forward only to crumble in soft shag carpet.

With trembling lip and bruised knees she pushes up on skinny legs, takes another step. At nearly a year, she’s headstrong. Walking in the footsteps of her older brother.

In no time at all, they’re off and running, two babies in a grown-up world. Spring arrives with a splash of sun and a chirp of nested birds. Renee spends her days jumping knobby-kneed in puddles, making mud patties with Darren, and chasing chickens that run, necks outstretched, across the yard. With a squawk and a flurry the chickens find themselves captured by chubby hands; they flee, leaving feathers behind. The kids stick the feathers on their muddy bodies. Flapping their winged arms they make bird sounds. Then Angela scrubs them human with a hose.

Renee's birthday finds her dunking her head in cake; reappearing with frosted eyebrows. Giggling. Angela laughs softly, her chest shaking.

A week passes. Angela is sidetracked by bulbs. The toddlers make squishing noises in the dirt with their bare toes; inch close to the open garage. Suddenly they're by the door, looking in. Darren sees a can of spray paint; grabs it with grubby hands. Pressing on the button with all of his chubby strength he sends the paint flying across Renee's face. He freezes at the sight of an orange sister. Hands lose their dimpled grip; he drops the can in the mud.

Renee is quiet; sticks a finger in the paint, likes how it feels. Then she licks it—squishes up her face. Makes a sound like a newborn kitten. Turns and tip-toes across the mud to find Mommy who is quick to scold and wash.

At night, she dreams. The longer she's on earth, the less she dreams of heaven.

Her imagination is fertile, inventing stories at random. One day when the air is thick with fog, she and Darren play indoors with Legos and Duplos. Their stomachs growl, caged animals. They make their way to the kitchen; spy a container of whipped cream. Mom is nowhere to be seen—Renee hears the washing machine; laundry.

She motions to Darren.

"It's time for the ciwvus," she says, pixie-face quite serious. "This cweam is ouw makeup."

Darren nods, catching on. "Ouw cwown makeup."

Renee reaches out, little fingers prying at the plastic seal of whipped cream. It snaps, and she opens the lid. Unveils a mountain of creamy sugar.

She scoops out a pile with her pinkie, slips it in her mouth: declares it suitable with an emphatic "Yum!" Sticks her entire hand in, slathers it

across Darren's face. Darren chuckles, looking much like Casper the ghost, and proceeds to do the same for her—smearing, from her bangs to her chin.

Leaving a trail of white fingerprints on chairs and clothes, they race down the hallway. There, an elongated mirror lets them preen and prance.

Renee stops, puts a finger to her lips. "Let's wear cherries on ouw noses."

"Yeah," Darren says. They crouch down, crawl "like snakes" to the fridge for fear Mom would see them. The washing machine has stopped; the house is silent. They inch closer; Renee feels the cold linoleum, is about to push into a standing position when: "Renee VonDyke!"

Angela stands tall, hands on hips, black puddle-eyes. Renee slinks backwards, bumping into Darren who begins to whimper. Her lip shakes. She draws in deep, finds strength to push up on Jello-legs. It's all she can think to do: running towards Mom she slams her face into her leg, kissing it repeatedly with whipped-cream lips.

Angela turns, grabs a washcloth and swipes at her leg. Renee tries to reason. "We'w cwowns. Ciwvus cwowns."

Angela's back begins to shake; she turns, erupts in uncontrolled laughter.

Renee rubs a toe in the floor. "We'w good cwowns," she says with a shrug. "We make Mommy waff."

Thick as thieves, they take on the world. One year at a time.

It is Saturday. The August sun scorches, flinging fire balls. The VonDykes pile into their station wagon; drive down dusty roads to the

Menville picnic. Renee is four years old, swallowed up by overalls and a blue t-shirt. Darren is wearing jean shorts, and a superman t-shirt. It makes him feel strong. They don't mind that their clothes are second-hand. One day, Dad promises, they'll be able to wear brand-names. "What are brand-names?" they wonder.

Piling out of the wagon they find themselves surrounded. Children stare. Freckled children wearing dresses and suits. "Looks like we're at a wedding," Renee whispers.

Pug noses sniff. The kids cross their arms. The girls are wearing patterned prints, the boys, long-sleeved shirts and dress pants. Renee and Darren suddenly feel out of place.

Soon the girls begin whispering behind white hands. The boys snicker, poke Darren in the shoulder. "Where's your sister? And who's the boy?"

Darren glances at Renee; she's digging toes in dirt, seeming sad and small in her short hair and overalls. The heat drives like knives into his head. Blood rushes. Fists curl up, face wrinkles, and he strikes. Pummels a round-faced boy flat on his back with one blow. The others run off blubbering.

Darren's fist smarts. He waves it in the air, then grabs Renee's hand. "C'mon, let's get some food."

And so they do. And for the rest of the day, she can't stop smiling.

The horse tosses its head. Then it begins to run. Its muscles move like water. Renee watches, face plastered to the car window. Beside her, Darren colours with Crayons. Baby Liana sucks her thumb in the car seat. Mom and Dad are listening to Christian radio.

She can't stop staring. The horse's skin is silk; its sides ripple. The grass flattens, making way as it runs, nose snorting air. It shakes its head and then, it's gone, left behind in a cloud of car exhaust. Five-year-old Renee

stays back with the horse. Closing her eyes she finds herself flying, broad back beneath her, horse hair in hand. She's gripping with white knuckles. The wind is rushing. They are one—nothing in the world can touch them.

It's a seed in her soul which grows; she can't sleep for the dream. Having moved two years earlier when Liana was born, their house now faces an open field. Each morning she sits, dribbling milk off her spoon, playing with her cereal, picturing the horse in the empty meadow.

Dogs and kittens lose their shine. Nothing compares to her vision of the horse.

Then, she's had enough. She marches with small strides up to Jonathan. He sits shrouded by a newspaper. Recently he took over the company; mornings find him tired, distracted. She tugs on his sleeve. He folds a corner, sees her standing like a soldier. Her face is serious.

"Daddy, I need to talk to you." Her voice is small but stern.

Jonathan sighs. Folds the paper, picks up his coffee. "Yes Twizzler?"

"I would like a horse. I promise to take good care of it, and to love it and to share it with Darren."

Darren's face appears wet with milk. He wipes at it, stammers, "A horse?!" Pauses. "I want one too!"

Renee shakes her head, firm. He was wrecking her plans. Now they would never...

"Renee, it's only fair that if you get a horse, Darren should too," Jonathan says. He stares at her pixie face. Can only see the baby in the incubator. "I'll have to talk to your mother about it."

She kisses him on stubbly cheek. Runs to her room, picks up a marker and draws a picture of a girl riding bareback across green meadows.

Chapter 5—Little One

*Come away with me
And let me be the wave
That washes on your shore
Let us dance together
Come away with me
And let us dream
New life is silence
Alone in the meadow (r.d.)*

Every waking hour of Renee's childhood is spent with her cousins.

They call themselves the Fabulous Four: Claire, Lily, Zoe and Renee.

Being the youngest and the smallest, Renee is 'The Little One.'

They share an uncommon bond. A bond comprised of books, food and sleepovers at Grandma Guth's.

Grandma has instilled in them a love for stories. From the time they could crawl, she'd read to them in a thick German tongue. Engrossing stories. Stories of fable and morale. Her voice rises and falls, lulls them in. Her eyebrows inch forward like worms, pull apart. Her hands fly about, this way and that. Literature comes to life.

Their favourite is *The Little Mouse Dances*. They gather and wait as Grandma lowers herself into the rocking chair. She crosses her ankles, folds her apron beside her in a square. One of the girls hands her the book. "Ah yes," she says, and they smile. Lie on the floor. She leans forward and, holding out the pictures for them to see, tells them the story of the mouse that danced.

The stories never stand alone. They're always accompanied by another, such as *The Beaver and the Rabbit*—a dusty old reader from Grandma's school-days.

The headache persists. Angela takes an aspirin. Can't stop fearing for Renee.

It's a mother's nature to protect, she protests.

Let go, and let me, he chides, gently.

She stands at the window, watching Renee ride her horse. It's raining, and yet, she rides. Jonathan sits behind her, holding on. Nothing scares her. A fact which scares Angela. She's already been thrown from the horse. When that happened, she'd merely sat stunned for a moment, then tossed her head and climbed back on.

The rain is letting up. Renee's laughing—her mouth wide open. She's a small girl with a giant laugh. It threatens to swallow her. The horse glides across the yellow-grass field. Jonathan's arms are wrapped around her.

Angela slices through spicy sausage. A pot of cabbage boils on the stove. She's making Darren's favourite—cabbage soup. He's standing in his poncho by the fence. The horse grazes beside him. He's shy of the beast. Yearns for courage of his own.

Darren watches Renee throw her head back, laugh. Feels forgotten. Wishes he were more like her.

When the final cover closes, the cookies appear. Young faces get covered in crumbs and milk moustaches. Then, they go downstairs, into the basement which is their hiding place. The place where imagination takes flight.

The basement is dark and damp. They switch on lights which flicker. Wrap themselves in afghans, huddle close on hammocks and couches. Renee slips on a top hat, leads the meeting with paper in hand, and a pen behind her ear. She is the artist; the others, utensils in her hand. They pretend to smoke pipes, light candles, create a mood. Compare themselves to The Inklings, and compose masterpieces such as:

“A rabid mule with wings ate Dawson and Dahlen’s brownies, and got out of bed to buy a family van down home, because there was a fish in the sink and it smelled like peanuts and barbeque sauce and it couldn’t climb trees.”

Renee always adds something about fish climbing trees. She cannot shake the image: Fish slip-sliding up a rough-bark tree, turning purple from holding their breath.

After penning ridiculous nonsense, pipes are tossed to the side. They lie on their backs, stick their legs up high, pretend to walk on the ceiling. Then, they fall asleep mid-sentence, clutching blankets close to ward off the chill.

Come morning they’ll eat toast and honey, bend necks over Sears’ catalogues and talk in a French accent.

Years pass; the magazines and readers thicken with dust. Stories are traded in for The Bards of Now—a local drama group, which exists to convey truth through the arts. It’s a theme Renee will later adopt as her own.

Reverend Samuel directs his young cast in pieces such as ‘Aliens’ and ‘Morbidman Meets his Maker.’

In the latter, the stage is set to depict Terminus City. There, Morbidman, a deeply disturbed hero, resides along with other hapless superheroes.

Everyman is an accountant who fights with his fists and ball-point pens. Master of the Obvious points out the obvious. The Supreme Diva fights for good using laser-beam eyes and lightening fingers, and Dr. Insidious, the bane of Terminus City, has fallen from grace. Jack and Lenny are the latter’s two interns, bent on learning evil.

Renee plays the intern named Jack.

Opening night. Renee stands in the bathroom, duct-taping her chest. Above her mouth, a fake moustache. Lily watches with a grin.

Renee turns, twists her moustache. “I will not be mistaken for a girl,” she says, her voice deep and masculine. “No, I am a man. A man intent on learning evil.”

She rubs her hands together, shifting her eyes back and forth.

Lily keels over, laughing.

Chapter 6—Camp
Summer 2000

*Flesh was the cradle that sang lullabies
To our master
The deep earthly voices of torn hands
Bleeding hearts
Making a mess of marble statues
Light transcended through the stain that
Clouds our thinking
Jesus trapped in the pavement
Trampled on by many ambitious feet
Apothecary and magician cannot cure us
Of the heresy enshrined in our hearts
There is beauty in the unadorned lines
Of a smile
Rough skinned majesty
So elusive we've forgotten the desert wind
That made our hearts beat faster (r.d.)*

Summertime means one thing: camp.

At the end of the road, in the middle of nowhere, it's a place of pine-branch fires, marshmallows on sticks, early morning sun and late night stars.

Renee swears she can smell burgers, can hear the call of the loon and the smack of a soccer ball. They round the curb. Zoe is driving. The sign appears like a jack-in-the-box: Beaver Creek Bible Camp. They've arrived.

A horse snorts, paws the earth as she steps from the car. It's penned, waiting for riders. Kids' footsteps crunch on gravel, running to play volleyball in sand. A girl sketches quietly at a picnic table. The back of her neck is sunburnt. Someone yells, followed by a splash of water and a

kafuffle of limbs. Laughter. Sounds of the beach. It's a raucous of rowdy campers. The air buzzes with energy.

She's been coming here since the age of seven. Nine years of being a camper. Now, at 16, she'll be counselling.

Zoe stands next to her. Renee's hands flutter. "It's going to be okay," she says. "You'll be wonderful."

Zoe has counselled for three years. She would know. Renee tries to feel reassured. Thinks calm thoughts. And yet, her insides quake. "I'm much older than I ever intended to be," she says with a shudder of a laugh.

Beaver Creek is a quiet camp, rustic and small. Thirty miles north of Riverton on a creek which begs to be more. Plywood cabins dot the landscape, and a humble lodge serves as camp hall.

Renee sees a girl sitting hunched, arms wrapped around herself as if in a hug.

She remembers her first day. It was a blur of sights and sounds, of eye-popping colour and constant motion. That night, the director had asked her what she was afraid of. She'd been sitting on a log bench, around a fire which looked like it was trying to singe the sky. He'd asked each child. Answers varied—"darkness," "ghosts," "silence."

She'd sat, thinking. He'd repeated the question. Then she'd said, "Nothing. I'm scared of nothing."

He'd laughed, gently. "Really, it's okay Renee—tell us what scares you."

She'd stayed silent. Looked him in the eyes. A little girl with a white face and a stare that could still a storm. And he'd known. She was afraid of nothing.

"What happened?" she asks now. Her chest throbs. She swallows hard.

“Nothing scares me,” she whispers over and over, grabbing her suitcase and trying to keep her voice steady.

Her pink suitcase is heavy. Full of crafts and books, candy and games. In her other hand, her guitar. She lugs the supplies a meter, stops to rest. Then, a hand on her shoulder. She turns; it’s Andre, the new director. He’s wearing a backwards ball-cap and orange flip-flops. “Hey!” His arms engulf her. She smiles. “I’m so glad you made it! This year’s gonna rock.”

She rests the suitcase on the ground; he picks it up with ease. “You’re over there,” he says, pointing. “Cabin four—a great group of girls.” She follows his lumbering steps. He’s a big man with a bigger heart. The children run up, beg him to play. Tug on his shorts. He laughs, tussles their hair.

He’s talking to her. She runs to catch up. “...direct drama group this summer. What do ya think?”

“I’m sorry?” Her breath catches.

Andre laughs. “Just wondering if you’d like to direct the drama this summer? We could use some radically new ideas.”

Nothing scares me. Nothing... “I’ll give it a shot,” she says. Her heart bumps against her rib cage. Her guitar, against her bare legs.

“Sweet.” Andre sets down the suitcase, gives her the peace sign.

They’re facing the door to her cabin. Cabin four. She hears voices. Takes a deep breath and steps inside.

The night sits heavy on her eyelids. They won’t stop. Their voices peck at her brain like incessant birds. Even the whispers seem like screams. Her eyeballs begin to spin. She stuffs her head beneath the pillow, can’t

breathe. Pulls the sleeping bag over her eyes—gags on the mothball smell. Sits straight up. *I am the cabin leader. I can enforce silence.*

Her orange pyjamas glow in the moonlight. Her hair looks like a brown mop. The girls hush. She stands quietly in padded slippers. Breathes deep as the conversations falter. Nonsense talk of boys and girls and who likes who.

She feels dizzy with lack of sleep. Tonight this will end. Tonight she will teach them the art of silence.

An owl hoots. Renee takes that as her cue.

“You had your chance! Up and at ‘em!”

“Huh?” the girls look at each other. They’re tucked snug, like chicken in fajitas, heads facing each other.

“It’s time to run,” Renee says.

Creaks the door open. Black air slides in. Cool night air. Untouched, undisturbed air. She points the way with her hand. “Let’s go. I want ten laps.”

She smiles as they groan. Shoves hair behind her ears and watches them stumble down from bunks, trip into shoes. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” she hears one say.

The soccer field sits quiet and moist from late-night showers. Their feet make slapping sounds in the mud. Andre appears, watches this late-night run. Girls in pyjamas whining their way around the track. One of them falls, lies splayed in black-blue dirt. The others gasp, giggle.

Andre shakes his head, grins. “Sweet. Only you would think of something like this!” he calls across to Renee who’s huddled in a housecoat.

She laughs. “Something had to be done! The situation was dire!”

They finally finish. Crash into pillows, fall hard into sleep. So hard they snore. The snores keep her awake.

“She’s just so tough, like hard cheese,” Renee tells Zoe. They’re sitting on the dock, legs swinging brown in the sun.

“Hard cheese??” Zoe laughs.

“I’m tired, okay?”

The creek bubbles beneath their feet. Fish lips nibble at its surface.

There’s dirt beneath Renee’s fingernails. She digs, scrapes them clean. “I really want to love her,” she says, eyes squinting. “But it’s so hard. Every time I try, she pushes me away.”

Zoe pulls a piece of liquorice from her pocket. Sticks it in her mouth. Red string of sugar. She listens.

“I usually find it easy to get along with campers. This one’s pretty tricky though.”

Zoe smacks her lips. “Did you ever think maybe she doesn’t want you to try so hard? Perhaps she can feel you being fake: that’s why she’s got her guard up. Just let it go... let her be her, and then she’ll eventually approach you. And if she doesn’t, that’s okay too.”

Zoe puts a hand on Renee’s. “You don’t have to reach all of them—just one.”

“I know—it’s just, I want her to be the one.” Renee shrugs, grabs the tail-end of Zoe’s liquorice and pulls. It snaps in two.

“Thanks,” Zoe says, punching playfully at her shoulder.

“No problem.”

Zoe glances at the bandage wrapped tight, white around her finger. “What happened?”

“Kindling.”

“Enough said.”

Renee lies back. The wood planks are warm. “Yeah, I was supposed to play guitar this week, but this bandage is not letting that happen. Gotta roll with the punches I guess.”

“Everything happens for a reason.”

Zoe pulls her curls into an elastic. Her freckles connect-the-dots across her cheeks and nose. “I should run, Little One. You gonna be okay?”

“Oh ya. I should probably head back anyway.”

Renee listens to her cousin’s flip-flops slap the dock, fade away.

“Give me love, Jesus,” she whispers. “Help me love my campers. Help me see them as you see them. Help me see *me* as you see me.”

“Beautiful,” is the answer, faint of air.

That night she has a dream.

The sky churns red and orange. People stare up into the swirling crimson. Renee’s friends are there. She tells them about Christ. Then, the birds come. White birds on winged-fever. Flapping their way to earth. The Christians have crosses etched in their foreheads. The birds pick up people without crosses. Fly them down, down into earth’s core of melting heat.

Then Renee looks down. Sees the cross, the way her ankles and wrists are nailed to wood. There's blood at the foot of the cross. Jesus is hanging beside her. He says something about her being with him today, in Paradise, and she screams.

Chapter 7—Heaven

Some say it never rains in heaven, but I know better. Even as I walk, the sky drips water, lovely and warm.

I twirl in the soft splashes. A breeze slips through cracks in the Forbidden Door. The door which stores God's creative elements. The door which holds back the storm.

In heaven, the wind is just strong enough to fly a kite. The rain—a splash of wet kisses. The door prevents the elements from ruling the land.

Above, the sky is streaked with red, green, purple, blue and orange: a perpetual rainbow. God's promise.

Rising jagged against the rainbow sky are mountains, tall and rough. At their foot lies a lake called Pale Face. A lake so named for its faded-blue water.

I go there often; sometimes with Jesus, sometimes alone. Sit in the flowers at the edge of the water. Peer into the faded blue. The lake knows my face; soon, my life on earth appears, as if on a screen.

It's hard to watch my life below, but at the same time, I can't stop. I don't remember what happened; the curiosity drives me.

Time knows no bounds in this place called heaven. This place where people rest. Here, clock-hands cease. Past is present is future. A second is a minute is an hour. So, despite dying, I can look into my past and watch life, as it was, and is, unfold.

I'm unusual. Most, upon arriving in heaven, want to forget the past with its pain and suffering. Yet some, like me, have unfinished business. And so, my spirit transcends time and space. I exist in two places at once.

Whenever I cry out, Jesus is there, beside me, reminding me I don't need to do this. I don't need to watch. I can't change a thing.

"But I want to watch," I whisper. "It helps me remember who I am."

"Who you *were*," he cautions.

Sometimes it's too much. I break for a walk, for a visit to the garden.

On one such visit, I find the caterpillar on a plant. On what is left of the plant. Its leaves are torn with gaping holes. It looks like an old gym shirt, ratty, tattered with years of wear.

The worm is a newborn. He's hungry. While shedding his skin he eats. And eats. I watch, eyes wide. The longer I watch, the more he eats. His body is a string of wriggling green fuzz. It's his fourth and largest coat; he is constantly changing it, like a fickle shopper.

Soon he will become a pupa with no ability to move. He will shed his coat one last time. His skin will split, to reveal a wet shiny hunched-over creature. It will only take two hours for the outer layer to dry, and harden. The pupae will stick to the plant using butterfly silk. Inside the egg, the caterpillar will dissolve, disintegrate, so a butterfly can form.

But for now, he eats—young and oblivious.

Sometimes I walk with Maggie. Wandering mossy trails. Tip-toeing among trees and plants, beneath an overhang of green.

Maggie has a long face and wide eyes. She died of a drug overdose. We've been together since the beginning.

"Right after my last hit I screamed out to Jesus to save me," she'd told me. "And He did. I never went to church or nothing. But here I am."

We met in Misty Manor—the house we'd been assigned to. A house on a hill surrounded by fountains and lilac bushes. We'd awoken to yellow sheets and beds of gold.

I remember sitting up, confused. "I thought there was no sleep in heaven."

An angel had overheard. He wore a simple brown garment. His job was to serve those in Misty Manor.

"Heaven is unlike anything anyone could have ever imagined," he'd said, bearing juice in banana-leaf cups. "It's your favourite day on earth and your most sacred experience, combined. It's uniting God with every-day existence. It's the purest kind of life."

I'd scratched my head. My hair was long and full.

The angel looked nothing more than an ordinary man. I'd turned to him, asked, "Are we still on earth?"

He'd smiled, a perfect line of white. "Yes. And no. God has renovated the world and made it his own again. There is no spiritual darkness—only light. But the world continues to spin on its axis. Elements of the natural universe remain, such as the sun and the stars, only now they've been heightened—perfected. There is no more death, suffering, or pain. All tears from earth are collected by God in a fountain of sadness. The fountain waters heaven's gardens. Its flowers grow larger and higher than anything you've ever seen. Their beauty never fades."

Maggie and I had let our feet dangle off the edge of our mattresses.

The room was large, open. Beds lined the walls. There was yellow paint on the walls. The windows were glass-less. Square panes of space. White veiled curtains moved in the breeze, as if in a trance. Music filtered in: faint, yet undeniable. A parade of haunting flutes, violins, cellos, and guitars, led by fingers on a piano, trailing up and down to the rhythm of drums. Occasionally, someone blew a trumpet. Soon we heard voices, deep and soulful, reminding me of a southern Baptist church.

We'd started to hum. Drum beats pulsated through our veins and we stood, swaying, then twirling. We looked like dragonflies in our loose dresses, sleeves billowing in the wind. The angel stood in the doorway, smiling. The music was very ordinary for him—like the air. But he loved to watch it romance those hearing it for the very first time. It was the music of his people—the music of angels.

Shafts of light made criss-cross patterns on the floor. After a while, the angel stepped forward. Our feet slowed as he spoke. "I know you saw Jesus when you arrived on the boat, but would you like to talk with him?"

Jesus.

The music seemed to fade.

The man who welcomed us ashore. Who hugged us, directed us to Misty Manor. The man who died for us.

"I'd love to," I'd said. Maggie had nodded.

"This way then." The angel motioned towards a path. Above, red roses climbed trellises. Along the path, a stream trickled. Its clear water was full of colourful fish. We'd rounded a curve and he was there. In the centre of what seemed a thousand flowers. Sitting on a rock,

surrounded by children. He was telling a story, and the children were laughing.

For a moment, everything stopped save for the laughter. It fell across the garden like a string of pearls. Birds hovered; the girls stood still. Watched the necklace untangle, wishing to pick it up, to wear it. Then, life had resumed, but the laughter remained, a suggestion, a promise, a prayer. True, uninhibited uproarious giggles—a child’s gift to the world.

“Go on. He’d love to meet you,” the angel had said. Then he’d turned and disappeared.

We slowly approached the man on the rock. The man with crinkly eyes. Heard him telling a story. His voice reminded them of what a dad should sound like.

“The father came running out to meet his son as if he’d been waiting for him forever. He took him in his arms like this”—Jesus scooped up a child—“and insisted on making him a huge banquet.”

Jesus had looked at us and smiled.

“The son couldn’t believe it,” he continued. “‘Why would you want to cook for me?’ he asked. ‘I’ve been a terrible son.’ ‘Well,’ the father replied, ‘you were lost, and now you’ve been found. I love you and I need to show you that.’ Then he called all the servants and had them put his best robes on his son, and led him away to the dining room.”

Jesus had set the child gently down, then walked towards us. “I’m so glad you’re here,” he’d said, hugging us. His clothes smelled like apples. “I know it’s been hard, but you’ve done so well.”

I couldn’t stop smiling, feeling somewhat goofy, but Maggie’s eyes made holes in the ground. He put a hand on her shoulder. “Maggie—why do you look like this?”

“I was so bad on earth. I must have made you mad, so many times.”

Jesus had shaken his head. “Sad, not mad. It was hard to watch you make those decisions—but you asked for help in the end. And now you’re here. That’s what matters.”

He’d paused. “It’s time for communion. Will you join me?”

We’d said yes, of course. Walked with him. He explained that, in heaven, one eats to commune. Hunger is non-existent. Banquets are an excuse for everyone to meet.

It was his job to ring the bell. We arrived at a lodge made of mahogany. The bell hung, waiting. Jesus pulled the rope, and the sound rippled across heaven like a hundred tongues. Children arrived from every direction, by horseback, elephant, eagle, or on their own two legs.

“Everyone?” I’d whispered.

“Everyone,” he’d said.

Soon we were seated. Me on one side of Jesus; Maggie on the other. I couldn’t see the table’s end; it stretched far into the horizon. On it were empty plates. No food to be seen.

Jesus stood; the room fell quiet. He raised his cup and plate, said “Do this in my name,” and then, the food had appeared. It seemed as magic. Everyone’s plate was full, except for ours.

We’d stared down at empty china.

“What do you feel like eating?” Jesus had asked.

“Portuguese buns,” I’d said. And there they were.

“Spaghetti,” said Maggie. Her plate filled with noodles and sauce.

We’d giggled. Then ate. I’ve never had better Portuguese buns.

Chapter 8—High School highs and lows
Fall 2000

*An empty shell
Of what used to exist
Life—sucked dry
Of meaning
Moments of fleeting passion
Arouse the body
Numb the mind
Deaden the soul
How can so many people be so empty?
When there is true life
True fulfillment
Right outside their door
Oh God they need you
They groan and ache
Without even knowing
They're hungry for you (r.d.)*

Camp ends, and school begins.

Autumn winds breathe cool and low. Trees shake. Leaves fall. The ground looks like a yellow sweater has come unravelled.

Outside the town of Riverton, harvesters whirl. Grain crumbles, corn is shucked, and brown dirt turns over, and rests.

Inside the town of 500, cognitive wires buzz. Sun-kissed students spill into Riverton Collegiate. Tongues waggle with gossip. Bells ring, teens groan, and then, the full swing of things: classes, homework, and tans beginning to fade. Stories cease. Smiles turn down.

Renee is a good student who doesn't study. She doesn't need to. The lessons stick to her brain like glue. Instead, she sits with her friends and laughs loudly. Plays cards. Goes on Slurpee runs.

Slurpee runs consist of five or six girls in a car. Limbs twisting, heads bending, the car speeds away to Arborg, home of the nearest 7-11. There, they slop soft coloured sugar-ice into cups. Shove in straws. Suck it up so fast it freezes the mind. Beg for aspirin.

One morning when the trees are all but naked, they pull into the 7-11. Girls spill from every which way onto the asphalt. A gas attendant scratches his head. "Well look at that," he says. "If it isn't the crazy car."

"And you, my friend, are jealous!" Renee declares with a laugh. They buy him a large Slurpee. His tongue turns blue as he slurps. Then they peel out of the parking lot towards the bakery where Renee buys everyone a homemade cookie. Soft, chocolate chip, warm from the oven. The girls protest.

"You will eat it, and you'll enjoy it!" she tells them. "Life is too short to be concerned about weight."

Driving home the old Tundra speeds over bumps. The girls yell "Riverton" to the sound of wheels smacking pavement and heads smacking ceiling.

Sometimes they sit in the school courtyard, spinning yarns. About leprechauns. Or inside-out people. Words come easily to Renee. She simply picks up a pen and scribbles. Like milk, stories spill and people drink them up. Fables and plays win her awards. The awards mean nothing. She just likes to write. Keeps the prizes in a box in her closet.

Then, Renee turns 17, and life becomes more than Slurpees and stories. Self esteem is pushed up by bras, blush on cheekbones, bottles and boys. Life is a ball and they are belles. The beer is dark, smooth, reassuring. The boys, mysterious. Alluring. Soon they're jumping through bathroom windows and riding Riverton roads in the back of a truck.

But late at night, when she crawls into bed, Renee sees the letters from campers plastered to her wall. Campers thanking her for her prayers.

Campers believing in her. She weeps. Lonely tears. Feels strange in her own skin. Falls asleep on a mascara-streaked pillow.

The party continues. The rush of being wanted. The blur of friends and beer. Soon she begins to tear the letters from her wall, until all that remains are tape-marks.

She barely notices when her brother leaves that spring. When she does, it's too late. Darren is gone. Hiding in the back alleys of anger. His eyes are black holes, his face, fatigued. His friends are his family. They lead him down paths laced with needles. Leave him there, alone, to find his way out.

Once again, Jonathan paces. Fists clench. He wants to fix this. To make things right. To bring his son home. To keep his eldest daughter from following the same path.

Angela trembles. Kneels on bruised knees and begs God to save her boy. Her girl. To help them be parents of grace and love.

Their tears spill over into heaven's fountain. God waters his flowers with their sadness. The flowers grow tall and beautiful. Bloom. And with their growth come answers.

Renee sits on the bottom step. She's wearing a skirt; her knees are white knobs. In her hands, a Rickard's Red. Zeppelin rocks the walls of her friend's apartment. She begins to cry. Pulls her knees to her chest. It's been months since she's wept. Why now? Spilling tears in her beer on this cold cement step.

Kyle wasn't who he'd claimed to be. He wasn't every girl's fantasy, and it was all she could do to hold his hand let alone kiss him without feeling the emptiness fill her. Dancing had become a stupefied saunter. And forever, the anxiety: gnawing at her mind like an insect.

What if they only like me because I drink? Do I really have any friends, or are they all faking it? I think I'm going to be sick.

Then, the sentence—flashing neon letters across her frontal lobe: “Love me.” It is simple, direct. A plea from God.

“Stairway to Heaven” is playing. She finds it fitting, sitting here on this step. Pondering love with a divine being. Cannot remember what it feels like to love God. Is it the same as loving a person? She can rhyme off what he's done for her. She appreciates what he's done. Says grace, attends church, tries not to swear, tithes. But love? It seems so fickle.

Another Friday. She's at school, desperate to find answers. Claire is walking, books in hand. Renee grabs her arm. Claire swings around with a question-mark forehead.

“Are you busy?” Renee asks. Her face is white.

Claire shakes her head. “I have a spare. Let's go.”

They drive to Papa George's, a Greek place in Winnipeg. Slide into booths.

“I can't figure it out,” Renee says, scanning a menu.

“What, the menu?” Claire says with a laugh.

Renee smiles. “No—my life. It used to be fun. Now, it's just hard work. I'm tired all the time. And restless. Darren is gone—I have no idea where he is and it's all my fault.”

Suddenly her face is a cracked plate, about to break.

The waitress arrives, a short girl with a mole on her cheek. Renee pulls in her tears. Orders the Pork Souvlaki. Claire asks for the Penne.

Then the waitress leaves and the tears return.

“Can you help me?” Renee swipes at her eyes. “I need help. I need to get back to where I was. And I need to find Darren.”

“We can never go back,” Claire says. Her voice is kind. “We can only take a new path forward. What’s changed over the past few months? Why do you feel like this?”

Renee snuffles. “Oh, I don’t know. I used to keep this prayer journal. I used to write girls from camp. I used to talk to God. Now, all I can think about is partying. But that’s getting dull.”

Silence. Glasses of water arrive. Lemons float on top—they look like yellow smiles.

“Did I ever love God?” Renee asks.

“Of course you did.”

Renee leans forward. “No, I don’t think I did... How could I just forget about him for the past few months?”

“Well, you obviously missed him. Otherwise you wouldn’t be feeling this way. If you don’t love someone, you can’t miss them.”

Renee looks down.

Soon, the food arrives, and they say grace.

“I think you can,” Renee says around a mouthful. “I think you can miss someone if you don’t love them. God was just a fixture in my life—a fixture my parents established. Parents, and camp. That’s why I didn’t love him.”

“Maybe you got tired?”

“Yeah, tired of traditions I guess. Stale church traditions.” She stops. “I don’t know that I’ve ever known Jesus. Can you know God? Like a person?”

“I think so. Look at Abraham. Or Jeremiah. They were very close to God.”

“Well, I want to know him.”

When the food is finished they push back plates. Order coffee. Renee takes a sip and her nose wrinkles. “That was a mistake.”

“I know—it leaves something to be desired.”

“Like taste.”

They laugh. Grow quiet.

“I want to know what it means to truly fight for something. To believe so badly it hurts,” says Renee. “Right now all I have are washed-up concepts from the church... meaningless theology drilled into my brain.”

“You could always ask Jesus to help you believe,” Claire says. “The Bible talks about God giving faith to those that ask.”

“You’re right. I should ask. For faith, and love. And for God to help Darren.”

“People cannot give you faith—they’ll only let you down. But God never will.”

Chapter 9—Abundant Springs
Winter-Spring 2001

*This is an attempt, an expression of that which is inexpressible
The still deep mystery that can only be glimpsed
One particle at a time
One hair, one finger, fingernail, chipped and ragged
The splinters from hands that work with wood
Shaping, cutting, bending wood
The hands that made wood
This is an attempt to feel those hands in mine
Not just holding me, touching, caressing lifting me
But my hands a second skin, a case, a shell for his
A glove to disguise, to make visible
To do the things his hands would do
Building, fishing, blessing, creating, healing (r.d.)*

Chocolates sit plump and brown in the clear glass bowl.

Outside the snow falls in lazy lumps. Like scoops of whipped cream, on bush and driveway. The record player spins with Sinatra's "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," and Angela hums.

Her voice trembles, yet she hums. She's basting the turkey. It gleams golden, juicy. Angela slides it into the oven. Cannot get used to this wide open space of counter and ceiling. They've moved. Jonathan's business is expanding, and he's rarely home. But they have this new house, in Winnipeg. And she has this new kitchen. It's one of those suburban places with perfectly pruned hedges.

She's humming, because Darren has come home. Her whole family is home, for Christmas.

Everyone walks on tip-toes. Darren's nerves are egg shells. They don't want to step on them, to crush.

Pale with shaky hands he hides, wary of dealers demanding payment. His room is a cave where he stays, head under duvet. Sometimes Renee sneaks down, sits on a corner of the bed beside the motionless form. Paints her nails red and waits for his eyes to appear. Then she paints his nails black and they sit, listening to the muffled sounds of Sinatra through the floorboards.

School is no longer an option for the strung-out boy. He's content with survival.

No one knows how to talk to the stranger in black. Angela continues to bruise her knees in prayer. Jonathan paces.

Christmas Day, Darren emerges. He sits huddled in a chair beside the tree. Watches the twinkle lights dance like white moths. Eats a chocolate from the glass bowl. Smells the turkey, ripening like an apple in the oven.

On his cheeks, a patch of pink appears. In his eyes, a sparkle. Then, it's his turn to rip open a present and as he tears the red paper, he feels the gate of his soul swing open and for a minute, he feels happy.

When the floor is littered with paper and presents, Renee reads. The Christmas story becomes real this year. She looks at the nativity scene, at the baby Jesus. God in a manger. It's too much. It hits her heart like a hammer. She asks Darren if he'll play 'O Holy Night' on the piano. He nods, once; lets his fingers become reacquainted with the ivories.

Everyone sings. Sara, Renee's youngest sister, belts out strong. Her voice breaks any tension. Liana looks at her toes. So does Angela. Jonathan stares out the window and twist-ties his thumbs.

From the back Darren looks like a little boy who's just woken up, dressed in pyjamas, hair tousled. The music starts off hesitant. Then his fingers relax, find their place on the keys. It grows louder. He plays by ear. Hears the song from somewhere inside him; it pours out through his hands.

O Holy Night turns into Away in a Manger, and the music keeps playing until somewhere in the middle of Ave Maria when Darren's back suddenly hunches and his fingers go limp.

He stands up, walks downstairs. The piano sits abandoned. The ivories, warm from his touch. An hour later he returns, showered and smelling of Ivory soap. And life resumes around steaming plates and clinking glasses.

Angela sees the poster at church. It's curling at one corner. Advertising a conference for teens called "Abundant Springs." A man with a green mask is shown doing break-dance moves. She writes down the phone number stamped across the bottom of the poster. "Perfect," she thinks.

Talks to Renee. "Claire told me about it," Renee says. "Ya, I'd like to go."

"What about Darren?"

Renee's feet shuffle. Wrinkle her pink bedroom rug. "I'll ask him."

She breathes deep. Knocks on Darren's door. He's been in there all day. A bowl sits outside; in it, a pool of milk and soggy cornflakes.

Renee hears something muffled, like a cat meowing in a bush. Pushes the door open. Darren is curled up in a foetal position, crying. A blanket is pulled over his head. One of his wool socks has a hole in it. He's never seemed so small.

He hears her. Straightens out flat as a board but it's too late. She knows. In an effort to ease the shame she takes his hand, but he pulls it away. She's saying, "It's okay."

Darren yanks the blanket away from his puffy face. Renee inadvertently jumps as his eyes spark. "Okay? It's not okay. Besides, you have no idea what I'm crying about. Don't you dare say it's going to be okay."

She looks at the door. It stands open, inviting. Then she turns back. Sits on the corner of the bed, and ignores her urge to flee.

"Remember when we were kids and we used to play orphans in the forest?" Her voice croaks. She clears it. He lies there staring at the ceiling. As if *it's* talking to him. "Liana would always figure out a way to save us," she continues, "by concocting some sort of magical cure—like a rich couple finding us and taking us home..."

His head remains motionless. Fixed on the tiles.

She plunges ahead. "Well I used to think that was stupid. I used to enjoy the hardship. But now I'm realizing, sometimes we need an easy answer. Life is pretty tough, and we're no longer pretending to be in trouble. *We are* in trouble—you and I. And I really think that, if you're open to it, we could find an answer at this thing."

She pulls out the poster and Darren groans. The whole thing is corny, cued. She holds it up and his eyes flicker, then return to the tiles.

Renee sighs. Gets up to leave. And then, just as the door is about to click shut, she hears, "Maybe."

The trees are fuzzy with pink blossoms. The dandelions pop up with furry yellow heads, and birds begin to chirp incessantly. Springtime. And with it, Abundant Springs.

Renee drives, and Darren slouches in the seat next to her. Claire sits behind them. The air seems warmer as they cross the Saskatchewan border. The sky seems to stretch, and the roads, flatten. Everywhere, square fields are being seeded. Farmers forming silhouettes against open skies. Soon they see the sign for Caronport; turn off towards Briercrest College.

She's never seen so many Third Day t-shirts. Six hundred teenagers, 75 per cent of whom are garbed in band gear.

Darren scuffs his shoes against the sidewalk. His eyebrows furrow. Teens yell and stumble past in a daze. Everyone seems to be heading towards the same set of doors. Whenever they open, Third Day music streams out. For a second Renee doubts herself. Then Claire grabs her arm. "C'mon," she cries. "It'll be fun!"

Renee throws a glance at Darren who looks away. He's wearing a black shirt and black jeans, ripped at the knees. Skateboard shoes sit unlaced on his feet. "You guys go ahead," he says. "I'm gonna have a smoke."

Inside it's a blur of faces. Everyone's going somewhere. They find name tags, register, and then, it's a riot in the gym. A yelling riot. Renee's team is Tnadnuba, and Claire's is Tropnorac. They do tug-of-war, perched on logs; slingshot wars using marshmallows; bobbing for chocolates in a fake toilet, and spitting goldfish as far as possible.

Darren is nowhere to be seen.

The blur of colours and sounds continues for two days. Darren's face never appears. Renee becomes angry. Then concerned.

It's the final night. The speaker uses his hands a lot. Walks among the seats. It feels like he's talking right to you.

"Do you know that God is alive?" he yells. When the youth cheer, he demands to know how.

"Is it because of a feeling inside?" he asked. "Or because God's word tells us so? You see, we've lost faith in words and placed it entirely in feelings. We need to invest our faith in a place where we will reap rewards. God's word is a safe investment. We *will* see rewards."

Renee feels chilly. Leans forward, wanting to somehow soak it all in. Claire is a note-taker. Her pen scribbles furiously.

"Are you prepared to be foolish?" He looks Renee in the eyes.

She cries 'yes' with the rest of them—but he wants to know *why*. His face is serious. "Do you realize how scary it is to appear foolish to a supposedly wise world? Right now you're all hyped up on sugar and friends so it's easy to say you're ready to be foolish, but let me explain what being foolish looks like: it's a missionary being martyred for sharing her faith in China; it's choosing to volunteer instead of going to college; it's believing that God can heal someone when everyone else says they're beyond help."

Hard words, like stones. The crowd grows quiet. Sombre.

The speaker leans into the mike. His forehead is shiny. "I look at you and I see a generation of God-seekers," he says. "But there's a lot of darkness in you, too. Don't be afraid to ask God to remove that darkness, to give you victory and new life."

Seek and you will find. Renee feels her skin itch. "You can ask for anything in Jesus' name, and receive it," he continues. "Your heart just needs to be aligned with his."

