



Horizons

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by

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It was the perfect morning to end it all. Daybreak peaked through the bedroom blinds in callous streaks, slapping Gabriel awake. The alarm clock followed seconds later with its shrill scream. He rolled over and subdued it with his fist. He then peered over his shoulder to see his fiancée still asleep. Thank God. He could remember a time when seeing her that serene would drench him in comfort, but on this dawn he felt little beyond relief.

Slowly he crept out of bed, trying not to wake her. He failed. She rolled over and looked up at him.

“Since you woke me you should go make me some of your awful coffee,” she mumbled.

Gabriel sighed. Her affection was glacial, especially in the early hours, yet that was her love. The bleak thought gave him sudden pause causing him to teeter in the hallway, but dawn was too early for revelations. He would have the whole day to ponder in any case.

The bones in his toes creaked as he shuffled along the floorboards to the kitchen and started the coffee brewing. Its scent permeated the air. Gabriel breathed deeply, then sheepishly looked about the old wallpapered room, deemed himself alone and stuck out his tongue. He imagined the coffee was a fluttering scent that perched on his tongue like a snowflake. Retracting his tongue, he chuckled.

Gabriel made his way back to the bedroom closet and dressed for work. Once he made the final jerk to finish knotting his tie, his monotonous routine had truly begun. He left the bedroom, heading out his front door into the assaulting sunlight to gather the morning paper. It had managed to slip out of the plastic wrapping again and had drunk up the majority of a puddle from the sidewalk. He could almost hear its sated sigh. Shaking his head, Gabriel scooped up the soggy pulp and briefly glanced over what legible words were left on the front page. Nothing but the same bad news greeted him as he made his way back inside. Just as he pulled out a chair to sit at the kitchen table, the phone rang and threw off his routine.

“ello son.”

“Morning Mom.”

She was the last person he wanted to hear. He could tell she was drunk again, so he sat and let her ramble as he skimmed the sopping news.

“I’m still in England son. It’s beautiful. The buildings are old and the people are nice. They ask me about the states - they think I get shot at all the time because of what they read and

see on TV. One called me ‘Yank!’ It was great! You should’ve come – it’s fun. Anyways, I’ve decided I’m gonna stay here a little longer. I miss you, bye.”

Gabriel hung up the phone as the dial tone shrieked, realizing it was the only thing he had really heard out of the earpiece. The floorboards behind him creaked as his fiancée appeared, her matted hair flowing like a confused and muddy river. She shuffled her long legs, meandering around the kitchen until she had found the cup of coffee, in the same spot every morning in which she inevitably took too long to find. After a gulp, she leaned over placing a kiss on the corner of Gabriel’s mouth. Her lips were soft rose petals on his cheek. She turned away in a zombie-like motion, taking a seat across the table.

“Who was on the phone?”

“My mother.”

Gabriel caught a glimpse at the clock and cursed in his head. He had to leave soon and hadn’t had any breakfast or enough coffee. With a sigh he rose.

“I have to go to work early.”

“Okay, I love you. Have a good day.”

“Bye, love you too.”

Gabriel left home and began his daily walk to work with a stumble. He didn’t fall, righting himself in time, and he realized he was far from groggier than normal. As if sleep was exercise and not rest. And his dreams...His nightly sleep consisted of insipid whites and depressing grays painted on a decrepit canvas in the back of his head. Life was tired and stagnant and his dreams reflected that. His brain, maybe even his heart, constantly pushed at him for direction, but Gabriel waved them past without looking, letting them breeze by without a care to where they were going.

What did he want to be when he grew up? What did he think when he was a kid? If he could find those old innocent goals then he might be able to resurrect some direction. Yet every time he tried to recollect the curse arose. The family curse he father wouldn’t shut up about.

God gave me a bad memory so I can’t remember past mistakes, dooming me to repeat them. Gabriel knew he suffered the same affliction but there was no cure.

