



# Horizons

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By Ryan Sherwood

It was the perfect morning to end it all. Daybreak peaked through the bedroom blinds in callous streaks and slapped 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 with comfort, even joy, but on this dawn he felt little beyond relief. The only notion in his head was a vague effervescent dream.

Slowly and quietly 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 breakfast,” she mumbled with the slightest hint of wit.

Gabriel sighed. Her verve was glacial, especially in the early hours. And yet that was her. That was her love. All of it. The thought gave him sudden pause and he teetered in the hallway, but he was up and reasonably awake enough to handle the cooking so he agreed with her. Dawn was too early to have revelations anyway, he would have the day to wonder.

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 it in deeply, then sheepishly looked about the old wallpapered room, deemed himself alone and stuck his tongue out. He imagined the coffee was a fluttering scent that perched on his tongue like a snowflake. He quickly retracted his tongue and 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, the weight of his monotonous routine had truly begun. He left the bedroom and headed 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 thirstily 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 as he walked back inside. Nothing but the same bad news. 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, yet he listened. 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; finally realizing it was the only thing he had really heard out of the earpiece. The floorboards behind him creaked and his fiancée appeared. Her matted hair flowed like a confused muddy river. She shuffled her long legs and meandered around the kitchen until she had found the cup of coffee he put out, in the same spot every morning in which she inevitably took too long to find. After a gulp, she leaned over and gently placed a kiss upon the corner of

Gabriel's mouth. Her lips were soft rose petals against his cheek. She turned away in a zombie-like motion and sat down 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.

"I have to go to work early."

"Okay, I love you. Have a good day."

"Bye, love you too."

Perturbed yet unabated by the notion, he walked into the slow sunrise as it burned away the fog of night. Along with the rest of the world, Gabriel pushed through similar mists in his mind and began to think.

Sleep had been boring lately. Not a single dream remained with him. Even if his previous dreams were drab, old and boring they were far more inspiring than the current lack of them. 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 it. 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? Well, 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 couldn't care as he walked to work.

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

"There's always tomorrow," he thought.

The hum of his aspirations sank away into the unsightly thought 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 drab thoughts plagued Gabriel he came upon a little yellow deli fearfully 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's perk up. And often his inspiration 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 hacked and heaved, gagging on a putrid smell. It was like sewage. Or worse. The stench crawled up his nostrils and planted on the back of his tongue.

Gabriel stumbled from the shock and barely caught 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. The sun screamed at him from

behind, coating the world ahead mustard yellow. Gabriel ran, passing through the tall shadows and into a leaden alley that was black as night.

His heart began to settle and he looked about embarrassed. Gabriel snorted in annoyance. He was at his office building. Even in a panic, he still managed to find his way back into his routine. He straightened his tie and entered the sleek marble lobby. In the elevator, his eyes nervously 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 but nothing much. 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 had his arms folded across his chest with his shirtsleeves rolled up – which told the world he meant business. Gabriel noticed that his bosses' lucky cufflinks weren't on. No wonder he was so nervous.

“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 briskly left his cubicle for caffeine. He filled his

cup, gulped its entirety then refilled. An annoying and thick coffee taste swam on his tongue. He returned to his cubicle and reviewed his notes.

Taking a quick break from his presentation, he glanced over at his coffee cup, ready for another sip. He squinted at the print on the cup. It was blurred. The black smudges that should be words spread out like fireworks, shooting all about within the confines of the porcelain mug. Looking at it was strangely nauseating. Gabriel shook his head and flipped about the papers scattered around his desk. They were blurred as well. Closing his eyes with a deep sigh, hating to admit any more bad luck, he tried to focus and breathe. He had to push this anxiety away. That's all this is. Anxiety. And he wouldn't let it get to him.

Slowly opening his eyes, he found every printed word was crisp and clear. Quickly shaking away his concerns, Gabriel slid all 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 at the podium and shuffled his notes. The coffee taste in his mouth disappeared and left his tongue numb.