Free. I want to be free. She stands when the music starts, doesn't even look around to see if others are with her. Raises her hands. People begin to walk down the steps, ask for prayer. She just stands there, hands lifted, until the music ends.

The night is black. Renee sees the puff of grey before smelling it. Sees his face outlined by the moon, a bowl of butter in the sky.

"Darren?"

"Finally," he says, dragging himself upward. He stomps out his cig, twirls keys in his hand. "Let's go."

"Where have you been?" she asks, old anger rising.

“Listen, it doesn’t matter. I just want to get out of this hell hole. Why’d you have to drag me here? All of this God-talk... such fluff. I can’t stand it.”

Renee puts a hand on his shoulder. He shrugs it off.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I didn’t know... I couldn’t find you.”

“It’s okay,” he says. Heavy sigh. “But can we get away from this Christian freak show?”

“I’ll go find Claire.”

PART 2: COCOON

Chapter 10—Rebirth Spring 2001-'02

*The wind has dried my tears
And swept my soul bare
Empty and alone before you
You pierce me with your stare
I need you to love me
You see right through my heart
You know I'm empty and dry
Nothing left to stand in the way
No more tears left to cry
I need you to want me
I'm cold, dark and empty
Fill me with all that you are
Change me and make me like you
Let me shine with the morning star
I just need you to hold me (r.d.)*

They drive home, and then, without a backwards glance, Darren's gone. Walking unafraid into the night. Bearing a green army bag. Staring straight ahead.

Renee won't see him again for three years.

As he walks, she prays. Putting pen to paper, scrawling prayers to God in the dark.

Darren. She begs God for angels around her brother. For a safe place he can run to.

Cannot stop crying, thinking of Abundant Springs: the grey puff of smoke. The lone figure, standing in the dark. *If only I had been there sooner. If only I had stayed with him.*

Jonathan's pacing turns to running. He's gone for days at a time, doing business across the country. Is grateful for the distance. Home reminds him of the son he's lost.

Angela's face normally looks like it's about to weep. These days, it's no lie. Her red eyes give her away.

Then, summer passes. School starts, and Renee escapes her heavy home. Keeps praying. Begins to study hard. When the pull of the party tugs on her heart, she grabs red leather shoes and goes dancing with Claire. In those moments she dances with hands held high, eyes closed, worshipping. Her red shoes become a blur. People watch, engrossed. She dances for One.

Kyle no longer holds appeal. She misses drinking but not the cost. Reads books by C.S. Lewis and Madeleine L'Engle. Begins to long for life after school. When she can escape concrete suburbia and live by faith, day to day. Her parents believe, but for Renee, it's more. It's a way of seeing the world. A way of seeing people.

She can still hear the speaker yelling: "Do you know that God is alive?"

Do I know? I want to know...

She follows Jesus into her classrooms. Watches her classmates dissect frogs in biology class, and feels her heart beat strangely. It's his love inside of her. Jesus' love, for the students. He wants them to feel this love which is not her own. Her eyes smart and she asks to be excused; sits in the bathroom and wonders if she's losing it.

That night in her journal she scribbles: *Dear God, I have no doubts about your existence. I marvel at your plan for salvation, so simple and yet so profound. You make yourself so evident to us, and yet you leave room enough for doubt so that it will take faith to believe in you. But faith is what makes belief beautiful. It gives wonder to life. I never want to stop serving you. Please, God, let them see how much you love them. Amen.*

The words look fake. Black ink on pink paper. She shakes her head. *It's real.* Tells herself this when she thinks of Darren and crumples like a Kleenex.

Renee begins peeling away life's layers. Begins to look for hidden gems. Discovers independent movies, her favourite being the story of a girl in New Zealand who saves a village: *Whale Rider*. Finds courage in the movie's ending, where the little girl dies on the back of a whale. Sinking down beneath the waves the girl's thoughts whisper to the movie camera: "I wasn't afraid to die."

I'm not afraid to die, Renee thinks. But I don't want to, either.

She wants to *live*. To discover what she doesn't know. She craves spicy foods: Mexican, Lebanese, Indian. Will not settle for the fast-food regime or box-restaurant hype.

Then she begins to hunger for travel: an insatiable appetite, inspired by family trips—a need to know what lies beyond.

Renee and Claire sit in cafes, dreaming of life beyond school. See themselves as missionaries, living in shacks, drinking dirty water. "My Dad would never approve," Renee says. "He thinks I should get a secure job, and save up for a pension. But what good is faith if we're always taking care of ourselves, all the time?"

Claire nods, shrugs slight shoulders. "I guess so. I mean, we're supposed to respect our parents, right? But... if God wants us to do something, shouldn't we follow him, not our parents?"

Renee plays with the sugar bowl. Scrapes dried mustard off its rim. "I think so. It's hard to know."

They sit, lost in thought, then, "I want to visit the Middle East," Claire says. Flash of smile. "That's my big dream. You should come with me."

"Yes! Maybe we can help somehow... ease that region's pain." Renee's eyes darken. "It makes me so angry when the church advocates war. Who are we if not peacemakers? Who was Jesus if not the antithesis of war? How did we ever convince ourselves there's room in the New Testament for fighting?"

Claire smiles. Renee is a dove, bearing an olive branch. Has been, since attending a Peace It Together retreat as a child. It was there she heard stories from the mouths of other children with burns on their skin and slashes across their faces. War orphans begging the world to cease fire. When Renee heard their stories, her eyes wept and her heart stormed. A certain madness for peace had formed.

"Art. That's how we can help. Art which conveys truth—not what people *think* is truth, but the gut-wrenching truth about relationships, life, God, nature, and the universe."

"A picture of peace," Claire concludes.

Renee lies on her back, on a quilt her mother has made. It's a patchwork of many colours, sewn with tiny stitches. She sticks her feet in the air as Jason Upton's raspy voice fills the air. Moves her feet to the pulsating beats.

"I want to hear the heartbeat of heaven; I want to hear the heartbeat right now..."

His voice sounds cracked with tears. She feels his longing.

It's a Sunday in April. The air outside her bedroom window is thick with thunder. She likes to watch the lightening rip across the sky. To hear the electricity crackle, feel her hair stand on end.

She wonders if Jesus likes thunderstorms. Wishes he were there with her. Sticking his feet up high. Listening to Jason Upton and watching the suburbs drown in sheets of water. *I ache for that day. The day*

when I can run into your arms and be home. But I also ache for my friends who are not going with me. Oh Lord, please open their eyes to see you! Oh Lord, please don't forget them. Please let them see!

The knock-knock is faint. She thinks it's the drums. Then, again, fragile knuckles on wood. Rapping at her door. A tiny voice asking if Renee wants some coffee. Renee turns down the music. "Come in!" she calls.

Angela enters, bearing mugs and cookies. She smiles, lines criss-crossing around brown eyes. Eyes shadowed with sleepless nights.

She sets the tray on Renee's bed; hands her a mug of steaming coffee. "Organic fair-trade," she says quietly. "Just as you like it."

"Mom, you look so tired..."

Angela says nothing. Her face draws closed like a curtain. She finds a place on the bed beside Renee. Their feet stick out from under the quilt.

"I remember making that," Angela says, pointing to the patchwork squares. Takes a sip of coffee. "You were only four. It was around the same time you decided you were going to move your bedroom downstairs."

Renee smiles. "That was a bit ridiculous, wasn't it?"

A crack of lightening. It sounds as if the world is a watermelon being split apart.

"You were pretty determined, that's for sure. Darren got very jealous..." Angela looks down, but it's too late. Renee sees the teardrop on her cheek. It falls into her coffee, making small brown ripples.

"Mom, what's wrong?" She puts an arm around Angela, pulls her close.

The tears don't stop. Finally Angela covers her face with veined hands.

"Your brother..." she sobs. "I'm so worried... Who's going to take care of him?"

Suddenly Renee's mind flashes back. She and Darren are six. Standing on their old deck in Mennville. Before them, a yard strewn with toys. In the back, a small greenhouse with a litter of kittens. Fuzzy balls of grey which mew.

Mom is inside; Dad, at work.

They're pretending the deck is an old pirate's ship.

"Ahoy mate," Renee says in her black t-shirt and eye patch constructed from paper and string. "The waves are vastly large. We'll need to jump. Look below—I see a soft landing (on the grass is a mattress, two feet beneath them) so fear not. We shall be safe. But ladies should always follow gentlemen."

She spreads her hands in a welcoming gesture.

Darren stands immobile, eyes wide, unable to move for fear of the fall. Renee steps close, speaks into his ear so Liana can't hear. "Are you ready?"

He nods. Slowly, then a little too vigorously. "I'll do it," he says in false bravado, stepping to the edge. His face turns green. "Umm..."

"Oh bother, I'll go first," Renee says, a bit crossly. Darren steps out of the way, and the tiny girl goes flying. Falls into the air, then down, down onto the mattress below.

In what seems a split second her pixie face looks up. Smiles. "Your turn!"

Darren plunges, plugging his nose and closing his eyes. Then, hard ground crunches up on his leg, folding it like an accordion. He opens up his mouth, lets out the scream threatening to explode inside him. He's sprained his ankle.

Thunder growls, breaking her reverie. Angela looks at her with watery eyes. Renee swallows hard. "I'm sorry Mom, I was just recalling something Darren and I did when we were young."

"You two were always up to something." Angela smiles a little.

"Some days I wish I could be a kid again, when life made sense and my biggest problems were planning my birthday parties."

"I know. I miss those days too."

"Perhaps heaven is one big childhood. Perhaps it's a life uncomplicated, a life of laughing, playing and running, 'round and 'round."

She looks at the quilt; the patches are stories, sewn neatly together. "You know what matters to me? It's not big things like cars or TVs. It's things like old toys, the broken horse swing that now lies in a pile of junk behind the barn, and the dog house that Billie had her puppies in."

Outside the window, clouds shift. The moon appears, a whey-coloured circle.

"Funny, hey? The things that stick, long after the years fade away."

Angela nods, and they sit in silence while the thunder drifts further and further away.

Following high school Renee and her cousins spend the summer together in a tiny apartment in Winnipeg.

The wall is cracked. A broken line zigzags across peeling paint. The appliances talk to one another in groans and grunts. But it's home. Four girls squished into three rooms.

The floor is littered with creams and shoes. The closets, a collision of colour: clothes crammed, snug. The girls lie on bunk beds, feet in the air. Roommates.

Outside the air is heavy with summer heat. Rain drops fall, hiss on black asphalt.

"We need to buy food," Zoe says with a twirl of her hand.

"And toilet paper," Renee pipes up. She's opening a box of red hair dye.

Something skitters across the ceiling. Tiny toe nails on wood. The girls squeal. The skittering stops. Nervous laughter.

"I think it's gelato time." Lily pulls herself up, blond hair dripping down. Leaps to the floor. Renee slides the red hair dye open, sits staring at the colour in her hands. Blood red dye.

"You guys go ahead," she says. "I'm going to dye my hair. It's a festive red. Something to celebrate our independence."

"No more parents," Claire chimes. She whoops quietly. "No more curfews, no more rules."

"Are we ready for this?" Zoe ponders.

"You mean, why didn't we do this sooner?" Renee asks. She turns the tap; the water begins to gurgle, cough. A stream of dirt. She waits; the phlegm disappears. The water is clean.

Puts her head under the tap and bites her lip. It's cold.

"Renee, you're insane!" Zoe laughs, watching her lip turn blue. "But you're right—we've graduated. And in a few months, we'll all be gone. So let's live it up."

They're young. Their cheeks are pink, their fingers nimble. They have boy-band posters and stuffed animals. They go dancing until morning yawns across the sky. And they still believe good food solves all problems. Food like gelato and cheesecake.

Once, when writing a play they said: "You just have to eat enough chocolate and pretend like it never happened. You have to pick up the pieces and get on with life."

Soon life would tear at the seams. A frayed garment of family and friends. Yet for now, they hold onto the material. Grip it, in tender grasp.

In the mornings the bathroom is a mass of bodies. Brushing teeth, hair. Finding space to breathe deep is hard in this house full of girls. Then they eat, cereal crunching, milk slopping on Frosted Flakes. Renee has Weetabix with fruit and yogurt. Rubbing eyes they pull on shoes, find their way to work. That night, they'll make supper together. The smell of spices and herbs linger. Promise another meal, another communion.

And at night, she talks with Claire. Claire of wide eyes and tender heart. When the lights go out, they huddle together with their stuffed animals—Mister Heffalump and Chocolate Moose, young minds brewing age-old questions like *Why does God let bad things happen?* And *Why will some people never believe?* Innocent minds, confounded by evil.

One day Claire clips Renee's hair short. They sit outside, the wind picking up stray strands and stealing them away. The strands look like flames of fire. "Your hair reminds me of autumn," Claire says. "When all the leaves fall red to the ground. I wish I could glue fall-time back onto the trees."

Renee smiles. "Perpetual autumn. I like it. Only then we'd never experience the excitement of spring."

"Always thinking, aren't you?"

"Well, sometimes." She laughs. Watches an ant pull a crumb along the sidewalk.

"Can I share something with you?"

"Sure."

"I'm reading the Psalms right now. They're so full of raw emotion. There's a lot of anger and hurt. And I love it—but I'm frustrated because I don't think churches today are able to, or equipped to handle that kind of honesty."

Claire is quiet. The scissors snip, snip. Metal flashing in sunlight.

"I mean, I don't even know how to handle my own emotions sometimes, let alone someone standing up in front of a church and admitting, 'God has forsaken me; he is far away from me. I cry out, but he doesn't answer. I am a worm and not a man.'"

Renee extends her hand beseeching the heavens. Laughs. Sighs.

"But that's how I feel sometimes. I mean, I know I haven't gone through anything tragic but even with Darren, I feel he's so far gone—so hurting, and I wonder, where is God in all of this?"

Claire nods. The scissors slow to a halt. She brushes hair from Renee's neck. Renee's face is illuminated by the shredded red. Her eyes suddenly seem too big. She turns, looks at Claire. "But even now I want to apologize for saying that; I want to make it softer—more palatable. Why is that? Who sets these Christian standards of what's acceptable and what isn't?"

"That's the good thing about the Psalms," Claire said quietly. "There are no answers or explanations; just emotion and faith. We're so obsessed with finding answers...."

"I hope I never have to feel like my life depends on faith alone," Renee says. They stand up. The wind has let up. The sunlight falls in puddles at their feet. "If it does, I hope I can be like the psalmists who, at the end of their ranting say, 'but I trust you, Lord.'"

She pauses. “Isn’t that what true faith is about, anyway?”

An orange leaf falls before her eyes. Then, it starts falling upwards. She looks closer. It’s a butterfly, performing a delicate dance just for her.

Chapter 11—A Father’s Heart
August 2002

*Of what use is your tempered idealism
Watered down by principles of reasoning
Until your vision of another
World has grown entirely too dim
It is by reason we go mad
Methodically marching in the name of progress
Forward, backward, sideways
As long as we are marching
Men will follow as they dream and die of a better world
When will we see that it begins here, it begins now
There are dual realities in nature
What it is and what it could be
The true idealist holds both
Undiluted in stark contrast
And yet inexplicably intertwined
In the marriage of heart and mind (r.d.)*

Renee has decided she doesn’t want to go to university.

Instead, she’s going to throw her life away on missions. Is leaving in the morning for the Youth With A Mission base in Vancouver. Angela’s offered to drive her.

Jonathan thumps his head against the home office wall. Leaves a mark which spreads like a blueberry pancake.

Why is she so stubborn? Why can’t she see I only want what’s best for her?

He shuffles stacks of invoices and receipts. Straightens piles. Sits at his desk, and tries to feel productive.

His mind is a muskeg of thoughts. He can’t concentrate. But he needs to. He has a business to run.

The cell phone vibrates, jumping across his desk, and he groans. Sometimes he wants to throw it against the wall. Watch it shatter into a million tiny pieces.

He flips it open, talks into the receiver. The call is quick, professional. He is proud of how controlled he sounds over the phone. Then, ‘click’ and he’s left with silence. Memories.

Recalls Renee and the others, lined up on the stairs. Waiting for him to come home from a business trip.

But too often he didn’t show. Then they’d crumble on the stairs, and cry. Wonder why Daddy didn’t love them. After that, Angela stopped telling them when he was coming.

He could still see them, pyjama-clad, skin scrubbed clean, teeth, minty. He drops his face in his hands. Rubs eyes with forefingers. Now there’s no one lined up, waiting. No boy, no girls. They’ve given up on him. Is it any wonder? He wasn’t there when they needed him.

There was a time when Renee had told teachers she wanted to be “just like my Dad.”

Now, she didn't even ask for advice.

Headlong, impulsive Renee. He still sees her as a six-year-old: small face, skinny legs; riding her horse in wind and rain. *I don't know what you want, God. She's got so much potential, only to waste it all on missions. I mean, I know we need missionaries but she could do so much more... I had such big hopes for her.*

His long body folds up. He drops head on desk; fatigue sits heavy on his shoulders. “I had hoped she'd partner with me, and one day take over.” Now he's talking to the sticky-notes on his desk. They stare at him with fluorescent orange eyes. “My little Renee... why won't you listen?”

She'd been only seven years old; brown hair dripping wet from the bath. Wearing a pink nighty. Tugging on his pant-leg, pleading, “Please stay home this time! I don't want you to leave.”

I should have listened. Should have stayed home. Instead, he'd kissed her on the head, picked up his briefcase and left.

She's still too tiny, he thinks. *But her heart—oh so big, reaching far beyond home, stretching around the globe.*

Now her music floats up the stairs, through the crack in his door. She's singing, packing. Tomorrow she leaves for Vancouver. She'd moved away for the summer; was back for her things. So she could leave again. First, their baby boy. Now, her.

It's too much. He unbuttons his shirt collar, but still, he's choking. Needs fresh air. Bursts out the back door.

He misses Mennville. Aches for fields of fresh sod. Brown sod, swollen from a night of rain. Earthy smells. A sky which makes him feel small. Insignificant.

Yet, he feels satisfied. Surrounded by freshly manicured lawn, fire pits, a perfect man-made stream and paved trails. Houses stretching up and out, like they own the planet. Living here makes him feel proud. Like he's done something right. It's his way of providing. Of making life better for the people he loves.

But Renee is different. Even as he walks, cell phone in hand, he knows. She's always been different. When she was young, she never cared about birthday presents. Just the party. She wanted as many people over as possible. Crammed the house full of children. Sometimes she gave her gifts away.

His feet make crunching sounds on the pink gravel. Somewhere, a lonely dog barks. Caged up until its owners return at some unheard-of hour.

Why do I always try to hold on? To control what isn't mine in the first place?

He kicks a rock, sends it spinning.

Ducks keep stride, swimming hard. Their wings are clipped. He finds this sad.

That's what you want to do with her. The thought is sudden, startling. Revealing.

He wants to clip Renee's wings. To keep her home, in school. But he needs to let her fly.

Footsteps behind him, running. He moves to let the person pass. Instead, an arm slides through his and he looks down. It's Renee.

“Hi Dad.”

“Renee.” He clears his throat. “I'm sorry. For getting so upset.”

A bead of sweat clings to her white forehead. She gets tired so easily. It scares him. “It’s okay Dad, no worries.”

They walk for a while. The ducks glide silently. The wind blows softly. He feels her hand tighten on his arm.

“Can I tell you something?” she asks.

He nods.

Her words are careful, as if she’s been practicing. “I’m not trying to be obstinate or rebellious. I’m really trying to do what God wants me to.”

He knows this. He just doesn’t think God wants her to throw her life away. But for now, he stays silent. Listens.

“The purpose of YWAM is ‘to know God and to make him known,’” she continues. “That’s not something I could learn at university. I mean, I could learn about God, but I wouldn’t get to *know* God. If you remember, most of Jesus’ disciples were unschooled, ordinary fishermen.”

Again, a civil nod.

“I have no university degree, but God doesn’t need degrees. He needs my heart.”

That would sound perfect on a Hallmark card, he thinks.

“Dad, I just really want to serve Him. I really do. Whatever that means. Even if it seems foolish... When people looked at the disciples, they could tell they’d been with Jesus. Even David killing Goliath—he wasn’t trained as a soldier, but he knew God would protect him, and that was enough.”

“I know Renee. I know you’re trying to do what’s right.”

Above, the clouds are fat cauliflowers in a blue-caldron sky. Jonathan spots a bench; they sit. The ducks float on by.

“I don’t want to fight with you, Renee,” he says. “I know I haven’t been there for you like I should have been. It’s really hard to keep up with you, you know—you’re always so busy, and part of me just wants to protect you, to keep you close.”

Renee leans back, red head against bench. Lets the moment simmer.

“I know Dad. But I’m a grown woman now. I need to make some decisions for myself. It would mean a lot to me if I had your support. It’s not easy leaving everything that’s comfortable...” She pauses. Realizes that statement wasn’t true. “But I can’t keep relying on you and Mom forever. I need to know if what I believe is true, if this God is real, and if he is—well, then, there’s no reason to worry about me, is there?”

Jonathan relaxes his face. Flattens his brow. Sits back.

Later, he will wonder if she knew her life was going to be short. If she knew time was ticking...

For now, though, he just sits.

Chapter 12—Heaven

I'm sitting in a bed of red tulips. The flowers feel warm. Jesus comes, sits beside me.

My cheeks are wet with tears. I've been watching myself walk with Jonathan. Realizing how much he loved me. These tulips blossomed from my puddle of tears.

Now, with Jesus, I sit and watch the sky leak into Pale Face. A reflection of rainbow colours. Along the lake's edge, calla lilies.

"The lily means peace," I murmur. "Isn't that right?"

Jesus rests on the crook of his arm.

"Lilies represent peace on earth," he replies. "Earth is a place where symbolism provides meaning. Because the father and I are invisible to the world, meaning helps one believe."

"So what does it symbolize here?"

"A flower. A simple, unadorned flower. Here, you don't need to search for meaning, because you are *in* it. This place is the epitome of purpose. It's easy to believe here, because really, there's no other choice. The truth is staring you in the face."

At this, he turns, looks me directly in the eye. I laugh.

Jesus leans back. "Age is another symbol no longer necessary in heaven. On earth, it represents maturity, wisdom, and seniority. But in reality, age is a symbol of decay, so it doesn't exist here. Nothing related to death can reside in the presence of Life."

I look down at my hands, dimpled and small. "I know. I still can't understand it. I often forget that I look like a child. My thoughts are an adult's, but my body is that of a seven-year-old."

"Seven is the number you attribute to a certain appearance. But really, youth represents an absence of death, not a level of maturity. Here in heaven, one's maturity is determined by how well you know the Father."

"So, when babies come to heaven, why don't they stay looking like infants? Why do *they* get older?"

"I wouldn't use the term 'older,'" Jesus replies. "Everyone receives a new body upon entering heaven. You all step into children's bodies, yet your minds and souls develop in conjunction with what you knew previously. This allows you to recognize loved ones, like your brothers."

"The kingdom of God belongs to such as these..." I recite quietly. "I understand now."

"Then you knew in part; now you know in full," Jesus responds. "Some people assume babies know nothing of God."

He sits up. "Let me tell you a story. There was this girl born on earth; she weighed only one and a half pounds and had to be incubated for months. Doctors didn't think she would make it. Nevertheless she developed normally, into a beautiful petite child. One day while she was out for a walk with her mother, the girl stopped. She asked, 'Mom, do you smell that?' The mother paused to drink in the air. 'It smells like rain.' 'No,' the girl replied. 'It smells like Him. It smells like God when he's holding you.'"

A heron splashes into Pale Face, shattering its smooth complexion.

"Babies are born knowing God," I realize. "As they grow older, it's up to them to hold on to that knowledge."

Inching towards the surface of the lake, I peer down into blue ripples. My face appears—pointed, like a pixie, with eyes too big, hair hanging low. It's me as a little girl.

“This is the first time I’ve looked at myself,” I tell Jesus who nods. He knows.

Even as he sits with me, he’s running in the garden with my brothers and interceding for someone on earth. He’s both here and there, then and now.

“Can I ask you something?” I cross my legs in a meditative position.

“You know you can ask me anything.”

“Why would you want us here? Why would you want to share your home with us?”

Jesus gets to his feet; pulls me up. “Come,” he says. “Let me show you something.”

As we walk, the land beneath us morphs. First, into water; then, a valley lush and green, and finally, a dry desert filled with sand and camels. We reach a cliff overlooking the desert. Jesus points. I see a house, atop the cliff. In a moment, we’re walking through the front door. Walking upstairs, down. The rooms are huge, vacant. Everything is quiet, save for the slap, slap of bare feet.

Soon we’re back outside. Again, Jesus points, and I gasp. Thousands of houses stretch row upon row. Some, mere dots on the horizon.

“This is but a few,” Jesus says. “There are so many empty rooms. We built one for each person ever conceived. We want everyone with us in heaven. You are our family. We are one body, and it hurts us when members of the family don’t want anything to do with us.”

Jesus sits on a rock, sets me on his lap. I smell wind, rain, pine branches and flower dust.

“But if you know they’re not going to accept you…” I say, hesitant, “Well, it seems like a waste of time and space.”

“Time, again, is an earthly concept. So it’s not possible to waste something which doesn’t exist. And we can easily create more space. If we need it, we make it.”

He leaves it at that, and we sit there, on the edge of the cliff. Watch an eagle dip and dive over houses which stand forever as rejected promises.

I look for them, find them in the garden huddled together like old men, their fuzzy white heads touching, conspiring. A cocooned cluster of tiny white butterfly eggs.

Crouching down I watch, hoping to glimpse life. Hoping to see some movement. The eggs cling to the leaf. Even in heaven, metamorphosis occurs.

One day they will change colour. The eggs will turn from white to tan to dark brown. Then, the little larva will wriggle. They will split open the cocoon, and they will become beautiful. And eventually, they will fly away.

But not today. Today, they hang still, silent. Hatching secret schemes to take over the world.

He’s hunched over, playing checkers with Abraham.

I know them both, without having met them. On earth, I’d pictured them as old and stooped, bearing grey fluffy beards, tattered robes and booming voices.

And of course he’d have a staff—gripping it tight, knuckles white. The staff which hovered over the Red Sea. The staff which struck stone.

The staff which ultimately denied him entrance into the Promised Land.

Yet here he is, a little boy. Playing checkers, no less.

“Moses,” I whisper.

He glances up, smiles. Then he turns back, instantly serious.

“Hello Renee,” he says, sliding a black piece diagonally. I’m not surprised he knows my name. In heaven, everyone knows everybody. He rests his head in his palm; watches Abe hesitate.

They’re seated inside the courtyard, parallel to the throne room. A stone table stands, old and grey, between them.

Sunflowers stretch bashfully along the courtyard wall, like girls in yellow bonnets. Morning glory winds around tree trunks and purple phlox fill in the gaps. Children play hopscotch on pathways. Bocce ball on grass. Dominos on picnic tables. Everywhere, the sound of laughter.

I sit and wait for Moses on a chair made of diamonds. Amuse myself by watching thousands of butterflies pour like Kool-Aid from the window of God’s throne room. Flutter to earth with heaven on their wings.

Moses stands, shakes Abe’s hand. Looks for me. I wave. It’s as if I’m meeting an old friend, versus one of my favourite Bible characters.

“Hi there—how’s it going?” he asks, walking towards me with short legs and wide strides.

“Might we walk and talk?” I wonder, suddenly shy.

“By all means.” And so we do, heading towards the river’s edge.

“This is my favourite part of heaven,” I say, feet sliding fast in grassy-bank soil. At the bottom, a stream winds like a string of turquoise beads.

“Have you travelled far then?” he asks, clamouring after me.

“Each day, I try to go somewhere I’ve never been before.”

We reach the water’s edge. Stick fingers in cold liquid blue.

His eyes sparkle. “Yeah, this place is great. Madrid is a good guy—he knows me well.”

And then, Madrid appears. Floating on a raft in nothing but shorts. In his hand, a pole with which he guides the logs. Behind the raft, a trickle of bubbles. His smile flashes white in brown Indian skin.

“Hey-yo!” he calls in a sing-song voice. Guides the raft to the edge; we climb on, and he pushes off with his pole.

For a while, we sit still. Listen to water splash between the logs. Stare at the mangrove trees. The way their roots extend out of the water, twisted, like a messy head of hair. Birds roost in the branches, diving sporadically at fish in the water.

“How did you not get angry?” I ask suddenly, as we round a bend in the river.

“I’m sorry?” Moses runs his hand through thick brown curls.

“I was just wondering how you didn’t get angry when God told you that you couldn’t enter the Promised Land?”

He laughs. “Oh, that. Well, yes, it was unnerving. I mean, you lead these people around for how many years—”

“Forty.”

“—right, 40, then make one, well, okay, many mistakes, and suddenly you’re not allowed to enter. Meanwhile, they can. Yeah, it was pretty upsetting. But you know…” he trails fingers in the water, “I trusted. I mean, God obviously knew what he was doing. He’d gotten us out of Egypt, parted the Red Sea and provided food for us while we lived in

the sand. I wasn't about to deny him just because I didn't get what I wanted."

"But it was so unfair!" I bite my lip. "I mean, How can a just and loving God be so merciless?"

"Well, there are many incidents on earth which can only be explained by taking into account the other side—the dark side," Moses points out. "In many ways I betrayed God by giving in to the dark side, even for that moment. I mean, we're human, right, so God understands when we make mistakes, and he factors that into the equation, but there still have to be consequences. Fairness is a human invention; justice is a godly one. I think we often confuse one for the other."

Madrid hums softly. The sky billows like a colourful sheet above them.

Something clicks. Moses' words make sense. I blink, and suddenly the whole landscape seems brighter, more beautiful, than before.

Moses reaches up, grabs a blushing mango. He hands it to me, saying, "Don't worry. Everything is a journey, even in heaven. The closer you get to God, the more these mysteries will be unveiled—either that, or they'll no longer matter."

I nod. Bite deep into soft flesh. Mango juice drips down my chin.

Chapter 13—Vancouver
September 2002

The crisp blue sky hangs over the city of grey people (r.d.)

It's a sapphire by the sea.

A gem for the refugee, the homeless, and the artisan.

A multi-faceted city which never sleeps, never weeps, and never stops shining.

The sea is Vancouver's source of wealth. With the largest port on the west coast, it trades, extensively. Meanwhile its streets are home to some of Canada's poorest citizens.

In the beginning, aboriginal people stood back and watched as the indigenous flooded through Vancouver's gate. Hailing from across Asia, the languages multiplied. Today, over 60 are spoken. Mingled with dim sum and chicken balls, mosques and Buddhist temples, sacred cows and beef on a stick.

Mountains hold the metropolis in a grey-rock embrace. Looking up, one can't tell where the snow stops and the clouds begin. The sea froths, lapping at the shore like hundreds of hungry tongues.

"Its toes are in the ocean, and its head in the skies," Renee tells Claire over the phone. In the background, a cacophony of voices. She has 14 YWAM roommates.

A week ago, Jonathan and Angela had driven her to Vancouver. Had watched, crestfallen, as the city stole her heart.

They'd passed coffee shops and outlet stores, broken-down people and pressed suits drinking Starbucks. Renee had rolled down her window, smelled the salty sea. Laughed. And then, they'd arrived. At the YWAM base on Commercial Drive.

Renee had unpacked in a flurry, kissed her parents goodbye, and wrapped her neck in a brightly coloured scarf. She'd run along the street with her new roommates, sipped fair-trade coffee at The Laughing Bean, and let the city soak in.

But then her heart began to beat hard. To ache for the pan-handlers and homeless. Every time she lifted her mug to her lips, she saw their faces. Their caps lying open on the ground. Their guitar cases, empty. And she choked for the pain of it all.

The first week of training takes place on the side of a mountain.

Crammed together in cozy quarters, they are Youth with a Mission. Teenagers from around the world, desiring to serve Jesus. Not knowing how to do it.

They talk about forgiveness and friendship in a cabin surrounded by trees and birds. About generosity and love. About understanding.

Then, when the week's over, they climb down the mountain. Live in houses with 15 bodies and one bathroom. Forget everything from the cabin. Beg for personal space.

Renee doesn't bother to raise voice or eyebrow. She shrugs her shoulders, finds moments to herself: While waiting for the bathroom. In the dark shadows of night. In the quiet hues of sunrise.

She's brought the most luggage—suitcases full of CDs, painting and craft supplies. The girls don't mind, because she shares. The suitcases spill over into all corners of the house.

The second week of training passes. Renee and two roommates dress as hippies. Hitch a ride to English Bay Beach. It's September, but the white sand is dotted with tanned surfers. They look like raisins in porridge.

"Look over there, girls! It's the perfect spot!" Carmen points to a rock jutting into rolls of sand. Carmen is from Germany. She has a short black bob, and is very ticklish.

They head towards the grey peninsula.

As they walk, they hear the swish of bicycle spokes on the Vancouver Seawall. Runners pound the pavement above them in tights and Nikes, and rollerblades glide along the edge. Everything overlooks English Bay. The water is like a bathtub, pin-pricked with hundreds of small boats. Occasionally, a horn blares from an impatient freighter.

It's one of those days where it feels like nothing could ever hurt you, Renee thinks. She's standing with Carmen and Aren, watching waves crash into rocks with blue fury.

"Don't you feel invincible?" she voices. "I mean, like nothing could ever hurt you? Sometimes, when I'm on the edge of the ocean, I feel that way."

"Why's that?" Aren asks. She's fragile as a leaf. Wisps of blond hair. Eyes of deep-set green.

"I guess because it's so wide and ...so capable of destruction. Yet it's not destroying. It's holding back, allowing us to live. It makes me feel ... safe. Invincible."

They find rocks to sit on. Large rocks with mossy bellies. Ants scurry across the granite surface, bearing crumbs from people's picnics. Renee watches them for a while.

"Just think, every day these little guys go out, get food, bring it home, just so everyone can eat. Then, they go out and do the whole thing, all over again."

"Seems pointless, doesn't it?" Carmen says. "But that's what we do too."

She arches her feet, lifts her arms, and forms a pirouette on top of the rock.

Renee laughs. Stands up and begins to twirl. Together they turn circles, then tumble into white pillows of sand.

Aren just shakes her head.

A seagull cries, haunting, lonely, from across the sea.

“Aren’t you afraid of dying?” asks Aren, sliding down into the sand. “I mean, I know you feel invincible. But when it really comes down to it, aren’t you afraid of death?”

“No.” Renee lets the powder-sand sift through her fingers. Again, its finiteness makes her feel strong. “I’m not afraid of dying. I know where I’m going. I mean, how can we be afraid if we believe?”

She looks up. “Scenery like this—large mountains, wide oceans—ultimately makes me feel invincible, because God made them. He’s the one stopping the ocean from exploding over the earth. So I’m not afraid, because I know he will take care of me.”

“What about tsunamis?” Aren asks.

A chill breeze catches them unaware. They shiver.

“Life is so hard.” Carmen sighs. “God wants to keep everyone from harm, wants to stop everyone from hurting, but by letting sin enter the world, he allowed his power to become limited. It’s actually a scary thought, and one of the biggest reasons we should be praying that good overcomes evil... God has put himself at the mercy of our prayers. If we don’t pray, he won’t be able to work.”

“It’s hard to believe such bad things happen.” Renee stands up, dips her feet in water. A swirl of silver fish appear then vanish. “I’ve been so lucky. I feel like I’ve already seen bits of heaven: snorkelling, sea

kayaking, dancing, sunrises... so if those are glimpses of what it’s going to be like, I can’t wait.”

“Me neither,” says Aren. “But I want to get married, have babies, and one day be a grandparent. I’ve always wanted that.”

“Me too.” Carmen grips Aren’s arm. “I’ve wanted to be a mother ever since I was little.”

Renee feels uncomfortable. Out of place. Squishes toes in sand. Wanders away from the talk of children and husbands.

She too wants a home, a place with white picket fences and welcome mats, but it’s far too soon. She’s only a child herself. There’s so much to do, and so little time... The world beckons.

“I want to see truth glorified through the arts,” Renee tells her YWAM directors. She stands tall, hands clasped, in front of staff and students, families and community.

Weeks have passed. They’ve gathered in a gym to celebrate each newcomer. Invited people to speak on why they’ve come.

“I never got how to live for God. I loved God and I believed in him but there were so many other things I was holding on to. It took God taking me away to Vancouver where I knew no one ... that’s what he needed to change my heart.” She swallows.

“One of the things that I’ve learned is from Galatians 2:2—‘I’ve been crucified with Christ, and it’s no longer I that live, but Christ in me.’ I’ve learned what it means to die to myself and to my own desires, and give all that up. That’s one of the things the Discipleship Training School does: it takes you out of your comfort zone and shows you what God really has for you.”

A haze of hands, clapping. She bows slightly, steps behind the black curtain.

Then it lifts.

Instrumental music. Renee, Carmen, Aren and a girl named Julie take their place on the stage as Earth, Fire, Water and Wind. It's a play Renee has written for today.

"Where there is death, he brings life," Earth states softly. "Where there's destruction he brings restoration. We are the clay. We will be used. God is doing a new thing. There is a birth, a revival. We must do our part. We will be the pioneers. Where there is nothing we will bring life. We will bring rebirth."

"The coal is ready to kiss our lips," says Fire. "Will we embrace it? Will we let ourselves be burned? Let it consume you..."

The music swells. Voices escalate.

"Water brings washing, cleansing, vision to the pioneers... the scorched land will become a pool. The water I give him will become a spring welling to eternal life."

Wind begins to shout: "The wind is alive, moving... it is the breath of life. Breathe on us God." The others join in: "Let the waves sweep over you, let the wind move you. Don't be stagnant, move forward into God's plan for you. The world around us is as dry bones... let us bring them new life!"

Then, the music stops. The girls bow their heads, and the black curtain drops.

Thunderous applause.

Chapter 14—Portraits of Poverty

November 2002

*Betrayal is a common theme of history
Fickle beings we float from breeze to breeze
Searching for warmer winds
Gentler climates
My heart is not as true as it could be
I would cut off my feet
To keep from walking away from you
Instead I get in the car and drive as far away as I can
Watching my back to see
If your heart's as bent towards betrayal as mine
Soft water laps the shores of my eyes
You are the only one not bent on leaving
Not carelessly hurting those who mean the most (r.d.)*

Renee sits on the sidewalk beside her new friend. She visits Matilda every Wednesday after YWAM training. Matilda makes her feel normal, somehow. As if everything is going to be alright.

Matilda calls this slab of concrete home. At night, when God pulls out his flashlight and peers across the country, he sees her, curled up on a mattress of newspapers, humming herself to sleep.

Matilda's hair is as yellow as her fingernails. Stringy strands, bunched on top of her head. A few straggle, listless cobwebs.

Her eyes are red-rimmed from last night, and from every night for the past 10 years. Her forehead is bruised from where he hit her—the man she calls John. The man she's trying to escape. On her face—a frequent smile, split open by stained teeth.

Matilda loves to sing. Even as she talks, she breaks off in the middle of a sentence and sings a line from a song she's made up.

“Apples and cinnamon spice the pastry, spice the pastry for you and me,” she croons one Wednesday afternoon. Renee doesn’t say much; just sits. Feels comfortable, just being there.

East Hastings is full of Matilda’s running from John’s. It’s a neighbourhood for society’s discards. A place for those who have nothing and no one. Together, the homeless form a family. A community of bleeding hearts.

At 10 in the morning, they line up for blocks in front of the bottle depot. Men and women in worn, torn clothing. Bearing bags of bottles and cans. It’s their daily income.

Afternoons are spent in parks littered with garbage and needles. Some are happy, just playing their penny whistles, talking to the birds. Others stretch out on yellow grass, trying to die quietly.

Occasionally, a fight erupts. A man tries to steal someone’s woman. Or a woman tries to steal someone’s cigarettes. Simple pleasures, sudden goldmines. One day Renee observes as someone’s shirt is ripped off his back. Watches the shirtless victim shove his middle finger high into the air: as if raising a flag. Then, he takes off after the culprit. Running, cursing.

She shakes her head. Leans against the wall of Won’s Mini Mart. Beside her, Matilda is singing the song about apple pie.

Renee feels calm. There, amidst riots, on a sidewalk with a woman who’s lost her mind, she is filled with peace. Above, the sky is a river; the birds, like pieces of floating driftwood.

Matilda closes her eyes while she sings, her lashes barely a suggestion on weather-worn cheeks. At one point, Matilda was pretty. Even beautiful. Her skin is brown, wrinkled, with a smattering of freckles. A faint, golden dusting across nose and cheeks. Her cheekbones are high, and when she smiles, it lifts her whole face, even her eyes. Her fingers, albeit yellow, are long and slender.

“I used to play the piano,” she says, opening her eyes and catching Renee looking at her hands. “I played for the queen and the prime minister.”

Renee nods, curling her feet beneath her and rubbing the back of her neck.

“They were meeting in Toronto; I was in the Philharmonic and they asked me to play during dinner.”

Renee’s eyes widen. “How long ago was that?”

“A few years. Probably 15 or 20. I’ve been here for 10.”

She begins humming—this time, a troubled tune. Twilight is streaking its hands across the horizon, but Renee wants to stay. Wants to learn more.

She’s known Matilda for three months. Met her serving soup at a local drop-in. While part of the YWAM practicum, for Renee, it was a highlight. A heartbreaking highlight. After serving soup, she’d visit with the kitchen’s portraits of poverty.

Matilda came in every day. And every day, she’d pull a silver spoon from her red coat pocket and sip her soup daintily. Then, after the final sip, she’d lick the spoon clean, slip it back into her pocket, and disappear.

One day, she gave Renee a daisy. No words were spoken. Renee stood stunned, trying to understand. Matilda just smiled, stained teeth. Tip-toed away. It was the beginning of a sidewalk friendship.

This was the first time Matilda had mentioned Toronto. Or the Philharmonic. Renee sits silent, not wanting to force the details. Waiting for Matilda to offer more. Then, as the sun slips like a watery egg yolk across the sky, she realizes: that is the extent of Matilda’s story. For tonight. Perhaps next time she’ll learn more. Perhaps not.

Either way, it is okay. Stories are treasured gifts; Renee knows she cannot demand them. They have to be earned.

Standing up, Renee reaches down. Takes Matilda's hand in hers. "See you soon," she says.

Matilda nods, suddenly very serious. Kisses Renee's hand. Pulls out her newspapers, puffs them up to make a pillow.

