

Portfolio Submission

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Contents Mercy (Short Story)
What Where When (Poetry)
Someone for Anyone (Poetry)
Pearl (Short Story)
Never Trust Appearances (Science-Fiction/Fantasy)

Statement of Purpose

I have been writing ever since I could hold a pencil, and it only seemed fitting that I continue that passion into my adult life as well. I hope the selections in this portfolio are able to convey to you my love for the craft.

I have always been fascinated by irony in names, and “Mercy” was my attempt at carrying it off. Whether the irony works well or not, it is a very haunting story that manages to stay away from the supernatural forces I am so fond of working with. “The Introspective” is probably the one piece that requires the most explanation before reading. The story comes across as a very fragmented and confusing stream of consciousness, written from the perspective of a Frankenstein-like creature whose mind has started to fall apart. While not the best piece included, it was very different from anything I'd written, and I just couldn't leave it out. Poetry has never been my strongest writing, but I enjoy it and think that my poems show a side of my voice that tends to get lost in longer works of fiction, so I have chosen to include the poems “What Where When” and “Someone for Anyone” in my portfolio. “The Price of Life” was submitted to Scholastic in 2005 and did well, but I was never happy with the ending. It has grown into what is now a 180 page work in progress, so the section included here is only a piece of the larger work, which explains the cliff-hanger ending. This story is especially important to me because it was my first real work, and years have been devoted to improving, expanding, and revising it. My portfolio would be incomplete without an appearance by main characters, Miriel and Lucian, from “The Price is Life.” I have taken music lessons for most of my life on both piano and flute, and that music has always been an inspiration for me in my writing. “Pearl” was a story inspired by a particularly melancholy piece of music I was assigned, although I have to admit I spent more time on this story than on practicing the music. “Never Trust Appearances” is a classic ghost story and was extremely fun for me to write. As a reader I have always been drawn to mysteries and ghost stories, so it seems only fitting that I should write and include a piece from my favorite genre.

After looking at the pieces I have compiled, I noticed a common theme. Each main character undergoes an almost 'Adam and Eve' like moment of revelation when their true place in the story is revealed. Each of them has been used, either through manipulation, fate, or a force within him/herself, to fill a role that doesn't become apparent until the story's end.

I hope you enjoy reading through this portfolio as much as I enjoyed putting it together.

Mercy

“Well! Mercy Thompson! Is that you?”

Mercy didn't need to look up to know who the voice belonged to, and in a panicked moment of aversion she busied herself reading a bottle of something she had no intention of buying, hoping her act of false concentration would end the conversation before it had a chance to start. Like it had ever stopped that woman before.

“Well hey there, hon! Don't you remember me?”

Mercy had no choice but to look up as the perfectly manicured hand clamped itself around her arm. It still amazed Mercy that a woman with seven children could find time for manicures, hair straightening and bleaching, and primping herself immaculately all before noon. Mercy had had cheerios in wine for breakfast and forgotten to brush her teeth – let alone her hair. She guiltily put back the bottle of fabric softener and forced a smile.

“I see you're back without our William. He have another show? You wouldn't have broken our boy's heart and

left him somewhere now?"

William was everyone's "boy." It was hard not to be when the town was so small. Mercy was the perfect example of an outsider, moving to the town a year before in a vain attempt to get away from herself and live as a hermit for awhile. Instead, she met and fell in love with William, a home grown protégé, and spent her free time being examined, stalked, and picked apart by the rest of the town's natives.

"No. William did have another show, I just wanted to get back to work."

"Oh. What is it you do again? It must be so hard to be away from him. Hope you can trust him; plenty of girls who'd want to snap him up," the woman gave Mercy a disapproving once over, "but you don't look half bad today. Did you lose some weight?"

Mercy laughed politely while simultaneously imagining her unfiled nails digging into that unnaturally clean neck. Luckily, a small child started screaming, and Mercy was saved an embarrassing display of emotion in front of the grocery stock-boy. Mercy headed quickly to the liquor section of the store, now in desperate need of a drink, and grabbed a bottle to replace the one that had served as breakfast earlier that morning. William didn't have another show. He was dead. It was only a matter of time before the whole town heard the news from his parents, and Mercy knew they'd somehow find a way to blame it on her. Mercy had convinced William's agent to call down Will's parents without giving them a reason until they arrived, but they would be getting home today. Everyone would ignore the details surrounding how William died and just make up excuses for how Mercy had corrupted him. After all, Mercy was the outsider, it would be easier to run her back to where she came from with pitchforks and torches than to have the memory of William stained. She was really starting to hate this town.