The world woke and crowded in around him in a rush. Conversations peppered the downtown air, congesting his ears. The throng tangled together like the winding ironwork decorating skyscrapers as the hordes cast long marching shadows down cement corridors. How he wished that he wasn’t standing in these masses, letting it all pass him by, but it was better than fighting the flow to only be trampled.

There’s always tomorrow.

His aspirations sank away into the trap of age. The future never spoke to him in a hopeful tone. It only told him, in a curt manner, that all it had in store for him was an ending. And that, he could never fathom hurrying towards.

Gabriel hit his halfway point on his morning commute - to the perk up point. As these routine musings plagued Gabriel, he came upon a little yellow deli huddled against a cold gray tower’s edifice. Every day a new and foreign smell sneaked from the deli’s imprisoning pots and wafted tasty aromas about the street. Gabriel perked up ready for the smells that would often inspire what he would get for lunch later. He strode past and sucked in a deep breath, ready to taste the aroma and decipher what it was for today. Instead, he was assaulted by a putrid smell. It was like sewage. Or worse. The stench crawled up his nostrils, planting roots on the back of his tongue.

Gabriel stumbled from the shock, barely catching himself on a parking meter. He looked up to only be blinded by the glare of the creeping sun. A steady stream of coughs choked him as he hastily retreated from the fetor. Screaming from behind, the sun coated the world in a mustard yellow. Gabriel ran, passing through tall shadows and leaden crowds until he reached his office building.

His heart began to settle and embarrassment set in. He snorted in disgust at himself for running to work for comfort. Straightening his tie, he entered the sleek marble lobby. In the elevator, his eyes scanned the people around him, carefully watching their expressions for any sign that they could detect the foul stench that attacked him. No one seemed to notice. Some mild sniffs, nothing more. The elevator reached Gabriel's floor and the reflective doors parted. Gabriel burst free and he found himself nose to nose with his boss.

"Wrong stench," Gabriel mumbled beneath his breath.

"What?" his boss asked as he followed Gabriel to his cubicle.

Preoccupied with a presentation Gabriel was to give to foreign investors in thirty minutes, his boss poked and prodded with questions about his nerves. His boss's arms were folded across his chest, shirtsleeves rolled up – which told the world he meant business. Gabriel noticed that his boss's lucky cufflinks weren't on. No wonder he was so on edge.

"Doing fine Gabe? Got everything? Need anything? You'll do fine. Oh and say hello to your fiancée for me. Tell her thanks for the recipe, I got some ass last night because of it. Chicks dig good cooks."

"Sure," Gabriel muttered.

After several nervous pokes and winks, his boss left Gabriel alone to review and prepare for the presentation. Gabriel left his cubicle for caffeine. He filled his cup, down it all and then refilled. A cloying coffee taste coated his tongue. He sighed and returned to his cubicle to review his notes.

Taking a quick break from his presentation, he glanced over at his coffee cup. The print on it was blurred. The black smudges that should be words spread out like fireworks, sparkling within the confines of the porcelain mug. Looking at it was strangely nauseating. Gabriel shook his head, flipping through the papers scattered around his desk. They were blurred as well. Closing his eyes he sighed, hating to admit any more bad luck. He tried to focus and breathe. He had to push this anxiety away. That's all it was - anxiety.

Slowly, he opened his eyes and found every printed word was crisp and clear. Quickly shaking away his concerns, Gabriel slid his materials off his desk and made his way into the presentation room. He was armed with colorful graphs and revealing charts.

"Good morning everyone," Gabriel said, greeting the room.

The others in the meeting room muttered a less enthusiastic echo.

He situated himself at the podium, shuffling his notes. The coffee taste in his mouth disappeared, leaving his tongue numb.

Get it together Gabe. Just work through this.

The bitter taste returned and with it came his control. Gabriel began his production and continued on for thirty minutes. Smiles smothered every wealthy round face docked at the conference table. As he went on he could see that he was close to sealing the deal. The final pitch was just over the horizon when Gabriel's head sank into fatigue; his thoughts fizzling into sporadic and incoherent images.

He panned around and saw every head bobbing with satisfaction and everything seemed to be back in order again. All present were ready to spend his or her money at his command.