“Get it together Gabe,” he thought, “Just work through this.”

The coffee 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 and 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 sunk into fatigue. His thoughts fizzled into sporadic and incoherent jargon.

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

"Wait, what about that... no before, yeah that. Shrink those figures a bit, my daughter needs a new car," laughed an investor.

Gabriel opened his mouth when a stinging sour taste invited itself up en lieu of a laugh. 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 as he knees buckled.

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 readying for their daily lives. Wiping the sleep from his eyes, his senses roused and the haze of sleep cleared. An all too familiar smell lingered in the air and coerced his stomach into protests of hunger. Visions of golden pancakes and viscous maple syrup

invaded his thoughts, quickly stirring him. As he stripped away the confining blankets Gabriel rose from bed and recognized the room he was in.

“Oh yeah, I’m at Grandma’s. I almost forgot mom dropped me off,” he said and headed to the door.

Gabriel rushed to the kitchen to find a mountain of sun-sparkled pancakes, swimming in cascading syrup that created a brown moat around the base. A feast of other foods also littered the table, but it was the pancakes in particular the 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 hurriedly sat down 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 arose on the side of his face as his grandmother pulled away from kissing his cheek. She slid a hot and steaming plate before him that he hastily jabbed a fork into. Reckless abandon shot the fork into his mouth, nearly missing his teeth as 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 bewildered Gabriel looked at his grandma with soft sad eyes, praying that this was some kind of joke. Tears welled and streaked down his fat cheeks in vast rivulets. 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 saw 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 sniffed 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 caught 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 Uncle Joe,” Gabriel said. “When there are no fish.”

“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 blurred here. Gabriel reached out and traced a cloud with his finger, rubbing his fingernail across their fluff, half waiting for 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 and wondered 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 gulped 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. All the life around the lake began to slow. The crickets chirped and the two fishermen began to pack up and head to shore. As the sun sank below the waterline, Gabriel always heard, in his head, a hissing sound as the sun went behind the water. 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 fish 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. Beginning to join in on his uncle's enthusiasm, Gabriel pawed at the catch to inspect it as a carrion feter stabbed his nostrils. Grimacing in disgust, Gabriel swallowed hard and covered his mouth, rocking the boat violently as he stammered backwards. The stench was awful.

Gabriel plugged his nose as 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, inhaled and smelled nothing. He licked his lips and tasted nothing. Gabriel sniffed the air, expecting the scent of the murky lake or the sharp pine trees or at least 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, who’re you and 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 dramatically with each labored wheezing 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 smell the sweat and oil that was his father’s aroma but all those familiar comforting scents were gone. Whatever was boiling in the pot had no odor either.

The kitchen lights were dim as his father cooked and chopped. A dark kitchen meant his dad had another bad 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 black kitchen and heaved the door open that lead to the dusty garage. The garage doors were open and Gabriel walked outside. The moonlight draped the asphalt driveway. Gabriel leaned against the lone car. Tree branches rustled against the roof and the autumn air shot chills down his spine. Clouds reached over the moon with thick fingers and concealed it. The wind kicked up. Screeching howls bayed from the neighbor’s yard. A splinter of fright stabbed Gabriel and hurried his feet back to the task at hand. He opened the refrigerator door and pushed past beer and soda cans. Fear hastened his hands. Dead leaves scratched along the cement floor and he nearly leapt. His fingers, after toppling several cans, found a cold handle and pulled the milk free. His bare feet slapped flatly against the cement and his heart pounded behind his eyes. Slowly turning his head, he looked out into the night but nothing was there beyond 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 the house. Fear gripped him again and he froze solid, mid-stride, as his imagination took over. Gabriel carefully steadied his hand around the doorknob leading into the house. There could be an intruder

inside making a noisy break-in just beyond the door before him. Did Dad even notice the clamor? He hasn'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 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 whipped the old door open. 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, God...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 locate. 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 diner being over-cooked, Gabriel looked around for a fire and found none. The house was open and dark. His father realized something too and 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 abrasion had already consumed most of his father, even devouring his wedding ring, as the disease hastily spread over his entire body. Darkness had him. The clever night crept up from around his father as he sat at the simple wooden table in meek light and ate. 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 assimilated the kitchen and everything within, leaving the room drab 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.