William had died with a needle in his arm and a cheap blonde in his bed. The classic death for a musician. She would have gone so far as to say it was cliché, but William was a classical pianist. Just like William, she couldn't help but laugh, to live like a rock star and play like a maestro. After simultaneously finding her boyfriend dead and discovering he was cheating on her, Mercy was in desperate need of someone to talk to and horribly aware of the fact she had no one. The one time she needed the people she had left behind. As she walked outside to the greeting of a blinding sun and a gentle breeze, she decided it was time to see just how much damage burning her bridges had done.

Mercy and William's house was tiny and devoid of almost anything that stated William lived there. Mercy had repainted the walls, torn up old carpet, and refurbished the wood flooring. She decorated every room, kept the kitchen fully stocked—although never actually ate anything—and paid the bills. All William did was stop by when he had the time, and even then most of that free time was spent catching up with his parents and extended family of neighbors. When he wasn't sharing inside jokes that left Mercy feeling more out of touch than ever, he was practicing on his Steinway – the only thing he had ever contributed to the household – and God forbid Mercy interrupt him as he ran through a Bach fugue or Beethoven sonata. Still, Mercy somehow managed to love him, in spite of him never being there, never really caring about her, and seeming embarrassed to be seen with her in town. Mercy loved him.

Looking at her cell phone cautiously Mercy scrolled through names she had never deleted but hadn't thought about in years. She picked what she thought would be the most receptive number and watched the phone start to call.

"Hello?" the voice sounded hollow over the phone, not at all what Mercy had remembered growing up, but it was still iconically her mother's.

"Mom?" Mercy began to cry, she'd tried to hold back all day, but after hearing her mother's voice for the first time since she left there were too many emotions for her weakening will to suppress.

"Who is this?" The voice was as annoyed as it was angry. It wasn't asking a question but demanding a confession that whoever this was confess their prank and hang up.

"Mom."

"Mercy?" the voice started to crack with realization this was, in fact, the lost daughter, but it still maintained a hint of anger.

"I need help."

"Help, Mercy? Don't start coming to me with what you need. You swore up and down you hated me. You stole from me so you could get away. You told me to stay the hell out of your life. Well, now seems like the perfect time to start listening to you. There's nothing you can get from me you can't get for yourself, I believe those were the last words you screamed to me before you left."

"Mom, please. You know me better than that. I wouldn't be asking for help if I didn't really need you!" Mercy screamed through her tears as if her volume could overcome the obstacle of time.

"No."

"Mom! You have to help me! They'll kill me for letting him die; I need someone to fight for me. I'm so sorry for

everything, but you're my mother!" Mercy was shaking so hard the phone almost fell from her hands.

"Yeah. Whatever you've done now you can go dig yourself out of. You deserve whatever they'll do, whoever they are," her mother's voice was calm now, anger extinguished and love no longer existent.

"Mom!" the phone beeped to signal the end of the conversation or in Mercy's case the closing of a door she thought would never be locked. To make matters worse someone angrily banged against Mercy's door.

The knocking persisted, and in spite of her better judgment and the fleeting thought that the angry villagers were coming, Mercy opened it. She was greeted by a hard slap to her left cheek by a grieving mother who had obviously made it back home. The woman shoved a letter against Mercy's chest; she had no choice but to take it.

"You killed my son! You ruined him and every chance of a future he had, you no good whore!"

Mercy could have come up with a sarcastic response involving William and whores if she had been more herself. As it was, she just settled for trying to slam the door.

"You read that letter. He left it for you! Like he knew this would happen. I hope it makes you wish you were dead in his place! I hope you rot in hell for what you've done." The last sentence was said in the cool manner of a woman who had gone insane and chosen to come back and take the rest of the world with her. Mercy couldn't really blame the poor woman, but she did feel the need to defend herself.

"I loved him," was the only response she could think of.