"Shrink those figures a bit, my daughter needs a new car," laughed an investor.

Gabriel opened his mouth with a standard courtesy laugh when a stinging sour taste invited itself up his throat. Biting back the vomit his eyes throbbed and the room exploded into blurred streaks. His head lost all its weight and swiveled on his neck.

"Gabe, what's wrong? Are you alright?" his boss asked.

"All a sudden...don't feel good," Gabriel muttered, his knees buckling.

In a last rush of panic, Gabriel tried to collect himself. He didn't want to fall, the ground looked miles away, but the floor came closer and closer until it greeted him.

And then, everything went black.

* * *

Most mornings, bright ones in particular, made Gabriel think of his stays at his grandmother's vineyard. He always woke to the glaring sun sneaking in through the window. As if they were perched on the sill, he could hear the clamor of birds restlessly chirping away their day. Wiping the sleep from his eyes, his senses roused and the haze of sleep cleared. An all too familiar smell lingered in the air, rousing his stomach into protests of hunger. Visions of golden pancakes and viscous maple syrup warmed his thoughts, stirring him. As he stripped away the confining blankets Gabriel rose from bed and recognized the room he was in.

"I'm at Grandma's. Mom dropped me off," he said, heading to the door.

Gabriel rushed to the kitchen to find a mountain of sun-sparkled pancakes, swimming in cascading syrup ending a brown moat around the base. A feast of other foods also littered the table, but it was the pancakes that grabbed Gabriel. Grandma's were to die for.

"Good morning little man," Grandma said as she watched him enter, "Why don't you come over and give your grandma a big hug."

He strolled over and wrapped his little arms around her waist, eyeing the pancakes the whole time.

"I hope you're hungry. I made you an extra special breakfast with all your favorites," she said as she finished setting the table.

Gabriel crashed on his soft chair, rubbing his chubby hands together in anticipation. He lived for mornings like these. Next was Saturday morning cartoons. God, this had to be what Eden was like.

A warm tingle rose on the side of his face as his grandmother pulled away from kissing his cheek. He hastily jabbed a fork into the steaming plate before him with reckless abandon, shoving all he could into his mouth, narrowly missing his own teeth. Gabriel prepared to relish the best food in the world, yet once the food touched his tongue, none of the wondrous burst of sweetness came. His mouth was filled with the terrible dead taste of ash.

Disappointed and confused Gabriel looked at his grandma with soft sad eyes, praying that this was a bad dream. Tears welled and streaked down his fat cheeks. He was crushed. Gabriel locked his gaze with his grandmother's blank and forlorn eyes. She looked upon him as a stranger without a hint of recognition in her stare. Her wrinkled face was twisted in uncertainty.

Rising from between the peaks of food on the table, she peered down at Gabriel and asked, "Excuse me young man, but have I met you before?"

Grandma forgets.

* * *

The vibrant sunset slowly strolled into nightfall. Splintering embers from the sun appeared almost obtainable as Gabriel reached to grab onto one. Every colorful dusk that he witnessed revived in him a brief belief in magic. A magic that he first saw on this very lake.

The sharp smell of pine trees, wetness and beef jerky hung in the air – the unmistakable smells of fishing with Uncle Joe. Echoes of barking dogs rang through the forest as a breeze kicked up off the water. The cool air was fresh and Gabriel took a deep breath of it but only smelled the musty lake.

Situated on an old small boat in the lax glow, Uncle Joe and Gabriel patiently waited, clutching the best fishing poles money could buy.

“Good poles catch good fish,” Uncle Joe always said. “No bass ever cared about how fancy your boat was. They only cared if they could snag a worm away from a frugal fisherman.”

Many of their afternoons would pass without a single catch but neither truly cared.

“The poles don’t matter when there are no fish,” Gabriel said.

“Not all fishing is about the fish,” Joe said. “It’s about relaxing.”

“Well,” Gabriel agreed in a cracking voice, “We’ve got that mastered.”