Father forgets.

A pounding at the window woke Gabriel. It sounded like one tone of rain rattling the pane at once. 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 on the way. 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?” his mother asked without much slurring.

“Nothing,” Gabriel sneered.

“I'm your mother. You better treat me with...um...”

“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 yerself. The only reason you’re still alive is because yer father was convincing ‘nuf to keep me from getting an abortion.”

Gabriel’s ears and brows perked. His fists balled up. His heart ached and pounded. He breathed methodically and heavily 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 filled 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. She was engorged with worthlessness.

Without a peep, Gabriel stood and walked into the kitchen and reached 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 motherhood deep inside you somewhere, only the booze held it back. Now, if you have any kindness at all, I don’t want to know about it. 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, needs, needs! 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!” Gabriel barked. 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 mother?”

“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. And 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...” Gabriel uttered.

“The world owes me and I’m gonna collect. I’ll do as I want.”

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 or puerility. Husked to a shell, Gabriel let his mother’s raspy words graft scar tissue over his heart and calluses instead of love. 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 right 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?”

Her words trailed off into nothingness until there was no sound.

Mother forgets.

She always struck the keys in such sweet succession. Her bitter blues resonated off every person lugging themselves into her bar. The same people often stopped in to rest their troubles for the day with Gabriel’s 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 and sang like a bird. Her music effortlessly brushed away worries from every shoulder. Gabriel loved seeing her play. Her smile was more vibrant when she was at the piano bench and her beauty doubled. 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 was insipid. Gabriel shook his head and closed his eyes, trying to drink in the sounds. Not a feeling arose in him. Nothing was right. He still continued to drink though. A drink without taste would still get him drunk.

Gabriel resituated himself in his chair. He sniffed, licked his lips, strained to hear and tried to feel yet nothing was still the response. Fidgeting his fingers and tapping his toes couldn’t keep him entertained. His eyes went back to her and the second he saw her sharp pains throbbed behind his eyes. He looked away. The smoky bar quickly became an annoyance. Discomfort settled on his skin in an opaque film instead of the typical

warmth that roared within him when she played. He repeatedly rubbed his palms against his forehead to settle his discontent but felt nothing. Everything felt foreign. He was alone. Betrayed. The world was crumbling.

Gabriel stared at his table and looked 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. Yes, 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 muted. Lightly stepping down the side stairs, her long skirt rippled with her strides. She was beautiful as she approached the empty seat at Gabriel’s side.

“How was I?” She asked while sitting down, knowing the answer.

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 were flat on the sticky wood and 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 were hushed and her beauty blurred. Gabriel raised his hand to interrupt her frantic words with the five 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."

His fiancée forgets.

Gabriel awoke to a room in which only déjà vu told him was familiar.

Very vague shapes helped him sit up. All surrounds were blurred and bland. Sounds that could have been voices hummed in an orbit around his head and then quickly faded. His nose and throat were devoid of even the slightest residual sensations. Forced into stand 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. Co-workers lugged him out of the conference room and dropped him on a couch near a window that overlooked the streets far below.

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 a floating darkness where he became a castaway, buoyant in a starless sea in which he would drown. He sat idly on the couch and wished that he lived his life instead of just surviving it. That if the meaning to life is to live, then not even done that.

He sat in a lump on the couch, 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.

In a scramble for medical attention, a secretary reviewed Gabriel's medical information on a nearby computer. She scanned over the screen and shook her head.

“This can’t be right,” she uttered. “There’s no one listed to contact in case of emergency.”

Gabriel forgets.