"You seduced him! Drew him away from his people and those who really did love him. He was infatuated with you, and you were using him for...for," William's mother slapped Mercy again for lack of any other response, and as Mercy closed the door she caught more than one angry look from passersby. The storming of the monster's lair by the angry village people had begun. Instead of dwelling on that status, Mercy sliced open the envelope.

By now, my dear, you will have noticed I haven't come back when you expected. I told my mother to deliver this letter if you came home without me. I'm sorry I lack the courage to tell you this myself. I'm getting married to Aerie Smith, Ruth's daughter. Mercy laughed, Ruth had been the first person she ran into after coming home, at the grocery store. It was only fitting that woman would question her about William's faithfulness while knowing her oldest daughter was engaged to him. I never should have gotten you involved in this, but I was having cold feet about the wedding. Aerie's the only girl I ever really knew, and I thought having a relationship with someone else might help make up my mind. Mercy choked back a sob, whether of rage or despair she wasn't quite sure. I never loved you, dear. Mercy forced herself into the kitchen to find something that might numb the pain before she had to keep reading. I hope you can understand. Well, you'll have to understand. As you know, the house is in my name, so you'll have to leave. I'll give you plenty of time to move out, dear, but it would be inconvenient, to have you here for too much longer. You never really belonged here anyway, I'm doing you a favor, letting you get back to the kind of life you're used to.

Mercy was spared the last line of the letter for a moment by a new furious banging on her door. It was *her* door now. William couldn't claim it anymore. Maybe she'd stay here just to spite his ghost.

"You. Killed. Our. William!" Ruth screamed in Mercy's face, a pleasant change from the slaps William's mother had given her. Mercy just thought it was funny the woman still managed to look immaculate as she was trying to look enraged.

"Your William died in your daughter's bed," Mercy wasn't really sure who the cheap blonde was, but it might as well have been Ruth's daughter. It didn't make a difference to her anymore, "Maybe you should be screaming at her."

"Well," Ruth smirked, "What did you expect, really? My daughter comes from good stock, just as good as William. You just blew in from the city. I'll admit I was worried for a bit, you being such a novelty and all, but my Aerie's never lost a man yet. Especially not to a girl like you."

Mercy couldn't respond, she had just realized her fate. By coming to this town she had stepped into a game, becoming the unnamed antagonist of the girl next door. She had given the well cropped families something to fight with, and they lived for a fight, whatever appearances might say otherwise. Everyone in that town needed something to hate because, if they began to hate each other, the utopia would fall apart. They needed someone to blame all of their problems on, from bad crops to bad blood, and she stepped in as the unknowing sacrifice. No one in this town would show her sympathy. If they did everything would fall apart. She had to be ruined for the town to remain. No pity, no love, not even from her mother – though how they had worked that out, Mercy had no idea. She cackled as she slammed the door, and carrying an empty bottle, she sat on William's piano bench to finish reading the letter.

It isn't your fault, my dear. These things happen, and things end. Don't try to hold on, dear, for your sake let me go. I assure, so you can be free of me, that I never loved you, Mercy.

-William-

"I never loved you, Mercy," she spoke the words out loud to herself as if making sure they were real. "Never loved, Mercy," she stood up and realized that the world had begun to spin. "Never, Mercy," she tried to walk but found the floor moving faster than she was. She started to fall, her head striking the end of the piano hard enough to draw blood.

"Mercy."

What Where When

Is what we are
just what we were,
when once
we were
but true?

And what is
truth,
but mystery,
yet to divulge
a clue.

Come with me
back to that place
where midnight's
bright
as day,

and maybe then,
we'll scarcely
see
the world
from where we came.

We're gone from now,
and gone from
then,
but hopeful for our
tomorrow.

Clarity begins
when life is lived,
and hope
may end
our sorrow.

Someone For Anyone

He asked
who she was.
No one,
she replied.

For no one
is anyone
as

everyone
knows.

Unless
anyone is someone,
to
somebody
else.

Yet no one
is someone
in
everyone's
eyes.

So
everyone is
someone
to anyone
willing
to see.

All it takes
is you
to make
a
someone
of me.

Pearl

She pressed her head against the glass, the side of her face almost immediately succumbing to the frosted pane, but she did not remove it. The outside world was covered in white, but to her it looked grey, and the sky dressed to match both through her eyes and the rest of the world's. The train continued on, not pausing to mourn the weariness of the world as she did. But trains rarely notice these things, so that can be overlooked.