The wooded shoreline was tinted with the setting sun’s orange rays and the light grew fatter with each passing minute. The boundaries between the world and the heavens seemed blurred here. Gabriel reached out and traced a cloud with his finger, rubbing his fingernail across its fluff, almost expecting them to pop.

“I wonder why you can look directly at the sun at sunset but not during the day?” asked Uncle Joe out of the blue.

Still contouring the shapes of the clouds without a break in concentration, Gabriel responded, “Because when the sun’s on the horizon, all the dust and crud in the air dulls the brightness. When it’s above us there’s less crap to cut through and it’s too bright to look at.”

Uncle Joe sat and stared. Gabriel dropped his finger and his childish fancies wondering what he did wrong.

“You’re a smart one,” Joe said.

“No, I..I just picked that up somewhere,” Gabriel admitted. “I’m not smart.”

“Modest too.”

“No Joe I..”

“Just keep learnin’ boy, don’t stop. Do that and you’ll have the world by the balls.”

Gabriel felt awkward and isolated. He reached in his pocket, unwrapped some bubble gum and tossed it in his mouth. Chewing on the gum would keep Gabriel’s mouth occupied so he didn’t say anything else to make Uncle Joe sound stupid. Joe’s rough hand clapped down on Gabriel’s shoulder. Gabriel flinched and nearly gulping down the wad of gum. His uncle patted him and smiled. Uncle Joe looked so proud.

A stiff breeze arose and brought in the cool shadows of the night. The life around the lake began to slow. As the crickets began to chirp the two fishermen packed up and headed for shore. The sun sank below the waterline. Gabriel always imagined a hissing sound as the sun went behind the water, like a match doused in a puddle. In quick shutters, Joe’s fishing pole jerked about. A sudden yank on the line made Uncle Joe grip the pole and drag the struggling line closer. Gabriel peered over the side of the boat and saw its squished face appear just below the water. Splashing fat waves in its slippery struggle, the fish shot into the air and Joe dragged it into the boat. Gabriel watched, soaked by the struggle, chomping on his gum in nervous

anticipation. It flopped on the deck like Gabriel's tongue in his mouth; both waiting for Joe to remove the hook. In anticipation of dinner Gabriel's mouth began to water, he could almost taste the fish. But only almost. No taste touched him. He wadded up the chewing gum and spit the tasteless lump into the water.

The fish slowly drowned in the fresh air; its struggles lessening with each passing second. The fish's final throes left only stillness. The silence was eerie. The dead scaly carcass was sickening and Gabriel found his zeal for dinner disappearing, but Uncle Joe was happy. Trying to join in his uncle's enthusiasm, Gabriel pawed at the catch to inspect it as a carrion stench stabbed his nostrils. Grimacing in disgust, Gabriel swallowed hard, covering his mouth, rocking the boat as he stammered backwards. The stench was awful.

Gabriel plugged his nose while Uncle Joe silently rowed them back to shore. Once on land Joe started a fire and gutted the catch. Satisfaction covered his face as he licked his lips.

"Getta load of that," Uncle Joe said taking in deep breathes of the cooking fish, "It smells so good that I can almost taste it."

Gabriel moved closer to the fire, inhaling but smelling nothing. He licked his lips and tasted emptiness. Gabriel sniffed the air, expecting the scent of the murky lake or the sharp pine trees or the clean night air. But there was nothing.

Gabriel looked at Joe, ready to complain when his uncle's look of contentment quickly dissipated. The fire danced shadows across Joe's features and changed his happiness into loneliness. Fear and confusion struck Gabriel as he saw his uncle's dismal face.

"Boy, whatcha doin here?" He asked Gabriel.

Uncle Joe forgets.

Loud clanks rang from the next room. Gabriel walked over to the doorway and watched his father prepare dinner. His father stood near the stove cutting vegetables on the counter, his shoulders rising and falling with each labored breath. Adorned in an ever shrinking blue collared shirt, piebald with stains, his father lugged about the kitchen in untied boots. Gabriel often wondered if the grease staining his shirt would ever squeeze loose into their food. He could always count on the smell of sweat and oil that was his father's aroma but all those familiar comforting scents were gone. Whatever was boiling in the pot held no odor either.