As Renee walks away, tears trace her cheeks. She wants to do more—wants to take Matilda home and give her a bed to lie on. Wants to take care of all the hurting people. Instead, she helplessly cries. Trails of compassion for people like Matilda to follow.

Every day, Jimmy sits on a bench on Hastings, dressed in a pin-stripe suit. He has unshaven cheeks and glasses which swallow up his face. Renee would have kept walking if he hadn't dropped the book he was reading—a well-loved copy of *Moby Dick*.

She stoops to pick it up; sees his name scribbled across the front in neat cursive. "Here you go, Jimmy," she says. Smiles.

He chuckles, a low rumbling sound. Rubs an arm across his glasses. Takes the book and kisses it. Dusts it off, apologizing to Ishmael for having dropped him so carelessly.

Renee had been heading to the drop-in. She pauses; decides to spend a few minutes with Jimmy.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" she asks, pointing to the space beside him.

He nods so fast she fears for his neck.

"Thank you," she says with a laugh. Takes a seat. Wonders what to talk about.

"Do you like 'Moby Dick'?" he asks, peering up from his glasses, forehead furrowed as if her answer weighed heavily on his mind.

"I do," she says. "I read it in grade 11 Eng..."

"I feel sorry for Moby, but even sorer for Ahab," says Jimmy, bobbing his head up and down. He clutches the book to his chest. "Ahab was killed by the same weapon he invented to murder Moby. His whole life was wasted on that one mission, and in the end, he got nothing. So sad."

Renee nods. Waits.

"I used to teach 'Moby Dick'," Jimmy says. "The students never got it though. Never got it. Never understood the true meaning behind the story. Do you get it?"

He stares at her through owlish glasses. She blinks.

"I think so," she says slowly. "Sometimes life blinds us—we get caught up in thinking something matters when, in the end, it's really only an illusion. It sidetracks us from what is truly important."

Jimmy's eyes water. His breath catches and he stares at her.

"Yes! That's exactly it." He sighs, as if relieved. Relaxes his grip.

"She got it," he says to himself. "Someone understands."

They go silent. A girl walks past chewing gum. A man, swinging a red yo-yo.

Jimmy smiles. It spreads across his face like butter in a frying pan.

Then he takes off his glasses, wipes them on his shirt. Picks up the book and hands it to her. "I want you to have this. I don't need it anymore."

He brushes himself off, stands up. "I've lived here for six months," he says, pointing to the bench. For the first time Renee notices how dirty his pin-stripe suit is, how cracked his frames. "Now I can finally go home."

He walks away whistling.

Renee watches him go, then fingers the dirty, worn pages. Proving the truth about *Moby Dick* had been Jimmy's obsession, his mission. When the kids hadn't understood, he'd gone crazy with the need to prove his point. Finally, she had comprehended, freeing him to leave. To return to everyday life. His mission had been fulfilled.

"Ironic," Renee whispers into the November air. Ironic that a teacher, intent on proving a point about a man who'd died for an illusion, had become so disillusioned about his point, he'd lost his job and been forced to live on a street corner.

She remembers the drop-in. Makes her way down the street, book in hand. She can smell soup a block away. Inside, vegetables are peeled, broth simmering, and the girls, laying out sandwiches.

Carmen gives Renee a side squeeze. "Hey, you."

Aren smiles, her eyes falling on *Moby Dick*. "What's that?"

"This guy I met gave it to me," Renee says. Her voice sounds far away. She's lost in thought. Nearly washes the book instead of her hands. Quickly slips it away into her backpack.

She chops carrots into stacks of orange blocks. Her thoughts stack together like the carrots. *What is my mission in life? Is it to do drama? To tell the good news through art? Will it make me go crazy if people don't listen, don't understand?*

"Do you ever wonder why we've been put on earth?" she speaks into the air. Breathes deep the chicken-broth steam. "I mean, what is our true mission? Is it to help people such as those we're serving today?"

Quietness. The soup burps. Sandwiches lie politely in egg-salad slumber.

"I don't know," says Carmen. In her hand, a half-eaten carrot. "I think so long as we commit our dreams to God he'll use our gifts to help those who need a hand up. I mean, some people are called to work in the inner city. But the rich need to be reached as well."

The door swings open; it's time to serve soup. They abandon their thoughts until later.

Later—when the world is asleep. When chamomile tea beckons. When feet slide up and afghans, down.

"I just want to know why I was put here, you know?" says Renee. "I don't want to waste time. When you think of it, there's so much we can do—if we make proper use of our lives."

"I understand. I do. But there's also a point where you need to trust God with the details. I mean, he tells us not to worry about tomorrow; today has enough troubles of its own. So just focus on making the most out of every day."

And just like that, Renee knows. It's simple. Her mission for tomorrow is to bake an apple pie for Matilda.

She smiles. Begins to sing quietly: "Apples and cinnamon spice the pastry, spice the pastry for you and me."

Chapter 15—Broken Buildings

November 2002

*A new building
A new build-ing
A new structure that isn't really a structure
But a collection of all the love, pain, tears, joy
That has come before
That is yet to come
Which we live in now
A collection of hearts and souls
A new direction
A new directing
A new order that isn't like any kind of order we've seen before
Because it's felt more than seen
Perceived more than understood
There is room in the earth for new life to grow
But the rock underneath it all says "I AM" (r.d.)*

Life had been relatively simple, up until now.

Renee steps outside into a yard of fading garden.

She breathes deep the late November air.

Sits down. Puts her head in her hands. Beneath her, yellow grass.

If the church is fake, what can I believe in?

It's the first time she's dared critique the church.

Church had always been unquestionable. Pure. The place where God lived.

But now that Margie is gone, Renee isn't so sure.

Every Sunday the pastor preaches on compassion and kindness. Fruits of the spirit. Other Biblical analogies. He stresses a tangible belief.

Then, Margie leaves. The woman who quietly attends each week suddenly stops coming.

Why?

Because the pastor doesn't notice, and the elders don't care.

Only Renee does. Renee, who sits beside Margie.

Renee had grown accustomed to Margie's lavender scent, her timid smile and her perpetually late entrances. Margie reminded Renee of a reed, swaying and slender. She'd come to love the woman who offered her mints during the sermon. The woman who sometimes, accidentally, crunched loudly in the middle of prayer.

She'd told Renee her story, one Sunday after church. One Sunday when the air felt brisk and the birds were chit-chattering. They'd gone to The Laughing Bean, sat down amongst students buzzed on caffeine and wireless.

"He wasn't supposed to die," she'd told Renee over a large mug of mocha. The chocolate stained her upper lip. "Jerry wasn't meant to die. He was only 35."

A heart attack had stolen her husband. He'd kissed her goodnight, rolled over, and that was that.

It had happened one year ago. Since then, she'd aged five.

Wrinkles lined the 32-year-old's eyes. Renee pictured her crying, alone, in an empty bed. Couldn't handle it. Pushed her chair close, put an arm around the broken woman.

“No one will talk with me about it,” Margie said, eyes downcast. A single teardrop. “People don’t know how to comfort someone who’s gone through such loss. It makes them feel uncomfortable.”

She’d begun to shake; Renee kept holding her. “I miss him so much.”

Outside, a black crow sat on an overflowing trash can. Renee stared into its beady eyes. Shaking its head, it lifted long lace wings and flew, flew away.

“Can I ask how you met him?” she asked gently, so as not to startle her.

Margie nodded. Blew her nose on an embroidered handkerchief. “Of course you can. I’m out of practice—I haven’t talked about him in so long. Will you still want to be my friend after this?”

“Of course.” Renee looked her in the eyes. “This is what friends are for—to be there through good times and bad.”

Margie laughed bitterly. “I guess you’re my only friend then.”

“Does no one in the church talk to you?”

“They used to. But then I think they got sick of me because I wasn’t very fun to be around. I’m always sad and tired.”

Silence. Then, “We met in a park. We were both walking our dogs, and he pretended to be a professional dog-walker and asked if he might walk mine sometime. I saw through it. He was wearing a business suit.” She laughed. “Our love exploded. Like fireworks.”

Suddenly she looked calm. The wrinkles seemed to fade. A light shone from her eyes. She wiped the chocolate from her lip, while inwardly, Renee wept.

Then, a couple of weeks later, Margie stopped coming to church. A card waited for Renee in her mailbox. Thanking her for listening. For being more “Jesus” to her than the church had ever been.

And again, Renee had wept. Shattered. For the broken-down building she’d assumed to be God’s holy house.

She stands to sing, sits to pray, pulls out her wallet to give. Feels her heart snap like a guitar string. Something isn’t right.

There’s more to faith than this. The preacher rises, begins his power point presentation. *What about the healings and controversy stirred up by Jesus and his disciples? What about the church in Acts, where no man was an island—where everyone shared his or her belongings?*

Renee looked around at the people with their legs crossed. Hands in laps. Wonders how many are screaming on the inside.

Her mind flashes back to October 31st. One month ago. She’d been baptized a second time. The air had been like ice, the ocean, tepid. “This is my pure act of love for you,” she’d called out in front of YWAM. “I would die for you.”

She’d felt him. He’d been there. *So where is he now?* She shivers. *No doubt in the streets with those daring to be real.*

Everyone is standing. It’s the benediction. She blushes, rises. She never knows what to do during this part of the service. Should she cup her hands upward? Bow her head in humility? Open her eyes and lift hands boldly? Or just remain still?

It’s over. Pews empty. Fake smiles slip on. People pause, make small talk about small matters. Try to disguise their desire for coffee and squares. Renee bursts from the sanctuary into the parking lot. Free. At last.

Chapter 16—Red Light District
December 2002

*Let them praise him with dancing
A sweet, wild, slow
Twirling, spinning, falling, catching
Gliding, dipping, bowing
Soaring like the wind
Shaking like the earth
Letting themselves go
Letting themselves be
A new song (r.d.)*

The bed in the budget hotel is like a wooden plank wrapped in a sheet.

Renee and the rest of her YWAM team bite their tongues. Stare out the windows into Singapore's red light district.

It's the mission part of their YWAM training. Three months spent overseas. Three months spent loving others.

The Lorongs in Geylang, Singapore run perpendicular to the main road. Odd and even numbers zigzag from one side to the other. The even numbers are attached to brothels with working girls and lady-boys propositioning passer by.

Asian art decorates local ancient buildings. Chinese restaurants line the sidewalks. A mosque rings out, five times a day, begging prayer. Wherever they are, the Muslims bow. Touch head to carpet, while Indian Sikhs pass by in their turbans.

On the streets, prostitutes. They look so young. Mere children. Some so shy they cling to their clothes—whatever clothes they have—while others brazenly call to onlookers.

Renee isn't used to seeing children this way. Vancouver had its share of working women, but never any so young. She gags. For the horror they

know. For the innocence lost in between bed sheets. For the crimson remains of childhood long-spent.

They stretch along Geylang Road, from Lorong 2 upwards to 30: women and children selling souls to feed bodies.

Yet, in spite of herself, Renee grows fond of this dilapidated corner of Singapore.

Long overdue for redevelopment, Geylang Serai (or Geylang Lemon Grass) reminds her of Vancouver. Downtown is filled with small shops, hundreds of street people, and the smell of the sea. The smell of fish and salt. A smell which stings her nostrils.

The children seem oblivious to the sea. To the magic of their home. For them, it's a hell-hole littered with pimps. For them, it's a place to watch their backs. Dreams mean nothing to those of wan cheek and street-corner status.

Renee begins to pick wild daisies. To give them to the girls standing outside the hotel. The girls are caught off-guard. A fragile daisy in a dark, smudged hand. Childish fingers touch the petals. White softness. Hints of a smile. The flower is a symbol of something bigger. They stick it in their pockets, to keep from getting crushed by man-hands grabbing, fondling.

She wishes she could do more. Renee wishes she could pick them all up and put them in a safe place. Wishes to give them food and drink and a reason to live.

Sometimes she sees them being children. Playing soccer, making sand castles along the coast, or chasing kittens down the alleyway. Geckos are a fast favourite, green bodies crawling along walls and beds in every home. The kids find in them friendship, playmates; set the geckos on their shoulders like guardian angels.

Street evangelism proves effective. After all, life unfolds on the streets. The YWAM team meets the people there: performing stories and

songs. Teaching them about God. Around them, both little and big stand scattered, unsure. Watching foreigners smile and dance.

Renee has purchased a long flowing skirt. She dances to a song about Jesus. Re-enacts his death and resurrection. The people's eyes are drawn to the aqua-marine swish and sway of the folds in her skirt. She lifts her hands. They watch as thin white palms press against the sky and wonder, *Who is she beseeching?* She closes her eyes and smiles.

After the song is over the children rush to touch her skirt. She gives them candy, stickers and toys. Tousles their hair. Kisses their foreheads.

It is the first of three stops. The trip is a mystery: no one knows where they are going. A spontaneous decision prayed over by leaders. Everyone, a nomad for Christ.

Then, for a few days—Singapore's Sentosa Island, where clocks unwind. It's a paradise among the poor. Renee lies on the beach getting sand in her hair. Cries on her orange towel for all the pain in the world.

Angela had written. They'd found Darren. Were sending him to rehab after Christmas. Renee cries, thinking of him—of the boy she used to know. Prays *God, please have mercy. Please help him.*

Then she stares at the water. Flat, unmoving, like a blue tarp stretched across land. The future looms large. *What will I do? What should I do, after this? Stay with YWAM? Go to school?* YWAM had asked her to take over the drama department. The honour warmed her, but it also made her wonder. *Another stepping stone towards—what? What is my purpose?*

Someone slips a coconut into her hand. She opens her eyes, sees a straw. Smiles. Takes a drink. Thin sweet milk slides down.

Later on she wiggles her toes in the water with Carmen and Aren; the boys play soccer in the sand.

Then, leaning back against a palm tree she thinks about Geylang and its poverty. Remembers the Bible story of the prostitute anointing Jesus' feet with oil, slippery and expensive. Pictures her: a young girl from Singapore, approaching Jesus in a fancy restaurant, her fingernails dirty, broken. Her face, smudged with tears and dirt. She looks strange amongst the sparkle and colour of the restaurant. Out-of-place.

Tip-toes over to Jesus, eyes downcast. Kneels down with her jar of oil, drips it onto his feet, onto the carpet.

Across the table, Judas sneers. Watches the money fall onto Jesus' blistered feet. Puddle onto the floor. Then Jesus lifts a calloused hand to the girl's young face. She shivers, fears a slap. Slowly looks up into tearful eyes. Jesus is crying. Loving her with his eyes. He pats the seat next to him, inviting her to stay, to eat.

The beach has been invaded by shadows. Renee finds herself teary. Wishing for the same kind of grace to be shown this part of Singapore.

In the distance, dark figures kick a ball on the sand. Above, the sun sinks into a bowl full of marshmallow clouds.

Christmas.

Stockings hang like fat sausages from the mantle in the hotel lobby. White lights twinkle, strung on a small leafy plant. Chocolates and candy canes, everywhere. Someone has made a banner which drapes the entrance. Outside, early morning sky is the colour of eggnog. The hotel manager stands behind his desk watching, smiling, as the team trips downstairs one by one in pyjamas and slippers.

They'd been told there'd be a surprise to wake up to. A surprise in the lobby.

Renee wakes while the world sleeps. Tip-toes downstairs, halts at the shiny Christmas scene. It is better than home, for all the effort.

Then she curls up with an afghan. Unwraps chocolates from their silver blankets. Sets three on her tongue.

“Twinkle lights make everything better,” she tells Aren, who’s half-asleep in a chair. A boy named Joey begins strumming his guitar, singing carols. Slowly, more and more drift downstairs. Fill in the seats and empty spaces. “All we’re missing now is snow,” someone states.

“I don’t miss it,” says Renee.

Then the boys strike up a rendition of “Feliz Navidad.” A choir of scruffy-hair males in wrinkled pyjamas.

Renee laughs with the rest of them. Wonders, *Where is Darren? At home, by the fat Christmas tree? Listening to Mom put the turkey in the oven? Or is he on the streets, alone and cold, searching for a star to guide him somewhere warm?*

Her eyes sting. She stares at the twinkle lights. Begs them to shine bright, so Darren and tired street children might see them, and hope.

Figures emerge from the dark hallway: their leaders, wrapped in housecoats. They rub their eyes and yawn. Everyone hugs them, a pile of bodies. Then they sing, “We Wish You a Merry Christmas”.

“Who wants to open presents?” asks Renata, team leader. Renee feels five years old again as she joins in the excited commotion.

She grips her stocking tight, watches everyone empty theirs in a flurry of paper. Wants to savour. Finally, when everyone is done she opens hers carefully. One item at a time. Deodorant and oranges, toothbrushes and candy spill onto her lap. She smiles. Folds the wrapping paper. Later, she will re-wrap them, give them to the children.

It’s a simple Christmas, but it’s enough.

It’s all anyone needs, she thinks. Just a little reminder that we’re not alone in the world.

Not alone. She wishes to remind Jessie. The girl with the butterfly tattoo.

She’d met her four days ago at HighPoint, Singapore’s largest rehabilitation centre, located on Lorong 23. It was run by Don Wong—a big man, founder and former underground gang leader. He’d introduced them to the recovering addicts in a deep voice.

There were 60 of them. Broken, humbled addicts hoping to be healed. Together they’d received acclaim for their hard work and community service. It was Wong’s opinion that one’s troubles seem less when helping others’. Each week the residents reached out with trembling, bruised ligaments to serve the destitute and disadvantaged

One girl had a butterfly tattoo on her thin brown ankle.

“I love butterflies,” Renee had said softly as she passed.

The girl looked up. Her eyes were emerald stones. She stopped. Frowned.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Renee. And you?”

“Jessie. Why are you here?” Her tone wasn’t unfriendly, just curious.

Why am I here? “Well, to meet you. And to let you know that I think what you’re doing is really good.” Renee grimaced. Hoped to sound sincere.

Jessie nodded. Brown skin pulled upwards. Her smile was lopsided, uncommitted.

“Come with me.” Jessie put a hand on Renee, guided her towards a room down the hall. Colourful stacks were piled on a neatly made bed. As Renee got closer, the stacks become CDs and books.

“Sit,” she said, pointing to the bed. Renee did, commenting on the brightly patterned quilt. It reminded her of home.

“My grandma made that one for me,” said Jessie. “When Mom died.”

She put a CD on. Classic rock. Renee’s feet started tap tapping against the floor. Jessie watched, smiled. “You like? It’s a Singaporean group—The Quests. They’re old. This song is Mr. Rainbow.”

“I like it. Rainbows are one of my favourite things,” said Renee. She began to hum, then stood up and swayed. Jessie laughed, clapped her hands. Began to dance awkwardly. Soon their hair was flying, heads banging to the rhythm. Outside the window, a flock of birds became startled. Flashed their wings. Flew away, white smudge of feathers.

Someone unplugs the twinkle lights. The room is now empty. Renee feels sad. She’s left sitting there alone in her chair covered in blankets and presents. The orange smells like summertime. She’ll give it to Jessie.

Chapter 17—Streets of Thailand
January 2003

*What should I be to you
Who are the sunlight on the water, the waves, the sand
You who are the water
What should I feel when all I can feel is your skin, your hair, your eyes
When you are my skin
Who should I be
(to you my dance, my rhythm, my song of praise you are my music)
What should I see when you are in faces, in cities, in strangers
When you are my eyes
When I see your eyes in every leaf, every flower, every raindrop
What should I hold when you are the bread and wine
The Incarnate in a simple glass, a word, a meal
You are a delightful feast (r.d.)*

Their faces are shiny brown coffee beans, all lined up in a row. They smile and clap. Some whistle, too young to care.

Renee and Aren bob their heads as they sing. Aren’s fingers fly on the piano; Renee’s, on her guitar. They’re making music for the people of Pataya, Thailand.

They’d arrived in Bangkok three days earlier. Then, they’d traveled 165 kilometres southeast to Pataya, one of the world’s most popular beach resorts, in the province of Chon Buri.

There, they minister, amidst sand and sea, elephant rides, cheap massages and pineapple drinks.

Pataya means ‘southwest monsoon wind.’ Bikini-clad bodies are brown dots on a white-sand beach. Pubs line the walkway like buttons on a sweater, each professing cheaper martinis than the next. Men dress as women, smile lipstick smiles and offer to take your order. On the beach, fire shows light up the night sky.

Every morning Renee dives deep into clear blue waters. Feels the sun on her back as she emerges. Wants to pick up the scene and put it in her pocket. Take it home with her.

One day, she and Carmen snorkel. Breathe bubbles, flail arms, until colours appear. Hundreds of colours mixing and moving; as they calm down and the bubbles subside, the colours become fish. Bright pink, red and green fish swimming this way and that. An underwater community.

She sees God in the fish. In the water, the beach, the transvestites. The women standing on her back, cracking it, for three dollars an hour.

Wants to talk to them. Wants to speak their language. Hates the superficial divide. The simple smiles, waves, nods.

Hours before they return to Bangkok, she walks with Carmen on the beach. Bare feet leaving footprints. Speaks of her frustration.

“If we were here longer, we could learn,” Carmen says. Her skin is brown and freckled. “But sometimes I think language is overrated. I mean, so much damage has been done through speech. Perhaps it’s good for us to be forced to communicate love through our body language.”

They reach the end of the beach. Rocks lie piled, mossy, forgotten in pools of water. Renee walks out to them. Mud squishes. Stands on top and surveys the beach. Carmen watches from dry sand.

“Let’s get them flowers,” says Renee, lifting her arms. The air kisses her armpits.

“Who?”

“The women who clean our rooms. And the missionaries who own the café where we sang. And the ladies who gave us massages.”

Carmen laughs. “That’s a lot of flowers.”

“I know.” Renee jumps with a splash. “But that’s good. We’ll make a lot of people happy.”

Back at the cabin they dress in sarongs. Walk along the dusty road to the market. They’d been urged to rest; tomorrow was a long day of travel. Renee couldn’t rest, thinking of the people she’d never see again.

A swirl of exhaust makes them choke. The motorcycle is weighed down by a family of five. All without helmets. The mother grips babies and children, her knees holding on to her husband. One of the kids turns her head; stares at the foreign girls walking. Her eyes are big in a thin face.

Beside the road, palm trees drop coconuts with a thud. Kids in ratty shirts and flimsy shorts play with old tires and pieces of garbage. Mothers scrub laundry in buckets of dirty water with yellow suds. Hang it on precarious wires from patched-together homes. Everyone looks hungry and tired.

“Did you know the Thai often cook flowers?” Renee says, scuffing her feet into the red soil. “Fried, boiled, baked, steamed, stewed, grilled, battered, pickled and eaten raw—they eat what we stick in a vase.”

Carmen chews her lip. “Do you think the poor appreciate beauty?”

“Oh sure.” Renee nods, frowning a little. “They’re not blind. It’s just a luxury they cannot afford to enjoy, because time is money. And beauty is often costly. But I think the poor appreciate beauty even more than we do—we take it for granted.”

“Look.” Carmen points towards an elephant being sprayed with a hose. Water splish-splashes against rough grey skin. A little girl in an oversized red shirt feeds him a banana.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Renee says. “We look at elephants and think, ‘Now I can tell my friends I’ve ridden an elephant.’ The poor see it as a way of making money so they can eat.”

They pass a man scrubbing down the elephant's belly. Raise their hands in greeting. He's wearing a straw hat; lifts it, eyes crinkling.

"Sawatee Khrab," they say in unison.

"Sawatdee Kaa," he returns, looking surprised.

The little girl runs up, red shirt billowing. She waves. Renee and Carmen blow kisses. She smiles, shy; twists the ends of the shirt in her hands. Turns, hides behind the trunk of the elephant.

Renee curls up into a ball on the sidewalk. Closes her eyes.

Tries to ignore the hardness of cement. The stench of trash by her nose. Pretends she's lying on a soft mattress. Above she hears their voices—her leaders, discussing where to go next. Rush of traffic, screech of tires. One of Bangkok's busiest streets. Down the road, the river acts as a source of travel. River taxis trail up and down.

She knows her friends are staring at her, wondering.

She's been so tired lately. Today, her head is spinning. It's only afternoon, but she's lying down. Otherwise she would have fallen.

She laughs it off. Hates when Carmen raises her eyebrows. Blames it on the heat. Is secretly worried.

Coming now, the soft whir-whir of the tuk-tuk—a bicycle taxi pedalled by a slim Thai man in shorts. Renee looks up: a girl and boy sit in the red carriage. The driver's skin is popping with sweat-beads. The ride will cost 25 cents: highway robbery.

Her mouth is dry. It's been a while since breakfast. They'd ordered it from across the street. It had arrived in a banana leaf, folded into careful compartments. Each space held rice, meat and sauce, separately. The

sauce was spicy and sweet. Renee had tipped the leaf upside down to drain the sauce onto her tongue.

She craves a 12-cent fruit shake from a street vendor. Fresh strawberries, a scoop of yogurt, ice cubes, and the shiny metal mixer which slams it all together. Squishing fruit with yogurt, crushing ice. Then, it's slopped into a plastic bag with a straw. All for 12 cents.

Smooth pink fruit... a dribble of saliva falls from her mouth. She wipes her mouth, looks up, hoping no one has seen. People seemed to be leaving. Aren is there, holding out her hand. They begin to walk.

Bangkok is like the inside of a leather shoe; from the outside, it looks polished, beautiful, with its river, palm trees, mosques and temples. But inside, it's harsh, uncomfortable—littered with grime, trash, its ditches like garbage cans. Children with bare bellies and little shorts. Men with caved-in chests and haunted eyes. Poverty scratching scrawny fingers across the city. Leaving painful sores. A longing for something more.

Houses concave inwards, held up by other houses stacked against them. Colour is absent. The city smells like an old man with cigar breath. Yet Renee finds her heart pounding amidst the ugliness. Finds herself loving the monks with their cell phones and the elderly women playing their drums; hungering after Pad Thai and roasted bananas dipped in chocolate.

So, while others whine of cold showers and cement beds, squat toilets and cockroaches, she plays ball with the children in the streets, and rides the river taxi downtown. Lives life on the streets of Bangkok.

Simone has a wide black face. She's from Zambia, and likes to tag after Renee.

One day they wander, looking for people to talk to. Come across a clothing store crammed tight with material. Colour upon colour,

stacked high, leaving no space to breathe save for the desk where she sits—a little lady with a silk hijab. She smiles at them.

“Sawatdee Kaa,” she says. Rises to her full height of four feet.

“Sawatdee Kaa,” they respond, bowing slightly, hands pressed together.

“Where you from?” she asks in broken English.

“I’m from Canada. She’s from Africa.” Renee motions to Simone. Watches the woman’s face flicker like a candle.

“Sit, sit,” she urges, pointing to a narrow bench covered in piles of paper. Shoves the piles to the floor. “Please, sit!”

So they do. Feel like royalty, with her eyes staring, unflinching. Her big smile.

“Your noses—very beautiful,” she says. Rising, she disappears through the mounds of material. Reappears in a few minutes bearing a tray with tiny cups of coffee.

They sit and sip in that shop full of clothes. She tells them her name is Layla. She’s from Malaysia. She’d followed her husband here.

“West is very good; very free,” she says.

“Sometimes too free,” Renee ventures. “Sometimes we do bad things too.”

Layla shakes her head. “I see only good. I want to go America. Where everyone has beautiful noses. And freedom.”

Inside, Renee hurts.

“I hope you don’t mind me saying—you can have freedom here,” she says. Her voice is gentle. She sets down her cup. “If you know Jesus you can be free. I don’t know that a country can bring you that.”

“Oh.” Layla looks at her hands. “I am Muslim you see.”

“That’s okay,” says Simone. “Muslims can know Jesus too.”

“Yes, yes please. I want this freedom.” She blows her nose on a scrunched up tissue. “My husband no like Jesus. But I want to.”

They talk more, about the Bible. About Jesus dying. About him ascending. Then they pray, cushioned by clothes. Hands clutched, prayers rise above buttons and threads. Lifted into heaven.

“Thank you,” she says.

They promise to return with a Bible.

Begin to walk away; glance back. Layla is waving.

Chapter 18—The Killing Fields

*Never again! We say in our righteous zeal
We know that if in our day
The lines were so clearly drawn
We would stand in the right
Forgetting that in our veins
Flows blood that murdered prophets
How can we be so sure that we have changed? (r.d.)*

Nothing prepares her for the butterflies.

They arrive in Cambodia by bus. The scenery kidnaps Renee's breath. Even as the wheels bump harshly along narrow roads, she can't stop staring. Rice fields stretch like wool sweaters draped across drying racks. Small brown men clamour up 12-foot palm trees to collect coconuts. Boys on bicycles tote the fruit, 20 at a time, while men on motorcycles pull pigs, pale and dead, along the scratchy road.

Cows block side-roads. Mooing and stomping, making billows of red earth dust. Policemen lie in hammocks strung up at random intersections. Little boys stand in wide rivers stabbing fish for supper. Women in round hats bob across rice fields, fingers gnarled and brown. Mouthing toothless smiles at the bus wobbling by.

Thatched roof houses appear lined with red earthenware jugs. One house has 50 jars and pots fading dry in the sun. A wrinkled woman beats at them with a wooden hammer. Gives them shape. Later on she'll sell them.

Other women bend in gardens on soiled knees. Wicker baskets sit plump, stuffed with onions, vegetables. Hammocks hang heavy bearing breads and cereals. Everywhere, shades of green: bright fields, leafy trees, shaggy ferns, shy ponds and raging rivers.

For lunch they stop in a fishing village. Tiny tanned shirtless children sit, feet in the river. Watching their parents hauling hundreds of fish. Ten slender wooden boats float in the water.

A little girl with a belly sticking out of pink shorts grabs Renee's hand. Takes her to the water's edge where a fish sits, full of spikes. She points at the fish. Renee looks around. A woman with tired eyes smiles, motions toward the fish.

Renee picks it up only to nearly drop it. It blows up like a balloon. A spiky balloon. The girl giggles. The woman laughs. Renee shakes her head. She's heard of these—blow fish. It feels like taut rubber. Its beady eyes warn her to set it down, so she does.

The little girl won't let go of her shirt. Her eyes plead dark and beautiful. Renee begins to braid her hair by the water. The other children crowd around, skin gleaming. Some play with sticks and rocks. Others catch fish with their bare hands.

Renee's mind flits back to Winnipeg's suburban houses: Plastic toys strewn like forgotten pieces of laundry on clipped lawns. The sounds of television and x-box filtering through windows.

Here, not a single child can be found inside. They run, sun kissed and smiling, through nature's playground.

A young woman passes by on the road, arms weighted down by bamboo tubes of sugar and alcohol. A man follows on his bike, a little girl in his arms. On his bare back, dark marks like lipstick kisses—signs of the suction cup, an ancestral form of healing.

Then, they're back in the bus. Stomachs full of fish and rice. A truck steams by. White feathered poultry flap frantically in the back, caged for eating. Renee is conflicted. Wishes to free them. Knows vegetarianism is an extravagance only the western world can afford.

The roads are dusty and long, winding in and out among rice fields and lakes. Birds flutter and flock. Collapsed bridges and potholes make the

trip longer. The team says nothing. Simply stares out the windows at houses made of tin and sticks. Such poverty humbles. Quiets. Seems out of place in this land of rich scenery.

Late at night they arrive in Siem Reap City.

The next few days fly by on a motorcycle through Angkor Wat, red-clay ruins of the Khmer civilization. Thousands of feet of crumbling wall covered with intricate carvings of Hindu mythology.

Renee can picture the ancient children, running. Barefoot among the stone houses. Laughing, playing. Drawing on walls. Mothers nursing babies, kissing husbands on the cheek. Men, stringing bows, heading off to hunt. Everywhere, curls of smoke from cooking fires.

But then she watches a documentary about the Khmer Reign. The rosy pictures vanish, replaced by the sound of mothers weeping. Husbands are forced to look away while the country is ravished by a tyrant. Now, all Renee can hear are the ruins crying out in blood-curdling screams. A graveyard of buried truths. She can no longer smile for the horror of it all.

The Killing Fields—a memorial site for one of humanity's greatest, unacknowledged atrocities.

At least 200,000 men, women and children were killed by the Khmer Rouge during his authoritarian reign from 1975 to 1979. If anyone dared communicate with the outside world or with the former government, he would receive a warning for pre-revolutionary crimes. A second warning consisted of the Khmer wiping the slate clean with the offender's bloody brow. Tortured and confused, the victims, some of whom were mere children, were then forced to dig their own graves. The graves, mere lumps, for the victims were too weak to dig very long.

They were executed using sharpened bamboo sticks or shovels in order to spare ammunition. Executors more often than not consisted of children or teenagers from local peasant families. Today the victims lie, row upon row of buried innocence, in Choeung Ek.

Renee and her team visit a museum about Khmer Rouge. Then, they go to the graves. Figure it's the least they can do.

The weather begs to be enjoyed. Winds are sweet and warm, the sky, a creamy blue. Green palm trees wave the busload into the Choeung Ek grounds covered in tall grass and flowers. It's hard to feel sad, for all of the beauty.

But then Renee steps from the bus. Hears the earth weeping. Feels the sticky blood of children clinging to her arms, her legs, her feet, begging for justice, begging to be redeemed.

A commemorative 'stupa' stands tall at the front gate, filled with the skulls of victims. The team is sober, observing the cold structure. Skulls of those who once ran and skipped and jumped, who loved and lived and laughed, crammed carelessly into a container as if they could be forgotten.

Never, Renee promises herself. *I will never let myself forget.*

The gate clangs shut, and the sun dips behind a cloud. Everything loses its shine, and Renee shivers. Wrapping her arms around herself she dares her feet to walk, to bear tribute to the lives so unfairly ended. Up ahead, a tree, tall, oblivious to the torture it's born witness to. Around its trunk, bits of rope cling, repentant. Scattered on the ground, pieces of clothing. Children were beaten on this tree; little ones, who knew no better, closed their eyes and felt the heavy weight of evil lash into their back and sides. Next to the tree, a mass grave where hundreds of mothers lay with their children. Too weak to dig very far, the earth was piled hastily on top. Little hollows in the ground. Lumpy grass.

The wind whispers. Grass swishes. Purple and white orchids and red and yellow heliconia move gracefully in the breeze. A delicate reminder of grace amidst horror. Yet Renee feels the earth bleed, and her back begins to ache with the heaviness of it all. Until she sees them.

The butterflies. Hundreds of them, coating the graveyard like a colourful blanket. They hover and dance over the Killing Fields, landing on flowers and grass and weaving amongst the children's graves.

Renee's knees buckle and she falls to the ground, head to dirt. Soil runs through her fingers, and tears trace her cheeks.

"It's so sad and horrifying and sobering," she prays, "yet there are butterflies—so many of them. This land holds promise. These beautiful butterflies which you have made symbolize rebirth and new hope. You will bring justice to these people; you will redeem this land and turn Cambodia's mourning into dancing, won't you God? You'll heal this broken land. You're already doing it!"

A butterfly with orange-tipped wings lands on her hand. She doesn't move, just stares at its intricate wings. Black and orange webbing. Tiny antennae. Then, a voice from above: "Hey there, Ren."

She peers up through strands of hair. It's Joey. He seems startled by her tears. She wipes hastily at her cheeks. The butterfly flutters away.

"You okay?" he asks, crouching down. She unfolds herself, sits upright.

Stares out across the meadow of mass graves. "Who could do something so disturbing, so terrible? I mean, remember the museum? The pictures of the mothers and their children? They looked so terrified. How can anyone stare such putrid fear in the face, and kill? No one should have to go through that, especially when they're so young. It's the children that bother me the most."

Joey nods. "Man, I know, I can't believe it. This place gives me the shivers."

"What really gets me is, they forced girls and boys to do the killing— young bodies too startled, too shocked to know any different; beautiful tender souls hardened by people's screams. It's so evil."

"Woah—it's really getting to you, hey?" Joey smiles, green eyes bright. Puts his arms around her, pulls her close. Joey reminds her of Darren. The day suddenly feels warmer.

"I know, I wasn't prepared for this anger," she says. "But to torture babies, you have to be a monster. This kind of stuff shouldn't happen."

"Unfortunately it happens all the time. Look at Bosnia, Darfur, Rwanda, Iraq... the world is full of evil. They disguise it, say they've got good intentions, but in the end, murder is wrong. Bottom line."

"I know." Renee shakes her head. "Death seems like such a foreign concept—I can't even fathom it. Earth is all we can possibly know until all of a sudden—poof! It's gone."

"Whamo! Just like that."

They sit, watch the butterflies weave in and out like seamstresses sewing a quilt of flowers. Wings glint. The quilt is a picture of hope. The stitches, mending what has been torn. Broken.

The sun droops and they wander back towards the bus. Notice a little Cambodian craft store sitting outside the graveyard. Alone. The name of the store is 'Songkem' or 'Hope'.

Inside, the owners embrace them.

They're Christians. Bringing light to a land of darkness.

Chapter 19—Heaven

The boat arrives in a wash of silver spray.

Hundreds of children stand on shore. Waving at the boat. A sleek, wooden schooner with wide, white sails. Gliding silent on the water.

They dance in the ocean rain. Jesus gives the word, a trumpet blows and a line forms. Children stretch from boat to beach to grassy hill and beyond. Their cheers sound like a low fog horn. Rise to an ecstatic pitch as the boat docks, and thousands pile off in wobbly-legged wonder.

The children laugh and bow, slight nods, as the newcomers pass. There is no luggage, only people. One after the other—brown, yellow, white, black and red—descending from the small boat like items from Mary Poppin’s bag. They walk with wide eyes. Cross the pebble beach, up the hill, past the line of smiling cheers.

It takes a while for all to descend but the cheering never fades.

On top of the hill stands Jesus. Tall on the grassy knoll, arms flung open. The newcomers see him, tremble. Stop. He smiles, runs to greet them. One by one he kisses their foreheads. They’re touching his face, his hands, to see if he’s real. He doesn’t mind.

Their skin is like fresh paper. Newborn children. Absorbing.

Behind Jesus is the cedar lodge, long and wide. Its wood planks glisten. Open windows send wafts of homemade bread and cookies. The new children stand and stare. Above them, rainbow sky. Around the lodge, gardens bursting with hyacinth, sunflowers, hollyhocks, roses and zinnias.

Angels whisk them away, to sign their names in the Book of Life. To eat from platters piled high with cookies, melting chocolate chips.

This happens every time the trumpet calls. All of heaven celebrates, stretching far across the plains to greet and meet the new arrivals. To scan the crowd for names, familiar. For family. Loved ones. Passed on from the world. Victims of old age, sickness, or disease, arriving in baby-skin.

“Welcome home,” Jesus whispers into each one’s ear. They look into his eyes; see their lives, leading up to this moment. See the love which brought them here.

“You knew, all along,” they say, and he nods.

“I never wanted you to go through such pain,” he says. “But now, you are here. My grace was sufficient for you. Well done, good and faithful servant.”

And in a moment, the pain of yesterday disappears, much like a mother glimpsing her baby after labour. The past is forgotten in the beauty of the present.

I stand and cheer, one of the many lined up from shore to hill. Clap my hands, cry, “No more weeping on the shores of Babylon... You’ve arrived in Paradise!”

I remember well the day I arrived. Remember when the boat slowed pace in the aqua sea, and sandy fingers of beach emerged. Like a hand rising out of a bathtub.

It had looked like New Zealand with its mossy cliffs and white-sand beaches. No angels sat on clouds strumming harps. Instead, ordinary men and women stood guard, awaiting orders. Their boss—the man on the hill. A man who looked as ordinary as any. A man who was God.

Something had settled inside of me: like pebbles in water. I’d breathed deep. Let myself believe. *Heaven is real, tangible. Beautiful.* Like earth, without the suffering.

“Nothing can hurt me now,” I’d said, stepping off the boat into soft sand.

The cheers had made my heart skip a beat. The voices, hugged me. I’d looked into their eyes, the eyes of heaven’s children. Had known this place was good. This place was home.

Running up the hill I’d stumbled at Jesus’ feet. He’d picked me up, held me close. I’d felt his heart jump into my body, felt it beat so loud it drowned out the cheers. Somehow, he had enough heart for everyone. Like the loaves and fishes. And all of a sudden I was filled with joy. The love was overpowering. Love for everyone and everything. Love that had to keep on giving.

Life was—is—now. In this love, in this moment, in heaven. There was no need to plan, no need to scheme. No need to protect myself, for nothing bad could happen. Slowly my inner clock began to disable itself until it was a mess of wires and plastic. I crumbled into peace.

And now, the cheering is done. The final person has crossed the pebble beach. Soon, another boatload will come, but for now, no one. I pick up my skirt and run to Pale Face where I sit, peer down at earth.

I’ve returned from outreach to Asia, and am wandering Winnipeg aimlessly. Wondering what to do with my life.

Jesus is suddenly sitting beside me. I turn to him and ask, like a child to her father, “How will I know what I’m meant to do?”

“Ahh, the question which boggles western civilization, keeping it from ever living,” Jesus responds with a smile. He pulls me close. I lean, head on chest. Feel young, protected.

“You mean, you don’t care what humans do?” My face scrunches.

“No, I care very much. I care about hearts. God has desires for each of his children; yet he also knows who they’ll ultimately become. Sometimes, he has to sit back and watch. But when asked to be involved, we always are.”

“How, though? How will I know my purpose, on earth?”

“With everyone, it’s different,” Jesus says. “Westerners have developed this notion that everyone has a unique ‘calling’, and that call is normally tied in with success, money, and fame. For Christians, it can become a way of validating their relationship with God, of measuring how spiritual they are by what kinds of ‘signs’ they receive or what career path they choose.”

He picks a daffodil from the ground.

“You see this flower? The father and I care about it too. We give it nutrients and water to grow, and flourish where it’s been planted. But it doesn’t need confirmation that it’s a flower... it knows what it is, and is safe to grow in that knowledge.”

I sit very still, trying to absorb. Jesus lifts the flower to his nose, kisses its petals, and replants it. His tears water the ground, and in a moment, multiple daffodils spring up. Fill the air with yellow shimmer.

“I cry because my heart hurts when I see people wasting their life trying to figure out who they are, or what they’re meant to do,” he says quietly. “We, the father and I, have planted gifts inside each one of you. Those gifts are there to guide you home.”