A flute case lay across her lap, and a bag filled with sheet music rested at her feet. These were her only companions in the train car, and silent ones they were too. She sighed and shifted in her seat, leaning her head to the opposite side with eyes closed and attempted to fall asleep. The motion of the train sent her swiftly to sleep, but even in semi-consciousness she remained altogether morose looking.

"Ma'am," the conductor gently tapped the woman's shoulder, he was polite, but it was obvious he wanted nothing more than for his shift to be over and the train to stop so he could get home.

"Here's my ticket," she held out the slip of paper and then turned back to her window.

"Thank you, ma'am, but I actually just wanted to let you know your bag tipped over. The man who got into your car, he knocked it over."

She looked up at the man across from her who smiled sheepishly as he bent down to help her pick up her music. She smiled, shoved her music back into the bag, and turned back to her window.

"Sorry about that," the man smiled, obviously trying to start a conversation. "Are you professional? My wife used to play."

"Oh?" the woman tried to be nice while giving him the subtle hint she wanted to get back to sleep.

"Yes. The clarinet's a beautiful instrument."

"Mhmm," she didn't look at him this time.

"How long have you played?" he asked, still oblivious to her hints.

"Never. I don't play clarinet," she glanced at him and went back to her nap, the hint finally sinking in.

The next time the woman awoke, the train had stopped, and the man had left her compartment. Blinking open

her eyes she reached for her luggage and gave the conductor a weak smile before running onto the platform.

"Pearl," a man dressed in a smart business suit, the only one on the platform actually, walked towards her and dutifully picked up her heavier bags.

"Hello," Pearl smiled and kissed him on the cheek, eyes still retaining that sadness from the train.

"Have a good trip?" the man wrapped his free arm around her waist, either not seeing or ignoring the sadness in her eyes.

"All right," Pearl looked straight ahead, her eyes blank, covering whatever emotion might have been hiding there.

The two sat together in the car, neither one of them speaking as they drove slowly home. The landscape outside had not improved; everything was still grey, except now houses instead of fields were blanketed by the dark and morose clouds. Pearl rested her head against the window, eyeing the small houses with sweet, warm looking fires enviously, before closing her eyes and feigning sleep. Her husband glanced at her only once before keeping his eyes glued to the empty road. It seemed like an eternity before the two arrived home, and there was no real joy when they did. Home was a pleasant two story house, yard perfectly maintained – just like every other house on the block. The inside of the house matched the outside, perfect and sterile, giving it that Stepford quality. Each house seemed dark, even with the lights on, like the outside had somehow infiltrated into what should have been a place of refuge. Pearl's husband shook her awake, recently used cell phone blinking off in his hand, impossible to know how long he'd been talking. It could easily have been hours while Pearl slept in the car. He never bothered with her until after business was done.

"Should we order out to celebrate your return?" Pearl's husband suggested with very little enthusiasm.

"I'm not hungry," Pearl turned and walked to her music room without another word. Her husband merely shrugged, returning to his office to do some more work from home.

It was almost unbelievable that in a house so large there were so few rooms being occupied. The kitchen never saw food, the dining room never saw a meal, and the bedrooms were almost never occupied. Pearl stayed in her music room practicing when she didn't have a performance, and her husband worked in his home office when he wasn't out working in a 'real' office. There had been love once, both in the house and between them. They used to love the days when the weather was too dreary to venture out, and they could think of nothing better than to stay home with each other. But that was when home was actually a studio apartment, and money had been more of an elusive myth than a way of life. Now they had no time for each other in a comfortable home and no hard times to blame for it.

Pearl glared at the sheets of music in front of her. Once she had been able to look at those notes, and they would unfold before her eyes into pictures and stories. Now all she could see were notes on pages. No magic anymore. No secret to uncover. No mystery to solve. These were just more notes to play, as she'd done for years, so people could pay high prices and hear things they forgot about by the time they arrived back home. Pearl set her flute down in disgust, eyes wandering to the guitar case standing silently in a corner. She always stared at that guitar on days like this, and she'd been having days like this more and more often.

"Pearl, I have to work, might not even make it home tonight."

"Good night then, I won't wait up," Pearl pecked her husband on the cheek and returned to her own world, not hearing the door close as he left.