The kitchen lights were dim as his father cooked and chopped. A dark kitchen meant his dad had another headache. Gabriel was in awe that his father never let his headaches incapacitate him. He would always finish his duties no matter how much the pain slowed him.

"Gabe, could you run out to the fridge in the garage and grab milk?" His father asked without looking. "You're mother didn't pick up anything again."

"Yeah, sure Dad. No problem."

Gabriel walked through the gray kitchen and heaved the door open to the dusty garage. The garage doors were open when Gabriel walked outside. The moonlight draped the asphalt driveway. Gabriel leaned against the lone car, listening to the tree branches rustle against the roof as the autumn air shot chills down his spine. Clouds reached over the moon with thick fingers and concealed it. The wind whirled. Screeching howls bayed from the neighbor's yard. A splinter of fright stabbed Gabriel, hurrying him back to the task at hand. He opened the refrigerator door and pushed past beer and soda. Fear hastened his hands. Dead leaves scratched along the cement floor and he nearly cried out, his fingers toppling several cans as they found a cold handle and pulled the milk free. His bare feet slapped flatly against the cement, his heart pounding behind his eyes. Slowly turning his head, he looked out into the night, but nothing was there beyond the heavy darkness and strange dancing light.

Gabriel chastised himself for being frightened and slammed the door. With a step towards the house a barely audible groan sounded from inside. Fear gripped him again and he froze solid, mid-stride, as his imagination took over. There could be an intruder making a noisy break-in. Did Dad even notice the clamor? He hadn't been the same lately, getting weaker and weaker every day. Coughing and thinning by the hour it seemed. So many times he tried to help Gabriel with his homework, but would fall asleep after the first problem. His breathing had gotten so heavy. Mother doesn't care though. She never noticed or seemed to care how his father's skin clung to his face or how his hair thinned. She just worried about the money being lost.

Shivering in his high school gym shorts, Gabriel placed the milk down on the cement. He balled up his right fist, ready to strike an intruder as he stepped closer. Anyone that was going to mess with his father was going to get a savage beating. The door slammed against the wall and startled Gabriel as he gazed at the floor.

Lying on the red ceramic tile was a feeble body. Shadows stretched from the walls and crept towards the man on the floor. Gabriel's veins pounded and every soft point on his body ached with terrible urgency. He knelt at his father's side. A torrent swirled within Gabriel's skull, drowning his thoughts as he placed his hand on his father's sweaty black hair.

"I'm alright son," he groaned.

"Dad, what happened to you?"

"Just fell...I'm fine."

Gabriel wasn't buying it. He helped his father to his feet.

“They said it was in remission Dad.”

Father straightened out his work shirt and wiped blood from his upper lip. Pallid and bruised, he walked through the dark household, refusing any more help. His bright blue shirt cut through the shadows. His father hobbled all the way to the kitchen but lost balance in the doorway. Gabriel ran to him but he caught himself on the doorframe. Diluted tears glistened on his father’s faint cheeks, twinkling in a light that Gabriel couldn’t place. Father turned and faced his son with distress in his eyes. Gabriel watched his father, the strongest man in the world, begin to collapse.

“I knew it was true and not a trick...” His father said clearing away his tears, his eyes lost in a memory. “I forgot all about the red checkered sundress.”

“What are you talking about Dad?”

“It was summer, late summer. That’s the only time when the skies are so tired from all the heat and it’s too weak to hold anything up except for a beautiful empty blue sky. The trees were so green. She was standing over you while you played Gabe. Her hands were on her hips as she watched over you. Then a breeze blew a branch aside and the sun shined down on her face. Sunshine slowly crept down further. Down and down that perfect checkered dress until the light stopped on her stomach. And there, in that spot of sunlight, was life. You were still digging up the lawn and shouting as she rubbed her stomach ever so gently. Caressing that promise in her womb. A promise she never kept.”