Chapter 20—God’s Heartbeat
April 2003

*I hear voices in my head and in my heart,
Some telling me to wait, some say to start;
I’m supposed to know Your voice,
Why can’t I tell which one You are?
I’m looking for the manger, but I can’t find the star.
Let me walk on water,
Let me come to where you are;
Let me walk on water straight to You;
I can’t go any further until I know the voice I hear is true,
So let me walk on water if it’s You. (r.d.)*

Renee peels off her socks. Her feet are raw from walking. Raw from circling the suburbs, trying to figure a way out. Trying to decide what to do with her life.

She sits on a bench massaging her toes. Beside her, the river. Man-made, confined to its banks. Gurgling like a baby.

Her heart hurts, looking at the stone houses rising callous from the ground.

They leer at her. She shudders. Longs for Asia with its poverty and warmth. With its garbage-strewn streets and bare-bellied children.

Here, there are no children. Only empty yards. She knows, having walked this route every day for the past two months. Ever since flying home. Not once has she seen a child playing outdoors.

Behind her is her parent’s home. Equally large and foreboding. Equally polished and decorated with a deck, swimming pool and unused fire pit.

Everyone has an unused fire pit, empty and cold, the wood soggy and green with mildew.

She finds herself despising the cemented suburbs. Yet, in the same breath, she weeps for them. Feels for the wealthy who will never know the riches of poverty.

Then, it hits her: *I am one of them.* For the moment, she lives there. Sleeps in a bedroom with a four-poster bed and closet stuffed with clothes. Borrows money from a father whose wallet is stuffed full with green. Sits in rooms filled with televisions and computers and exercise equipment. Pets a cat whose coat of fur shines. Whose bell shakes prettily. Whose mouth devours food stocked with more nutrients than most children see in a day.

“I don’t want this,” she whispers to the river. It seems to perk up its ears, to listen. “I want to live with nothing. To be like Mueller.”

She’d learned of George Mueller through YWAM. He’d founded the Ashley Downs Orphanage with only two shillings in his pocket. Never once had he asked for money. Instead, for 60 years, he’d prayed. In return, over 7,500,000 dollars was granted him to pay for the staffing and funding of the home.

“In the greatest difficulties, in the heaviest trials, in the deepest poverty and necessities, he has never failed me,” Renee recites. Recalling Mueller’s words about Christ. “But because I was enabled by his grace to trust him, he has always appeared for my help. I delight in speaking well of his name.”

The wind picks up, scuttling clouds across the sky. They part, making room for the moon. It’s a bowl of blue-grey milk. The old hymn, ‘Trust and Obey,’ begins to run through her mind, a rambling train. She sings softly while pulling on her socks. The moon spills milk across the sky.

“Trust and obey, for there’s no other way, to be happy in Jesus, than to trust and obey...”

The midnight air is soft as a cushion. Renee tilts her head, then leans, until she’s horizontal on the bench and snoring delicately. River-water rushes past, and frogs croak. Nature’s lullaby.

A few minutes later, the water has stilled but the frogs are still croaking and splashing. She flings open her eyes, sees a pale, grey lake fringed with flowers—red tulips, graceful calla lilies and daffodils. Bunched together like heads, conspiring.

She turns around. Finds herself surrounded by flowers of all kinds. Blanketing the ground in colour.

It steals her breath, and then releases it, all of a sudden. She sobs for the beauty of it all.

She hears a dove cooing. It's walking on tender foot towards her, wiggling its plump body like a proud lady.

“Where am I?” she wonders aloud.

“You're in heaven,” the dove replies. Turns, wiggles its plump rear and wanders off.

A talking dove.

She shakes her head.

“Heaven.” Repeats the word. As if to make herself believe.

She crawls to the edge of the lake like a toddler. Looking down, she sees her face, only she's years younger.

Renee touches her cheeks as if she's never felt skin before. Climbs to her feet; feels short. And then, in a moment, a man is standing beside her with kind eyes. Talking to her as if he knows her.

Saying, “Won't you come and dance?”

“Dance?” she asks. “We can dance in heaven?”

“What kind of place would it be if there was no dancing?” The man laughs, pulls at her hand. “Come, let's go.”

She recognizes his voice, somehow. “Jesus?”

He pauses. Smiles. Takes her hand and puts it to his heart. It's beating so loudly her hand jumps. He holds it there.

“Yes, Renee,” he says. Turns his palm up, shows the scars, fierce and red. The scars which tell the story of betrayal. Love. Crucifixion.

She shakes her head. “How is this possible? How am I here?”

“Not how—but *why*,” Jesus says. “You're here in a dream, because I saw you. Wandering, wondering. You were confused about life, but there's no need to be.”

Renee stays silent. Her hand is still clamped to his heartbeat. Something begins to travel through her arm. Something electric. She pictures a blue wire buzzing.

“Do you feel my love?” he asks.

She nods.

“Take this love, and give it to the world.” He peers into her eyes and she sees herself in his pupil. She's lying prostrate, hands outstretched, face to the ground. People are stooping, taking food from her hands. “I know you, Renee VonDyke. I know what your gifts are, what your dreams are. No matter what you choose, let it be something which shows your love for me. Be my heartbeat for the world.”

She nods, mute. He picks her up, carries her to the dance floor—a marble slab which stretches to no end. On it, people of all colours, whirling and twirling. Angels making music with guitars, drums, bass, violins, cellos and many other instruments she doesn't know the names of.

Jesus sets her down and suddenly she's caught up in the rhythm. It starts with her toes. They begin to tap, ever so slightly. Then her hands begin to clap, her head bob, and soon she's a blur, circling around and around.

Then, as soon as it starts, it stops and she's in the throne room, chanting "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty." Looking up it's all she can do to keep from crying out for the light which shines from the throne. Then, she's dancing again, before the throne, and the light envelopes her with yellow arms.

All too soon the warmth recedes. She begins to hear frogs croaking, water gurgling. Light fades into the blackness of her eyelids, and something hard presses against her cheek.

Renee's eyes creak open like rusty hinges, and she sees sideways trees. Smells damp wood. The air is chilly, and she finds herself shivering. Pushes herself up from the bench, and begins to pitter-patter across the lawn to her house in sock-feet, shoes in hand.

She puts a hand to her chest, feels her heart beating hard, as if she'd been active. Her cheeks are warm. She smiles.

If anyone were to look at her, they would say she was glowing. As if she'd seen the face of God.

Chapter 21—The Script
May 2003

Disenchanted
Disenfranchised
Dis-
The prefix that suffocates my generation
I hope and dread that You will give me
Something to believe in
Rub the calluses
Scrape the empty flesh
My blood is thick and old
False courage be gone
And false hearts
Dis-eased (r.d.)

In the days following the dream, Renee begins to feel Jesus' heart beat harder than ever.

Once, while watching a documentary about Mother Teresa's work in India. She sees the squalor in which the people live. The incredible sadness etched on their faces. Their hollow stomachs and hearts, and she can't breathe.

Her grief escapes in quiet sobs. As if she herself is hollow.

Pain is no longer avoidable. Ignorance, no longer an option, for his heart beats inside her. Forcing her to feel. To look into people's eyes and love them.

She feels it beat when she thinks of Darren, who's no where to be found. There are rumours he's a go-go dancer living with his partner downtown. But no one knows where. He doesn't call, doesn't stop by. Doesn't want to see the way their eyes shift. The way their hands fidget with quiet disappointment.

Every night she sees him in her dreams. The grey puff of smoke. The angry back of a boy walking away from everyone who loves him. And every night she cries out to God to save him.

But never does her heart beat faster than when she watches the news. The bloody bravado of America's war on Iraq. Her tiny face turns red. She shakes her fists at the television screen and seethes on behalf of a people being undermined and undernourished, undervalued and misunderstood for the oil blocking the leaders' vision.

For one year she'd beseeched. Sent letters to organizations and ministries, begging Christians to stand up for peace. To no avail. Even the three million protestors in Rome, marking the largest anti-war rally yet, had been pushed aside by troops on their way to Baghdad.

She'd known the war was coming. Had known along with the rest of the world, since the attack which had toppled the towers. The attack which had sent Renee sprawling across her bedroom floor in passionate prayer.

"Has anything ever been resolved through violence?" she cries to Carmen over the phone. The TV is muted, but she can still see the images. One-second shots of children and their parents, dead or dying. "When people resort to using violence to solve their problems, the value of human life is lost."

"I agree, but I don't think Bush sees it that way," Carmen replies. Her voice sounds far away. "I think he's trying to save his country. I mean, this being said from my lowly place in Germany, but from the looks of it, he's trying to do an honourable thing."

"Okay, well, in a poll, 63 per cent of Americans wanted him to seek a diplomatic resolution versus war," Renee says, too quickly. "Sixty two per cent believed war would only increase the chance of terrorism. I don't think he's looking out for his country, Carmen. From the sounds of it, he's looking out for himself. I mean, look at all of the worldwide protests that have occurred! Apparently, 36 million people have participated in almost 3,000 protests against the Iraq War."

"You being one of them," Carmen says with a tired smile on her voice. "I really agree with you, deep down, Renee. I mean, look at Jesus. He came to give undeserved grace. He told us to turn the other cheek, and anticipated a day when swords would be turned into ploughshares. He urged believers to bless their enemies, to help those who hurt them. I don't see that happening. For a country that claims to trust in God, that is disheartening."

Renee rolls onto her back. Finds comfort in the dingy white ceiling tiles.

"That's what makes me so sad," she says in a soft voice. "When the world is viewed through his grace, everyone becomes equal. Jesus' message has the power to transform lives. When everyone is equal there is no basis for conflict. Because of sin, the world will not be perfect, but if more people could see the world through grace, it would become a better place."

"Grace has become an old-fashioned concept I think."

"Mhmm... So many people who claim to have the Christian faith are in support of this 'war on terror.' Everyone faces choices to resist violence. Individuals can resist violence by refusing to fight back when insulted or hurt. This doesn't mean nothing can be done about the situation; however, the injured party does not have to fight back with violent words or actions. That's what 'turning the other cheek' means."

"People don't see peace as being pro-active."

"Let me tell you a story, okay?" Renee sits up. Her red hair is tousled. Her eyes, bright.

"Okay."

"On June 25, 1944, the Nazis imposed a curfew in Copenhagen, Denmark. No one was allowed outside from 8:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. Twelve hundred workers in the city walked off the job that day at 1:00 p.m. They did not strike, they were simply leaving because they needed

time to work in their gardens, something they could not do any other time, due to the new curfew. In a few days people all over the country were leaving work to cultivate their gardens and there were street demonstrations underway. Eventually, the Nazis had to remove the curfew, and they even made a few other concessions to the leaders of the country.”

“I should have known that story. That’s some kind of proactive peace.”

“Exactly. That’s the kind of peace which makes a difference.”

It comes to her as she’s watching TV, gripping the couch with white-knuckled hands. It comes to her as she watches Iraqi women dressed in black weep over corpses. It comes to her as she hears the sounds of Iraq’s back being broken and its children, orphaned. And she knows, without a doubt, what she’s meant to do.

Drama.

Acting out pictures of peace. Showing the world what peace could look like. What Christianity could look like if Christ were actually involved. What the world could look like if love were its diplomatic resolution for every problem.

She swipes at stray beads of sadness. Inches towards the edge of her seat. Beside her, Angela is dozing. Upstairs she hears Jonathan on the phone. A new energy pulses through her veins. She is nervous, but hears him whisper: “My grace is sufficient. Take up your cross and follow me.”

YWAM had asked her to return in June to staff the summer Missions Adventure program. Then, to continue on with drama ministry in the fall.

Vancouver—her heart skips, thinking of the city that never sleeps. Of Matilda and her apple pie. Of sunshine and waves.

Conveying truth through the arts—that is, after all, my mission statement, my life philosophy. She thought of Jesus’ words to her in that strangely vivid dream of heaven: “I know you, Renee VonDyke. I know what your gifts are, what your dreams are. No matter what you choose, let it be something which shows your love for me. Be my heartbeat for the world.”

She could feel it—his heart. Pounding through her skin. Beating for her. Beating for the world. Beating through the arts.

That night she dreams of a crowd of people. The crowd is a mix of races and languages. To look upon them is to see a rainbow of black, brown, yellow, red and white faces.

Everyone is standing before a stage. The stage is shrouded by a curtain, like legs in a white skirt. The curtain is strung up by stars. The stars pull. The curtain rises. The crowd hushes. On the stage appear four girls, and they begin to perform Renee’s play—*Earth, Fire, Wind and Water*. As they speak their words appear on large blank screens. The translation is flawless.

A man in a black hat conducts strings and flutes, violins, oboes, and drums in muted tones. Then, the girls’ voices fade and the man’s hands rise. Music storms over the crowd as if a dam has burst. The drums sound like thunder. People begin to sob and weep, and then, with a crash of symbols and a flash like lightning, Jesus descends.

The crowd is silent. Stupefied. Jesus turns, embraces the girls. Then calls the people to him. Heals their diseases.

For hours he listens to his people, heals them. Kisses their foreheads, forgives them in the name of the father. And then, the people are gone. The scene, wiped clear save for Jesus and Renee. She’s standing before him, gripping the play script. It’s wrinkled and worn. Jesus takes it, smoothes it out. Begins to read, and as he reads, he smiles.

“It’s beautiful,” he says. “Let me show you another one.”

In that moment the old script fades like invisible ink, and new words arise—a play of hope.

Renee bows low. “Thank you.”

He lifts her chin, says “Keep writing. Keep letting them feel my love.”

“I will,” she says in a voice shy of a whisper.

Then, his voice breaks. “I wish to heal you. To make you well. No matter what happens, please believe that.”

She feels his hand on her arm. Feels his strength breathing life to bones she hadn’t known were broken.

The sky turns a deep velvety purple. Bleeds violet over the moon and stars.

Jesus rises, a flash of white. Disappears into the sky.

For a long time Renee sits there with the butterfly. Stares up into the purple sky. As she sits, her limbs begin to ache and her heart, hurt. Then she’s in an ambulance with the butterfly on her shoulder and they’re rushing her to the hospital.

She wakes, shaking from head to foot. It’s four in the morning. She refuses to fall back to sleep. Refuses to find herself back in that ambulance.

Instead she clicks on her bedside lamp. Its glow is like a kiss on a cold night. She pulls out her stationary and pen, begins writing a letter. Telling her parents about her decision to move back to Vancouver.

Chapter 22—Riding the Wave Fall 2004

*I hear the voice of God
Calling me to follow him
This fire will never die
This bright light never dim
As long as I follow him
The road I walk is rough
I feel I’ve had enough
But I’ll keep going on
Sometimes it’s always night
But then I glimpse your light
Telling me “Keep holding on”
I hear the voice of God
Calling me to follow him
This fire will never die
This bright light never dim
As long as I follow him (r.d.)*

After a year of doing drama ministry in Vancouver, Renee begins to itch for adventure.

And so, she joins The Wave USA.

A rag-tag group of YWAM missionaries from five nations. Shoved like sardines into an old retirement bus. Shuttled around 50 states in 50 weeks.

Caleb later says he never *really* got to know Renee. But he tries to. Calls her the Crazy Canadian. The igloo-woman who owns a maple syrup farm. Wonders where her fur coat is hiding? Does she ride polar bears or eat them for supper?

Meanwhile Caleb is the boy from down south. The boy from Georgia. Renee throws back red-neck jokes with a quick sarcastic tongue.

In more serious moments, he helps her understand her new Mac laptop. Helps her start a blog, not realizing he'd later read it on a daily basis. Would read it, to know how to pray for her.

He first sees her dancing in the middle of the gym. Around her, tables piled high with registration forms. Young people lined up, scrawling signatures, looking nervous. Music filtering in, fuzzy but warm, on old church speakers.

She is twirling in the middle of the room, with a necktie as a belt. Being a large boy, Caleb finds it a challenge to get the tie around his neck, let alone his waist. He stops, along with everyone else—mesmerized by the girl dancing in the patch of sunlight.

She sees no one. Her eyes are closed; her face, raised to the ceiling, her hands, stretched open as if to embrace the air.

“I want to know her,” he says out loud, unaware that everyone feels the same way.

Humans are drawn to vulnerability, to expressions of spontaneity, because inwardly they long for that, themselves.

No one would have guessed that Renee *was* self-conscious. That she battled fear. That she cared, sometimes, what other people thought.

“I just try and remember, I’m my own worst enemy,” she tells Caleb later. They’re sitting with their laptops on a plaid chesterfield. She’s wearing a yellow sundress. He’s in khaki shorts. His round face is a perpetual smile. Faded tan.

“Hmm, yes.” He stares at the Pepto-Bismol walls. Wonders who would ever choose such a colour. “Kind of like us, with the Wave. We’re our own worst enemies.”

They’re being hosted by a family in Los Angeles, California. The sound of surfers riding the sea washes through the windows. They hear the

splash of waves; the crash of board against water, the ripple of laughter; imagine the salt and sun on their skin.

It’s all they can do to stay seated in this pink, air-conditioned room. To prepare for the church presentation that evening. Renee is directing ‘Left to Blossom,’ a play about a mother losing her daughter.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Renee leans back against the couch.

“Oh you know, we’re just so idyllic, determined to travel to the four corners of the US for God but... doing it so carelessly, without rhyme or reason. The lack of superstructure will leave us chasing our tails. Just you wait and see.”

“Ahh, the prophet speaks,” Renee says. Sardonic smile. Her eyes twinkle, and she raises a pillow above her head. “Tell me, what will I do next?” And before he can speak there’s a flash of white, muffled sounds, flyaway feathers. The pillow fight lasts a few minutes. They retreat in a tired truce.

“No but seriously,” he says, dabbing his forehead. The sweat is beaded, like tiny jewels. “I know it’s only the beginning of the trip, but I can already sense we’ll regret doing it this way.”

“You’re such an optimist. Don’t you think there’s a small, very slight chance that God can guide our steps? I mean, we have to believe that, right? It’s what we live for.”

“Oh, I trust that God can do it. I just don’t trust *us*, to hear him correctly.”

Renee sits, silent. Her fingers play with a cushion’s tassels.

When she speaks, her words are slow, careful. “I think, for me, that’s the way in which I demonstrate my faith in God—trusting he will use people like you, and me, and our Wave leaders, to know what he wants of us. I mean, that’s why he uses the weak and foolish—to shame the wise, right? So this might appear foolish, this taking the states by storm

without a plan in place, but at the same time, it leaves lots of room for God to move.”

Caleb nods. Her simple belief steals his cynicism.

That night, hundreds gather in the darkened sanctuary for “Left to Blossom.” The community has been invited.

The curtain rises. The setting is heaven.

A girl appears, in white; then a man, in black. Flowers, everywhere. Trees. Sheets of paper are scattered across the fake grass.

The girl in white wanders along picking up the pieces of paper. She’s blond, with white leggings, white flip-flops and a white sleeveless dress. She steps through some trees, finds a man in a black jacket and black jeans sitting on a bench. He has shaggy brown hair and a beard.

“Mom’s been praying a lot, lately,” the girl says to the man later revealed to be her Dad.

He nods. “She needs to know you’re not alone.”

“She needs to believe *she’s* not alone,” the girl sends back, angrily.

Then she runs, as if being chased; she’s still gripping the papers. All of a sudden she reaches a clearing where her Dad is sitting in a chair. He leans forward.

“Hanna, your mother didn’t have anything to confide in like you do. She needed more than that—she needed you to confide in her.”

The girl shoves aside a wayward branch and storms off to the sound of music chiming in haunted tones. The man gets up, begins to follow after her. Finds her seated amongst flowers beneath a willow tree. He pulls a branch aside, as if a curtain, and approaches her.

The spotlight shifts to another section of the stage, where a hospital scene is revealed. In the background, the sound of a heart monitor beeping; piano music. A vase of pink and white lilies sits on a bedside table. A woman with long brown hair and a thin face is hovering over a hospital bed; in it, lies Hanna, eyes closed. The woman smooths Hanna’s bangs off her forehead; her eyes are pleading, red from crying. Then she forces a smile.

“I brought you something,” she says. The girl lies motionless, a tube strapped to her nose. “I’ve been looking for it the whole time you’ve been asleep. It took me four years to find.”

Her voice catches. She reaches into a bag, pulls out a black journal. Looks at the girl with an apologetic smile. “I wasn’t even sure you still had it.” Laughs. “You were so religious about writing in it every day.”

The spotlight shifts again. Reveals the bedroom of a younger Hanna. She’s sobbing. “I’m afraid to die,” she says to her Dad, the man from the garden.

“Woah there,” he says. “Where is all this coming from? You’re not going to die.”

She tries to steady her voice. “I know. But someday!”

“Well, at some point, true,” he concurs. “Listen, you remember that story I told you about Adam and Eve?”

The girl nods, her breathing still jagged and raspy.

“Well, someday, when we all pass, we go to a place much like their garden. But there’s no need to be afraid.”

The mother is standing at the bedroom door, listening.

“Really?” Hanna asks.

“I know so.”

Then he pauses. Reaches down and grabs something. “Listen. I want you to have this. It’s very special.” The camera reveals a black journal. “The magic of this book and this pen is that, whatever you write in it is only between you and God.”

He picks up the pen. “Watch.” Begins to scribble across a blank page. “For my angel Hanna—may all your dreams blossom into full beauty.”

The father kisses her on the forehead; leaves to go to work.

The sound of a gunshot. Her father dying. Shot by an angry customer.

The music begins to chime in haunting tones. The light shines again on the garden scene.

“What happened to you that night?” Hanna’s father asks.

“I stopped fearing death,” she responds.

He rises, begins to pace. “I think you traded your fear for something else.”

She begins to prune. “Your flowers are beautiful,” he tells her. “They really are, Hanna.”

“They don’t grow like they used to,” she says. “Not enough sun.”

“Just because your hope isn’t thriving doesn’t mean she loves you any less. I see when it rains each day,” he says. “That’s why they’re still alive.”

Hanna’s voice is forced. “These aren’t my flowers Dad. I’m not the one who’s withering. She needs to let us go. She needs to let *me* go... I’m not afraid to die.”

“Well, what are you afraid of then?”

Once again the scene changes; shows Hanna, following the funeral of her father. She’s dressed in white. Slamming her bedroom door shut, over and over again. Her face is twisted with anger.

In the living room, a man named Jim is standing by the mantle; Hanna’s mother, also in black, is sitting on the couch.

“Why’d he have to kill him anyway? Karim would have given him his tips. It just doesn’t make sense.”

Hanna falls to her bedroom floor, grabs her journal.

“I mean, shot and killed for \$83!” the man says.

In her room, Hanna begins to scribble frantically across the page.

Jim kneels by Hanna’s mother. “Lynn, if there’s anything April and I can do, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Hanna rips a page from her journal. Her mother begins knocking on the door; Hanna ignores her.

Then, it shifts to the hospital scene. The heart monitor is beeping. On the bed, Hanna continues to lie with her eyes shut.

“Why wouldn’t you just let me in?!” Lynn asks.

In the garden, Hanna and her Dad are sitting on a wooden bench. Her Dad’s back is slightly turned; he looks sad.

“You locked her out of more than your room that day,” he says.

“My grief was enough for *me* to carry—I couldn’t take hers as well.”

“Ever think she might have needed you?” he asks.

“If I came to her, she would have depended on me—the same way she always came running to you for stability.” She glances at him from the corner of her eye.

“You came to me all the time, Baby Girl,” he says softly.

Hanna’s cheeks flush pink. “When you were gone, I had to find my own strength, and so did she! But instead she put the burden of comforting herself on a six-year-old child!”

Her voice escalates, hitting the roof of sky.

“Grief is a burden that we all share, Hanna. We’re family.”

Hanna is a teenager; she’s standing in the kitchen, dressed in black and red, wearing a long necklace; her eyes look desperate. “Mom, this is the last chance I’ll have to see my friends before I go.”

“And this is the last night I’ll have to spend with my daughter before she goes off to college!”

“Mom, everyone’s going to be there!”

“And they’re more important to you than your own mother?!”

Silence. Lynn raises her eyebrows, waiting. Hanna looks down, her eyelids heavy with makeup.

“I’m cooking you a graduation dinner,” Lynn says in desperation.

“Mom, you can’t guilt me out of this one—please! You said you’d give me more space.”

Now Lynn looks down. “Fine,” she says.

“Thank you. I’ll be home before the morning.”

Even as the light fades the car crash can be heard; sirens follow the sound of smashing metal; someone is reporting a Code Six. Then, the hospital bed. The heart monitor is still beeping and the piano music resumes.

Lynn is sitting in her chair, shaking her head. “I shouldn’t have let you go. Why did I let you go?? Wake up, Baby. Wake up! Oh, don’t make me go through this—not again. Don’t leave me here pretending that you can hear me! How am I supposed to let my own daughter go when I never even got to know her? You just poured your entire heart out to that stupid—”

Lynn looks over at the journal, picks it up. The light changes, and suddenly she’s in the garden, holding the black book. The music grows ominous. As she stands there, holding the journal, paper falls from the sky, landing scattered around her. She opens the book; all the pages are blank. Lynn flips desperately and finds nothing. Then, as she begins to cry her teardrops splash onto the blank pages, revealing words.

The spotlight switches back to Hanna’s bedroom. Hanna’s father is saying, “The magic of this book and this pen is that, whatever you write in it is only between you and God. Watch.” The words fade into the paper. Invisible ink.

Lynn is back in the garden, and it’s started to rain. Lynn begins to lift her arms and dance, feeling the raindrops on her face.

She opens the book, reads, “...And I am going to study half a continent away. If I bonded with her now, I would never be able to let her go. It is easier to love at a distance, than love in regret.”

The mother’s face lifts; her eyes are bright. “You were afraid of losing me too,” she says.

Hanna comes up behind her. Puts a hand on Lynn’s shoulder. Lynn turns and the curtain falls on their embrace.

Over the next few months, Abe and Renee film movies using her laptop. Carve out spaces of time in between performing and ministering, moments unveiled through bus rides or rest-stops in grassy knolls.

The more Renee learns about movie-making on her Mac, the more she begins to see the world as a film, reels unrolling before her.

Voices become scripted... scenes acquire soundtracks.

Slopping spaghetti onto plates in a soup kitchen, she hears Pavarotti's rich voice serenading the tomato pasta. Playing soccer in the streets of a run-down Nevadan town with children in tattered clothing, Renee hears the songs of Sufjan Stevens.

It is her desire to bring hope—the very concept which had inscribed itself in bright colours across Cambodia's graveyard—that drives her need to make these movies.

Chapter 23—Songkhem Spring 2005

*You speak in words my heart can't understand
You move in ways my mind can't know
You're unreachable and unattainable
Yet you reached out to me to love me
I still can't understand the mystery of your grace
And why you gave your life for me
You love me, the unlovable
And save me, the un-saveable
The impossible is possible with you
Sometimes you seem so far away
And yet my heart still needs to know you
I want to know the unknowable
And see the invisible
I want the impossible to be possible for me*

*Come down to me, into my heart
Let me see you face to face (r.d.)*

In the quiet folds of time, apart from the WAVE team, she sits and breathes. Can barely stand, for the fatigue.

No matter the power of her dreams, Renee's strength is lessening.

Exhaustion filters through her body like moonlight in a forest. Subtle, yet undeniable. Leaves her breathless, aching for rest. Begging for someone to come and stitch her up again.

No one knows how tired she is.

And no one knows about the sadness. A persistent shadow which, if stared at, becomes darker than her actual self.

At night she writes in her prayer journal to quell the pain. "Today the depression came back in little bits. I guess you already know that. I've decided to stop wondering about why it happens and trying to prevent it. If I truly am a stranger here on earth, and I truly am made for a better place, then it only makes sense that sometimes I get a little depressed. It keeps me longing for something more and as long as I remember I am longing for you, I think I can handle it."

News of ongoing war in Iraq forms the outline of her shadow. Death tolls and bombings wake her each morning; bid her good night. She dreams fitfully, knowing peace is not on the agenda.

Even as she serves soup or plants trees, war pummels her brain like a dull hammer.

"Where are the peacemakers?" she asks politicians, who gape fake grins and swallow back bottles of gin.

"Where are the bearers of peace?" she asks preachers, who take out their Bibles and mop their brows with the holy pages.

“I know,” she says, turning away. “They’re in the soup kitchens and homeless shelters, hospitals and prisons, serving selflessly without recognition or fanfare. They’re in orphanages, refugee camps, AIDS hospices, remote jungles and garbage dumps. Oh Jesus,” she cries to the night sky, “Raise up more of them! Raise up more peacemakers.”

The WAVE bus rolls through the southern States, where darkness weighs thick. The Bible Belt is nothing more than a long string of suburbs with the Jesus-fish slapped on Hummers’ bumpers.

And then, they reach the east coast. It’s all Renee can do to keep from clapping her hands at the smell of the sea. The open grey sky splashed with flocks of seagulls. The unreligious free who embrace her authenticity.

Darkness lifts. Releases a flood of sunshine warm on Renee’s skin. And for a moment she believes peace *will* come; love *does* reign; God *is* real, and hope is more than a pithy concept conjured up by Hallmark cards.

They visit a hospital in Trenton, New Jersey. Bring flowers and get-well cards. She meets him in the psych ward. He’s an American soldier dispatched early due to injury, now hospitalized with post-traumatic stress disorder.

“They call us peacekeepers,” he tells her. His eyes wobble; his body twitches at the slightest sound. Renee sits perched at the end of his bed.

“The only peace I saw was in my friend’s face after he died. We were in the same bunker. I had left to use the bathroom when they bombed ...” His face turns ashen. His legs begin to twitch. Renee’s eyes widen and she puts a hand on his shoulder but he slaps it away. “No!!” he cries. “Johnny, I’m so sorry. Sh*\$#, here they come. Here they come, you’d better hide. They’ll get you too.”

He tries to cover her head with a blanket. Ducks under the white hospital sheet. Screams. A nurse rounding the corner rushes over. Speaks in soothing tones while buckling him to his bed. Looks at Renee who stares, distraught, at the belts holding him down. The nurse’s eyes are sympathetic. Rimmed with red.

“He tried to escape last week,” she whispers, “and then to choke someone. We have to take precautions. When he’s reliving the war, he’s not with us anymore. He’s over there, fighting the soldiers.”

“Would it be okay if I played him some music?” Renee points to her black guitar case boasting a Canadian flag.

Surprise flickers in tired eyes. “I don’t see why not.” The nurse smiles, walks away.

Renee pulls out her guitar. Begins to strum, hum. Spends the next hour with the soldier, making music. His white knuckles relax, release the sheet. His body begins to sink into his mattress and slowly, his eyes open, revealing grey calm.

He’s handsome, Renee thinks with a small smile. Then, when she begins to play ‘Amazing Grace,’ he starts to sing with a raspy voice. Together they belt it out; the other patients join them.

“And grace will lead me home...”

She is struck by music’s ability to heal. To calm and inspire. To mend what medicine cannot. Science, she decides, is a reflection of God’s intellect. Art, a mirror to his soul.

Indi is a tiny girl with large violet eyes. Indi wears burets and plays the guitar. She and Renee like to splash in puddles and dance on subways.

One night in their host home in New Jersey, when everyone is in bed, they pretend to be British and drink tea with their pinkies curled.

Renee sets down her tea cup. Looks serious.

“You know that verse in Isaiah where it says ‘Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations you do not know will hasten to you because of the Lord your God?’”

Indi nods, her pinkie still curled.

“Well, I have this burden for the Middle East which I cannot shake—it’s like a million stones piled on my back, and it’s been there ever since the war began,” Renee continues. “And I was thinking, can you imagine the power of art in a war-torn country? Today I watched music melt a soldier with post-traumatic stress disorder into a little boy, someone who forgot that bad things happened because his heart was too full of harmony.”

Renee pauses for breath. Her limbs scream with fatigue. She takes a sip of tea.

Outside the air is swollen, perspiring. Giving birth to springtime.

“All this to say, I’m thinking about taking a team of artists, musicians, and filmmakers to the Middle East.”

“I would love to help you!” Indi sets down her tea. Leans forward. “I definitely see a co-relation between peace and the arts; music, film, and creativity can breed such stillness in someone... would it be for the soldiers or...?”

“The Iraqi people,” Renee finishes. “I want to do it for them.”

The yellow taxis remind her of a caterpillar, stretched along Time’s Square, inching slowly along.

It’s the first week of May. Branches twist and curl like ribbons in Central Park. Tree buds burst open like party favours, reveal thin green leaves. The roses are tightly wrapped pink presents.

Everywhere, the sound of horns and traffic. Police cars hide quietly in the park. Billboards flash neon pink and green. Everywhere, something to see. The pretzels are warm, soft: salted, cheesy, or pizza-stuffed. Renee buys one every day for lunch. With a cup of fair trade coffee.

And then she discovers Cannoli.

Tube-like pastries stuffed with sweet, creamy filling. She finds them in Little Italy, a secret stashed away in an unassuming restaurant. The pastry flakes on her tongue. Melted butter. She feels warm inside, happy.

“It’s a crime to be so delicious,” she says.

One day, she takes Indi. They ride the subway. Watch boys do hip-hop in the centre aisle. Then a man gets on who sings soulful jazz. They tip him. Ask him about his album—he’s working on it, he says with a smile. “God bless you ladies.”

They arrive at the restaurant. Order Cannoli, and sit by a window smudged with fingerprints.

They silently eat; the pastry vanishes like a magic act.

“Cannoli,” Indi says with an amorous sigh, as if talking about her lover. “It must mean ‘food of the gods.’”

They laugh. Discuss names; origins. Renee says hers means “Reborn.”

“When I was little, a doctor in New York City saved my life. I was kind of struck last night by what this place means to me... it’s the place where I was, in a sense, ‘reborn.’”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I was born with a disorder called SCIDS, which means I had no immune system.”

“Seriously?” Indi’s eyes are like purple buttons.

“No—I’m kidding.” Renee smiles. “Yes, seriously. Anyway, my parents thought I was going to die, just like my two brothers—also born with SCIDS—but then they read this *Reader’s Digest* article telling them of a New York City doctor who could basically give me immunity through a stem cell transplant.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah; it’s kind of neat because my mom had already given me a name which meant ‘reborn’, in the hopes that I would, in fact, have a second chance at life.”

She stops. Brushes pastry crumbs into her napkin. “Have I said too much?”

“Renee!” Indi flashes the peace sign. “It’s all good. This is what friends do! They talk.”

“Sweet.” She swallows. “Would it be okay then, if you came with me to get my tattoo?”

“What?!”

Renee unfolds her dream to get the word ‘songkem’ tattooed above her ankle. The Cambodian or Khmer word for ‘hope.’ In memory of the butterflies at the Killing Fields.

“And what better place to do it than New York City—the place where I was given hope?”

PART 3: BUTTERFLY

Chapter 24—Swollen Sadness
June 2005

*Across the sea of doubt and fears
I’m tossed about by waves
It’s so hard to trust
When I can’t see the shore
So hard to believe
There is anything more
Where are you now that I need you?
Why don’t you answer my call?
If you’re really there, do you hear?
Can you see me, broken and small?
My heart has gone astray again
I’ve wandered off and gotten lost
Alone and crying for help as I take up the cross (r.d.)*

The fatigue is now accompanied by pain.

Tears wobble at the edge of her eyes. Like children, atop a steep cliff.

She cannot move her feet.

Night had been relentless. Renee was unable to sleep for her feet, swelling. The moon’s round yellow face mocked her. Her eyelids deceived her into thinking she was dreaming.

Finally, morning breaks like a bowl of butter, and she’s able to see them—puffy and red—from her wrinkled imprint on the pillow. Meanwhile her team-mates rise and shine, taking for granted their unswollen ligaments and rested eyes.

The teardrops teeter, totter. Tears which have been bottled up, kept in secret confines for such a day. Then, they tumble. Fall far off the cliff onto smooth ground.

Worry rises, like heat on the wing of a summer's day.

Prior to this morning, the pain had been easy to ignore—but each day, it was becoming more obvious. Her feet, more inflated. This had never happened before.

God wouldn't let anything bad happen to her—no, he couldn't, *shouldn't*—not when she was serving him like this. The Bible promises God's protection from flames and storms; but (and her tear ducts swell as big as her feet) it also cautions: "In this world you *will* have trouble—but take heart, I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

You will have trouble. Slowly she shuffles her feet to the side of the bed; bites her lip, draws blood, to keep from crying out loud.

No one can know. Pain shoots pellets through her legs. By now the room is empty; she hears the clink of spoon against bowl; the splash of milk; the crunch of cereal. Everyone is slurping up breakfast, loading up the vans. Suddenly, she is jealous of this very ordinary activity.

They are leaving Ohio for Illinois. She can't let them know, won't let them see—yet some already have. Have noticed the way she flinches with every stinging step. The way she pauses, feigning taking pictures when really, it hurt too much to walk. Her fatigue has become worn, suspect. Yesterday, she'd limped after performing skits. Abe had offered to give her a piggy-back ride. She'd laughed it off. He'd turned away, eyebrows wrinkled.

She perches on the end of her bed, feet hovering above the ground. Wiggles into shorts and a tank top. Tries to squish her toes into her shoes; more tears. Settles for flip-flops. Outside the sun is brazen. She'll blame the swelling on the heat.

Yet the pain is too sharp for such a simple explanation.

What is happening to me? Renee hobbles down the stairs, suitcase slung over a thin shoulder. *Where is God in all of this?*

He'd been with her, just last week. Had given her a vision, as she slept in New York City. A vision of people, hiding behind trees like oddly shaped shadows. They'd emerged, wading through a rush of river, rising on the other side in white robes. A tree stretched up from the riverbank. They'd pulled out axes, flash of silver; begun to chop it down. The Tree of Knowledge.

Even now she shudders at the prophecy. God had been intimate in New York. A person, whispering into her ears. She'd felt loved in the city which had given her life as a baby girl.

Having lost her pen, Renee had been forced, in New York, to spend time with God "in person", versus the "long-distance letter writing thing" of her prayer journal.

But now, in spite of a pen, she finds even written prayers difficult. Stark and cold. Like pin pricks in her swollen pink feet.

Renee slips into a kitchen chair, bows her head over a bowl of Weetabix and yogurt. Doesn't notice the teardrop land salty in her bowl.

"I really like you, Jesus," she prays silently. "I like spending time with you. It's great that you can speak in so many ways. Nothing brings me joy like being intimate with you. But I'm scared. I don't know what is happening, and I don't understand why you feel so far away right now. Where are you, when it hurts?" Pause. "That's all I've got. Amen."

India stands, washing dishes. Sees the teardrop fall. Turns away. Feels like an impostor. The soapy suds are warm. She scrubs furiously at the chipped china. Renee sits unaware, determined to swallow her sorrow with her breakfast, to have the kind of faith which moves mountains and swollen feet. According to her, no one needs to know.

Even her parents don't, although they suspect. She'd seen them a few weeks prior. A surprise visit. Angela had remarked on the bug bites splattered like calamine lotion across Renee's feet. She'd shrugged. Blamed the mosquitoes. But the bites hadn't itched. One week later,

her feet had started to swell. Like pink water balloons, the skin stretched tight.

“You coming, Ren?” Abe calls from the kitchen doorway.

Renee jumps; her spoon dribbles yogurt onto the table.

“Yes! I’ll be right there!” Shuffles to the sink, looking much like an old man with a walker. India puts a hand on Renee’s shoulder. She’s once again startled.

“Hey—what’s with you this morning?” India’s voice is soft like terry-cloth. “You seem a bit out of sorts. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine. Thanks. Want to sit with me in the van?”

“Sounds good.”

Renee insists on washing her own dishes. Doesn’t want Indi watching her walk away. Knows it’s only a matter of time before someone notices. Until then, she’ll keep pretending.

Indi loves Renee’s pink hat. Wishes she could leap up and hug her, but sits quietly, held snug by the seat-belt. Renee’s pixie face seems pale beneath the pink. White, almost. Her forehead is shiny.

She sits next to Indi, draws the seat belt across. The clasp clicks. Her hand shakes. Indi wonders at the silence. Over the past 26 weeks she’d become accustomed to Renee’s laughter, the way it lifted each moment like a curtain. Shedding light.

Indi squeezes Renee’s shoulder, and Renee smiles, a fleeting line across wan cheeks. Sighs. *She knows*. Renee is partially relieved. Her friend is too close to let her get away, too loving to let her be morose. Indi is Renee’s Garfunkel. They play guitars in the sun and dance in the rain and

drink fair trade coffee in the afternoons. Only recently had Renee begun to pull away for fear of breaking down.

The van purrs to life, and Renee tucks her feet beneath the seat in front of her. Wishes to squeeze the air of its tension. Or is it only imagined? She doesn’t know anymore. The silence seems like a loud voice exposing her secret. It ebbs and swells, pounding in her ears like waves in a sea shell.

She swallows hard; a rock pings against the van. *Why so nervous?* Her fingers twist together and she remembers New York’s pretzels. Stares at passing fields of crops, wishes to be back in the City. Back where life didn’t hurt.

Maybe if I sleep. Her head begins to bob with the rhythm of the wheels. *Maybe then, when I wake up, everything will be better...*

In her dream Darren is standing over her, looking down, his face drawn and skinny. He is painting her nails bright red. Family surrounds her: Angela, Jonathan, Liana, Sara ... Then Indi’s face comes into focus, and everyone else’s blurs; she’s twirling in the middle of the room. In her hands, baby blue ballerina shoes. She catches Renee’s eye, says, “These are for you,” but when Renee goes to try them on, she can’t move her legs. Looking down, she sees sausages. Her legs are as puffy and red as her feet. Try as she might, she can’t lift them. India catches sight of Renee’s legs—lets out a scream as shrill as a train whistle. The scream keeps sounding, rippling like a long ribbon across the night sky and Renee begins to cry with all of the ferociousness pain can muster.

Someone is shaking her, and that just makes her cry harder. Then a voice: “Renee, are you okay? Renee... wake up!”

She feels the dread before lifting an eyelid. Knows the entire van is watching. Beneath her the wheels grind to a halt; traffic roars by.

Clenching her fists she squeezes open an eye, comes face to face with Abe. His eyes are black with worry. “What’s wrong, sweetie?!!”

Indi has stopped shaking her. Instead, she's staring at the floor. Tears leak from her violet eyes. Renee follows her gaze, and gasps: her feet have somehow emerged from under the seat and are now in full view. They seemed redder than ever, straining against the flip-flop straps. Renee braces herself for the scream but it doesn't come; instead, "What's going on, girl? Why do your feet look so swollen?"