Tonight was the performance of her life, she had been playing so listlessly recently that she was in danger of losing her job. Pearl shook when she thought about it but wondered why she really cared. What was work anymore? Still, she picked her flute back up and began to play, not knowing how she managed to carry out the motions.

Pearl sat down in her section, flute to her lips, playing the music automatically as her mind wandered off.

She was sitting on a crowded train, guitar case covered with stickers from all the places she'd played...and all the places she hoped to go. Everything was pressed up close to her in an attempt to make room for other passengers. Her hair was uncombed and hanging loosely around her shoulders, and she gazed out the window anxiously, rushing into the arms of the man known today as her husband. The pair couldn't afford a car, but they always claimed to like walking better anyway, content with what they had. Simply happy.

Pearl had traded that all in for security, so had her husband. Finding a good job, a good home, everything they thought they never needed. Pearl admitted to herself that she was scared back then, worried about how they'd make it week to week. So, they gave up on their dreams. Her husband became the businessman he always was, and Pearl traded in her guitar for the classical flute.

Pearl stood up with the rest of her section, bowing automatically before realizing the concert was over. She couldn't remember how she played or even if she'd played anything. All she knew was that she couldn't go on like this. She would have to give up part of herself. Either give up the past or give up on the future. She drove home too

fast, quickly shutting and locking the door behind her before rushing into her music room and grabbing her guitar.

Pearl walked slowly into the unused kitchen, looking around the room that stood halfway between her world and her husband's work. Her glance caught the stove and she smiled to herself. Perhaps that stove would finally get some use.

Never Trust Appearances

"Do you hear that?" Dee looked around the room and then back at her friend, expecting him to immediately realize she hadn't been hearing things for the past two months.

"No. I think your going crazy," Aaron nudged her arm jokingly, but his eyes still held a slight pang of fear.

"Seriously? They're getting louder! I can barely hear myself think anymore."

"Dee, there's nothing to hear."

"If this is some kind of sick joke you've got to stop. I can't handle this anymore. You've been trying to mess with me right? Like when we were kids?"

"Dee, do you honestly think I'd pull a prank for two months straight while watching you drive yourself crazy? Give me some credit."

"Aaron, make it stop!"

"Dee, I think I'm gonna go. There's no point in me staying here and getting accused of this crap. Call me if something starts going really bad, but try sleeping. When was the last time you actually slept through the night anyway?" Aaron backed out of the room, throwing a quick concerned glance at his friend, and then closed the door. She never listened to him.

It had been two months now since Amanda had first started hearing things, little things at first, whispers she couldn't quite make out, that could easily be explained by a radio being on in another room, a car driving by with the bass turned up, or the neighbors having a loud argument with the windows open. Then the music started. At first it was quiet, easily dismissed as a radio left on or something going on outside, just like the whispers. Now it was different. The noises were almost inescapable, long drawn out noises, fully orchestrated pieces filled with all the terror and misery of hell. Dee was going crazy. She couldn't get away from the sounds, couldn't block them out, couldn't turn them off. Some days she wouldn't hear anything. Other days it would just be the whispers again, but there were always the bad days, like today, and her mind would be filled with these sounds leaving no room for anything else, especially not rational thought. There was no explanation, no family history of anything like it, and no reason for her to be haunted, yet here she was, hearing voices like something out of a Stephen King novel.

"What do you want with me? What did I do? Just tell me, and I'll fix it! I'll do anything. Just please, please let me be," Dee pleaded with her bedroom wall, looking at cracked paint that seemed to smile at her and pleading with whatever possessed her now to let go.

"Listen," for the first time Dee could understand something. These voices were talking back. She couldn't help but smile. At least this was progress – to what end didn't really seem to matter.

"To what? Tell me what you want; I've never been good at cryptics."

"Just listen!"

"I do! I have no choice but to listen; I can't hear anything else!" Dee screamed out at her wall, for once wishing she could see this ghost, if only because it would seem saner to be talking to a face than a pattern that looked like one.

"Listen!" the voices seemed frustrated now; they were all crying out together.

"I am!" Dee screamed back, collapsing onto her bed, body twitching with sobs and shock.

Slowly any traces of noise started to dissipate; they seemed almost regretful that they had reduced her to such a state. As the noise stopped Dee looked around her, took a few deep breaths, and waited for it to start again. All she heard was a bird outside the window. Minutes passed and still a blissful silence. Dee sighed with relief, maybe they were finally gone. Closing her eyes she instantly fell asleep.