The faintest wisp of smoke floated in the air and caught Gabriel’s attention. Worried about the simmering dinner being over-cooked, Gabriel looked around for a fire, but found none. The house was open and dark. His father, realizing something too, straightened his back.

“Your dinner is almost ready,” his father said walking into the kitchen.

“Dad, sit for a bit. I’ll do it...”

“No. Please don’t worry about me son,” he said putting the food on the plates, “You already carry too much. I’m supposed to be caring for you, not the other way around.”

“But I want to help.”

“This is meant for me.”

“But it’s too much for you.”

“Any burden on your shoulders only weighs as much as your head.”

Gabriel blinked and stared at his father with adult eyes. Gabriel looked down at his smooth hands and then watched his father’s hands rest on the counter. They were the same except Gabriel’s lacked the attrition of age. That already consumed most of his father, even devouring his wedding ring, as the disease spread. Darkness had him. The clever night crept up from around his father as he sat at the simple wooden table in meek light to eat. Gabriel approached the doorway to join him but stopped before entering the kitchen. Frozen in the shadows, his father’s vibrant blue shirt had faded to gray. His jet-black hair dulled to a monotone dust. A blanket of gloom draped the kitchen and everything within, leaving the room dead and foreign.

Gabriel blinked. Among the eclipsing darkness, his father sat alone at the kitchen table. Gabriel’s school backpack that was resting near the table was nowhere to be found. His father ate silently from the only plate set on the table. Gabriel wanted to cry but couldn’t feel a thing.

* * *

A pounding at the window woke Gabriel. It sounded like one tone of rain rattling the pane. Half asleep, Gabriel pulled open the blinds to the familiar image of fogged glass and oily handprints.

His mother's face was nearly indistinguishable and her gestures invisible in the downpour, but he knew what she wanted; she required the same thing every weekend night. Gabriel shuffled to the door and let her stumble in. She tripped in the doorway and fell into his arms. The embrace was abrupt as she slipped on the red tiles and pushed past her son to the couch, peeling away her wet clothes. He closed the door and splashed through the puddles she made. He followed her liquid trail onto the creaky hardwood floors. With just one step the floor burst into cackles. His other foot followed and the laughter persisted. The mocking chorus continued until he couldn't bear it and halted.

His mother bounced off the couch cushions and flopped onto her back. Her brown hair swarmed over her face, clumpy and wet from rain and the hot breath of other men. With her suspect love and destructive passions, she watched her son with hypocritical disgust. He stared at her the same way. So labored was her breathing that it resembled snoring.

"Whatcha looking at?"

"Nothing," Gabriel sneered.

"I'm your mother. You better treat me with..."

"Respect is the last thing you deserve. You're an embarrassment."

Anger clung to her wrinkled face but quickly washed away. Quiet hung on her hot and sour breath until a smirk appeared.

"Well son," she said sitting up, a slur nudging into her voice. "I didn't plan on a child. You wanna talk about embarrassment, talk about yourself. The only reason you're still alive is because yer father was convincing 'nuf to keep me from getting an abortion."

Gabriel's gritted his teeth. His fists balling up as his heart ached and pounded. He breathed methodically to keep his temper even. This was just another one of her evil jabs. She's as nurturing as a tornado – as affectionate as a thorn.

She calmly waited for his reaction with a raised eyebrow. The room flashed between light and dark with the static on the television screen. The alcohol on her breath polluted the room. The stillness in the air directly opposed the tempest within Gabriel. He was done with her. All hope was gone. Whatever vestige of goodness and compassion that a mother was supposed to have had withered long ago. She was engaged with worthlessness.

Gabriel walked into the kitchen reaching into the cupboard for a bottle of vodka. He ran a finger along the label and felt nothing. He returned to his mother and sat cross-legged on the floor before her. Gabriel nestled the bottle on top of the carpet just out of her reach."

"Give it here," she commanded.

"I always thought it was the alcohol that made you this way. I always hoped you had some kindness, some sense of motherhood deep inside you that the booze held back. Now, if you have any semblance of kindness at all, I don't want to know about it. I know now that this bottle isn't what I hate. It's you."