Renee looks around at faces etched with love. Knows she can no longer hide.

"I'm sorry," she begins, softly. Her finger traces the window pane.

"Don't apologize," Abe says. The others murmur agreement.

"I haven't wanted to tell anyone. I was hoping the pain would disappear, but it hasn't. My feet are swollen. They hurt. I can barely walk." Renee clears her throat. "When I was born, I had no immune system, so they did a stem cell transplant. I'm not sure if this is at all related, but I'm crying because I'm worried, and... it hurts so badly."

Indi raises her hand as if it's a classroom. "I vote we stay in Ohio until Ren is better. We should take her to a clinic today. Who's with me?"

Renee's feeble protests are lost in overwhelming support of Indi's suggestion. Soon the van is retracing the highway in search of an exit.

Twelve hours, until she has to say good-bye.

Twelve hours, until she returns to the city which once saved her. Hoping it will save her again.

A bus will arrive with the morning sun. Will take her back to New York City, where she'll be hospitalized.

That night, Renee dances so hard her body aches. She can't stop. Her feet are no longer swollen, thanks to antibiotics, but her head hurts from restless nights spent tossing and churning.

She hates to leave the team which is her family. The team which has kept her company over the past three days, and brought her to this Audio Adrenaline concert.

Flashing lights provide momentary darkness, letting Renee wipe away stray tears in secret. She is tired of crying. Wants to pretend to be normal for one more day. Abe and Indi dance on either side of her. Together they raise their voices, bang their heads. But soon, this too will be over. And she'll have to leave.

"You'll need to be admitted for a bone marrow biopsy," the doctor had said.

The anaesthesia had stung. He'd removed her marrow, and she'd waited.

Then, the phone call.

The tests were positive.

She had leukemia.

Chapter 25—Unlikely Friendship
Summer 2005

*Cocooned in this dark dungeon
Confined to never see sunlight
To never walk upright
Without the strength to break the walls down
And I'm wishing for days gone by
When times were better
And I could see you
There weren't all these prison bars
In my way I hardly remember your face
But I know it was shining and I know it was smiling
I know it was love
I feel you again
Like sunshine creeps through my window
And you whisper to me (r.d.)*

The chemo pump is her Wilson. Her 'Cast Away' friend, afloat the lonely white stretch of the hospital wing.

The friendship doesn't happen overnight. It takes 30 nights of lying wide-eyed in the dark while others snore around her. Then, the words begin to spill—un-breached bubbles of verbal liquid. Words which, in time, cement a bond between the inanimate and the animate.

"I'm not going crazy," Renee whispers to "Thomas." He stands by her bed, a tall, lean pole, dripping liquid into her body. "Rather, the opposite."

She scrunches up her forehead. Wonders what she's doing. Only a month ago, she'd been surrounded by loving faces. Now, she's isolated on a floor full of sick kids. Desperate for some semblance of connection.

For the first while, her parents had been there. Eyes pouring out concern, wallets extending gifts like cute nightgowns and Broadway tickets. But

then they'd left, promising to return, forced to tend to life's calls and duties.

They did return, again and again, but it's not the same as having friends with whom to talk. Angela sits beside Renee's bed with knitting needles flashing. Endless rolls of colourful yarn. She brings homemade meals and fluffs up Renee's pillow and does other motherly things with a concerned line etched in her forehead. But it's not the same.

Craft time finds Renee in the Patients' Recreation room, making an ugly origami pig with pale pink eyes. Her mind rewinds to the time when she and Indi sat and strummed guitars on the front steps of municipal buildings. "Jamming for Jesus" they'd called it.

Her mouth splits into a half grin. Then she looks at Thomas. Sees him for exactly what he is: a pump full of poison. The slip-sliding of the liquid makes her want to pull her hair out. Makes her want to flail and scream and flee the hospital.

Nevertheless that night she confides in him—because she has no one else. "I feel captive in the city which once captivated me," she says.

Thomas stands there, dripping.

Then, Indi arrives on the coattails of September. And, for a while, Thomas is merely a chemo pump. Forgotten amongst walks in yellow-curved leaves and fermented smells. With her neutrophils and white blood cells slightly above zero, Renee is free to attend Broadway, drink strong coffee and buy clunky jewellery at the flea market. And everything seems normal, save for her pale face and the need to sit down every half hour.

Later, when the neutrophils drop, the girls strum and sing like hippies in her room, Renee's bald head wrapped in a long green scarf, and Indi's in bright blue. They reminisce, as if they've been friends forever, about running in the rain and living out of a suitcase. And for a while, Renee remembers who she was without the cancer.

But then The Wave crashes over India, pulling her back in—and Renee is left alone with her knitting mother and silent Thomas.

“It’s like, I lived under a waterfall for so long, and now the river is all dried up and I can barely find a trickle.”

If Thomas were real, he would have reached out and touched her tears. Instead, he stands cold while she cries beneath a milky night sky. Her mother has already taken a yellow taxi back to her apartment. Somewhere down the hall, a nurse is humming.

“You know, I shouldn’t be so low. I need to remember my life isn’t that bad.” She sniffs. Recalls the child she’d met that day, the girl named Sami. She too was bald from chemo. At just five years old. Her large eyes had belied her age, giving her wisdom a century old. Placing a dimpled hand on Renee’s, she’d said, “It’s going to be okay,” for no reason other than, she could.

Faint touch of hand had sent Renee’s heart spiralling. Her tears had begun to flow right there. Surrounded by rows of plastic chairs, and toys.

“Faith like a child...” she whispers to Thomas. “I want that kind of faith. The kind I felt on The Wave. It used to be so easy to believe. Now... Now, there’s nothing.”

Suddenly she’s talking to God, tears leaking words onto her face. “What can I do for you here?” Her pale face is illuminated by the fluorescent light in the hall. “I don’t want to do this anymore. I’m done. Just get me out of this place. Wouldn’t I be of more use back on the team with everyone? Serving you, encouraging the church, using my gifts, praising, worshiping, interceding? Here I barely have the energy to walk up and down the stairs...”

The sobs choke. She sputters alone in her bed. The nurse’s humming has faded. The night is vacant of expression. Then, “What do you want from me?” and she’s done.

Darkness tucks her in, deep amongst cushions of sleep.

But this isn’t the end—despite her dropping neutrophils and constant fatigue.

She feels like a lab rat, with doctors wanting to conduct a transplant never before conducted.

They talk about her as if she cannot hear them. She watches their mouths move above her. Feels transparent. Wonders if she could touch them, if they would notice.

“Transplants are one thing,” Dr. O’Reilly says, peering down at his clip board. As if the secrets of the world lie scribbled there. “But this scenario requires transplanting cells from a matched donor into someone who has had a transplant from an unmatched donor.” He scratches his head; grey strands crouch unaware on his neck. One day to spring up, take his blond head hostage.

They leave the room on polished leather, and her stomach hurts. “A lab rat,” she tells Thomas. “That’s what my life has boiled down to. A fun little experiment for these doctors to conduct.” She stares at her fingers. Her nail polish is chipping, and she aches to feel pretty.

“What do you say I skip town and join up with the team again?” she whispers to her inanimate friend who sits silent, killing her cancer. “You wouldn’t rat me out, right? Rat out the lab rat? Of course not; you can’t talk.”

Renee’s eyelids close. She’s running towards them—her WAVE family; they embrace, then begin to pull her back towards the hospital, with Renee kicking and screaming the whole way. A tear drips down her cheek. Even her dreams offer no mercy.

But the children do. Renee finds grace in the way they play, round eyes gentle, bald heads unassuming. Her heart slows to a pitter-patter and she begins to rest.

Alone, it's easy to lose herself in pity. But here, in the Recreation room, surrounded by piano music, colourful Fisher Price toys and children like five-year-old Gray who sits on her lap, the sun shines bright, unwavering.

Gray is smaller than the others, save for his smile. When he laughs he seems as tall as the sky, embracing life with arms which have known nothing but the prick of needles since birth.

He “vroom-vrooms” his toy truck across Renee's arms. His legs are boney, his arms like sticks. She kisses the top of his head, marvels at how smooth it is. There they were, two bald-headed children, finding healing in each other.

“You push now,” he says in a voice that sounds like a squeak, and so she does, “vrooming” it across his stomach and head, making him squeal with laughter.

That night, Claire calls; tells her she's found a job teaching English to women from war-affected countries.

Renee feels the familiar speeding of her heart, the anxious thud of time weighing down her plans, her dreams. Then, Gray's face comes to mind. As Claire talks about this and that, Renee focuses on his smile, then his laughter, over the simple pleasure of pushing a toy truck around.

“Renee? You still there?”

She pulls herself from her reverie. “Yes, I'm here. Sorry—drifted for a second.”

“You doing okay? I miss you.”

Eventually the phone clicks quiet, and Renee lies there, daring to remember old dreams. Her goal to convey truth through the arts.

Two days later Hurricane Katrina hits New Orleans. Families sit on rooftops, begging God to save them as their belongings float away. Renee is pained with sadness. The heartache is too much to handle. *Where is God in moments like these?*

Then she reads of author John Grisham giving five million dollars to the hurricane relief cause, and she smiles at the hint of goodness.

Soon afterwards Angela calls from home. Darren is but a faint shadow of himself. She'd seen him on the streets, his face caved in, his body lost in baggy black.

And once again, Renee weeps. Begs God for his goodness to shine on her brother.

If only we could all see life through the eyes of a child.

*The darkness is my closest friend
I waited for you to find me
But you never came
And now everyone is gone
My soul is dying
The smell of death surrounds me
So I hug the darkness closer
For at least it will always be here
There's a melancholy comfort in shadows
Overwhelmed by the torrential floods
Oh God, why do you not listen to me?
Why do you not answer me?
When did you stop loving me?
What can I do for you in this dishevelled state?
But oh God if you would heal me I would praise you
And proclaim your goodness
What glory is there in letting your children suffer?(r.d.)*

Time erodes Renee's spirit like water on rock.

She's far from the children. An overflow of the young has forced the older ones to leave. Removed from the paediatrics wing, she has no one, save for Thomas. The sound of laughter is but a faint memory.

Now, she's surrounded by the living dead. No more Grays, sitting on her lap "vrooming" toy trucks. No more tender bald heads or large shining eyes. Instead, the patients' skin is leather, stretched tight across jowls. The lines on their faces, like ancient carvings.

She tries to smile. Tries to wish them 'Good Day' and to love them. They merely cackle or spit, or turn away.

Then Angela and Jonathan move close: rent an apartment across the street, and fill Renee's days with a taste of home. And for a while, life is

tolerable. The madness, set at bay. Angela feeds her fresh Cannoli, rich coffee, Thai curry and Lebanese tabouleh. Some days Renee can eat; others, she merely stares at the bright colours and longs to be hungry.

Gilmore Girls preoccupy, while Angela knits, Renee lies flat under a home-knit afghan, and Jonathan does business on his cell. When her blood count allows, they ride the horse and carriage through Central Park and watch the leaves fall like shreds of tissue paper.

But at the end of the day, Renee is always left with empty hallways and the strange noises old people make when they're trying to die.

That's when she buries her head under her pillow and makes up stories about bright lovely places with enormous lollipops and horses that fly. She recalls her Grandmother Guth, homemade chocolate chip cookies, late-night stories. Devises secret plans for escaping the hospital, with Thomas as her accomplice.

Sometimes sleep evades, due to flickering fluorescent lights or the sounds of patients weeping. In those moments she scribbles down reasons the doctors should let her out. And one morning Renee shares these reasons with the doctors, begging them to let her go.

They turn her down flat. Tell her the counts aren't getting any higher. Dr. O'Reilly's face is a riddle—so calm, as if this is normal news. Then he tells them it's been too long. Her counts should have risen by now, and they're concerned. His forehead barely wrinkles.

Angela is there, holding Renee's hand, but Renee is gone. Unable to feel. Unable to think. Her eyes are dry, her mouth a single line in a blank face. She looks like a plastic doll wrapped in a blanket.

Then, "What if the chemo has wiped out my whole immune system??!
If I stay another week, it'll kill me."

Angela's heart shatters into a million pieces—a glass jar against the cement wall. But her voice stays intact.

“You’ll be fine,” she says. “It’s important right now for you to be focused on the other patients here; perhaps you could try going for walks in the evening, and praying for the people whose rooms you’re passing?”

It’s maternal, this strength pulsing through her. As she speaks, she can see him: Jesus, bearing glue. Mending her cracked heart. Putting the pieces back together. *Rest in me*, he says. *I am good*.

That night, Renee whispers down the hallway in her purple slippers. She talks to God in muted tones. And for a while, the moans and groans of people dying seem to cease, in the sanctuary of prayer.

Myrtle Jones is sitting on the edge of her bed like she always does. Counting to ten on her fingers. Trying to remember what comes after “eight”. Her nails are ragged from biting. She bites when she’s nervous. She gets nervous when she can’t remember her numbers. Sometimes when the biting doesn’t work, she grabs her silver curls and yanks.

Renee stands and watches. Prays silently. Suddenly Myrtle’s fingers release. Her forehead un-scrunches. “Nine, ten!” she declares proudly to no one, not having seen Renee who slips away with a small smile.

But then she’s alone, with her thoughts, and they pile up like rocks until she can no longer bear the weight.

“I hate cancer,” she cries into the softness of her pillow. “It’s stolen everything that I loved about my life. And there’s nothing good that I can see coming from this. I haven’t learned any deep meaning to life, I have probably less faith than I’ve ever had and I’m not even being a witness to my family. I want to stand on a mountain and scream at you! I want to rage and cry and feel justified in doing so. I want to feel like I have a right to be mad at you. Not forever; I couldn’t stay mad at you forever, but at least for a while.”

Suddenly, she sees Darren. A picture so clear Renee can’t breathe. He’s huddled in a corner, holding a knife to his wrist. His face is twisted. His body, a rack of bones.

She forgets about herself. Hugs her knees tight and says prayer after prayer for the boy holding the knife. Begs God to save him.

She can hear the slippers shuffling. Wonders if she’s dreaming. Lifts an eyelid. Sees Myrtle’s shaggy head in the shadows. As her eyes adjust she recognizes the flower-print housecoat. Myrtle is a ragged white ghost. Renee shifts in bed, and Myrtle sees. Panics. Runs—straight into the bedside table. Knocks over Renee’s laptop. It’s all so fast Renee can only gasp and then, Myrtle’s gone. Soon, Renee can hear her singing sorrowfully. She slides out of bed, puts her laptop in her drawer. Wanders to Myrtle’s room where she’s sitting, wringing her hands. She’s pulled out her catheter and IV.

Renee pats her on the shoulder. Helps her lie down, tucks the blanket up to her chin. Myrtle looks young. Helpless.

Renee calls a nurse who tends to Myrtle. Then she crawls back into bed.

It takes a long time for her to fall back to sleep. When she does, Myrtle is in her dreams. Smashing Renee’s laptop against the floor and laughing wildly.

Darren wishes the shadows would suffocate him. Sadness sits on his shoulders like a small man. Strangling. He slumps against the paper-thin wall of his basement suite and laughs a weak, high-pitched whistle. He’s remembering being jealous of Renee’s bedroom in the basement. Looking around, he despises his hole in the basement. The grey air. Dark cement walls. The sweet smell of urine. His bed is a thin mattress on the floor. Nothing else, except for a lamp with a broken shade. The bed sheets are clean. If he does sleep, he crashes on top of the faded quilt.

Darren runs shaky fingers through greasy hair. White flakes fall on his black t-shirt. Then he coughs, shakes, so hard his emaciated body bangs against the wall.

The coughing subsides. Leaves him empty, ravaged by the storm. All he has are visions of angry faces for company. Fists, shaking, eyes, scowling. Demanding payment. Around him, needles litter the floor; his arms are purple from bruising. The longer he stares at the bruises, the more they seem like kiss-marks. He longs for another kiss. Longs to rise above this very low moment. But he can't afford to. Couldn't afford the other ones either. So he pulls out the knife.

The blade is smooth, cold. Gripping its sleek handle he feels a rush of power. He can end his life. He presses the blade against his skin. Watches his veins part, blue waves making way for the Moses-staff. For his salvation.

Why stay awake? What is there to live for?

Yet, as the blade digs deep, he sees his family. Their faces, like bubbles in the air. His heart twists. And suddenly, he's a little boy again. Running through the woods. Renee's skinny white legs in front of him. They are orphans, escaping. Behind them, Liana is huffing—she's the orphanage director. Renee stops, begins to climb a tree. He follows, scratching skin. They perch together on a thick branch. She takes his hand in hers, says, "There, you see? I told you I'd take care of you. He's gone now. Everything's going to be okay."

Someone's knocking at the door.

The leaves scatter on the sidewalk before her. It's as if they're leading her. Claire hopes they are. Feels blind, not knowing where he lives. All she has is a request from Jonathan to find Darren and get him on a flight to New York City.

He'd been a go-go dancer downtown. The address of a discothèque is scrunched on a piece of paper in her hand. Autumn winds whip at her coat. Her nose turns red for the cold.

The disco is tucked into a side wall. She steps into a barrage of bright lights and loud music. Girls swivel around poles on the stage. It's Ladies' Night. She breathes deep, wanders towards the back. A bouncer eyes her, arms crossed.

She clears her throat several times. "Hello. I'm, um, here to ask the girls something. About a guy named Darren who used to work here ... He's, uh, gone missing."

His eyebrows are thin and pointed. They rise, jagged mountain peaks. Then he growls, "Fine," and lets her past. "Make it fast. They've got work to do."

The curtain is stained, washed-out pink.

Behind it, very ordinary girls in thin bathrobes pushing up their hair and smoking cigarettes.

She stands awkward. Feels wide in the narrow doorway. The girls turn, eye her suspiciously.

"Yes?" one says. Her voice sounds like a rusty saw on wood.

"I'm sorry to barge in like this," Claire fairly whispers.

"Speak up honey, we can't hear you."

So she does. "I said—I'm sorry to disturb you, but I'm wondering if you know of a guy named Darren who used to be a go-go dancer here? His family's looking for him."

A small girl with freckles steps forward. Her eyes are heavy with black makeup. "Darren—yes, I remember him. Is he okay?"

“I’m not sure; I’m trying to find him to make sure he is. Do you know where I should look?”

“Just a minute.”

She rummages through a bag half her size. Pulls out a torn piece of paper. Hands it to Claire. “Here’s his address. We were friends. Then stuff happened and he stopped showing up, or when he did, he was too stoned to dance... Anyway, tell him hello—from Marcie.”

“Thanks.” It’s all she can do. Turns to leave. “I really appreciate it.”

Darren wakes to find himself lying next to Renee. They look like matchstick children, their faces gaunt, their bones sticking this way and that. He stares at Renee’s bald head in the night-light; fair lashes make shadows on her cheeks; the IV drip-drips through her arm; a pump stands faithfully by the bed.

Then he huddles close to her shoulder. Curles up like a lima bean. Falls into a deep, desperate sleep.

The vomit is unexpected. He smells the food, brought in on breakfast trays. Spews across the room. Warm hand on his back; Renee is smiling. His pale cheeks blush. The nurses hurry to clean. She puts an arm around his 90-pound shell.

“Five years,” she whispers. “It’s been five years since I’ve seen you.”

Angela and Jonathan stand outside the door. Watching and waiting.

“I’m sorry you’re in the hospital,” he says, shy like a little boy. “I had no idea. When Claire told me...”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Renee cuts in. “It’s not your fault. I should have stayed in touch.”

Her eyes are wet. He fiddles with the blanket. “I’ve missed you,” she says quietly.

*I am here in this place you brought me
What do you want? I can't see
Darkness envelopes
Even my brightest days
What once was light is
Impenetrable haze
This is me Lord,
I am nothing
Take what I have, take it all
What little I have is all yours now
In humble repentance I fall
I am just me, no one special
Yet I was chosen by you
I don't deserve the love you give
You're righteous, holy, and true
This is me Lord, you're my everything
You alone can give what I need
Your joy has spread all through me
I'll follow where you lead (r.d.)*

“My inspiration is like my skin. Dried up.”

Renee’s whisper seems too loud in the quiet confines of the New York City community church. Angela nods a bit quickly. An usher passes, seeming to slow by their pew. “And with losing my hair and everything, I’ve also lost my creative vision. It’s hard to write anything, anymore.”

Angela puts a finger to her lips; an arm around Renee’s bony shoulders. Squeezes. Beside her, Jonathan turns off his cell phone. Straightens his tie, as the preacher approaches the pulpit in white flowing folds.

A bitter wind wails against the stained-glass. Tree branches slam, snowy. Winter has arrived with a chip on its shoulder.

The preacher has a deep rolling voice. Welcomes one and all to “God’s House.” Invites everyone to stand and sing “Be Thou My Vision.”

The worship band grips their microphones and closes their eyes, and Renee forces disappointment aside. Raises her hands and tries to imagine heaven. The words are easy, until the last verse:

*High King of heaven, my victory won,
May I reach heaven’s joys, O bright heaven’s Son!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be my vision, O ruler of all.*

Her spirit balks. She finds herself beseeching God: “Not yet. I don’t want to reach heaven yet. Let me stay here a bit longer.”

Finally the song ends and she sits, wobbly of knee. *Will I ever get better? Will I ever know what it’s like to be strong again?* She swallows hard. Can’t help but think it isn’t normal to be so weak.

The transplant has been put on hold. The chemo seems to be working. It’s another blow—Renee had finally grown fond of the transplant idea. Can no longer confide in Thomas for the way he’s been strangling her with his hands full of poison.

She remains seated for the next few songs. Angela sits also. “Thank you,” Renee whispers. Leans, kisses cheek.

“We can worship God just as well from down here,” Angela responds.

Meanwhile, people around them are staring. She tries to ignore their sidelong looks, but cannot. She can hardly blame them. Her head is wrapped in a scarf. She would have worn her wig, but it draws even more attention. It had been the least expensive one her father could find. In spite of a padded wallet, he was frugal.

She’d worn the wig last weekend, having flown out for the Wave’s farewell party in Washington. The team had tried not to look at it, which made it worse.

Everyone had been so kind. Too kind. Their voices tender, as if she would shatter with increased decibels. As if she didn't remember what they normally sounded like.

But could she blame them? *No*. She shakes her head and passes the offering basket silent with paper bills. She'd been their pied piper. Their red-haired mascot who'd laughed loud, now shrivelled into a skinny bald girl with no eyelashes.

"It's easy to pretend not to care what you look like, when you know you look fine," she'd told Indi. "But now, all I can think about is how I long to feel pretty again."

The preacher opens his leather Bible. From the pews, the sound of candy unwrapping, sliding into mouths, crunching, sucking.

He speaks of healing. Of Jesus touching the blind man's eyes with mud. The first time Jesus touched, the man saw shadows. The second time, he saw clearly. It took two tries for the man to be healed.

The preacher compares that story to the creation of Adam—how God made Adam from the dust of the ground. By slathering mud on the blind man's eyes, Jesus had made a new creation, symbolically speaking.

Renee begins to squint at the preacher. To fidget with her bulletin. *Does he know what it's like to be sick? Does he understand what it meant to the blind man to receive sight? For the lepers to be wound-less? For the woman to stop bleeding? If not, how can he possibly speak of suffering? How can he speak of healing having never known what it's like to be truly sick?*

But the idea has been planted. It stretches, grows, entangling her with its roots.

God can heal. God *could* heal her.

Inside her rib cage a bird flutters—a hint of hope she tries hard to ignore.

And in her mind, a little voice, dreaming.

I want to travel again, to go somewhere exotic, dangerous or exciting. I want to teach English in orphanages, to play with Gypsy children, to feed the homeless, to speak to high school students and encourage them in their walk with God, to challenge the church to get involved in missions. I want to eat strange food, and learn about a new culture, and meet new people every day. I want to do anything that's not sitting in a hospital watching TV. I want to make films.

I want to live out of a backpack again, and even sleep on floors, in a different city or town every week. I'm tired of being 'the girl with cancer.' Why can't I be the crazy hippy missionary again?

The thoughts exhaust. She lies down as outside, the sun drips yellow onto white-icing snow. Closes her eyes; finds herself at the edge of the ocean in her night gown. It flips and flaps with the wayward wind. And a voice drifts from across the waters. "Daughter, my dreams for you are bigger than yours," it says. "Let me make them with you."

They give her the news while she sits in the dark room, wearing sunglasses, sipping cocoa.

They give her the news while her skin falls off, dry and poisoned.

They give her the news while the planets continue to sing, suspended, and the world, to rotate—even though for her, it seems to stop, just for a second.

"You can go home."

For a moment she thinks it's a dream. Her eyes are closed, and voices are speaking into the darkness, telling her what she likes to hear.

But then she squeezes open an eye and sees O'Reilly's shadow, illuminated by the soft light of the doorway. Outside the snow plops in soft piles; the church bells begin to ding-dong Christmas carols, and her spirit quickens.

When the door finally shuts, she mouths into the blackness: "Thank you, God."

For a long time her eyes pierce holes into the billowing sheet of darkness. Trying to picture life beyond hospital walls. There are so many things she can do. Where to start?

Once again, she's been reborn. Once again given a second chance.

What do you want with me? What am I to do? Who am I to be?

It would seem they aren't meant to leave, for all the delays. But finally, she is home. Away from New York City's blaring horns and bright lights. Tucked between clean, pressed sheets, surrounded by yellow walls, in silent suburbia. Upon waking, she will begin to squirm with a need to escape the wealth, but for now, she sinks deep into her mattress, and sleeps.

"The voice of the LORD strikes with bolts of lightning. The voice of the LORD makes the barren wilderness quake; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the LORD twists mighty oaks and strips the forests bare."

Psalm 29 stares up at her; ripples like ribbon across her mind. She glances at the baby Jesus in her parents' nativity scene. Tries to reconcile the awesome holiness of God with the chubby little one in a manger.

The smell of leftover turkey lingers. In the kitchen, Angela is whisking pancakes. Soon Renee hears the batter hit the pans with a sizzle.

It's six in the morning. Boxing Day. Renee breathes in the steam of coffee in her hands. Recalls The Laughing Bean, with its bright chairs and big cinnamon buns. Feels like a tourist in her own life.

"That will change," Claire assures her, later that afternoon while painting Renee's toes a fierce red. "Life is funny that way... Sometimes I feel like a tourist, too, in my own country. In my own home."

"Is that because our true home is in heaven?" Renee wishes she could reach out and hug her cousin. It's been so long. Now, she's here—so very close and real.

"I guess so. Someone once said we have a God-shaped hole in our hearts..."

"Blaise Pascal."

"Right. So perhaps that space is like a key-hole to the doorway of heaven. Until the key is inserted, opening up the door, we're going to remain empty. Longing for home."

Renee nods. "Yes, I can see that. Even though I'm out of the hospital, I don't feel content. In fact, I feel more lost than ever before, because so many options are available to me."

She leans forward, a cheeky smile on her pixie face. "You know what though? Today I did absolutely nothing—and it was everything I dreamed it would be. I just sat around the house, read books and magazines, took a nap, worked on scrap-booking my Wave pictures and talked on the phone ... but never once did I change out of my pyjamas or set foot outside."

Claire laughs. "Perfect!"

Chapter 28—Heaven

Renee looks down. “I guess it’s not really that different from what I would do every day in the hospital, only I’m not hooked up to an IV and I don’t have doctors, nurses, and nursing assistants coming in and out all the time. Doing nothing is much more fun when you can do it on your own terms, because you want to and not because you have to.”

“The LORD rules over the floodwaters. The LORD reigns as king forever. The LORD gives his people strength. The LORD blesses them with peace.”

The psalm’s final verses wrap around her that night like a thick wool blanket. She closes her eyes. Everything would become clear, with the dawn of a new day.

It’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen.

The projector screen stretches seamless against the sky. Trees hedge its sides. Creeks bubble and burp along its rim, creating an oasis of hidden pictures.

A long foot-bridge extends wooden planks across shiny stones and rainbow trout. The island is a secret, by invitation only. The Father extends these invitations, sent by messenger angels: gold script scrawled on ivory paper, ushering one onto the island. Only he knows when a person is ready. Able to understand the life they’ve just passed through, as seen through his eyes.

I’m standing stiff-legged in the middle of the island. My eyes are glued shut. I’m a little girl surrounded by foliage and water. I know I look lost, in the centre of this hallowed piece of land, but I don’t want to open my eyes. Don’t want to see what’s going to happen to me.

Cracking open an eyelid, the screen is blank. There’s nothing, save for white space. James, an angel, stands guard by the bridge, should anyone try to pass without invite.

Suddenly, arms wrap tight. Jesus is holding me, telling me I don’t have to do this.

“Then why am I here?” I ask. “Why did the Father extend this invitation?” I recall the gold-sealed envelope which had been resting on my pillow that morning.

The silence is sweet. Hundreds of flowers perfume the air. Lemons and oranges cluster close in bright juicy colours.

“He wondered if you might like to see how the story ends—not through your eyes, but through his. It might be tough, that’s all; trying

to comprehend it, alone. This screen allows you to see through God's eyes; events up until your death, as he saw them."

I don't understand. Won't that give me access to God's mind? Isn't that what got us in trouble in the first place—knowing good and evil?

Jesus shakes his head. Motions to a bench, mossy green. We sit. A lion cub splashes in the creek; shakes herself off, pads across the grass towards our feet. Purring, she rubs her face against my leg. Her fur is rough and warm. Then she curls up into a yellow-fur pretzel. Closes her eyes, and wiggles her nose.

"It's different," Jesus says. "The Father filters through the images; shows you only what you need to know; in His wisdom, He is able to discern what each person can handle, and to focus on that particular aspect of life."

I fiddle with a broken flower stem. "I think I need to see, to understand," I say. "Will I be heartbroken?"

"Perhaps," he replies. "But that's why I'm sitting here with you."

"Why didn't we do this from the start?"

Jesus puts a hand on mine. "Two-fold. First of all, this only centres on pivotal moments. It skips most of the every-day. Secondly, so that you might know how the world sees, versus how God sees."

When I'm ready, the white screen fades, replaced by images as real as day.

It's my life, all over again. I begin to protest, saying I've already seen all this, but I haven't. Not from this angle. I'm looking at it through someone else's eyes. It takes a while before I realize, they're God's eyes.

I'm a baby. Angela is holding me, crying. Cradling me close, crooning in my ears. Then, a random hand extends, as if from the video camera, and brushes away Angela's tears. She doesn't notice. Just keeps singing.

"Was that.... my Dad's hand?" I ask.

"I am always with you, until the end," Jesus says.

"It was you." I look down at his hands, equally knotted and gentle. "You were with me from the start."

I pause. "And, there is no true end—only a new beginning, correct?" Turning back to the screen I catch a smile crossing Jesus' face.

"Yes, my girl," he says quietly. "You're learning fast."

The images flicker between night and day; I watch myself as an infant, being carried into the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Centre; lying in bed, tiny and frail, being fed by an IV; doctors coming and going; purple and screaming; then, the hands, knotted and gentle, extending from the screen—picking me up, rocking me.

"You rocked me to sleep?" I look at Jesus.

Again, he nods. The film continues in this pattern, showing God ever present, ever loving; whenever I tripped or fell, he was there kissing boo-boos, hugging me at night and whispering sweet peace into my ears as I awoke. He stood guard over me as I rode a horse for the first time, jumped off my deck, learned to ride a bike and drive.

"How did I never feel you? Or see you?" I turn. Jesus has vanished. In a moment something tickles my arm. It's a butterfly, with orange-tipped wings.

"Can you see me now?"

The butterfly is talking. I laugh; recall him telling me the butterfly would be a symbol of hope on earth. In a moment, Jesus is back in human form, sitting beside me.

"I get it. I've felt you many times; I just didn't know it."

“I am in the wind; I am in the stars at night; the flowers of spring; the rush of a babbling brook; the dawn of day, and the sunset. And I am in the butterfly.”

“But then, if you are everywhere, always with us, then why...?”

“Why do people still get hurt?”

Jesus sighs, releasing a reservoir of pent-up strength, and I feel a chill in spite of myself. “Because evil resides on earth. And as much as we’d like for earth to be heaven, humans made that choice a long time ago—you wanted to be masters of your own domain. But you were already being mastered by Satan. So the Father gave Satan earth. You see, you can only serve one master—God, or his enemy. So as much as we want to protect you from pain and suffering, some things, like disease, have to take their own course—and can only be cured upon arrival in heaven.”

The film is stationary, having paused when I looked away; I look back; shudder. It’s stuck on a picture of me with no hair, lying in the hospital, clutching a pillow to my chest, sobbing. Drops like rain smudge the lens.

“God is crying,” I whisper.

Jesus looks at the screen, nods. “Picture your child going through unbearable pain; that is how we feel, every time one of you suffers.”

I find it hard to believe. Standing up I wander to the creek, stick my bare feet in, let the water wash between my toes. The lion cub joins me; red tongue, gentle licks.

“If you cared, I would think you’d stop the suffering,” I say. “I mean, you could.”

“Satan will do anything to drive a wedge between God and his people; he dishes out disease like main course,” Jesus says. “He uses every kind of trial and tribulation to wear down people’s faith. It’s a constant war. We win some, and we lose some. But in the end, we will not hold back. We

will take our people home, and Satan will not be able to hurt them anymore.”

I don’t have anything else to add.

“Are you ready to watch the rest?”

“How much more is there?”

“Now, that’s a trick question.” He helps me to my feet. “You’ll need to watch to find out.”

And so I do, not knowing how it hurt Jesus to watch me suffer all over again.

Chapter 29—Baby Steps
February 2006

*Doubt and fear oppress me
I'm sinking in this sand
I feel like I'm alone
Do you still hold my hand?
I'm slipping from the rock
And bit by bit I'm dying
Do you hear my tortured screams?
Here in the night – I'm crying
I can't see you, the night is all around
Will tomorrow ever come?
I can't see it, all I see it emptiness
To the despair I succumb
I need you to help me make it
To take this just a day at a time
Clinging to you every moment
Holding on till I am strong enough to climb (r.d.)*

Cancer has proven a voracious thief. Stealing six months of her life, then stepping back in, robbing her of fertility. Removing forever her chance to have a child.

She hurls fists in God's face, water weeping down hers. Once again wonders where he is in the hell that torments. *Why me? Why now? And When will it end?*

The chemo has been too much for her ovaries, doctors tell her. Impregnated with poison, they've perished. Folded up on themselves, denying Renee of dreams to one day be a mother.

Yet another sacrifice, demanded of her without permission. *Where are you God, so 'good and loving'? She cries. Why won't you come down? Save me?*

And then, a pregnant friend gives birth. Emails dozens of photos: doting parents and perfect child. Scissors to Renee's soul.

She feels like Lazarus's sister: 'Lord, if you had only been here.' Supposedly he is, yet she cannot feel him. Nor is there evidence of people rising from the dead. "What really gets me is how before, I was so sure that you were there," she scribbles in fierce black ink across her prayer journal. "I'm not at all the same person I was a year ago."

The winter days are dark, striped only with the faintest of lights. Through the window, she glimpses a mom pushing a stroller. On the sidewalk, a baby's tiny pink mitt. The sorrow is unstoppable. Tears, just a Fisher Price commercial away.

Even at work, serving customers fair-trade products at Winnipeg's Global Connections, she can hear them in the cracks and crannies—the tiny voices of her unborn children, weeping to be held.

And when it seems nothing can get worse, she is fired. Let go. Released of income and responsibility. For reasons undefined.

"I feel like my faith is dead and I'm not quite sure how to resurrect it." Her words bleed with tear water. Smear her prayer-pages with sadness. "Of course it's not really dead, or I wouldn't even be talking to you at all. It's just tired. Tired of believing that there's a reason for everything. Tired of never knowing for sure if I'm doing the right thing. Tired of doubting. Tired of being angry. Tired of feeling like a failure."

A voice so quiet it sounds like a secret: "This too shall pass."

And she knows it will. Everything does. It's the 'in-between' stage which is killing her: the waiting which makes her double over with pain. She feels like Job. Hates the clichéd reference. Seeks refuge in Brian McLaren's *A New Kind of Christian*, yet can barely read for their faces dancing before her: beautiful baby faces, dimpled and round, mouths gurgling, big eyes gaping then squinting in laughter. She sees herself holding them, rocking them, singing them to sleep under wide

open skies but then the heavens open and hail rains down in torrents and she can't save her children. Can only watch as they drown in the storm.

She finds comfort in poetry by Dylan Thomas. Specifically, in his poem, 'Do not go gentle into that good night,' where he entreats his readers to fight, to 'rage against the dying of the light,' to not go down quietly but rather, kicking and screaming.

Then, there is fearlessness, found in John Donne's sonnet, 'Death be not proud.' While inexplicit, its words triumphantly declare Christ's power over death. Its boldness makes her itch for the recklessness of Thomas, yet all she can do is lie on her bed and wish the nightmares away. For the present.

"I wish I could hear you like I used to," she pens to God. "I wish I knew for sure what was right. Why don't you make things clear anymore?"

Again: "This too shall pass," but she realizes: with the passing of one hardship arises another. And she breaks down.

One evening, as twilight tiptoes across the skies, Angela brings her daughter a mug of cocoa. Renee has gone into hiding since getting fired. Stepping towards her yellow-walled room, Angela feels the darkness before she sees it. Something is shrouding her baby girl in black.

Renee is curled up on the bed, journal in hand, blank pages staring outwards. Curtains are drawn, and the only light is a flickering candle on her bedside table. Papers and clothes litter the floor; a book lies unread, unopened on her dresser. The air smells like sleep, although judging from Renee's pale, wan face, she's been doing anything but.

From the bed, a voice, tight with unspent tears: "Even if I find a man someday, I will never have children of my own."

Angela steadies herself. Sets the cocoa by the bed, and settles down by Renee's bare feet. Renee's eyes are as red as the newly dyed hair which powders her head. Angela places a smooth hand on hers. For a moment, something flickers in Renee's eyes. She looks up, offers a faint smile. "I

feel like God is telling me I need to walk in my healing," she says in a voice scratchy with disuse. "But how can I, when parts of me will never be the same?"

Then, the mood shifts. She pounds her pillow with a free hand. "Nothing good came out of it," she cries. "You guys are no closer to God, or to each other... what else would he have wanted from my suffering?!"

Angela is startled; says nothing. Knows not what to say. Hadn't expected Renee to justify her sickness by her family's relationships. Hadn't realized the extent to which Renee loved them, prayed for them, grieved for them.

Darren's face comes to mind—his gaunt, skeletal face and body. She remembers him lying next to Renee in her hospital bed. Can still see them giggling.

"That's not true," she tells Renee, shaking her head. "Your brother's life was saved by you being sick. He would have killed himself if it weren't for us getting him on the plane to come see you in the hospital."

Her eyes are misty now. Darkness is settling in the room, like tea leaves in hot water. She pulls Renee to her and begins to play with her hair as if she were little again.

Renee has stopped crying. Is silent, as twilight turns to night.

Then, "I remember being in love with God. Sitting on those rocks by the Connecticut Shore, feeling the sunshine and knowing I was completely loved. I don't think I've experienced God or love or anything in a while."

She feels her mother's hands, worn and soft, hesitate for just a moment. Is quick to add, "I know you love me, Mom. I've never doubted that. I'm sorry—I should not take you for granted. You are so good to me."

“Not to worry—I know what you mean,” Angela says in her quiet way.

Lying there in her mother’s lap, Renee begins to rest. To let herself breathe.

Another line from Donne’s sonnet presses across her mental landscape: “Batter my heart, three-personed God.”

For her, it describes love far better than any of his romantic poems ever could.

Chapter 30—More than a Shadow
March 2006

*I feel smaller than the smallest bug
I feel invisible to you
Your hands hold the whole earth
But somehow you dropped me
And now I’m broken
If you wanted to change me again
Wasn’t there an easier way?
I used to be your lover
Now I’m a hardened, uninteresting lump of clay
Who doesn’t have eyes to see you
A mouth to speak or even ears to hear you
I can’t reach out and touch you
But must wait for you to put your hands
Around me
Pulling, stretching, squeezing
Please stop, I’m already broken
What can you do with me now
That you couldn’t before?
I’m so small that I would drown
In one of your tears (r.d.)*

Winter melts with a silent splash, leaving spring, wet and wide-eyed, in its wake.

Renee’s spirit quickens with the sight of dripping icicles, the songs of breathless birds flying home, the croak of frogs clearing their throats after a long cold silence.

The sun is hesitant; coaxing crocuses and daffodils to the surface, dripping like liquid butter on the backs of spindly-legged calves, making grass green and the world take on a newborn’s pink glow.

Renee feels much like a calf, trying out its new legs. Wobbly legs. Walking in a faith which had disappointed. One minute she’s standing. The next, collapsing.

“I waver back and forth so much, even in one day, between having faith and not,” she confesses one morning when the air smells fresh like laundry.

The clouds disperse lazily across a plate of blue. Renee and Claire sit on Renee’s parents’ patio. Stare across neighbours’ yawning lawns and empty fire pits. The buds on the trees are splitting open like green smiles. The ground is plump from last night’s rainfall.

“I think that’s only natural,” Claire says, licking the honey off her spoon. She sips her herbal tea.

“Is it?”

A robin jabs its beak into bird seed, scattered on the ground. Stabs, repeatedly. Renee watches, her cheeks flushed; her red hair short and tousled. “I guess I feel like everything I’ve been taught could be a lie. You know?”

This reaches out, grabs Claire’s attention; makes her sit back, consider.

“I’ve survived cancer and I still believe in God—sometimes—but if he made something even worse happen to me just to make me a better person, I think I would hate him.”

Renee swallows down the bitter lump of words. Continues slowly. “But I know him. He isn’t like that, and that’s what I have to keep fighting against. I just can’t stand the thought of him having done all that to me. If he was trying to build character in me, there are a lot of other ways. I’m not sure which is worse—for pain to be part of his cosmic plan to bring about good, or for it to be about nothing.”

Claire nods. “He seems almost heartless sometimes, allowing these things to happen.”

Then she takes a deep breath; plunges. “And I don’t really have answers for you—I don’t know if any of us do, except that, if you *do* feel him at all; if you see *any* sign of him in anything around you, or in the people that you know, and you find these signs and wonders good, then I think you can believe he has your best intentions at heart.”