She looked into his eyes and then at the bottle. Gabriel looked at the bottle and then in her eyes.

"Chose your love," he barked and put the vodka in front of her.

She snatched the bottle away without a moment's hesitation and yelled, "Nobody! I don't love nobody!"

Tears streaked down her cheeks and Gabriel almost began to pity her. But it was just another ploy.

"I'm the only person left. I'm the only one who won't leave. You don't know what it's like. Love ruins people. It steals your youth. There used to be magic in life and it made life worth living, but every year takes a little piece from you. And you don't notice it. It takes it through heartbreak and responsibility. All I hear from everyone is needs and wants and no one hears mine. So I go and get them my damn self."

The patter of rain against the window deadened. The floor, as the couch rocked against it, ceased to creak. All the ambient sounds of life muffled and ran to a safe distance.

"Why did you do this to us Mom?"

"Why did everyone do this to me? Why does anything happen?"

"Tell me how you could do this to your own family!" He could barely feel and hear himself yell.

"It was easy son. Don't care about your insides, just worry about your outsides. Don't let anyone know what's within you, because when you do, they'll see and you'll realize there's nothing to see in the first place. It's all been hollowed out."

"You don't love anyone but yourself."

"No. I don't love anyone *especially* myself. I love things that can't love back, that way nothing can hurt me," she said and took a swig of vodka.

The world began to drown.

"It's terrible not knowing who you are," her eyes trembled and she almost seemed sober, "It's probably the worst feeling of all. How could all of the wonder and the magic of life just forget about someone? I mean after all that work, after all that time to make a person, you'd think I'd get some reward? But no, I gotta go out and get it."

"Is your own family that easy to forget?"

"I'll choose my own family now thank you," she said. "You know, people tell me I'm a mother and a wife. I don't hear it. I hear only what I say and I say nothing. The same people that tell me I'm a parent are the same that tell me I'm an alcoholic, and what do they know?"

"More than you..."

"The world owes me and I'm gonna collect. I'll do as I want. I deserve it."

Every sound submerged as Gabriel sunk. Inundated in a watery abyss, his head fell into the depths and floated on and on until it landed in a place without enchantment. Husked to a shell, Gabriel had let his mother's raspy words graft scar tissue over his heart. His guard erected to exasperating heights. He adapted to her hatred and called it love. Gabriel fought the few tears that came as he glared at her.

Wiping her eyes and shaking her head, his mother peered through squinted and bewildered eyes, staring at her only child. Her glazed eyes sparked no recognition when she saw him.

"You're a handsome young man," she said with a smirk. "What's your name?"

Mother forgets.

* * *

She always struck the keys in such sweet succession. Her bitter blues resonated off every person in her bar. The same people often stopped in to rest their troubles for the day with his fiancée's music. She was captivating. Her raspy voice tickled the ear. Her piano sang like falling rain. Gabriel was in the sea of people, staring in awe like all the rest, even though he could barely hear her talents.

She was perched up on the stage, singing like a bird, her music effortlessly brushing away worries from every shoulder. Gabriel loved seeing her play. Her smile was more vibrant when she was at the piano bench, doubling her beauty. Her smoky image exercised emotions that most didn't know existed. He took a sip of his scotch and grimaced; it was bland and watery. Even a sniff of the alcohol gave him nothing. He pushed the glass aside and listened. Her music turned insipid. Gabriel shook his head and closed his eyes, trying to drink in the sounds. No feelings arose in him. Nothing was right. He drank though. A drink without taste would still get him drunk.

Gabriel resituated himself in his chair. He licked his lips, straining to hear and trying to feel. Fidgeting he tapped his toes but couldn't keep entertained. His attention went back to her and the second he saw her, sharp pains throbbed behind his eyes. He looked away. The smoky bar had become an annoyance. Discomfort settled on his skin in an opaque film, not of the typical warmth that roared within him when she played. He rubbed his palms against his forehead to settle his discontent. Everything felt foreign. He was alone. Betrayed. The world was crumbling.