“I know. I *do* see him...” Pregnant pause. “I see him in a baby’s birth, in springtime, in fall; I see death and life—it’s all a big cycle and it’s orchestrated so perfectly I know someone, somewhere out there, has to be in charge. And...” Renee pauses, “I feel him inside me, speaking to me, sometimes, but it doesn’t change the fact that he let me down. He let me go through something really hard, and, I’m just afraid... of what else he might make me go through. I’m afraid, well, that this healing is only temporary.”

Renee bursts into tears. Claire is devastated. “Oh honey.” She puts her arms around Renee; waits till the sobbing has ceased.

“I’m so emotional right now.” Renee hiccoughs. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s going on... I’m scared to death of relapsing. My faith made it through one round of cancer, but I don’t think it would fare so well in the second... Why do people think having cancer makes you a better person or something? I mean, I suppose my story could inspire people, but I feel like a fake. I did nothing heroic. I kept breathing.”

“It’s very natural for you to feel vulnerable. You put your faith, your life, in the hands of someone you’d never seen, and then it felt like he dropped you.”

She pushes back her chair. Crosses her legs. “I don’t think it’s wrong for you to question God, or to feel angry. On the contrary—I think it’s vital for starting over. Just don’t get stuck in the ‘What If’s’.”

Renee takes a sip of tea.

Claire clears her throat. “I know, I know. It’s a crappy world, owned by someone who wants us to fail. To throw in the towel, and to give up on God. Satan’s goal is to make you hate God, to think he doesn’t care about you. But he *does*. And one day, he’ll be able to show you that fully—in heaven. Meanwhile, trust that he’s going to take care of you—no matter what happens—and that he loves you.”

They sit in silence. Below them, the earth seems to groan with birthing pains.

“You know, I don’t think it’s about God building good character in us,” Claire continues. “I think it’s about us relating to him in everything, even in our suffering. Because without hardships, we’ll never become like him. Sorrow makes us die to ourselves. In you, I see him. He sees the little sparrow fall. How much *more* does he long to comfort us, when we fall.”

Suddenly, a shaft of yellow light through thin cumulus clouds. It’s as if the day is finally awakening—breaking free of the rain, daring to shine.

Renee prays silently. “God, show me what is life; what is real. I will never stop following you, but every once in a while, I’d like to see if what I’m following is more than a shadow.”

Time speeds by. Renee stares after it, like a girl watching a train, aching to be on it, wondering where it's going.

She wanders the hallways of Winnipeg's Canadian Mennonite University feeling restless, claustrophobic. It isn't enough just to be learning—she wants to study what she's *meant* to.

"You should consider working for Vidir Biomass," her father says one night over supper. Referring to his own company. She pushes food listlessly around her plate. He leans forward, grey hair fringing laughter lines. "I think, if you worked hard, I could hand it over to you, one day," he says with a wink, as if it's an honour. And it would have been—if it weren't for Renee.

She can't explain it to anyone, not even Claire. Doesn't want to believe it herself, yet cannot shake the voice. The memory.

The horse had stood over her, nickering softly. Nudging her face with a soft wet nose. Morning was suddenly night, flashing with stars, swirling around her head. The fall had been sudden, unforeseen. One minute she'd been riding bareback. The next, she was flat on her back. At eight, Renee was fearless. But in that moment, lying there on the shorn wheat field, autumn's colours as red as the blood on her forehead, she'd felt a twinge of uncertainty.

And she'd heard, "Your days are numbered. Live them wisely."

At the time, she'd shaken the voice off. "So silly," she'd scoffed, getting up and brushing herself off.

But it hadn't left her, all these years. That voice, sounding in her ears, reminding her to count days gone by.

Now it makes her crumple into tears, weeping dusk till dawn, balancing the weight of people's expectations with the fear of not truly living. *Should I stay and run the business? No—that would be heeding money; life is more than that.*

"When you gotta go, you gotta go," she finally tells her Dad. "I cannot live my life according to other people's expectations. I need to do what God wants."

But what *does* he want? And how much time does she have, to accomplish all she wants to do?

She watches *Water*, a movie about widows forced into poverty in the city of Varanasi, India—a melting pot, where life and death join hands. The women's faces plead with Renee's over the screen; their palms stretch out; tears drip down Renee's face and she feels herself falling on the living room carpet, begging God to see the pain in this world, to make it go away.

"How can you let people be so ill-treated?" she cries. "How can people have so little conscience? My heart bleeds for the poor, the marginalized, the beat-up and broken-down Lord. I want to make it better."

And then it comes to her—the voice. It sounds the same as it had in the fields, only its message is different: "Let the world see itself through your eyes."

She remains there, folded up on the carpet, feeling the felted textures between her fingertips.

And in a moment, she knows. She's to make movies.

It's a word discovered one day in a book. It sums up her very reason for wanting to make films. It forms the roots of justice. Declares hope for the unpardoned.

Atonement. At-one-ment.

God is about being one with the world. The whole world. She will portray this furious desire through film, providing a visual landscape for an invisible God. It will be her red ribbon theme.

“I will bring your hope to them,” she whispers into her pillow at night. “Oh Lord, let me go to Iraq and Sudan and Cambodia, and make movies about the forgotten people. Let me see with your eyes, so I don’t miss those you want to be heard.”

Then questions probe ugly heads: *When? How?* And of course, the *What If’s*. But, as the answers arise, the questions prove harmless.

Vancouver—Renee’s city by the sea—lifts its warm face and smiles, blue eyes shining across swollen plains. And Renee smiles back. Scours the internet for schools on the west coast. Applies for what she deems the friendliest option—Capilano University, in the north end of town. Its film centre offers a two-year Motion Picture Production Diploma Program, promising to establish “creative, entrepreneurial film makers for both the Independent and Hollywood scene.”

And so it is that with spring’s first apple blossoms, Renee finds herself skipping on thin white legs down nearby sidewalks. She feels very little and very young. Everywhere she goes, she makes movies in her mind; she lets the camera roll over an elderly couple stepping slowly across the street, one with her blue-veined hand on the other. The movie tells their love story. She envisions the sad-looking mail-lady finding a letter addressed to her; she’ll then release long black hair and run away to Paris to fulfill a lifelong dream of painting. And the stocky grocery clerk is a dancer in disguise, who will one day wow the world with his quick steps.

Then, it arrives. A letter addressed to Renee VonDyke. Renee dials the cousins, and they meet at their old stomping ground: the Mercato Café. Lick gelato-covered spoons, and giggle as if they’re back in high school. Then, when the final bowl is streaked with fingers swiping at final drops, Renee grabs their sticky hands. Squeezes.

“I’ve got big news,” she says. Their eyes are glued. “I’ve been accepted into film school. I’m moving back to Vancouver!”

A unified squeal, then a flurry of hugs and kisses seal the afternoon.

That night, as Renee sits on her patio, she stares up into the Milky Way and smiles.

Chapter 31—Call of the Middle East
April 2006

*For a moment beauty unites us
The naked eye a wounded soul
A shooting star briefly illuminated
In the dark night
It is true that evil and hatred
Exist everywhere
But in some small way
So do goodness and truth (r.d.)*

She can't erase the memory of the butterflies.

How they hovered like whispers of hope in the graveyard of forgotten people.

Even as she serves at Winnipeg's soup kitchens, she sees them. Fluttering over walking graves: men and women so used to depravity that a bowl of soup makes them gape toothless smiles.

She pictures the butterflies landing on their shoulders; following them back to the rickety tables where they slurp up soup on wobbly spoons then shyly return for more.

Flash of colour, flap of wing—a symbol of purity, in a world full of suffering.

April's winds blow soft and low, breathing colour into cheeks and pushing rain clouds away. Renee picks up the phone and calls her cousin Claire.

She and Claire share bleeding hearts; have, since childhood. Even as other girls had shopped for jewellery and giggled over guys, they'd slipped off to Missions Fest; sat enraptured by stories of missionaries living dangerous lives.

Then, the summer they lived together, many nights were spent under blankets whispering about made-up lives in China, as part of the underground church, smuggling Bibles and tracts in the name of God and living each day as if it were their last.

Claire answers the phone. Renee's palms are sweaty. Now is the time. Now is when their dreams can accumulate in a trip to the Middle East, where life is indeed, dangerous, and each day, somebody's last.

And so it is that a trip to Lebanon is organized in excited phone whispers.

Chapter 32—Land of Cedar
July 2006

*It's been so long
Since I've felt this way
So long since I stood
On this mountaintop with you
But now we are alone
With nothing but the grass
The trees and the clear blue sky
It goes on forever
Just like your love for me
I don't know where it begins
And if it will end I only know that it is here
Under the sun you see everything
You see through my shallow motives
And tell me I can be me
I am free to be your child
You hold me and you love me
I can't wait to come again
The separation won't be so long this time
I'll be back again soon (r.d.)*

They're everywhere: the Lebanese soldiers. Even in the blue midnight air, Renee and Claire can see them—strong-jawed men in green; guns strapped like extensions of leg; men standing upright, alert beyond measure.

Houses stretch sideways out of round hills. Piled up on top of each other, colorful shoddy shacks stacked like Lego.

Markets sprawl across empty parking lots where men sell coffee beans out of floppy burlap bags. Farmers parade skinny goats and chickens. Corn on the cob is sold by wrinkled women on street corners, warm, for snacking on; mana'ish, or flat dough stuffed with cheese, is baked in large furnace-type ovens and sold as lunchtime sandwiches. Renee grows

accustomed to the inexpensive, smoky delicacy, the way cheese strings tickle her cheeks, the way the soft dough fills her stomach.

Palm trees line the roads, heavy with coconuts. Fishermen guard the shores of the Mediterranean, lines heavy with fish. And boats dot the ocean waves, like blue-smudged fingerprints. Above and beyond, the hills are splattered with cedars short and stout—cedars as old as the flood.

Standing, looking out over the grassy foothills Renee can hear Jesus calling to his people; can see where his footprints left dents in the sand, where his blood stained the sunset red. And a single teardrop rolls down her cheek. It's their third night in Lebanon.

They find it easy to worship in this valley of olive branches. Sit on their balcony in the village of Aley, surrounded by grape-vine roofs and winding paths. And there, as the sun spills orange and red in a final salute they open their Bibles. Read Revelations 4. Let the image of God on his throne, of penitent powerful beings bowing, circling his majesty, carry them to bed.

A rooster cock-a-doodle-does, waking them each morning. Starry-eyed in the land of cedar. Breakfast is flat bread with fig jam on the balcony. Staring out over donkeys grazing and mothers baking bread over open kilns. Elderly men tap sticks on paths. Children run to school. The call to prayer is haunting, beautiful. It resonates across the hillside, echoing centuries past.

They spend their days skirting the language, smiling large and playing with children at local schools. The children with cinnamon skin whose brown eyes light up at the sight of 'ajnabiyy' or 'foreigners'. Conversations are awkward silences pebbled with random English phrases such as 'The weather is cloudy' or 'Today is Monday.'

Teachers beg the girls with pleading hands to help them lead class. This results in much play, little study, and great thrill. Renee strums her

guitar, sings a chorus no one can refuse. Claire uses socks for puppets. Makes up a story.

Wandering home at day's end the women stand in their doorways with their brooms, calling out 'Tfadeli' or 'Enter!' And so they do. Sit for 'mettea'—tea leaves stuffed in a tiny container smothered in sugar and hot water, sucked up by a tiny metal straw. Eat piles of fruit and smile politely. Admire the fancy cushions and ornate rugs. Sometimes Renee sings, and they clap and laugh. Look disappointed when the girls leave. It's their way of surviving, this afternoon company, in a land where males crowd together, discussing politics, religion. Leaving their wives at home.

Women are treated like children, simple of mind. You'd never guess they were dying inside for their smiles spread thick as butter across well-worn wrinkles, the energetic 'Marhabba habibi' or 'Ahlan wa sahlam.'

Appearance is everything in this land of richly adorned, poorly constructed houses.

But at night, as she lies in bed, Renee swears she can hear the muffled sobs of women crying into their pillows, long after their husbands begin to snore.

One evening they sit and read, as per usual, Revelations 4. Renee begins to leak tears. Looks bashfully at Claire. Is shocked to find she's crying, also.

"It's just so scary," says Renee. "To think of God, sitting there, in utter holiness, while we carry on down here without the slightest fear of him. I mean, I'm so scared of missing something—of not knowing what it was I was meant to know about my relationship with him, while on earth."

She takes a deep breath, exhausted; her tears taper.

Claire nods. Pulls up her feet. "I know. I fear that too—and yet, isn't that the point? To be afraid of missing it? To live in awe of what God could do, should he decide to?"

The wind smells of mint. It's cool, soft. Below, olive tree leaves dance silver in the moonlight. "I mean, were we to assume our relationship with God was perfect, *then* we'd be wrong," Claire continues. "We wouldn't know what it meant to truly worship him. But I think living in awe of him, and begging him for mercy and guidance, is precisely what he wants of us."

Suddenly, "We only have a couple more days, and I feel that I need to share something with you," Renee says.

"Okay." Claire's eyes are shiny tinfoil.

Renee clears her throat. A faint blush paints fragile cheekbones. "You know the Palestinian camp?"

"Yes—in Beirut?"

"Mhmm. I know we've only seen it a few times, but every day I've thought of it and, well... this is going to sound crazy..."

Their faces are dark with unwashed dirt and too much sunshine. They're dressed in tattered rags, little bellies peeking out from behind ratty curtains. Lined up in a row, thumbs in mouth, the children stare at the girls as they enter Beirut's Palestinian camp.

Renee cannot believe the poverty. The garbage, the rats, the children playing in piles of rocks. Cardboard houses, some with metal roofs, are crammed close to one another. Women in brightly patterned skirts and men in torn shirts and cotton pants are working, sweeping dirt, fixing cars, wringing out clothes to hang on makeshift lines, stoking fires for pots of tea, and cooking flat bread.

Two little girls with long stringy hair run up and grab Renee's and Claire's hands. The other children stand back, guarded. Renee smiles,

tousles their hair. They look up with smudged faces, dimples forming by their mouths. Their eyes are grey washed stones.

Over the next two days they refuse to part, the little ones from their foreigner friends. Renee and Claire cling too. Sit for hours on a blanket making balloon animals of all colours and shapes. When the animals don't turn out, they invent names for them like 'paloompamouse' or 'hide-a-tail's. The children don't understand, but they laugh at the silly sounds, clutch their animals tight—sometimes too tight. Even when they burst, the children pick up the rubber remains as if they're priceless valuables. Stick them in their pockets.

The adults observe from afar, seeming suspicious, but then as evening approaches and music strikes up in a run-down café where men smoke Argille pipes and the women sip tea, they begin to engage. To fall in love with the white foreigners who easily dance and smile.

Then, they must leave—pulling out of camp in a swirl of taxi dust. The two little girls with stringy hair chase after the taxi, tears leaving trails on dirty skin. Wave until they cannot see.

Renee doesn't forget the children's tiny faces, their little bellies, the way they'd run forever in their bare feet along the dirt road, desperate to hold on.

And as the plane flies home over the Atlantic, she determines to one day return to the forgotten people of Palestine.

Chapter 33—Falling for Film
September 2006

*You were a stranger to me
The first time that we made love
You were wrapped in secrets
And mystery I thrilled to uncover
I swallowed you up like I was starving
Like I was drowning
But just as I pulled the last membranes away
You went and changed
I would have left you there
So plain and un-beautiful
Except I felt a familiar ache in you
I laboured again to uncover you
To learn who you really were
Without the mystery
I discovered page after page
In the measureless ocean of your eyes
And when I thought I had reached the last one
You transcended
And I felt you on my skin (r.d.)*

The suite is a pale, sickly yellow.

The landlords give them permission to paint, and so they do: Lily and Renee, roommates in Vancouver. Lily is saving money, working in a coffee shop. Renee is studying film.

They dip brushes in cans of discarded colours. Slop them around their little home in old T-shirts and sweats. Dig out old bicycles to ride, old couches to fill their empty living room, and old movies from the library to watch on Lily's tiny 15-inch television set.

Capilano's campus is tucked into the slopes of the North Shore like a perfect secret. Just 20 minutes from downtown Vancouver, the college combines quiet study with the whispers of the sea.

Her first week, Renee walks to class in a stupor. Cannot believe she's finally here. It seems only yesterday she was curled up in her Winnipeg bed, fearing a relapse.

Yet as the weeks pass, she feels strong. Cancer-free.

Creativity pulses through ligaments. She embraces every waking hour, sensing its promise, dreading nothing save the night which forces her to lie down and sleep. The only reminders of her prior diagnosis are the monthly blood tests. She closes her eyes, and they're gone. Fleeting, unfriendly.

Sacha of heart-shape face and long black hair becomes her friend. Shares her outlook on faith and film. She sits behind Renee in both Screenplay and Theory.

Together they spend twilight hours mulling over movies and ideas at the Afghan Horsemen, where they tuck away plates of Aushak or Afghan Ravioli, and envision changing the world through film.

Their vision unites countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan or Palestine—whose victims of war find peace in the pictures.

One November night when the Aushak is particularly soft and cheesy, Renee twirls a cheddar strand around her fork. Then she leans her head to one side.

Sacha knows what it means when Renee cocks her head, so she waits. Busies herself with excavating the ravioli.

"I want to make films that capture God's heart for his people ... without selling out," Renee finally utters. She sets down her fork, takes a swig of Stout. "You know? Why do we have to be cliché, just because we're Christians? Shouldn't being tapped into a personal relationship with God release our creativity, not stifle it??"

It is Sacha's turn to tilt her head. "Yes," she says, slowly. "But I think it's easier for people to embrace rules rather than grace. Plus, when we release, and 'let go', it's easier to fall into sin—I think people are fearful of that, so they stay away from the creative-pool all together."

"You mean, the whole 'sink or swim' philosophy?"

"I guess so, in a way."

Renee leans forward, eyes made bright by a teal scarf wrapped around her neck.

"What people don't realize is the Bible encourages us to leap into the 'pool'," she says. "Ecclesiastes 11:1—'Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.' It means, take a risk—give liberally and live dangerously, trusting you will be taken care of. I think far too many of us say we trust in God while living in the confines of self-erected fences."

The restaurant door swings open. A young lady and man walk in, she on his arm, gazing up; he, smiling down. Renee rolls her eyes and Sacha laughs.

"Someone told me the other day that God's backyard is big," says Sacha, "so we shouldn't be afraid to play in it. Perfect love casts out fear."

"Hmm, good analogy."

They scrape plates clean, polish off beers.

"Speaking of love..." Sacha says, wiping a hand across her mouth. "You remember Tim, right?"

"Tim Kirk? From class? Of course... what about him?" Renee is looking for her wallet; doesn't see the strawberry flush spread across Sacha's cheeks.

“Um, well, we’re kind of seeing each other…”

Renee’s hands still; eyes lift. “Oh! Wow. I had no idea—that’s so great, Sacha. Wow.”

Sacha leans forward. “Are you sure? I mean, you’ve known Tim for so long…”

“...but that doesn’t make him mine! Of course it’s okay!” Renee smiles. “I’m seriously glad for you. You’re both great friends—I want to see you happy.”

Sacha grins. Her cheeks look like small pink balloons about to burst.

They leave the restaurant, step onto grey sidewalks crowded with colourful couples. The world suddenly feels like a very lonely place.

The theatre is quiet save for the sounds of Chinese Type 59 tanks rolling across the screen. It’s the Amnesty International Film Festival. The Pacific Cinematheque is crowded with art and movie lovers. Renee sits motionless beside Sacha. She’s watched 10 documentaries over the past two days. A flood of images compete for approval. Yet the tanks quickly steal her attention.

The red folds of the People’s Republic of China flag flap noiselessly in the wind. Its golden stars, oblivious emblems of hope in a land of oppression.

The camera pans over screaming students, raging bonfires, men on stretchers, girls lying dead, protest signs smashed in dirt. And the tanks—countless tanks, rolling over the desperate courage of a smothered people, suffocating their chants, ending their cries for freedom, forever.

On June 5, 1989, the day following the senseless massacre, silver smog lifts with the coming of dawn. Beneath the cloud, hundreds of murdered

bodies—mere children who’ve stood up for their rights, marching the streets for the past five weeks.

One by one, the tanks appear, engaging in what has been described as a dance—an absurd waltz of victory. They make their way, guns high, down abandoned streets, revelling in blood-stained victory.

And then, there he is—the Unknown Rebel of the June Fourth Incident. A grocery bag in hand, he seems an ordinary man, stepping out in extraordinary shoes, standing tall, shoulders slightly bent, white collar shirt stained with sweat and fatigue, blue dress pants creased, worn. He stands before dozens of tanks, blocking their route. Behind him, bodies in peaceful piles.

Perhaps this silent man realizes nothing more can be said? Perhaps he’s spent the last few days huddled in his tiny apartment, head bent over knees, weeping endlessly for someone he loved—someone killed by the very tanks he now faces?

Or perhaps he is just tired of words—useless words, flapping like China’s red flag in a perfectly controlled wind.

And so he *does* something. While seemingly suicidal, he merely exhibits a nonchalant *laissez-faire* attitude: whatever must be, *will* be.

And so, it is. The tank tries to roll around the man; he jumps in front of it. It turns the other way; he follows. Then the tank does the unthinkable and shuts off its engine. The other tanks follow suit, and for a moment—inconceivable quiet.

The man jumps up on the tank, opens its lid and says something to the people inside. Then he leaps back down and continues to stand there. Renee finds herself breathing deep, praying for the man on the screen. Laughs quietly at her absurdity. When men in street clothes come and escort the man off the stage, tears sprout and Renee is lost in an accidental puddle.

It isn't that she feels sad for the lone defiant. Rather, she's bursting with something like pride, as if he were her son. There he stands, oblivious to impending international fame, to thousands of shutters clicking and cameras rolling. All that matters to him is his duty to stand there, to force a deliberate decision in the face of tragedy. Will they choose to let live, or let die? The man knows, in that moment, he isn't alone: crowded around him are millions of martyred, slaughtered souls who've dared to fight for what they believe—ghosts of China's long forgotten, the soundless sighs of unsung heroes.

Overnight his photo will inspire a world. Overnight his picture will become a symbol of peace, of spirits exploding in an otherwise stifled country. The nameless, faceless figure will serve as a muse for those trapped in labour camps, for those continuing the fight for freedom. Yet all he's trying to do is abide in a world gone mad.

And something clicks inside Renee: Life isn't about being in the spotlight; it isn't about finding true love, or traveling, or drinking fair-trade coffee. Life is about standing up to the tanks—daring to stand, in the face of war, peacefully waiting, being willing to die, in order to make a difference.

Hector's purr is a rusty machine. He sticks out a sand-paper tongue, swipes her hand. Renee rubs between his ears. He whimpers on skinny grey legs, then curls up on the carpet and begins to clean himself. Hector has made their home his, and she doesn't mind. But she's writing—craving uninterrupted space.

"I want to make movies that show both the good and the bad side of religion," she scrawls in near-frantic script. "I don't want to tell the audience what to believe, and I don't want it to be too flat or two-dimensional."

Pauses. "Do we need to obey you blindly?" she asks God on paper. "I'm still struggling with the whole metaphor of 'army' to describe the church. On some levels it works. We need to be out there, standing up, doing

something as opposed to being dead and apathetic. But there's just too much of the war rhetoric. It can be used to manipulate, just as war recruiters use the ideals of nobility, honour, et cetera to manipulate young men into thinking that's what war is."

She rests her pen. Sighs. It isn't enough to just write. She wants action. She wants to face the tanks and make a difference.

Chapter 34—Imagination’s Scope
Spring 2007

Arise, my beloved
Fall into me
See my darling
How beautiful you are
Like a lily, like a sweet apple
The winter has gone
Spring is here and the
Forest and meadows are alive
Come away with me (r.d.)

Time is a winged creature in the face of unfulfilled dreams.

For Renee, it seems her year at film school is over as soon as it’s begun. Summertime looms large—four months of potential; four months of craven chances. But all she wants is to keep making movies.

Lessons from school whirl around in circles: an electric mixer in the pools of her mind. She’s learned props, camera operations, directing, art directing, gaffer; has performed post-production duties such as editor, sound editor and composer.

And now, she craves the lens. That which captures the world artistically. Life through the lens zooms in on what matters. Fades fastidious details. Focuses on glossed-over truths of every-day living.

When the final school bell rings, she stays behind. Pens the movie ‘Photogenic,’ and films it with her friends. Unable to divorce herself from the camera.

It’s filmed on a bright day in May on the streets of North Vancouver. The scene opens with the camera zooming in on the sign: “Lester’s Pawn Shop.” Eerie jazz music; a narrator declares, “This is the story of Sam.”

Sam appears dressed in ordinary street clothes. He enters the crowded, cluttered Pawn Shop. Computers and television sets are piled high; from behind them emerges Lester. A man with a greying goatee.

The narrator proceeds: “He was going to become a photographer.” Unaware of what he is looking for, Sam seeks advice from the man behind the counter.

Lester dusts off an ordinary camera, offers it to Sam, then pauses; peers down from gold-rimmed glasses, and says, “I can tell you’re looking for something a little extra.”

Reaching down beneath the counter he procures a camera with a long zoom. “It may not look like much,” he says, “but this lens will give you perfect clarity.”

“I’ll take it,” says Sam.

Techno music. “Photogenic” slides across the screen. Sam dispenses a roll of film into his new purchase.

He then wanders Lonsdale Avenue, looking for people to photograph. The first candidate is a man dressed in a sports jacket with a bag slung over his shoulder. Next, Sam meets Renee. She’s dressed up as a waitress, wiping tables in front of Sweet Art Bakery. Smiles winsomely for the camera.

Sam waits for the film to develop.

“Sam loves his new camera,” the narrator drones.

But then, Sam flips through the pictures. His face turns white. While the photos depict the original subjects, they’re wearing different clothes and expressions.

The man originally dressed in a sports jacket is garbed in a black business suit, gripping a briefcase; Renee, the waitress, is dressed in a sweat band and tank top, gripping a tennis racket.

“What the heck?” Sam wonders aloud. Quickly exits the studio.

He approaches Renee at the bakery. Poses the question: “Are you a tennis player?”

She just stares. “I used to be, but I had to stop after an injury... Why?”

He shakes his head. “No reason,” then turns and walks away.

“Sam’s new hobby has quickly become an obsession,” the narrator states. Sam furiously snaps pictures, needing to know his camera’s secret.

Once again the movie shows him waiting, face tight, for the film to develop.

He grabs at the photos, is relieved to find the picture of his little sister unaltered.

Flipping to the next, his smile fades. Sam’s parents are drinking beer, stoned. His mother has a bandana wrapped around her head. His father’s belly hangs heavy, exposed by an unbuttoned shirt.

Unable to stand it, Sam breathes deep, positions the camera and snaps a shot of himself on his bed. Waiting for the film to develop, his forehead perspires; his fingers drum on the studio counter. He snatches the envelope, hurries home.

Slowly, he slides the picture from the envelope. Nothing. The space where Sam was sitting is blank. Sam is absent from the photo. There’s nothing, save for a picture of his bed and his bedroom wall. He is invisible.

Sam shoves the photos in a box, along with the camera. Stuffs the whole thing beneath his bed. Then he sits, head in hands, and the picture goes black.

“The end,” says the narrator.

Addicted to film, it isn’t enough for Renee to make an off-the-grid project. She imagines the camera’s presence with every moment. Adjusts the lens in her mind. Sees the world through the scope of her imagination.

A sales-clerk at Value Village, Renee wanders the mothball store in her red smock making mental movies with oblivious, capricious characters.

Characters such as the large woman with white hair buying a pink, plastic unicorn. “It’s for my daughter-in-law,” she says, smiling wide, lipstick on her teeth. Renee nods politely. In her head, she slots the woman in an eccentric role.

Odd couples try on endless piles of too-snug clothes. Threadbare T-shirts and ripped jeans are held up like prized items, praised for their economic imprint. Renee pauses, watches the couples dote on each other. Anything looks good in the eyes of love. She feels a twinge of sadness. Slots them in the romantic role of her make-believe film.

Then, the oppressive mothers, forcing eight-year-old daughters to wear grown-up suit jackets. Insisting, “It looks lovely, darling, trust me,” while looking the other way. Renee cringes; the little girl in the jacket is now her main character. The film will follow her life, highlighting how a mother’s neglect can harm a human being.

An aboriginal man stands quiet, a red kerchief around his neck. He’s admiring his partner’s outfit. She turns in a circle. He approves, and she smiles. Renee glimpses soul-mates. In her film, they will help the lost girl find her way again.

A boy whimpers from his seat in the shopping cart; his mother sighs, plucks a toy from a line of woeful options. He’s pacified, for the moment. *Ah—the commercial. Consumer trap*, Renee thinks, her smile like lemon in a glass of water.

Two employees walk past, blue jeans making scratchy noises. Their voices are hushed, but Renee can still hear them complaining about lazy staff. She hurries back to her till.

It's all she can do to keep from daydreaming. To keep from losing her job for planning movies in her mind.

At night she unwinds her days like rolls of film to Sacha, at the Horsemen.

“One day we’ll own a production company and make hundreds of documentaries,” Renee says around a bite of Kabuli Palaw—baked rice topped with beef stew.

Sacha nods. “Most definitely.” Smiles. “Make sure you get the phone numbers for all of your clientele—little do they know, they soon have the chance to become famous in our films!”

Yet, sometimes even imagination cannot mask reality’s cruelty.

The woman has thinning, matted hair. It sits, unwashed, above a grey face. Her clothes hang limp like wilted celery; her eyes are wide, too wide for such a small head, and they are vacant, a washed-out sky. Her scrawny arms are covered with red sores which she habitually scratches; she smells of stale cigarettes and Lysol.

She’s standing in line at Value Village, arms full of clothes. Dumps them onto the counter in front of Renee. Smiles toothlessly. Pays cash. Renee folds the clothes carefully into a bag. Wishes the woman a good day; the woman seems scared, scratches nervously—grabs her bag and scuttles off, muttering something incoherent.

“Ugh—did you see her?” a steel voice states. “That woman was disgusting.”

The voice belongs to a woman with coiled silver hair and fake eyelashes. Her nails are manicured.

“I don’t know what she had, but I certainly don’t want it.” She looks pointedly at the counter. “I’m not putting my clothes down there.”

Renee stammers, “You can come around to the other side, I guess.”

She steps around in high-heels, puts her clothes down and sighs deeply. Smacks her gum.

Then she leans towards Renee. “Didn’t you notice how gross her arms were? You didn’t even look like you saw!” Her hand fans the air. “What is this world coming to?”

Renee focuses on the way the till makes a strange ‘brrp’ sound when it opens. “Yeah, I noticed,” she says, “but I guess I’ve learned not to let stuff like that bother me.”

Then, after a moment of awkward quiet, “Besides, I have some pretty powerful hand sanitizer right here! I don’t go anywhere without it!”

The woman sniffs. Picks up her bags. “That won’t do much against whatever she had,” she says.

Renee’s heart shatters like an icicle across her face, and she turns, keeping her tears a secret.

*There's a song echoing over the mountains
Just a faint hint of melody
If you let your heart start thinking you can feel it
And I would follow that song anywhere
There may be dark roads ahead
And there may be danger
I may not always see the way that I should walk
But I can feel you in the darkness
And if I stop my eyes and listen
I can hear your song
I am bleeding from the wounds this road has inflicted
The sharp stones under my feet
And the thorns that pierce my side
A constant reminder I am alive
I will follow this road
Even as your song is haunting me
Driving me on (r.d.)*

Every Tuesday night, Renee and Gordy serve chilli downtown.

His eyes leap like stones skipping across water. His hair is soft moss fringing a face filled with hardships and cares. His skin speaks of aboriginal descent. And his hands are stained with tomato sauce.

Gordy—former drug addict, Calgary Flames fan, humble visionary—is a hero among Commercial Drive's homeless. They love him, because he is one of them. They love him, because he invented the Chilli Wagon.

Gordy cooks big pots of chilli every week and feeds the hungry. His life was once wrought with difficulty and pain. Paid for and crossed off by the careless hand of the government, his body knows the cold slab of concrete as a bed; his eyes have shed one too many tears, and his wrists, felt the slice of a knife offering sweet salvation. But, the knife stopped

short at the grace found in the nail-pierced wrists of a God too big for no one.

Renee meets him at church. He invites her to join him. And so, every Tuesday she makes her way down to the park where cigarette butts and broken bottles interrupt the grass, where stars and faces emerge from the shadows. Every Tuesday she stands beside Gordy and hands out hearty bowls of chilli.

The Drive, Vancouver's 'expressive edge,' is a long strip of pavement garnished with neighbourhood parks, Farmer's Markets, festivals, cinemas and art studios, appealing to culture and creative enthusiasts. Yet, in the quiet moments of night, when pubs crawl with those too rich for sobriety, the Drive is inhabited by a different sort of people: those with no place to call home.

It's in these grey hours of night-light, in the tow-zone of Charles Street's neighbourhood, on the outskirts of the Drive, that Gordy parks his Wagon—an old moving van. Serves chilli and banana bread out of the back.

Hands shaking with unfed addictions reach out from the dark, grab steaming bowls—but Gordy won't let them, not without asking them to step into the light. He wants to catch their eye, to see them for who they were, to memorize their faces, to let them know they're more than just figures in the night.

They crave such intimacy—more than they crave chilli. Moments in which they're seen for who they are. Moments in which the past overshadows the present. Moments in which they have names, careers, families and homes; in which identity means more than concepts; in which existence is more than survival and holidays, more than just another day on the streets.

Gordy's vision catches, like a net around a swarm of fireflies. Many take turns volunteering with the Wagon in Grandview Park, a place where slides and swings sit ignored in the dead of night. By day, a

different story: stay-at-home parents find a haven in the park for children cooped up in stale-room apartments.

For some, the Chilli Wagon is a noble cause. For Gordy, it's a humble effect. Like Bob Dylan, he doesn't believe in causes: instead, he finds meaning in being and doing. These are his brothers and sisters. His family. He's merely sharing the bread found with those who are hungry.

Renee is one of few who grasp this concept, who step outside the box and into people's lives: every week she stands there, among the outsiders, among those who don't belong, shaking their hands, looking into their eyes, and loving them.

This love stems from somewhere beyond her. From a source which understands pain. In Renee's presence, they feel embraced.

One night the line stretches like a rope along five blocks. Gordy's heart twists; only one pot of chilli, for hundreds. Praying, they begin to dish out bowlfuls of food. As the hours progress, the chilli abounds, until every last mouth is fed.

Every week the chilli is savoured, as if a turkey dinner. Most lick the insides of the bowl clean before admitting completion. Then, they stand around and kick pebbles. Visit, smoke. Everyone, that is, except for Jane.

Her eyes are tucked inside a dried-apple face. Her toothless smile spreads with ease, a ship sailing across wrinkled waters. Each night after she eats, Jane twirls. In the streetlights, on the sidewalks, she picks up tattered skirts and dances. It's been this way since the beginning, Gordy tells Renee. Jane dances every Tuesday, rain or shine.

One night when the sky is deep purple and the chilli long consumed, Renee makes her way to Jane. Picking up her own skirts, she begins to dance alongside the aged lady. Jane laughs, claps her hands, keeps dancing to the beat in her head. Renee raises hands to the sky and twirls, closing her eyes, hearing the scrape of sole against cement.

In the distance, a train. Car horns blare, people chatter. A clatter of city sounds. But the dancers hear nothing but music.

Renee doesn't forget that night. Twirling with abandon on the dimly lit street corner. Dancing in the darkness.

Jane is homeless—with no one to call upon, no family to her name, and no where to lay her head—yet she dances. She has no reason to get up in the morning, yet she not only gets up—she *leaps* up, and challenges the day with brazen steps.

Meaning is not found in doing, but in the pure essence of being.

Sensing the urgency of time, Renee finds it easier to spend her days *doing*. Sketching out ideas for documentaries. Dreaming of the day when she and Sacha will start their own film company.

Time is ticking; I can hear it: tick, tock, tick, tock... I want to do as much as I can while I'm here, yet in the end, does any of it count for anything?

Deep within, however, Renee knows: she's scared of *being*. Of layers peeled; of thoughts exposed. Every morning she carefully conceals her anxieties, her fears of death, of disease, of cancer's hideous head reappearing. Every month she holds her breath at the doctor's office, daring *it* to return: daring life to hit her hard in the face, and when it doesn't, she lets herself breathe for just a moment.

Gradually, however, the sting of disappointment disappears. Life is good. God feels closer. Renee unlatches her heart-gate, and slowly, he re-enters.

Yet despite dancing on street corners, Renee has yet to dance in church—for to her, this means full acceptance. Dancing before God means letting what had happened be okay, and it isn't. It can't be.

Christians shouldn't have to deal with disease, she thinks. We should be immune to pain. After all, what is the point in believing we can be healed?! Jesus died to set us free—does that freedom only kick in once we're in heaven?

She knows this isn't true. Christianity isn't insurance against pain or death. It's merely assurance of eternal life, yet the lines have been smudged. Existence isn't safe anymore; faith, no guarantee. Prayer, an insufficient means.

Sunday: another evening church service, another attempt at what eludes her—belief. Nevertheless, she goes. Vancouver's Vineyard is packed with people who seem to have it all together. Families smiling, laughing; couples, arms around each other. The elderly, adoring grandchildren in their laps.

But then, the pastor begins to speak. The peripheral falls away. Suddenly, Renee is alone with the man behind the pulpit. The man talking directly to her about prayer. He suggests that the world, with all of its self-focus, has infiltrated the sanctity of prayer. Distorted it, made it about getting what we want, when in truth, it's about three things: Committing, Connecting and Praise.

He quotes C.S. Lewis: "Prayer is either a sheer illusion or a personal contact between embryonic, incomplete persons (ourselves) and the utterly concrete Person. Prayer in the sense of petition, asking for things, is a small part of it; confession and penitence are its threshold, adoration its sanctuary, the presence and vision and enjoyment of God its bread and wine. In it, God shows Himself to us. That He answers prayers is a corollary—not necessarily the most important one—from that revelation. What He does is learned from what He *is*."

Renee sits stunned: this, in itself, is an answer to prayer. This blatant response to recent cynicism. Proof that God in heaven wants to answer her little-girl questions.

The drums are unexpected. They break through the reverie in her brain, send chills down her arms and before she knows it, they've travelled to her feet which tap against the hardwood floor.

Around her, people are starting to dance in Pentecostal style. Mothers with children, husbands with wives, singles—everyone emerging into the aisles, feeling the sway of the drums. Renee tries to sit, to ignore the pull of the beat, but before she knows it she's standing, swaying, moving her feet, then twirling with more abandon than ever before. Her steps, accompanied by tears streamlining her jaw.

Then she hears him speak—his voice like a quiet spot in her brain. "You are my beloved," he says.

She bows on the floor. No one questions why. Her teardrops splash in messy puddles. "I will dance, even though I don't feel like it," she says. "This is me fighting for you, God. I've been so mad at you for hiding from me, but I haven't been doing my part in drawing near to you. I haven't been persistent in seeking you out, and then I wonder why you don't speak. Thank you for speaking to me. Thank you."

As she huddles, something inside of her breaks: snaps off like a dead branch leaving a wound, open and vulnerable. The music is salve. Even as the lights dim and people go home, Renee remains bowed. Healing.

Angry no more.

Chapter 36—School’s Out
August 2007

*I’m standing stronger now
Than I have for a while
Not bowing under pressure
Or shaken when on trial
Scared to be your child
And show the world love
I was lost and dark
Needing light from above
I’m standing stronger now
Because you love me
Standing bolder now
Because you set me free (r.d.)*

Renee decides not to go back to school in the fall.

Garbage pail in hand, she smiles.

It had seemed risky at the time—rebellious, even foolish—but now, it feels right.

“Life doesn’t come in a neatly wrapped package,” she tells her parents over the phone one August night when the air feels like a steam bath. “We have to break free of the supposed box. Step into a frameless existence. That’s why I’m not going back to school.”

Their protests fail to dissuade her. In spite of menial jobs like garbage clean-up, traffic lock-downs and crew parks, she is learning—and getting paid to learn—about life in the movie business.

She prefers digging in the field versus sitting still in a classroom.

“Why do you think your life is going to be short?” Sacha asks Renee one Saturday. They’re walking along the Drive, towards the colours and sounds of the local Farmer’s Market.

“On the WAVE, I found a structure that seemed to fit with all the things God had said. But then we tried to make the Word of God fit the structure, and it didn’t work. Instead of preaching the Word, we preached the structure. But the Word of God doesn’t come in a neat, flashy stream-lined package.”

They halt at the market gate, surrounded by a crowd of shoppers. Step cautiously around them, eyes falling on vibrant fruits and vegetables: green, red and yellow produce, piled high, water droplets glistening on ripe skin. Grab wicker baskets, begin to browse.

“I guess I see life the same way.” Renee picks up a blushing tomato. Tests its tenderness. “It’s too often stereotyped—shoved into a 90-year-package which ends up being 60 years short of its potential. When I was in school, I felt trapped—as if opportunity was whizzing by, and I couldn’t do a thing about it. Reality bites, so we might as well brace ourselves for it—and dive in.”

Sacha puts a yellow tulip to her nose. It wobbles, dusts her cheeks with pollen. “But I want to be naïve!” she protests. “Please!”

“Okay, Miss Rose-Coloured-Glasses!” Renee laughs. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you!”

Suddenly, she becomes serious. “Someday we will not be disappointed,” she says softly. “I live for such a day.”

When did my rose-coloured glasses crack?

Rain pelts her thin plastic jacket. Steady stream of cold. She shivers. Bends, grabs some wayward plastic bags. Shoves them into the garbage pail. She can hear the camera crew issuing orders through the wash of rainbow showers.

When did the sweet taste of ignorance turn bland? It's a taste she despises compared to the spice of reality. Spice might have a kick, but it was full and exciting.

She smiles, slight twist of the lips. Recalls her YWAM mission statement: to mobilize the church to missions, and proclaim truth through the arts.

She still craves truth—still wants to proclaim it through the arts. But somehow missions had become more about showing mercy than proclamation of anything. Missions meant loving. Solely loving. Words too easily destroyed. Hence, the haven in film. Pictures.

A leaf floats haphazardly before her, alone on a sidewalk puddle. Renee's heart goes out to the tree whose leaf it is; she shakes her head, sighs. *Look at me. Mourning the loss of a leaf.* Yet, it's more than that. For her, the leaf represents the fallen innocence of yester-year.

Cancer has grown her, changed her. *Yet truth remains the same*, she considers, finding cover under a canopy of oak. She watches the camera crew, the actors; feels important, even as a garbage girl; certain her job will improve as time exhales.

The rain lets up. Sends a shiver of joy. And she knows, even now, she's growing new leaves, painted with unfading colours.

"I have AIDS," he tells her.

She notices the scratch in his lens; the way his grey eyes glimmer like a cat's.

"But you look so normal," she says, then bites her tongue. The blood tastes like steel wool.

This is their second date. He is her first love. She's told no one.

"I know. Please pass the cream."

They are at the Laughing Bean. They've biked there, on a blue-sky day in late August. The air is thick with coffee dust.

She passes the cream; sits in silence. This is big news—so big she feels her heart will break. "But I love you," she says.

"I love you, too." He palms her jaw and kisses her forehead. "But I must go. You cannot follow. I cannot let you watch me die."

His mouth widens into a scream as he's sucked into the vortex of her mind, drifting further and further away.

"Tell my story!" he yells. She's reaching out her hands to him as she wakes up.

Her skin is damp. He'd been so real, this man with the grey eyes. She could still hear his voice, his palms on her face, his hollow tin-can voice begging her to tell his story.

The other day someone had told her Ethiopia anticipated five million orphans by the year 2010, due to AIDS and catastrophic drought. Five *million*.

Outside the sky is dark. She turns on her laptop, leans against the nearest wall as the familiar sounds of waking technology greet her tired mind. Soon the modem turns blue; a desktop photo of Central Park, and she enters her email account. Types: "How would you like to make a documentary about AIDS?" Sends the one-liner to Sacha, then falls back into bed.

Renee's sadness is echoed by the drip, drip of the faucet. With every salt-water splash, the tap's leaky pipes pling-pling on unwashed dishes.

Her hair is a matted nest; her eyes, red pouches. She sits on the couch in her pyjamas and slippers at three p.m., glaring at her crimson living room wall. The colour, once beloved, infuriates her.

Sacha is getting married. The email is still open on her laptop. The one in response to her late night dream on AIDS. The one she'd awoken to read. The one which is now making her cry.

"It's not fair," she whispers to a nearby cactus plant. "We had plans; dreams. She can't go and throw that all away for a guy."

The email had been laced with euphoria, underlined with apology, but convinced, nonetheless, that love was taking precedence.

"I still want to produce movies with you, Renee." Sacha's words had tripped like confusing dance steps across the screen. "But Tim and I need to seize the moment and get married now; I know you'll understand. Once we're married, and things have gone back to normal, then we'll make movies okay? Thanks for understanding. By the way, we're getting hitched in the Dominican—I would love if you came. It'll be this winter."

Renee's infatuation with Grey Eyes quickly dissipated with dawn's listless fingers.

And now, she huddles on the couch inwardly protesting love's magnetism. *It isn't right—to disregard life's call for the sake of a warm kiss. Fickle—that's what it is. Is life to be squandered and squeezed, left to dry, die for a few fleeting seconds of romance?*

Soon there would be kids, then extracurricular activities, then graduations and grandchildren—she rung her hands at the endless cycle. Only yesterday the future had been bright with the promise of friendship, collaboration; then, in one brutal moment, with one impassioned proposal, everything had been pulled out from under her.

What gives him the right to waltz in and steal my best friend? Her face flushes; fists squeeze tight. She stabs the air. "I hate it! It's robbery! What am I to do now?"

Her head hangs low in quiet defeat.

Suddenly, the shadows shift, making room for light. The air in the living room shimmers purple, red and yellow. It's a mid-afternoon sunrise.

Renee's breath catches for the beauty. Then, in a flash, the colours evaporate. Yet it was enough. Slowly she becomes aware of something light and lovely nudging at her brain: spreading like cream pudding.

I will not lose hope. I will pursue my dreams.

An array of visions flood her brain. She sees people staring wide-eyed at her films—children, with tear-drop eyes; old men and women whose wrinkles dig deep like scars; teens whose arms are scraped sore with disease; mothers whose bellies are swollen with still-life; fathers, faces ragged, haggard, unable to imagine how they're going to appease their children's wails.

As they watch her film, bodies relax. Faces soften into pools of butter; light from the screen melts worries away. The children's eyes turn bright; bellies ease into arms and legs. Wrinkles iron out. Mothers glow pink with new life. Fathers' frowns lift, and teenagers' wounds heal, stretching into new skin. They run and dance before the projector which stretches for miles. The film which breathes hope to a weary world.

Forgiveness falls with autumn's first leaves. Renee's heart peels, shedding its hardened scales. And her mind begins to burst with ideas, with the promise of a thousand untold tales.

Justice burns inside her, a candle, refusing to be extinguished by the world's apathy. She will make documentaries on her own.

Sunday mornings, Renee's bike takes her to Seb's Market Café on East Broadway. There her dreams are fuelled into action by Chef Francois Godbout's breakfast menu including eggs, toast, homemade preserves, or his Benny—biscuits topped with meat or cooked vegetables.

This particular morning she chooses the tomato and spinach Benny. Finds a seat in the corner, sets down her backpack and pulls out a book entitled *Art and Faith* by Francis Schaeffer.

Inside, expressions of creative freedom too often banned by the church.

She reads: "If Christianity is really true, then it involves the whole man, including his intellect and creativeness... Once we understand that Christianity is true to the ultimate environment—the infinite, personal God who is really there—then our minds are freed. But there is another side to the lordship of Christ, and this involves the total culture—including the area of creativity.... About all that we have produced is a very romantic Sunday School art. We do not seem to understand that the arts too are supposed to be under the lordship of Christ."

She closes the book, much like a lid on a jar of cookies. Breathes in the aroma of words so sweet she can barely handle more.

This is what I've been searching for. This is what I long to share: that life in Christ is one of utmost creativity. After all, if one is connected to the maker of beauty, light, poetry and music, shouldn't believers be among the most ingenious, the most creative, the most daring of all artists?

Her heart sings. In Schaeffer, she's found a soul mate—a foothold on which to stand and promote justice through the lens of a camera.

Chapter 37—Falling off the Wagon
October 2007

*Precious thoughts
Like sand spilled from the glass
Innumerable, uncountable
So holy, so true
Unlike my own
My inattentive mind
Distracted
Using worn metaphor and cliché
To describe profound beauty
Broken phrases that can never complete you
How can I explain what You are like
Shepherd, potter, creator, father, friend, and lover
My sense of form and structure
Can never contain you
Like the raw and powerful forces of nature that you control
Your love is overwhelming
Overcoming
Weak at the knees
Exposed in all my frailty
You complete me (r.d.)*

It arises sooner than she'd expected: the chance to establish justice from behind the lens.

Gordy's Chilli Wagon is under attack. Posters smear themselves like blood along the Drive, threatening those that dare associate with the "weekly parade of lost souls." Boycotts fling themselves at the oblivious homeless who stand in hopeful hunger every Tuesday, while hundreds of narrow-minded men and women sit at food-heavy tables despising their existence.

A letter is written to the mayor on starch-white paper, in heartless Times New Roman font. The words screech like fingernails across the page:

To Whom It May Concern:

We are writing to voice our opinion of the free Tuesday night food distribution service that has been occurring for several years at Grandview Park in Vancouver. We have serious concerns about this service and feel strongly that it should be shut down immediately.

Issues:

- 1. The food outlet is unlicensed and unregulated by Vancouver health authorities.*
- 2. The food truck is parked illegally next to Grandview Park in a tow away zone.*
- 3. The food service brings a large number of people to the neighbourhood who often line up for hours as they await its arrival. The nature and appearance of this group is not suited to the park or the general neighbourhood.*
- 4. Litter from the food service overflows the garbage containers and is dropped everywhere in the surrounding streets.*
- 5. While other groups using Grandview Park for assemblies must apply to the City of Vancouver for permission, the food service has no such permission despite the weekly appearance of dozens of people.*

In summary, we feel the food service has been in the Charles Street neighbourhood long enough and should either move to a location where its customers live, or should be discontinued altogether. We plan to take further action if the food service operator is not cooperative in removing the service from Grandview Park.

Sincerely,

Greg and Norma J.

Gordy finds the letter plastered across the local paper. Crumples it in shaky hands; tosses it away. Refuses to stop loving his family of misfits who come from as far away as Hastings Street for a hot dinner. And so,

he continues to park his moving van, pull out his cast-iron pot of chilli, and feed until aching bellies are relieved.

She can see it in his eyes: the anger, the disappointment, even flickers of fear. But he never says a word.

Then, the volunteers began to speak up for Gordy. Wayne, a tall man with a low voice, is the most vehement: “This is all about money,” he says one Tuesday night when the chilli pot has been scraped empty. “We knew this would happen—it’s all about changing the demographics of this neighbourhood. Yuppyism. The spiritual forces of yuppyism: forcing people to fit into a polished demographic.”

He pounds his hand against a tree. Leaves a red imprint on his skin. “Well I’m not going to roll over for a bunch of yuppies that have more money than me.”

“How do we balance standing for justice while living peaceably among neighbours?” asks Dorette, a woman with grey hair and laughter lines. “If the Chilli Wagon goes away, the problems won’t be resolved—they cannot blame us for people’s personal habits or lifestyles.”

“They think we’re enabling drug use,” Wayne replies. “They picture us patting these people on the back, saying, ‘There there, it’s okay that you’re not working and destroying the décor of the neighbourhood. Here, let us help you stay on the streets.’ They don’t realize our true motives—to inspire these people towards hope, a new way of living. To release them from a purgatory of homelessness.”

He pushes back a flop of hair from his forehead. “The thing is, when push comes to shove, the mayor will listen to the most convincing stats. If the situation gets ugly, whoever has the most data wins.”

“Data.” Dorette scratches her temple. “How would we go about getting that?”

“Well...” Wayne looks directly at Renee sitting cross-legged on a bench. “There’s video documentation for starters; we could interview

parents who come to the park, asking whether or not they feel the wagon threatens the safety of their children. Renee, would you be interested in this?"

Renee glances at Gordy standing quietly to one side, arms folded. He gives a quick nod. "Sure, that's not a problem."

"Great. Then all we need is data from police, from the neighbours, and from community officials..."

Gordy's quiet voice rumbles like the hint of a storm. "Prayer," he says. "This is a battle against spirits we cannot see; we need to be on prayer vigils, night and day, interceding. Only God can help us win this fight."

The volunteers wait.

"And we know many people along the Drive who would stand up for us, were they given the chance. We can get them to write support letters, to write letters to the paper and to the mayor on our behalf."

He clears his throat. Glances down. Heaviness drapes across his shoulders like an iron shawl. "This is my family," he says, his voice thick with emotion. "Their name has been damaged. We must redeem it for them."

"How do you feel about the safety of the park on Tuesday nights?"

The parents are unaware of the lens zooming in, catching the surprise in their eyes. "It's fine—nothing changes on Tuesdays," they insist, one after the other.

Stay-at-home dads in sweats push little ones in strollers; keep a watchful eye as their kid waves from the top of the slide; then they run to the bottom, arms open wide, catching the kid tight. Young moms carry babies, cradled close, toddlers on tricycles.

Some are more willing than others to be interviewed. But everyone is polite.

"How often do you come to Grandview Park in a one-week period?"

The answers vary. Some say every day; one young man with tired eyes explains he and his kids live at the park—sleeping nearby at a local mission.

Renee videotapes while Ryan asks the questions. Ryan is pale faced and thin. His eyes are wet pools of empathy. They find it easy to lose themselves in his watery pools.

Renee fiddles with the lens. At times the lighting is perfect, a soft angelic glow through leafy trees; on grey-cloud days it requires an extra source. She is careful to frame the interviewees in context with the children, laughing in the background; to catch the genuine care of the parent, the sincere laugh when asked if they feel their child is in danger because of the Chilli Wagon's clientele.

"No, no," they insist. "The Wagon doesn't affect us at all. I think it's a really good thing they're doing. Besides, those people would come whether the Wagon was here or not."

They admit the park *is* used for purposes other than play. But these things happen at night in the company of shadows. Come morning, the evidence is gone, save for discarded cigarette butts and a few broken bottles.

Renee focuses the camera on a child's footprint in the sand. Then, an adult's print in matted-down grass.

When she coughs the camera shakes. It irritates her, this cough. Steals minutes of her time. She's had it for the past two months, and it's only getting worse—digging deep into phlegm and lung.

"It's only a cough," she tells herself. "It will go away."

But so far, it hasn't.

She ignores it for the sake of redeeming Gordy's family name. By day she runs errands for filmmakers; by night, she becomes one of them—and soon, the latter, her all-consuming thought. She spends hours each night editing the interviews, playing around with effects, and utilizing other techniques garnered through one year of film school.

Renee lives to see justice done. She lives to document the truth about Gordy's Chilli Wagon.

The clouds yawn, then stretch, revealing a blue underbelly. Looking up, Renee can only see a small square of it, hedged by an overhang of entangled leaves.

Her footsteps crunch, snapping oblivious undergrowth on the early morning hike to Lake Garibaldi.

The trails are fringed with mossy roots and leafy brush; vines wind their way up tall trees pollinating bright yellow dust. It's a land of jagged crevices and weeping waters, of glistening glaciers, plump pines and eagle's wings.

With a surface of nearly 1,500 metres above sea level and a depth exceeding 250 metres, the translucent lake is held captive by grandeur: mountains, boasting volcanoes on every side.

When Renee and her cousin Lily finally reach the top it takes them all of five minutes to breathe. Layer upon layer of granite, ice, snow and pine needles snag their thoughts, silencing them in the face of such beauty. The lake speaks in cold sparkling volumes, a turquoise necklace on a neck of solid rock.

"Would you like to know the secret behind the lake's colour?" Lily asks, unscrewing her thermos and gulping back water.

"Sure, what is it?"

Lily wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. "They say it's because of glacial flour, or very tiny particles of rock produced by a glacier, which make the river cloudy; when it falls down the mountain and into the lake, it takes on the appearance of being turquoise."

Renee shakes her head. "I had no idea. Who would have ever thought something as dirty as ground-up rock could produce such a beautiful colour?"

"I know. It's incredible." Lily points towards the east. "It extends from the Sphinx Glacier, over there, and from Mount Garibaldi on the south."

Renee laughs. The sound ripples across the panoramic postcard like trickles of water. "Now you're just showing off!"

A cough suddenly grabs the baton and steals the show. Wheezing, Renee doubles up on herself and begs for release. Two weeks of 15-hour workdays have paled her face and scraped at her throat. Lily watches in silence. When Renee finally straightens and takes a swig from her water bottle, Lily speaks.

"How long have you had that thing?" she asks carefully.

Renee shrugs. "Oh, I don't know—a month or two."

"It doesn't sound so good—do you think we should get it checked out? I can go with you to the doctor's."

"Um, no, that's okay. I have my monthly blood test next week anyway; but I'm sure it will be long gone by then."

They stare in unanimous quiet across the vast expanse, letting unspeakable beauty fill the silence.

PART 4: MIGRATION

Chapter 38—The Cough
October, 2007

*Who sees my brokenness?
Who knows my deepest fear?
When I am crying
Does anyone listen?
I'm screaming
I'm bleeding
Am I invisible?
I want to know
Is there a God
And does he see?
When I'm empty inside
Can anything fill me?
If I'm dying would anybody care?
I'm worthless I'm nothing
Will you just disregard me?
I need to know
Is there a God
And does he see? (r.d.)*

Renee sits pale-faced on her couch, white-knuckled, gripping an old church bulletin as if it can save her.

But it can't. It's just a piece of paper with clichés folded up inside.

She can't ignore it any longer. The cough is no longer a solo act. It's now accompanied by a second blood test.

The tests have become ritualistic: once a month her arm is poked with a needle to ensure everything is normal. And everything *had* been normal. That is, until the neutrapaenic blood test, which then required a second test. She sits, now, awaiting the results.

Abnormal white blood cells are collecting in forums, parading around her body as if in jest, daring her to panic. Her lungs occasionally join in the festivities, applauding with uncontrollable coughing fits.

“Renee—is everything okay?”

Lily stands before Renee, forehead etched in a question mark. In her hands, work shoes; she's returned home at three in the afternoon to find Renee sitting still, too still—motionless, in fact—on the couch they call Lumpy. It had taken her a minute to see Renee sitting in the shadows: she'd been racing from room to room, looking for her wallet, when she'd sensed something was wrong. It was then she'd seen the silent figure shrouded in sadness.

Renee nods. Words are too abstract to formulate, too complex, too foreign. They seem disjointed—all she can see are letters, floating around in her mind, smacked together in random fashion.

How had they ever joined together to produce sound? And what good would it do if they did? Words—mere words—in the face of such travesty... Can they resolve war? Can they fix world hunger? Can they change the results of her blood test?

The questions wear away at her conscience, scraping her thin, until all she wants to do is scream, but she can merely sit. Clutching the paper *does* help, in some small way: it allows her to hold on to something, anything, while the rest of her world falls a part.

Someone is speaking. Lily's voice breaks gently through her reverie and all of a sudden words begin to make sense again. She's asking what happened... she wants to know the gory truth—and Renee will have to tell her, not just about this, but about the other blood test: both of which declare in black bold letters that something is wrong.

“You've had two??” Lily is kneeling beside her now. Renee has no idea what she was talking about. “You've had two blood tests??”

How does she already know? Renee wonders.

Meanwhile, her mouth continues talking. Moving on its own, somehow conveying to Lily through staccato syllables that she doesn't want to scare anybody—doesn't want people thinking of her as the 'Girl with Cancer.'

A warm hand rests on her shoulder. Assurances are being spoken. No one will think of her as that; no one even needs to know. Lily will go with Renee and help her through this. It's probably a false alarm, she says—this girl beside her, this girl with the name she knows really well but somehow can't remember in this degenerative moment.

Lily. That's her name.

Suddenly Renee is standing, walking with staggered steps towards the door. Lily is following her, peering into her face, wiping something off her cheeks with tender fingers—she pulls fingers away and Renee sees teardrops on them, smeared, wet, ancient. They must be hers. She can't even feel herself crying. But there they are. Humiliating, but true. She must be sad.

Then she is crumpling, falling down, while her spirit remains far away, detached, looking down from a safe place. Lily catches her, holds her, smoothes back a strand as the tears rush in unabashed rivers. The scene is broken up by the occasional cough, then a jagged admittance: "I'm scared."

"There, there," Lily says. "It's going to be okay."

And for some reason, those words help: as trivial as they might be in the long run, for that moment, they are crucial: pulling Renee up and out that door, and into the doctor's office where she receives antibiotics for her cough.

The words aren't strong enough, however, to fight off her dreams. Dreams which swallow her whole and spit her out into cold, hard reality. Dreams of doctors—hundreds of them, peering at her with looking glasses and probes, needles and ropes to tie her down should she start

flailing, which she inevitably does. Dreams in which one word is spoken: "Relapse."

Only then does she begin to flail. She can't cry out, because someone has stolen her mouth. She can only flail, and that's when they decide to tie her down. This is how she wakes for the next two nights: drenched in sweat, lips pursed together, lungs bursting with un-released air. Then she looks around her room, recalls the blood test, the cough, and bursts into sobbing gasps. Sadness and fatigue grip hands and waltz around her room, disturbed only by Lily's footsteps flying down the hall. Then she's at Renee's side, holding her hand, wiping away her sadness and praying God, please make these bad dreams go away.

"It's not the dreams I'm afraid of," Renee tells her one night—the night before she's scheduled to see the haematologist. "It's that one day, I might wake up and realize they aren't dreams—they're my life, and I've relapsed. I ... I ..." her bottom lip quivers.

"Shhh..." says Lily, and Renee shrugs her shoulders limply.

"I don't think I'll be able to handle it," she whispers.

Lily waits for Renee to shatter into a million pieces, but she just sits there, nodding mutely, while the haematologist, a plump woman with pink cheeks, delivers bad news wrapped in a doily.

She hears, "the cancer is back." The rest, a blur of details. Lily grips Renee's hand. It turns white. Renee doesn't seem to notice. Seems oddly at peace, sitting there on the noisy paper-bed which makes her feel like a piece of meat.

The doctor tries to appease the situation, moving her eyebrows this way and that, but now, neither girl is listening. Their minds are elsewhere in a land of childhood fantasies—visualizing snow cones, Ferris wheels and giant lollipops—to ward off the blackness of this sudden news. The harsh reality of this diagnosis.

Suddenly Renee, cheeks sticky from her pretend lollipop, returns with a thud at the word “Relapse.”

It’s too much. She shudders at the sight of the doctor’s stethoscope. *I wonder if I could just fly, fly far away from here and never return?* She glances towards the window.

“I’m sorry that I had to deliver this news—I really am,” the doctor is saying. “I’d encourage you to seek treatment immediately, though, so the cancer doesn’t worsen.”

Renee’s eyes widen as if hearing the prognosis for the first time. Tears spring. She clears her throat. “Can I ask what kind it is?”

“AML,” the doctor replies, her voice soft. “Acute Myelogenous Leukemia—also called granulocytic, myelocytic, myeloblastic or myeloid leukemia. Basically, it means too many granulocytes, the white blood cells which normally fights infection, have been produced in the marrow and aren’t maturing properly. This results in healthy blood cells being crowded out by the excessive number of abnormal ones.”

She pauses. “We want to stop the reproduction of these immature white blood cells before it becomes too late. So that’s why it’s important to get immediate treatment.”

The words are starting to disintegrate again, to fall apart, separating into meaningless letters. Then the alphabet begins to float before her, flaunting itself—a string of abrasive ABC’s—and she grabs Lily’ arm.

“I need to get out of here,” her mouth moves and Lily, eyes full of tears, nods, helping Renee off the crinkly paper and out the door.

“Thank you,” Lily tells the doctor who watches them leave with a wrinkled brow.

“You’re welcome,” she says sadly.

That night Lily locks herself in the bathroom and lets sorrow have its way. Her body shakes and her eyes become puffy as sponges soaking up the pain of the world.

How could you let this happen? is the refrain which plays over and over, skipping like a CD in her tired mind. *Renee is a sister to me—don’t you see how this hurts her? Don’t you see what you’re doing?*

Yet the only response is the hum of the toilet, accompanied by an occasional faucet-drip.

Where are you, God??? She finally screams, slamming her fist into the wall. The plaster breaks. It feels good to wreck something. But it isn’t enough. The anger capsizes, frothing with white-lipped rage, and she tears out of the bathroom and into her bedroom where she grabs the lamp and throws it against the wall. Its smash is very satisfying, and sobering. As silence descends on that lonely room, Lily curls up like a cat on her bed, on a quilt made by Grandma Guth, and falls asleep.

While Lily is smashing china and punching walls, Renee finds herself sitting at church, in an empty sanctuary, staring into space, daring God to enter.

Instead, Gordy walks in.

It’s Tuesday, and he, along with the rest of the Chilli Wagon members, are eating together prior to feeding others. He misses her—has come looking for her—and finds her, a stranger.

Gordy takes one look at Renee’s ashen face and grey-circle eyes, and sits quietly next to her. The only sound in that sanctuary is the groan of a generator, joined by faint chords of a song being sung next-door: choir practice.

“Amazing Grace,” she whispers. “How ironic.”

Gordy turns just slightly so she knows he's listening.

"What's so amazing about grace?" she asks, staring straight ahead, her profile stiff, unflinching. "Isn't he God, after all? Wouldn't it be normal for him to extend grace? After all, he's perfect. So 'amazing' is a word we humans have constructed to explain away God-like normalcy. For him, though, it's nothing. And *yet*, he can take it away in one foul swoop—oh look, no more grace for you."

By now she's crying, but fury makes her voice strangely calm.

She turns to him. "You know, it's all a bunch of baloney. This God thing. I mean, I know he exists, but I think we've misunderstood him. He does what he wants, when he wants, and doesn't take anything we say into consideration. He's... a tyrant. There's nothing amazing about that."

Gordy is startled when tears begin roll in silent streams down Renee's thin cheeks. Puts an arm around his broken girl. She begins to sob. "Can I ask what happened?" His voice is gentle.

After a moment: "I'm sick. I'm very sick, Gordy." She wipes her face with trembling fingers; he fishes out a Kleenex and hands it to her. "It's clean," he says.

Blowing her nose helps redeem her composure; she straightens her shoulders, looks him in the eyes. "I never told you, but I've been sick before... I had cancer a couple of years ago—Leukemia—and I recently found out it's back. I have to go away for a while, until I get better."

She breathes deep while he tries desperately to grasp her words. "Leukemia??" Dark skin pales. "A relapse??" When his mind finally wraps around the idea, he enfolds her and she shatters.

When the sobbing has subsided and another Kleenex procured, Gordy says, "Wait—just wait here; I have something I want to give you, okay?"

In a moment he's back holding a crumpled piece of paper. "I'm sorry—I carry this around with me everywhere I go, so it's a bit worse for wear."

He sits, clears his throat and unfolds the page. "It's a prayer—the Prayer of St. Patrick. It's known as the breastplate prayer—with words that shield. I want you to have it, to keep it near you until you get better. You can return it then, okay?"

She nods, and he reads.

"I arise today
Through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity,
Through the belief in the threeness,
Through the confession of the oneness
Of the Creator of Creation.

"I arise today
Through the strength of Christ's birth with his baptism,
Through the strength of his crucifixion with his burial,
Through the strength of his resurrection with his ascension,
Through the strength of his descent for the Judgment Day..."

As he finishes, a shaft of sunlight hits Renee's red hair. It appears to burst into flames. She smiles. Gordy puts a hand on her shoulder.

"Go in peace, sweet sister."

Chapter 39—Heaven

The film on the island continues. The story of my life, as seen through the eyes of God.

It's so hard to watch, yet I cannot look away.

It's as if a chasm has grown up around my screen-self: a chasm of grey stone. I'm a tiny flesh-faced speck in a deep valley of sadness.

I've run far, far into what seems a desert of ice and snow. A desert of sheer white nothing. The wind blows in unforgiving waves, biting my cheek, stinging like sand.

I watch as emotion grips and rocks me like a cradle. On the screen, I'm swaying back and forth in pain. Soon the movement is such that I've buckled over, onto my face and knees, gripping handfuls of soft white snow and letting sadness drip from my eyes onto the pallid surface, daring it to feel *anything*.

Upstairs in the billowing lofts of sky, the sunrise seems to have frozen over. It looks like strawberry ice cream. A few trees poke their heads out of winter's shivering shawl, their frosty fingers stretching, claw-like, as if to grab the ice cream. My fingers look like sausages, puffy and swollen.

"Where are you??" my screen-self scream at the sky. My eyes pierce the air, looking for something, anything. "I dare you to speak to me now. I dare you to tell me why this had to happen."

I am dying—my earthly body destroyed by the jaws of death.

"How could you give me those dreams, and not let me fulfill them?" I yell into the frozen air. Gasp with fatigue. "How could you... dare to let me think I had a future? Why? Why would you give me that kind of hope, only to take it away?"

Then it returns—my energy, a swollen burst of fury—and I begin to run, chasing after unseen disappointments, wanting to cling, to make my life on earth worth something.

What really gets to me is the waste: wasted time, spent dreaming of things which will never happen; wasted wants; wasted hopes; wasted beliefs, in a God who's let me down. My faith has stretched as far as it can—snapping in two, setting me free to find my own path.

Suddenly the strawberry skies come to an end and I drop, falling down off the edge of winter, down, down through swirls of brilliant colour then landing, soft, in someone's lap. Lemon light penetrates my skin, so warm and brilliant it melts my sadness, making tears slide away like raindrops off flower petals.

A voice above me rumbles; rolls over me. I feel cozy, safe. It's both distant and close—a lilting tone, a soothing sound. Blankets of fuzzy cloth envelope me. The voice continues to speak and slowly I decipher words, as if picking up a new language—when in fact, I'm just remembering it. Heaven's dialect.

"I am with you always, to the very end," the voice says.

I sigh so deep I become light-headed and weary. Lean my head against the chest belonging to the voice. Sleep.

Meanwhile the scene shifts; the film reveals a distant land, a land which, as it comes into focus, is pinpricked with sadness. Something like a veil falls away from a place parched for purpose, starved for meaning—a place of deserts and dry-bone streets, of yellow-grass and graven temples, of tall men in robes and lowly fishermen in rags.

On the island I grip Jesus' hand as the camera dives down onto the bloody head of someone walking up an overgrown trail weaving up a hill. Suddenly the movie is being shown through this man's eyes. Beams of wood weigh down his shoulders—so heavy they make him collapse. Someone yanks him to his feet, spits in his face and shoves

the beams back onto his frail body. Looking down one sees bare, scratched feet and whip-marked legs—he is naked, save for a thin cloth robe, and his body is that of a man severely beaten.

Sweat pours in rancid streams down his skin, chasing the dirt across his body. His head swims, throbs, as if someone hit his temples with a two-by-four. His knees nearly buckle; as if through steam he sees a figure standing before him with large eyes, concerned eyes; the figure lifts the beams from his body, and he feels the weight of the world relieved, for just a moment. Sees the whip too late, feels it slashing down in criss-cross motion, ripping into his skin, making him scream. His voice is low, hoarse.

Suddenly he hears them: the cries of women speaking in a foreign tongue. They are pleading the cause of a man named Jesus. And then he sees them—thousands of them, lining the road all the way up the hill: men, women and children weeping, standing still, some with eyes averted, others with obvious, unabashed pity. The pity is worse than the aversion; his eyes flash—yet his feet keep plodding up the dusty trail towards the peak.

Then, he's there, atop the hill, facing a valley of flat-roofed homes and cedar forests. His back creaks upward into a standing position; then his face turns white, and he falls. A man with sour breath yanks him up, slapping him across the face.

“Dirty Jew,” he sneers. “Some king you are—unable to walk up a hill.” He strips off his cloak; Jesus, too tired to protest. Sees the man's glinting armour; power's sheen in his eyes, and knows he has no chance. The soldier grips his arms, drags him to the beams nailed together like a 't'. Pushes him down, sits on top of him. Then the soldier picks up a hammer, and: unspeakable pain; impeachable pain which offers no respite, no promise of relief, even hours later; pain which only increases as the night endures.

The nails break through his skin and split his wrists; for a moment he thinks he's dead; then, he wishes he was, as the second nail slams through his wrist. The pain strangles him, sends his mind reeling into a

land where demons dance and then, as the nails drive through his ankles, crushing through flesh and bone, he feels the demons reach inside his chest and squeeze his heart until the blood leaves his body and his screams become desperate gulps of air.

But the demons aren't done. They steal his saliva and tickle his throat; he's desperate for water. Eyes roll back. He can't breathe for the dryness in his mouth and the pain which feels like a thousand needles pricking his limbs, but life forces itself upon him. Then, the beam is lifted, with his body hanging off it; they pound it into the ground, and his neck drops into his chest.

Air becomes a distant memory—he has to push upwards on his ankles to feel any sense of oxygen, then hold his breath as he once again sinks into the gravity of his body. Through dry eyes, he watches people below playing games for his clothes; they jeer at him with faces like red jalapeños, wishing him dead. Then they laugh, pick up rocks and toss them against his paper-thin skin; his bruises turn purple then black. Throughout it all, the demons inside his head screech with mirth, dancing on his bleeding brain, stabbing the sides of his head with their sticks, and pummelling his mind with angry thoughts: “No one loves you. You are a fool, to think you're a child of God. Where is your father now? It's all a lie. You believed a lie, and now you're going to die for it. Your faith was for nothing.”

The anger makes him retch, then gag as it clogs his throat: his neck sinks too low. Hopelessness fills him as blackness inks the sky, a navy-blue blackness which offers no relief. The people are leaving. All that remain are the soldiers.

Where is God now? Why did he allow this to happen? Why won't he save me? Jesus tries to cry—but the tears won't come. His body has no liquid to spare.

“I'm such a fool,” he whispers. It isn't enough. Pushing up on throbbing ankles he uses all of his energy to scream, “God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Then the night cracks open like a coconut, releasing white juicy innards which spill across the earth in a torrent of creamy light and he sees his mother below, kneeling in the dirt, praying. In a moment the air begins to ripple with lime-green waves and the demons chant “Hell is near, hell is near.”

“It is finished,” he says.

And with that, he falls, far, far into the core of the earth, so far it feels like he’s left his heart behind—only to have it drop, seconds later, onto his head. He lands suddenly on paved-rock road and smashes his back into a thousand pieces. As he lies there, Jesus feels the flames seep up through the rock, sees the demons from his brain standing before him in grotesque, physical form, bowing and laughing and then, faces, hideous faces, rise up out of the ground and point long skinny fingers, sneering and jabbing until he prays for escape but it won’t come—and for three days, it avoids him, until all of a sudden, he’s being lifted out of the flames into fresh air which smells of honey.

In a moment his skin is pink like a newborn baby’s, and angels are bowing and making way for him to walk a long red carpet into the room of light. Trumpets blow; instruments of every origin strike to life and the throne room is filled with music. Upon reaching the front, the elders part revealing a throne on which the father sits. Renee still cannot see God’s face for the angle of the camera, but it doesn’t matter for Jesus is being embraced, held close, kissed on the forehead and crowned. He is sitting beside the father, and a choir of children from every nation begins to sing.

And then, in the movie, I’m standing there before him, bowing low, my forehead to the floor, knowing Jesus went through all of this just for me. And he is running, picking me up and swinging me around and around.

The film has ended.

I sit still, staring at the sky. I will never tire of the way it erupts in spontaneous adoration, clapping its hands in explosions of joy. Purples, greens, reds and blues leap up and waltz in each other’s arms, colliding and swooping, revelling in the fullness of creation.

In such moments the mountains and trees also light up like children’s faces at Christmas.

And sometimes, when the dance quiets and the sky returns to its gentle arc, you can hear Him: the Father, whispering his message of love.

My face is wet with tears.

I stand as if mesmerized and slowly lower my body to the earth and lie there, feeling the soil from which I’ve come.

Chapter 40—Dream Catcher
November 2007

*I'm afraid I'm losing hope
Losing faith
Losing you
Is there any rhythm to the madness?
Or is this just some game of chance You play?
Throw me high, pretend to catch
And then step back and watch me crash
I've loved you too much to even think these thoughts
I've known you too well
I could never doubt your existence
But when I'm so close to
Hitting the floor
It's hard to believe you love me anymore (r.d.)*

Angela's hands shake like linen on a clothes-line, caught in a gust of wind.

She turns the key to the apartment in New York; breathes in so deep it feels the bottoms of her soles will give out.

“Home, sweet home,” she calls in what she hopes is a normal voice, but in truth sounds like a kettle's whistle.

Renee follows, a white sheet of paper dressed in clothes. Finds a nearby armchair and sits down. Rubs her eyes, surveys the apartment.

“It's got two bedrooms and two bathrooms,” Angela says, her shoes barely making a sound as she steps quickly. She is a light walker. Renee feels grateful—harsh sounds grind her nerves like chisel on metal. Jonathan's heavy step approaches the door.

“Well, what do we think?” he asks, sliding his cell away and pushing dark brows into a question mark. “Better than two years ago?”

Angela can only nod; back turned, she stares through the bedroom window, across York Avenue into the open eyes of the place they'd begged God to never see again: the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Centre.

“It's good because it's so close,” she whispers. Jonathan catches the tail-end of her sentence like a ribbon from a kite, and he holds on, hoping the kite will fly. But there isn't much air in that tiny space.

Putting his arms around his wilting-flower wife, he says, “If this is what you want, we'll get it. It is \$4,500 a month... but anything's worth it for our little Ren.”

No one knows the way his mind is folding up on itself, the way his heart is shutting down for the pain of it all. *I'm the father—I'm supposed to make everything right, to save my family, and yet all I can do is stand by and watch my little girl get sick.*

Angela shrugs her way out of his arms. She wants to stand alone. It makes her feel stronger.

“She needs it,” Angela says to him, to anyone who can hear through the fog in her mind. “I need to give this to her. It will allow her some privacy. There are only big open rooms over there...” her finger points, then falls, as she continues to stare at the closed mouth of a building which will soon swallow up her daughter—again.

Merry-go-round thoughts encircle Jonathan's mind: *HIT by a relapse. She'd said 'There is nothing more to write' on October 26. 'I can't bear to hear a bad diagnosis.'*

Then, she'd cried.

She wanted to stay in Vancouver... among her friends. But the doctors said she should go to NYC again. She'd have a chance there.

She'd cried.

Jonathan reaches instinctively for his cell phone; its smooth, cool presence calms him—like mint jelly on aching muscles. He turns, sees Renee’s head resting in her hands, eyes closed. Her face is as pale as new light leaking from the horizon.

His eyes darken. He lets go of the cell phone. His business can suffer. He has a little girl to care for.

Putting a hand on her arm, he watches her eyelids flutter open—translucent insect wings. “I’m going out for some food,” he says softly. She thinks he looks old. “What would you like me to get?”

For a moment something skips like a child jumping rope inside her; she is in New York—she can eat anything she wants. But all she can picture is a hospital food tray. “Nothing,” she says leaning her head in her hands. “Can you take me home now?”

Jonathan looks down. Rises. Stands there for a moment, shoulders slumped. Silence slaps his face and he calls to Angela, “I’m going out.”

The door slams shut, an exclamation mark at the end of his sentence.

The next day, Renee starts chemo. The hospital smells like a freshly scrubbed toilet; its walls are blank faces staring at her wherever she turns. Floors squeak as she walks, and the gown covers just as little as before, cold fingers of air run up and down her back.

At first, she is an outpatient, able to bring her chemo pump ‘home’ and pretend life is normal. But then the fever arrives, infiltrating her brain like soldiers out to kill. It feels as if missiles are strapped to her back; she can barely drag herself out of bed. They tell her she needs to stay. She cries, but only for a moment—too exhausted to weep.

“Forty days,” the men with stethoscopes and clean smiles tell her. In 40 days her counts will be high enough to receive the transplant. In 40 days she can attend Sacha’s wedding. In 40 days she will be free.

Renee clings to that number as poison fills her stomach with nausea and tongues of sickness lick out her insides. She imagines an inflated ‘four’ and ‘zero’ as her body falls apart: pictures herself clinging to the numbers like a buoy in the middle of an ocean filled with IV fluid.

Forty days, she tells herself. I can do this. Jesus did it: 40 days in the desert, with the devil.

She looks around at walls so clean they bleed starch and thinks, *This is hell*. And as she pulls her IV along the hallway, grabbing the back of her gown to keep her body a secret, she begins to sing, “I’m on the hallway to hell” in Bon Scott’s scratchy voice, which cheers her up immensely, for the moment.

But then bald patches begin to appear—patches of dirt in an immaculate red lawn. Even her song fails to compensate for the haircut she’d adored. It had grown below her ears, and she’d gotten it styled, felt its soft fullness in her fingers—only to have it fall apart.

She feels disposable. Begins having dreams about limbs breaking off. Dreads waking up and looking down at her pillow, seeing the way the strands cling to the cotton pillow-case like yarn to the plastic head of a doll.

She makes a dream catcher in crafts time, tying strands of sinew in a web around a tear-shaped frame of willow, hanging beads and ribbons from the rim, then attaching the catcher to her IV pole, but the nightmare remains: no matter how many dream catchers she makes, she’s still a bald rat in a thin polyester gown haunting the hallways of hell.

They give her the news on a Monday.

Dr. Steinherz is the one who delivers it. He, along with Dr. O’Reilly, has pumped her full of hope since her arrival. She feels high off of new treatment possibilities. Even when the fever ravishes her head with

invisible flames—even when the hair she’d been planning on saving for charity is accidentally thrown out, Renee can still hear their voices calling like a mother to her lost child: “It’s going to be alright. We’ve got everything under control. It’s amazing what modern-day technology can do.”

Then, when the magical 40 days has passed, and her blood count, risen, light begins to dawn—beckoning to her with the Future’s hands.

At which point Dr. Steinherz walks into her room, head bowed, and says, “I’m sorry.”

The rest is a mumble of negative prognoses. All she knows is, she won’t be able to leave. The buoy is sinking; the inflated numbers are losing air, falling beneath the waves and she is drowning in her own sickness. Later she will recall his faltering words: “Your lungs have become infected—a funnel infection. We need to treat it before it spreads. You have to stay. I’m so very sorry.”

“Sorry”—a verbal band-aid on a physical condition. It mocks her, like a kid with a bigger lollipop patting her head then licking his candy. Apologies mean nothing in the face of devastating disappointment. A disappointment so dire she can taste it—poisoned sucker. She won’t be able to attend Sacha’s wedding. She won’t be able to go home for Christmas. She won’t be able to go back to work.

She tries to cry but can only feel rage. A slow, steadfast rage which grows—bubbling like lava and threatening to overflow. She wonders if there’s such a thing as anger-drops; do they look like teardrops with spikes? Would they pour from her eyes?

Angela is going mad with worry: Why can’t they just fix her daughter? Why don’t they just make everything that is bad, good, and send her girl home? The bone marrow transplant would solve everything—but for now, it’s delayed due to the infection.

Thinking about it hurts her stomach.

But she hides her worry like a stowed-away blanket: behind smiles and presents. She’s a constant fixture in Renee’s room: knitting, watching movies from the hospital library, painting Renee’s fingernails and fluffing up her pillows. And at night, when the dream catcher fails to do its job and nightmares crouch at every corner, Angela reads her daughter poems from Garrison Keillor’s *Good Poems for Hard Times*.

Poems like “Proverbs of Hell” by William Blake and “Nothing is Lost” by Noel Cowards. Poems which make Renee’s chest settle, a puddle after a rainstorm, and the hyperventilating, cease.

The poems do, in fact, what Keillor says they will: “The meaning of poetry is to give courage,” he writes. “A poem is not a puzzle that you the dutiful reader is obliged to solve. It is meant to poke you, get you to buck up, pay attention, rise and shine, look alive... wake up and die right. ... What really matters about poetry ... is the miracle of incantation in rendering the gravity and grave and beauty of the ordinary world and thereby lending courage to strangers. This is a necessary thing.”

The air greets him with a cold handshake as he steps into a world layered with whipped-cream. It is wintertime in Winnipeg, or ‘Winterpeg’ as Renee calls it.

He smiles, thinking of the first time she’d called it that. They were seven years old. She’d leapt around like a leprechaun with a smile as big as a watermelon slice, so pleased of her clever new word. He’s surprised he can remember that moment—a lot has been wiped out by the bulldozer of drugs. But the longer he stays clean, the more he can recall.