Gabriel stared at his table looking over two small metal items. They were blurry. They were why he was here. They belonged there least of all. They looked as smug as their owner.

Gabriel had thought of every scenario possible, every single detail that could explain why his fiancée seemed so distant and cold.

She's supposed to love me. Not who I could be or who she wants me to be. Me.

Gabriel scooped up the metal objects on the table and shook them in his hand like dice. He stopped and pressed his fist to his mouth and closed his eyes. He hoped and prayed that the obvious and simple answer wasn't the right one and that some elaborate alibi was the truth. That would let him rest easy. With a flick of his wrist, his fingers released the items into a roll and they danced from his hand across the sticky table. The evidence tumbled to a halt just past his drink. They were still blurry, but the harder he stared a golden pattern emerged and stared up at him with deceit. Those little cufflinks were proof enough his boss had been in his bedroom.

Her piano was silent and her lips still. The applause she bowed to was mute. Lightly stepping down the side stairs, her long skirt rippled. She was beautiful as she approached the empty seat at Gabriel's side.

"How was I?" She asked sitting down.

Gabriel didn't respond. Nothing tasted, smelled, felt, or looked good, let alone sounded good. All he could do was fixate on the opulent proof on the table. His hands, flat on the sticky wood, slowly began to tremble. The cufflinks were blurry again. He had gotten used to love's disappointments, used to the differences that chipped at him, but not betrayal. God, not that. That never gets easy.

"What's the matter?" His fiancée asked as she looked over at the cufflinks. Her eyes doubled in size.

Gabriel was weightless and impassive. Old wounds in his heart cracked and bled as their eyes met. She was full of tears and explanations but he was too empty to hear. Anger rejected all. Severed from all his dreams and left at an impasse of emotion, Gabriel stood and left the table. His chair tumbled over as she cried muffled excuses. Everything within him felt cheated and useless. Below his pulsing scar tissue and callused emotions, his heart finally broke.

Gabriel's eyes were slivers, her frantic explanations hushed and her beauty blurred. Gabriel raised his hand to interrupt her frantic words with the worst he could say to her. "You're worse than my mother."

He was no more than a phantom as he drifted out the door.

A squat waitress walked over to the table and looked at the cufflinks and a half drunk scotch.

"Who was that Claire?"

"I don't know, but he left his cufflinks here."

Claire forgets.

* * *

Gabriel awoke to a room in which only déjà vu heralded as familiar. Vague shapes helped him sit up. Everything was blurred and bland. Sounds that could have been voices hummed in orbit around his head and then quickly faded. His nose and throat were devoid of even the slightest residual sensations.

“Get him outta here,” his boss said and turned to the investors, “I’m terribly sorry for the interruption. Now where were we...”

Forced upright by the vague figures around him, he teetered on uncertain feet, not feeling the ground below or the pull of gravity. Atrophy took his muscles and mind; he hadn’t the slightest notion on how to use himself. Shapes lugged him into the hallway and dropped him on a couch.

Gabriel grasped at cavities were his senses used to gather input. He scrambled to compensate for the paradox of nothingness that filled him. He was empty. He tried to observe all around him, but nothing made sense. Not a single one of his senses responded as he squirmed and fidgeted like an over-stimulated newborn.

All the relentless sensations experienced by simply being alive, all the tastes, smells, sounds, feelings and sights bombarded him. Gabriel lost the means to process them. Billions upon billions of sensations overran him and left him senseless.

Gabriel’s reality dissipated into floating darkness where he was the castaway, buoyant in a starless sea in which he would drown. He sat wishing that he lived his life instead of just surviving it. That if the meaning of life was to live, then not even done that much.

He sat useless in every capacity, as the mounting void of the past consumed what was left of him. It wasn’t long until his eyes glazed over.

“Who is he?” a secretary asked Gabriel’s boss as he slipped out of the conference double doors.

“Got me,” his boss answered. “But what I wanna know is how this vagrant got into my boardroom?”

Gabriel forgets.