The snow squeaks under his feet. The sky opens up one eyelid then another, revealing a hazy blue morning. This is his favourite time of day. He stops by Tim Horton’s, picks up a large double-double and a muffin, then makes his way to Subway where his key slides like a

secret into the lock. An envelope drops to the ground as the door swings open. “Darren” is all it says.

Curiosity tears it open. Inside he finds a note with three sentences scrawled in chicken-foot writing: “Renee sick. Gone to NYC. Love Dad and Mom.”

Is this a joke? A twisted joke?

She’d been fine just last week. They talk once a month—she phones like clockwork to see how he is. Why hadn’t they called him, told him voice to voice, instead of leaving a lame letter?!

It feels as though someone is squeezing his heart; his tongue tastes like sand—and then, he remembers—his cell phone is out of minutes. He’d used them up, talking to her.

Head bent, he shuffles into the store. As manager, he’s the first to consecrate it every morning. He’s glad no one is there to see the way his skin turns red, the way his shoulders shake and his glasses fog up.

He hasn’t seen her since last summer, but the visit is tattooed like the angel on his shoulder blade: she’d listened, a priest in a confessional booth, while he’d dumped out the laundry-bag that was his life, and then they’d laughed. Together, heads bent like swans on a lake, they’d remembered days of old: playing pirates on the deck and forcing each other to jump off; dressing up in ninja costumes and karate-kicking the trees; Darren’s jealousy over Renee’s horse-riding skills.

He sits on a stool, and stares, unflinching, at nothing. Suddenly he sees her, lying there before him, and his heart spills, splashing across his face.

Even though he doesn’t know if he believes, he prays anyway: “God, give her courage. God, give her hope.” The words tumble out of his mouth like puppies learning how to walk. The longer they try, the easier it gets.

All day long he prays that prayer. And all day long, God listens.

Chapter 41—Rising of the Dawn

December 2007

It’s a hard faith

A cruel mountain pass we cross

Hoping, but with no promise of greener pastures the other side

It’s a hard word this disjointed syllable we invoke

Hoping that somewhere it will be heard and answered

It’s a hard God

A wild animal who asks for love and admiration

With the promise of nothing in return (r.d.)

Forty days have come and gone, and Renee is still in the hospital—sick in bed, fists flung towards heaven, feet stuck in hell.

Darren’s prayers rain down on paradise. Jesus collects the wet-droplets. Pours them across heaven’s gardens. The flowers instantly rise like a choir, lifting their heads in bloom and greeting the dawn with silent songs.

Even in heaven, Renee can’t see them for the tears. Her sadness is blinding, washing away sight, leaving vacant spaces seeking.

But due to Darren’s prayers, the dream catcher does its job. Sleep beckons with a strong hand, and Renee finds herself falling away from nightmares, into darkness.

Landing in a lap of warmth, she is surrounded by drips of honey-light and angels’ songs. Fruit scents fill the air. And a voice as rich as rum slides down from a misty haze hiding the face of God: “Renee, my child, do not fear. Have I let you down before?”

She nods, head bent. “Yes, you have,” she whispers. Half-expects lightning to strike.

Instead, something like a warm blanket falls on her back. “Let me share something with you,” God says. “Do you remember Jesus’ hands? Where the nails pierced through?”

Again, she nods. Gazes through the haze, desperate to see the face to whom this voice belongs. Reaching up, she can only feel the light getting warmer against her skin, like heat from a radiator.

“I want you to look at these,” he says softly. His palms appear. She gasps. Hand to mouth, as if that gesture alone can make things better. His palms and forearms are sieves, pierced with dozens of tiny holes.

“That’s not all,” he continues. “They cover my body.”

“Why?” She shudders. Wants the pain to go away. Wants to fill in the holes with putty, to smooth out his skin.

“Because I didn’t just die once,” he says, withdrawing his hands. “I die countless times, every earthly day. Every time a believer deliberately sins, it pierces me, like a nail. But this is what I do, because I love you. I love you, Renee VonDyke.”

Renee is quiet. Recalls a song from long ago... drifting through the air like a falling leaf: *And I love you, I love you, I love you, like never before.*

Suddenly she pictures herself, standing in the throne room; Jesus is running towards her, wiping tears from her cheeks; she’s falling, begging him to let her live. Flashes of her parents, standing, weeping over a cradle. In it, a newborn, wrinkled and oblivious. Then Jesus’ voice, saying, “On earth, I can’t stop the suffering and pain. I can give you strength to cope, as well as the hope of heaven, but because of sin, many things happen on earth which we don’t orchestrate. Things like disease and accidents.”

After which he takes her face in his hands—his gentle, nail-pierced hands—and says, “Don’t ever forget where your true home is, my child, and when it’s time to return, please remember that we love you.”

It’s a memory of something which hasn’t happened yet.

God’s rumbling voice breaks through the reverie: “So let me ask you, again: Have I ever let you down?”

“No,” she says, slow shake of the head. “You never have. You’ve kept your promise. You gave me love, you gave me life. You gave me fair warning of the pain. I wanted to live anyway. You have never let me down.”

She’s being lifted, like a bird—arms-turned-wings—and flying over heaven. The land scrolls back; reveals earth in its premature years. She comes to rest above a country lush and green. A naked man and a woman are its sole inhabitants. She watches them walk and talk with the animals; sees the way they laugh and tumble with the baby lions and bear cubs; swim in blue rivers, eat luscious fruit from the trees.

“The Garden of Eden,” God whispers from somewhere near. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

She nods, her bird-like body suspended by gentle gusts of wind. Then the landscape begins to morph into a place of sand: the rivers dry up, and the people multiply. Animals go into hiding. Armies invade, and soon people are dying in droves across the country while a haunting bell chimes. She recognizes it as Iraq. Cannot bear to watch.

“Take me away,” she cries, and suddenly she’s back in God’s lap.

“I show you this, because I know your heart for the Middle East,” he says through the mist. “I know you long to see its people set free. It breaks my heart too. I made it to be paradise, and it’s turned into Hades. One day, though, it will become Eden again.”

God pauses. “That’s how I feel about you. I made your life to be full of joy and health—but the enemy has robbed you. One day, though, these things will be restored to you—not on earth, but in heaven.”

She reaches for his hand, puts it to her mouth, kisses the open wounds. “I long to be gracious to you,” God whispers; “To show you compassion. Blessed are all who wait on the Lord.”

Dawn arises like a ballerina dressed in pink. Twirls across the skies, draping ribbons of blue as it dances. Renee finds her heart singing with the sound of a thousand harps, knowing she is loved.

“I don’t care how expensive it is—I’m going to make this the best Christmas I can.”

Angela looks at her hands as she speaks. She’s sitting sideways on the bed, feet dangling in woollen socks. Jonathan is beside her, tucked between the sheets, reading. He glances in her direction over the top of his book; all he can see is the back of her head and shoulders, slumped over as if giving a child a piggy-back ride.

All day long she carries her head high, wearing a smile as bright as the noonday sun, lavishing laughter like a garnish with every meal. But beyond bedroom doors, Angela’s façade fades. Sadness garbs her like a nightgown, and her demeanour shifts from noon-day to twilight. Shadows hang black curtains around her eyes and her mouth droops into an upside-down ‘u’.

It’s a charade performed daily for Renee: an act of desperation by a loving mother, trying to heal her daughter the only way she knows how—by pretending everything is okay.

With Renee allowed to spend Christmas at the apartment, Liana and Sara are coming. Darren has to work, being manager.

They have a lot to be thankful for—or so Angela keeps saying. And everyone falls for it: the Hallmark band-aid. Sometimes life is too painful to be utterly honest. But every night, as darkness falls, shrouding the

apartment and turning the city into a game of hide and seek, truth emerges from the woodwork and dances in the corners.

Angela always insists on retiring early, not wanting anyone to see her face fall apart.

“That’s fine honey,” Jonathan nods, reading glasses jiggling up and down with the motion. “Christmas is in your hands. Spend as much as you need to.”

He puts a hand on Angela’s arm. She turns away; slides under the covers and closes her eyes.

Jonathan shuts his book, clicks off the light and tries not to bump his wife as he slides down beside her. He lies there in the dark, missing her—wanting to hold her, to promise her everything will be okay—yet he can’t.

When will it end? he wonders. When will my little family be back to normal? When will New York City stop being associated with cancer? And when will we spend Christmas at home, instead of squished together in an overpriced apartment?

Her sniffles sound like socks padding on the floor—barely discernible yet undeniably there. Angela thinks he is asleep; she does this every night, after his breathing gets heavy. Each time, however, he can still hear her. His breathing might slow, but his mind does not. Insomnia has become an unwanted, frequent, visitor. He either fails to fall asleep, or wakes in the wee hours to fear pummelling him in the face. To ignore the punches, he listens to music or to sermons on his Discman.

Angela, however, lets her sniffles carry her into the land of dreams. Sorrow is the only one allowed to touch her. Each night, it rocks her gently to sleep.

It's Christmas Eve. Church bells chime like a chorus of voices across the city. Taxi drivers pause in their yellow-cab offices and remember, 'tis the season.

Businessmen and women in pressed suits walk like cloned robots bearing Starbucks coffees and cell phones, unable to hear the chimes for the sounds of the stocks rising and falling. Children too young to be alone wander the streets looking for the reason for the season. The homeless pull out green and red caps into which people toss their leftover guilt, and Renee sits in the apartment, hooked up to her IV, scanning Epicurious.com for recipes she and her mother can make for dinner.

"Dream big," Angela tells her. "We're going all out this year."

Such is apparent by the robust Christmas tree standing plump and green in the corner of their living room; plucked from a local tree farm, it threatens to make Rockefeller Center jealous.

Renee feels a thrill, whoops quietly inside herself. It's the festive fever: every year, it drapes across her soul like a string of popcorn, a strand of white twinkle lights or a holiday melody. If it wasn't for the crass commercialism which caught consumers in a web of specials and stole the baby Jesus right out of his manger, it would be her favourite time of year. Even now as she looks outside, snow begins to descend like tiny white angels from the sky.

"Mom!" she calls in a very young voice. "It's snowing! Isn't that perfect?"

A genuine smile spreads across Angela's face as she remembers Renee, the tiny toddler, wobbling into the kitchen on skinny legs, face flushed bright red and head and hands full of the cold, white powder.

Perhaps there are things to be thankful for, she thinks.

Wraps the final gift; stows it carefully in the closet, to procure later, in secret, and place under the tree. They'd mailed off Darren's a week earlier; he would have come, but holidays promised him time and a half.

Angela's mind flashes back to when Darren and Renee were young, outside, building a snowman. Renee eventually returned to the house, but Darren was nowhere to be found. When Angela enquired about his whereabouts, Renee said simply, "He's being the snowman."

And sure enough, Darren's pink round face and bright eyes had been peering out desperately from within the snowman's body.

Angela shakes her head. *Why do children have to grow up?*

Renee has settled on a menu; handing it over, she leans back against the couch as if full from dinner, while Angela scans the list of recipes. "Roasted pear salad, as an appetizer," she reads, "and then for main course, mashed potatoes with sage and white cheddar and..."

"Brussel sprouts with pine nuts and marjoram!" Renee chimes in, unable to stay quiet. "I'll also make chicken breasts with apple and currant stuffing, and of course, extra stuffing. And for dessert—drum roll please—a chocolate cranberry tart!"

Angela's eyes light up like the Christmas tree strands and she laughs—a real laugh. Feels like a kid again, for just a moment; wants to hug Renee—and so she does. "Let's get our coats and go grocery shopping!" she says, a skip in her voice.

Renee nods, her face suddenly pale. "I just need to lie down for a bit first, okay? I feel really tired ..."

And with that, Angela becomes a mother again, helping Renee to her room and drawing the curtains.

Darkness comes early that day—but, for a moment, there was light. And for that, Angela is thankful.

*Child, precious child
You hear me you see me
Everywhere on every wind
With every breath I am wrapping myself
Around you
Deep inside you know I'm there
I'm the secret
That can never be forgotten
I am moving with your every step
Pointing your feet
In the way they should go
There's so much more
Than just the invisible me
Take a step
And another
Towards me (r.d.)*

She can't stop laughing.

It's one of those rare days where the sky seems the perfect shade of blue, and the world, a place where angels sing.

Bound on each side by Lily and Zoe, Renee throws her hands in the air and exclaims, "I feel good!"

For once, she is not the girl with cancer. She's the girl who's very much alive. Skipping from one edge of the sidewalk to the other, Renee grins. Hooks arms with the girls who've come to see her.

"I can't believe you're here... Have I mentioned that I love you?"

"Oh, once or twice," Zoe says with a wink.

Renee feels beautiful. She's wearing an expensive auburn wig which cups her face like a crimson-glove around a flower. "I want to buy a dress," she declares, twirling. On her chest, the central line, taped and covered beneath her jacket. A secret stowaway.

Her sickness is a fading memory on this morning of miracles.

"Sounds like a plan," says Lily, scanning the street. "Where would you recommend we shop?"

Renee breathes in deep; a pretzel maker is twisting the dough and dipping it in butter. The yeasty smell makes her nostalgic for all things childlike, such as circuses and fairs, and she has to buy one. Then, when the salty dough is in her hands, she turns to her cousins. "Barney's," she says. "Let's go to Barney's. It's on Madison Avenue..."

"Not Bloomingdale's?" asks Zoe. "I always wanted to visit Bloomies to see if butterflies actually go there to buy hats..."

The girls stare at her, wide-eyed.

"Oh c'mon—you mean, you haven't seen 'You've Got Mail'?" She feigns disbelief. Then, clears her throat and assumes the role of Kathleen Kelly, played by Meg Ryan. "'Once, I read a story about a butterfly in the subway, and today, I saw one. It got on at 42nd, and off at 59th, where, I assume it was going to Bloomingdales to buy a hat that will turn out to be a mistake—as almost all hats are.'"

The pretzel, twisted as it was, became even more distorted as Renee squished it, doubling over with laughter. A breeze kisses her eyelids, tickles her cheeks, and whispers sweet nothings in her ears.

"Ahh, Hollywood—I guess it can come up with some clever lines, after all... Bloomingdales it is!" she says, straightening up. "You know how I love butterflies. Let's see if we can't find ourselves a little guy in a big hat."

She pauses. “I need to buy a dress for dancing in. So I hope you’re ready to get your groove on, girls. New York City won’t know what hit it!”

Her dress is black. It matches the night which rises like fingers across an eye, leaving slivers of light which leap from street lamps and car lights.

The floor is marble. Glasses tinkle; lamps twinkle, and Renee looks like a star. Her legs move to the music as clouds to a storm and she is conscious of nothing except the lull of being one with something else: of letting the music take over, like a conductor, with her, an instrument, obeying the notes he’s written.

She’s unaware of people watching, wondering about the slim auburn who twirls so gracefully; unaware they’d remember her as The Vision; unaware of raising her hands high to worship the God whom she’d hurled fists at, just one week earlier. She *is* the dance: cancer has no hold on her. It has no place amongst music or rhythm. And for that night, Renee is free—of death or disease, of anything save for the music which has captured her.

No one knows her head is bald; that her skin feels like someone is raking long fingernails across its surface, or that, two weeks ago, she was wearing sunglasses in a dark room unable to pray, unable to think, barely able to breathe for the pain of chemo. Not even her cousins know the extent to which she’s suffered. Today is a brand-new day. She does not feel like dragging the past into it like a sullen child whose bedtime has long since come and gone.

The clock’s hands usher in the wee morning hours. When shoes and cardigans have been discarded, the girls sit surrounded by couples slow-dancing, men and women mingling, and a jazz singer crooning. They drink mugs of dark coffee and concentrate on resting.

“So, when are you coming home?” Lily finally asks.

Renee frowns, tries to drag herself back down into reality. Her efforts are interrupted by a lady in teal who puts a long-fingered hand on her shoulder and says in thick southern tongue, “I just love your hair, honey. It’s exquisite.”

“Why thank you,” she stammers, placing a hand on her head as if to confirm her hair is indeed, still attached.

When the lady is beyond hearing distance Renee laughs, self-consciously, adjusting her dress over the central line which pokes up its head like a ghost.

“Wow,” she says. “If only she knew this was a wig. Ahh—life is funny.”

The girls smile, sip their coffee.

“About going home,” Renee continues, looking from one face to the other; “I’m hoping it will be soon. I just have to do these outpatient treatments for my lung infection. Once that’s cleared up, then I can have the bone marrow transplant. Apparently they’ve found a perfect match. After that, I’m out of here! Sayonara, sickness!”

“That’s really good to hear,” Zoe says, “because otherwise, we’d have to kidnap you.”

Renee smiles. “You know, a month ago I was hatching a plan to run away with a doctor, but none were handsome enough! Not to mention single... They’re all ancient and married and wrinkly—or short and unattractive. But trust me, the plan was hatching. It was practically a full-grown bird.”

“And now?”

“Now I’m just waiting.” She drains the rest of the mug; suddenly feels tired. It’s the good kind of tired though. The kind laced with endorphins.

“For??”

“For God to save me from this hell-hole,” she finishes. “I know he will. He won’t let me down.”

It hasn’t snowed since Christmas. January was a month of muddied, frozen ground and sullen skies.

Now, with February’s arrival, the heavens fling open for their honoured guest and release a light dusting of coconut flakes across cinnamon-yellow grass. Barren branches become wide-open mouths which swallow up the coconut. Blue Jays are startled smudges of cobalt blue, flashing up into white skies then settling back down in a bed of wet flakes. The world is a magical snow-globe scene—*But shouldn’t it be the other way around?* Renee thinks to herself, walking in Central Park with her mom, feeling at peace with the woods and the sky and the air nipping at their noses.

It’s Angela’s birthday. She doesn’t feel much like celebrating. The treatment had failed to remove Renee’s lung infection, so they’d been forced to do surgery. Yet Renee seems to be recovering.

Suddenly, a clump of snowflakes kisses Angela’s cheek with slobbery lips and she lets out a laugh. Then she turns, sees her daughter standing with pink cheeks and bright eyes and feels her heart reach out and embrace the entire moment: the background of frosty-faced trees and bushes, and the foreground with Renee feeling better than she has in a while.

Maybe everything was going to be okay. Maybe she *could* celebrate. And maybe, in a few weeks when the transplant was over, everything would go back to normal.

Angela pauses. She’s almost going to miss this place, when everything is said and done. Looking around, she hangs the postcard picture up on the walls of her soul.

Children skating on a large glassy lake; a young girl sitting on a bench, reading, red toque slipping to one side; a flock of birds rising like cotton balls over the moss-covered bridge, and everywhere, trails beckoning them onwards through man-made nature.

Renee grabs Angela’s hand and, with a wild look in her eye says, “Mom—let’s make this the best birthday ever! Can I take you to all my favourite places?”

Angela laughs nervously. Chews on her bottom lip. “Are you sure you’re up to it, honey?” she asks gently.

Renee dances around in an energetic display. “Yes! I feel great. Now, let’s go buy some hats and then get some coffee!”

It’s a day of no return: a day when the moment is, in itself, a present—a gift to be unwrapped and treasured. Even time, for once, seems to stand still. They take a horse and carriage, clip-clopping down the street, the horse swishing its pure-bred tail and neighing softly. The wheels roll rough over sand-paper roads; the driver clutches his old-fashioned top-hat and bumps up and down in his seat upfront. The sun makes a lazy appearance, only to slip backwards behind snow-filled clouds. Men at kiosks line the streets, frying, flipping, and folding food inside paper pouches and calling out their wares in loud, drawn-out voices. Billboards flash like gaudy jewellery, draped across every building, and the streets are lined with yellow taxis.

From an aerial view, Angela imagines the city looks like a splash of melted crayons. Everything is a hodgepodge of colour and confusion. Renee loves it. Angela misses Manitoba with its simple, unadorned hills and lakes.

First stop: coffee at Housing Works’ Bookstore Café, where buying a book helps fight AIDS. Then, an exhibit by Kara Walker at the Whitney Museum of American Art—Renee is captivated by the gouache, paper collages and videos crying “Hysteria! Savagery! Passions!” They spend hours with Van Gogh, Renoir and Da Vinci at

the Met—eyes feasting on colours, symbolism, shapes and textures until the air begins to swim. “We’ll go dancing,” she says. “I’ll wear my new shoes.”

After that it’s shopping. They pause by a lady wearing a burette and three sweaters, selling hats at the side of the road, and spend a few minutes modeling various plaid and felt options; then, New York cheesecake at Grand Central Station. They lick the sweet cream from their forks, one prong at a time, testing their dessert like a fancy wine. Once their taste buds have settled, it’s a visit to Madison Avenue, where Renee buys a pair of ballet slippers.

“For dancing in, when I get home,” she says.

Finally—as the snow flakes begin to glow-in-the-dark—they engage in supper at Persepolis where Chef San Sethachutkul turns eating into an art-form: an eggplant mirza appetizer opens the meal, followed by the saffron chicken for Angela and the soltani bah filet for Renee. Accompanied by two large martinis, the night seals tight with a display of satisfied giggles over childhood antics and other nostalgias.

Angela silently begs God not to let it end—to slow down the taxi which speeds far too quickly towards their apartment, whizzing past newly-made memories erected like statues adorning their path home.

But then, there they are—standing in the apartment, hands full of bags. Renee’s shirt slips down revealing the central line; splashes cold water on Angela’s flushed martini-face. She grabs Renee’s bags, turns maternal: “Go have a shower, sweetie. Or a bath. Relax. I’ll make us some coffee.”

Renee’s forehead is sweating. She nods, a bit too slowly, her eyes like brown stones sitting at the bottom of a river. “I’m feeling pretty tired. Thanks for today though Mom.” She reaches over, gives Angela a hug. Her arms feel skinny. “Happy Birthday, Mom.”

“I had fun, Renee,” Angela says shakily. “Your birthday’s coming up too—we’ll have to make it a special one.”

*I feel your presence in the rain
Like a warm flood surrounding me
I've nothing to lose and everything to gain
You have thrown my sins into the sea
The cold wind chills my heart
Still I must let it rest in your hands
Here in the midnight I'm making my start
Pouring out my soul like the sands
A gentle rain is falling, like a sweet breath from
Heaven I can feel your blessing on me
Here among these rocks and stones you have given
A glimpse of how heaven will be (r.d.)*

It's the hardest decision she'll ever have to make.

The leukemia has returned. Renee has to decide whether or not to do a second round of chemo in order to survive. A second bout of poison, in the hopes of being cured.

She cries.

All day long, she cries—after the doctors come and go, after the sun waves yellow hands hello then goodbye, after supper plates have been cleared away—hers untouched. Nothing stops; life simply continues, as if all is good. But it's not.

She cries while her parents beg and plead with her to get the chemo—her mother's face grey, as if someone has taken a piece of charcoal to her face.

Renee thinks back to a recent church service when she'd heard God's voice, heard him whisper to her, heard him comfort her, and she mocks him inside.

“Where are you *now*?” she asks. Then weeps again, remembering his words: “Have I ever let you down?”

“What is this??” she yells inside the cavern of her soul. “What is this, if not letting me down? When will you save me?”

“Soon,” comes the near-inaudible whisper, a flickering flame on a black night.

The flame is quickly snuffed out by the cold wind of chemo, blowing over her soul: she remembers this pain, the way her body feels separate from her skin, the way she wants to grab that skin and yank it from her bones, to rid the itchiness. Yet, as if through smoke, she sees her parents' faces emerge—eyes large, filled with tears, softening anger like warm water on ice—and she knows, she should do it, for them.

Then, she remembers the butterflies. Thousands of them, hovering over the graveyard in Cambodia. And Renee breathes deep, knowing there is hope amidst utter darkness.

She cries one last time—lets the sobs shake her with massive hands, wrenching her from side to side until it's finished. The sadness passes like a bad dream and she's left, feeling frozen.

Rising to tell her parents she'll do the chemo, the shoes she bought for dancing catch her eye. She walks over, picks them up; considers throwing them out the window. Instead, she holds them close like a teddy bear. They become her saving grace. Remind her of life beyond that white-washed tomb.

Just two weeks earlier, the preacher had talked about suffering. It was the Sunday she heard God's voice. The Sunday she'd felt, for once, like worshipping—because she was feeling well. Thought she was getting better. Going home.

The preacher had used the example of Job, saying *God does not initiate pain—only permits it.*

There are two common responses to suffering, he'd said. First, there's stoic cynicism, which asks like a spoiled child, "Why me? There must be no God, or if there is, he doesn't care about me, so I can live however I want."

Then there's fanatic moralism, which, much like a faded door mat, thinks, "I must have done something wrong, so I should try and be a better person."

There are two common responses, he'd said—neither of which is correct.

"We need to learn to live without an answer, to embrace living without knowing 'Why,'" he announced from behind the pulpit. "Our response shows whether we love God just for what He does for us, or for whom He is, *in spite of* what He does."

Can I do that? Renee had wondered, her fingers twirling the threads of her green silk scarf. *Can I live without an answer? I am selfish. So, so selfish. And I am afraid I will continue to be for some time yet. My dependence has never been on God. He has never defined me. I've depended on my friends, my work, my hobbies, even my beliefs and ideologies to define me, but never God.*

Two years ago she'd verged on fanatic moralism, asking, "Have I not done enough?" With the latest diagnosis it had become, "Because this is happening, God must not care."

I still firmly believe that when I was first diagnosed I was not doing anything wrong—there was nothing more I could have done to please God, she'd thought from her seat in the pew. I was exactly where he'd told me to be, doing his will as best I knew how. So the whole moralism thing didn't last very long.

These days it's easier to picture God as a malicious tyrant—a green magic-marker ogre with yellow eyes and sharp teeth—inflicting

suffering just for the hell of it.

"A stem cell is like a blank canvas," says the doctor with round glasses and a tie in the shape of a trout. "They can morph into any other tissue, and possibly prevent someone from dying."

Angela would have to do G-CSF shots for four days to increase the cells. That would make her bones ache. Then, for the procedure itself, she'd have to lie very still with a big needle in one arm, and a smaller one in her hand. She was allowed to take pain killers.

She nods. She knows all this. Says she will do it. After all, she'd done it for Renee 23 years ago—she would do it again. Anything, to help boost her daughter's immune system; to help heal her from the chemo. Anything, to save her baby.

The food won't stay down. Angela keeps making smoothies, but her daughter's body is rejecting nutrients. Shutting down.

The pain is so bad Renee's face seems twisted into a perpetual scream. On Friday they contemplate doing a scan. Then, the anxiety attacks start; she can't sleep without drugs. Starts hallucinating. Asks Jonathan to get her food from Tio Pepe's Restaurante Mexicano—in Vancouver.

By Monday, her skin looks sunburnt—only there is no sun, just very red skin. Angela finds her this way, after donating the stem cells and walking to Renee's room with aching limbs. Renee is having a reaction.

It's all so sudden Angela just stands there for a second with a hand plastered to her mouth. Then, she lets out a yelp and runs to Renee's side, trying to smooth the redness away with the coolness of her palm. Renee's eyes beseech her: "Help."

Angela runs to find a doctor. Grabs the arm of the one wearing the trout tie. Pulls him to Renee's side. "Something's wrong," she says, only she needn't have because he can see that. Can see the way Renee twitches, the way her eyes whirl.

He puts down his clipboard, checks her oxygen levels: "Normal," he says, confused. Then he puts an ear to her mouth, shakes his head. "Raspy—she can't breathe." Doesn't even bother to disguise the concern.

By this time a nurse has joined him; together they work, huddled over Renee while Angela stands back, biting the edge of her thumb and wishing she could do something.

"It's her CO2—she's not getting rid of it," the doctor announces. "Her lungs are collapsing—get me a ventilator. And we'll need to take her to the ICU."

It takes a long time to hook up the ventilator. Eventually they ask Angela to leave the room. Renee looks frantic. "I love you," Angela whispers. Renee nods, wishing she could cling to her mother and not let go. But then they give her a needle and the world swims by in a swirl of pinks and blues, carrying her out of pain, into sleep.

As soon as it's hooked up they wheel her down to the ICU in a blurred hurry with Angela following.

By this time Darren, who'd taken a week off and flown down to be with Renee, arrives at her old room to find her gone. He'd just woken up, having flown in at dawn.

"They've taken her down to ICU," a pretty nurse tells him.

Darren takes off running. He's been clean for a while now, feels strong. His shoes eat up the floor with squeaky strides. Soon he comes upon the ICU wing—pushes open the doors, keeps running until he sees his mother's bent-over back and doctors huddling over his sister. The strides still; his heart beats fast. They're hooking her up to machines with

flashing colours and beeping sounds; her skin is bright as a red pepper, and she looks tiny—a newborn hooked up to hundreds of wires.

"Mom?" he asks tentatively. Pushes a hand through thick hair and steps into the room. She turns; stares at him for a minute. She's shaking. Now, she's pulling at his hand, putting thin arms around his neck. He isn't prepared for this.

After a moment Angela pulls herself together, wipes her eyes and turns back to Renee. "It doesn't look good," she says softly.

He puts a hand to his nose; the hospital smell has caught up to him. A wave of formaldehyde and penicillin washes over him. His knees wobble. He sits in the nearest chair.

They spend the next few hours listening to the monitors beep and watching the doctors take her blood pressure. The CO2 is still too high. They've discontinued the chemo, but Renee keeps shaking—they pile blankets on top of her. She's thirsty—they give her a piece of ice to suck on, but she isn't allowed to drink because of respiratory distress.

Angela's face is a blank sheet. Darren wishes he could draw a smile on it, but he can only sit there.

"Hang on, sweetie," Angela keeps whispering to Renee. Today is Monday, February 25. The transplant is scheduled for Wednesday morning. She just needs to live for one more day. "Lord, help her hold on."

Jonathan comes that afternoon; can't stop pacing. Won't stop berating himself, beating his own back with the guilt-stick: "Why wasn't I here sooner? Why couldn't my phone calls have waited? If only I'd been here, this would never have happened..."

It's the unforgiving curse of a father, born to provide, born to fix, born to solve, yet, when faced with life and death, unable to control a thing. Somehow he feels that, by pacing, he's helping. That he can maybe

hasten the healing by moving. It's all he can think of doing—and so he does it.

Then he notices Angela with her head bent and hands, folded. His feet slow to a halt. Prayer. Of course. That is, really, the most effective resort—yet it seems so simple, too simple. To believe in a God he doesn't know he can trust; to put his daughter's life into the hands of someone who let her get sick in the first place.

A verse comes to him like a child walking barefoot across his brain: "The Lord longs to be gracious to you." It's from Isaiah. He'd read it not too long ago. In that moment he chooses to believe, to bend his head and trust God to be gracious, in spite of the gruelling circumstance.

He feels a cool hand slide into his—looks up. Angela's head is still lowered; a tear traces her soft cheek. He kisses it away. She looks into his eyes, asks, "What now, Jonathan? What now?"

"You should sleep," he says, suddenly aware of the red in her eyes. "I'll go home with you. They'll call us if anything changes. We'll just sleep for a bit."

Angela nods. She hasn't been at the apartment all weekend; feels like a paper-doll. Her voice sounds echoed, far away. She wishes she could be more inside the moment. Perhaps sleep will do this for her. Perhaps, when she wakes up, everything will be okay.

Darren sits by Renee's side that night, painting her fingernails coral pink.

He knows she likes having her nails painted. It makes her feel pretty. He talks to her, even as she's unconscious, telling her about life in Winnipeg, about how proud she'd be of him, having cleaned up his act and gotten a management position. He swears she smiles when he tells her that, while he hates to admit it, she was right all along.

After a while he curls up on a bench outside her room and sleeps until hands wake him, shaking his shoulder. It's 5:30 a.m. Jonathan is standing there, looking dazed. They'd received a call—Renee was going into multiple organ failure. No amount of medical science could save her now.

Soon, the hospital's music therapist knocks on the door; she has tears in her eyes and a guitar in her hand. She and Renee are friends. She begins to play *Amazing Grace* while Darren sings; Angela and Jonathan stand at Renee's side, eyes dry as desert sand, unable to speak or move.

They stand like that for hours, begging God to do a miracle. Play Renee's favourite CD, over and over. After a while, Angela sings the Eva Cassidy song, not caring who hears her. "*For you, there'll be no crying. For you, the sun will be shining. And the songbirds keep singing like they know the score; and I love you, I love you, I love you, like never before.*"

Renee used to giggle when Angela sang. Angela wishes she'd giggle now.

Liana and Sara are on their way, but their flight is delayed. They won't make it in time.

Fourteen hours after the phone call, Renee's heart stops beating.

"If there is hell on earth, this is it," says Jonathan.

Chapter 44—The Smell of Rain

*What is life?
We have hardly drawn our first breath
Before we breathe our last
And we leave this place
So much unfinished
So much left undone
Words not spoken
Love not given
Broken hearts and stubborn pride
This is life and when it's over
Those remaining watch with tear-filled eyes
Wishing for another chance
To be a little kinder
To hug a little oftener
To hold a little longer
The precious life that
Slowly slips between their fingers (r.d.)*

She is buried in the black dress. Her dancing dress. She'd worn it only two weeks ago... Now she lies still. Too still. Like a beautiful Monet painting. It could have been called "Girl Gone Dancing."

Angela can't look. They close the coffin, and she turns her eyes upward. Pictures her little one twirling barefoot across northern skies.

The weather, too, seems in mourning. Clouds are plump with unshed tears. Tree branches stretch like crow's feet across grey skin.

The coffin, a light, pine-wood box, sits in the middle of Mennville's cemetery. Flowers adorn the top of the lid—burgundy lilies. They seem tacky; fake—as if trying to cover up for the fact that she's dead. It all feels fake.

Renee wouldn't have wanted this, Angela thinks. She wanted to be remembered as the girl who lived. She considers yanking the flowers off

the box; pulling the lid open and lying down with her daughter. Maybe then she could protect her little one from this madness.

But she can't.

People begin to write on the box in black felt marker—notes to Renee, as if she can read them. One woman scribbles, "Sweet life, sweet life, sweet life." Words seem so futile at a time like this. Angela can think of nothing. *Blank*. Her mind is blank. How does one word a scream? It's all she has. An empty, hollow scream rising up inside like steam from a tea kettle.

The cemetery is too small—she feels caged in, an animal slammed tight against a herd of strangers. Their sadness is seeping through her skin.

Who are all these people? Where have they come from? What are they doing, intruding on such sacred ground?

Angela wants to be alone. Wants to run in the fields... Fields filled with stubble and black dirt... Fields which know what it means to be robbed—and then forgotten. She imagines kneeling in the dirt, letting its wet blackness soak into her skin. Then, lying down and begging God to take her instead of Renee. *It isn't right! I should have gone first! No mother should have to watch her daughter die!*

But instead, she just stands there, a statue of frozen grief. The church hovers tall behind her, a white pillar of salt seemingly indifferent to the moment which begs like a pauper for mercy. Begs for a miracle. Begs for Renee to rise from the dead.

Muffled sobs rise with a stream of balloons pouring upwards into the clouds. Dozens of bright balloons, released simultaneously. They splash—bright globs of colour—against the grey canopy of sky. It looks as if a child has stuck fingers in paint then pressed them, one by one, against blank canvas. Or as if someone has shot the heavens with a paint-ball gun.

For a moment, Angela hears her laugh: Renee’s giggle, echoing throughout the world as she pauses mid-dance and grabs the balloons ... but then it begins to float away, carried up, up by the balloons until once again, she can no longer be seen or heard.

And all that remains is the smell of rain.

Jonathan is surrounded by people in the middle of the cemetery. He can’t feel his heart beat. His feet seem rooted to the ground. Occasionally he cocks his head to the side, ensuring his mobility. It’s as if he’s been paralyzed, head to toe.

How can he be standing at his own daughter’s funeral?

It wasn’t her time to go... it couldn’t be. How could it be? How could a good God let a good girl go, in such a bad way? If only I hadn’t been distracted—if only I’d been there to stop it. If only I’d been there when she needed me the most. It’s my fault.

The people before him look like little Lego figurines. The whole scene seems blockish—plastic, constructed. *Perhaps if I try hard enough, I can reconstruct everything. There must be something I can do...* but no, the minutes just keep ticking by, ignoring him like an insolent child.

He glances at his wife. Her face is strangely smooth, as if someone has taken an iron and flattened every crease. Her eyes are glossy, fixed on a far-away place—a place too far for him to find. He remembers a time when they touched—when they wanted to be close. Now they can’t get far enough apart. Even now they stand on opposite sides of the grave, their daughter’s body between them.

Perhaps he can borrow some Lego blocks, build a bridge to her. Perhaps then, everything will be okay. If he can just reach her—put his arms around her—maybe time will unravel like a ball of yarn and he can redo everything. Start over.

But his feet remain rooted—obstinate weeds.

The wind blows, taunting him with its fluid motion. People pat his arm, tell him how sorry they are. He wants to yell, “It’s okay, everything’s going to be fine!” but can only bow his head. Because it’s not going to be fine.

Each pat is like a slap to his skin. A judgement hurled in his direction. A hammer pounding nails through his flesh. What must they think of him? A father who can’t save his own child! There is nothing. Nothing. *Nothing* he can do to make things better.

That night, Renee visits them in their dreams, her face flushed with health, her hair long and strong. She seems young and old, wise and innocent.

To Angela she says, “I am with you, Mom, in every coffee cup, in every spicy dish, in every independent movie—so don’t stop living. Don’t stop breathing. Don’t stop loving. You may not see me, but I see you. Please, live on my behalf. Do the things I enjoyed doing. Be happy, for that will make me happy. I am in a better place—one where I don’t hurt anymore. There are Portuguese buns here, and there is dancing. I’m holding a place for you. Soon we will be together again. Until then, find me in the little things—the little pieces of saving grace. I love you, Mom.”

With Jonathan she pleads, “Dad—you have to believe me when I say, There was *nothing* you could have done. It was my time to go. It was orchestrated from the very beginning. God does not want me in pain—that’s why I’m here now. I’m better than I’ve ever been; I am so very happy. You are not to blame, for it was all meant to be. Life does not abide by human desire—there is a divine plan which supersedes all we could ever imagine or dream. Keep hoping, keep believing, keep persevering. And know that I love you.”

An orange butterfly clings to their window ledge.

The sunrise spills across their bed like a pile of red, orange, yellow and blue candy wrappers. It's as though a piñata has split across the sky.

Wakened by the colours of the morning, Angela and Jonathan find themselves clinging to each other. For to let go would mean falling off the face of the earth.

Once again, I'm in the throne room, bowing before him. The elders and creatures kneel beside me. I'm unable to stop crying for the light. It melts my insides like margarine. I feel a hand on my shoulder. Then, the voice: "Listen, my child, and believe."

An angel approaches, unrolling a scroll. He has a gentle face; the kind of face you'd want in a friend. He reads what's been written—"An assignment for Renee VonDyke."

Then he tells me I've been chosen to document life in Heaven. To record the stories of those who've entered.

He winds tight the scroll, hands it to me. It's mine, should I choose to accept it.

I want to hug him, but he's putting something behind my ear: A camera of the tiniest model. It hooks to my ear, ends at my eye. Like a one-eyed spectacle. The camera listens to me. I tell it to zoom, and it zooms. I request more light, and the shadows lift like a curtain.

My body is leaving, now. Feet flailing, I'm rising above sea and land. And then, just as quickly, I'm being set down again, next to Jesus on a bench made of wood.

He's smiling. The scroll crumples in my hands.

"When do I begin?" I ask.

"Your assignment begins when, and if, you say the word," Jesus says. "At some point everyone is chosen by the Father for a specific job here in heaven. Your time is now."

"Why? Why would he want *me* to do this?"

“He knows you were unable to complete your earthly dreams; he knows your passions, your artistic gifts,” Jesus says, soft of voice. “Heaven is the fulfillment of every person, the completion of every being. It is where gifts are allowed to shine without hindrance, in full sight, and appreciation, of the giver.”

He tips my chin; I look up. The skin by his eyes is crinkled, like a croissant. “Take this, and receive it; do it, in remembrance of me.”

Then, he stands. “It’s communion time.”

He picks me up and carries me across mountains, plains and moors. The ground is a blur. Soon we will arrive at the table. The table which stretches for miles. He will sound the bell, and heaven’s children will come, take part in the feast.

It’s a holy place. A meal of grace and song.

And this time, I will document it.

But for the moment, I’m in his arms. The earth beneath us is a smudge of greens, browns and grey. I marvel at the pastels. Wonder at the assignment. Feel quietly lost in love.

I’m waiting there, in the garden, when the butterfly is born.

The pupa splits; cracks open like an acorn. A wing emerges. I want to reach down and help, to lend a finger. Instead, I tell my camera to ‘zoom.’

The wing is so fragile, so wet and new. Soon, another wing appears. The whole process reminds me of an old person trying to climb out of bed. Eventually the butterfly hangs upside down, like wet laundry, drying itself off.

Its wings begin to expand, pump full with blood. They become Chinese fans—colourful silk which flutters in the wind. The wings are transparent but strong—like a waif of a person with a powerful voice.

I study the flexible body—its antennae, tiny head, and pretty colours. Watch it rotate. Stretch its wings, as if to test the wind. Then, with a dainty bow to its audience, the butterfly ballerina stands on its tip-toes and floats upwards. It seems to twirl with newfound freedom, to circle up and down and around, and then, to fly away, a tiny dancer in a great big world.

It will seek food, and then, a mate. Together, they will form larvae, and the cycle of metamorphosis will begin again.

The excruciating process of becoming a butterfly.

Butterfly
by Seven Day Jesus

You see me
It's not me
It's something underneath my skin
I wanna tear it all away
And show the beauty that's within

Begin to
Come unglued
And throw away the older me
Just give it time and then
You'll see

I remember the last time we met.... Her face was glowing with energy, and her eyes just sparkled with the excitement of adventure. I am truly saddened by her passing, but I know that her mission lives on through the people she inspired, and will continue to inspire. Indeed, a creative spirit such as Renee's can do no less. (Moirra E.)

I want to be a butterfly
Flying high in the sky
With you today
I wanna lose this old cocoon
I wanna do it soon
And fly away, away

Your wind is underneath my wing
It carries me away
It's you
My God
That makes me sing
When I'm on my way
Change a little every day

You take what's old and make it new
So I can be with you
And fly away, away

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