At noon the next day Dee finally awoke. The voices hadn't troubled her all night, and she was feeling optimistic. Maybe it was over; maybe it had all just been a bad dream and all she had to do was sleep it off. Unfortunately, bad dreams are never that simple. Shuffling into the kitchen Dee realized, probably for the first time in two months, that she had no food in the house. She hadn't left the house since she started hearing the voices, not trusting herself to drive anywhere, but she felt awake and hungry. Time to go shopping.

"Oh, dear, I am sorry," an older woman bent over and picked up the can of salsa Dee had dropped after the woman had hit her with a shopping cart.

"It's all right," Dee smiled, laughing lightly to show there were no hard feelings.

"Then here you are, my dear," the woman handed her the can and patted her arm in the way all old women do to girls who remind them of their better years. The second the hand touched Dee's skin the music came back, louder than she had ever heard it. Her head pounded with it, and Dee was amazed the woman couldn't hear it seeping out. Life seemed to be draining out of Dee's heart, and she fell to the floor, holding her head as if she could cover up the problem.

"Child? Are you alright?" the woman bent down and felt Dee's head, gently touching her arm in an attempt to comfort her. The music reached a crescendo, and Dee moaned. The woman removed her hand and glared, eyes flaming, "What do you hear, child?"

The music stopped as the woman backed away, Dee, still on the floor, found herself staring into eyes that seemed to rip into her soul; she decided she preferred the music. Dee remembered having a vague suspicion at the woman's immediately asking her what do you hear instead of something like "are you having a heart attack," but was too disoriented to make the connection. The music started again, softly, like the soundtrack to a movie. "It's horrible."

"What do they tell you?" the woman demanded, her voice hard and cold.

"They?" Dee looked confused and pushed herself up onto her elbows in an effort to feel more in control of the situation. It didn't work.

"Do they speak to you?" The woman looked like she wanted to scream, but someone else had walked into the aisle.

"It's music," Dee decided to leave out the part about making contact with them the night before.

The woman smiled, her face softening back into the little old lady. She seemed satisfied somehow, almost relieved, "Come, child, let me help you up." She extended a hand to Dee and pulled her up with surprising force. "I used to hear them too. Until I learned how to get rid of them." The woman winked. "I could do it for you."

Dee was so desperate for someone to think she wasn't crazy that all the warning signs faded away, and she nodded. Walking outside with the old woman Dee started to spill out her story, about the voices starting, the music that never seemed to stop, how it seemed they were trying to tell her something but their voices were muffled like they were covering their mouths. The woman slipped her a piece of paper with her address on it, assuring Dee that her ghosts could be gone in an instant; the woman would cleanse her. Excited about seeing the end of this catastrophe, Dee agreed to meet with the woman next week. In fact, Dee was so distracted by the prospect of everything being over for good she never realized the music stopped as the woman disappeared into her car.

"Dee, I don't think this is a good idea. Going to some strange woman's house just because she claims to know what's happening to you?" Aaron's skepticism was easy to hear over the phone.

"Aaron, you know this might be my only hope. If this doesn't work, I'll probably be sent to undergo psychiatric treatment, be told I'm just plain nuts."

"What's wrong with talking to a doctor? This might just be stress," Aaron sighed heavily into the phone, not willing to tell his friend *he* thought she was going completely nuts. He had to be there for her now; he might be the only thing that could keep her from putting all of her trust in this old woman.

"She can help, Aaron. I really believe it."

"The voices didn't seem to like her, and up to this point they haven't tried to hurt you, just annoy you," Aaron tried to be reasonable.

"You know, I'm kind of tired. I'm going to go to bed. You've been telling me this might just be a lack of sleep right?" Dee sounded angry now. Apparently Aaron had said the wrong thing.

"Just be careful, Dee. Please?" Aaron reluctantly set down the phone after hearing the click from Dee's end, he decided he'd just have to research this woman himself. Dee didn't seem like she was going to do anything about it.

Dee hung up the phone and got ready for bed, rolling her eyes to herself in the bathroom mirror as the noises continued their never ending din. It was getting easier for her to ignore it; she just pretended the radio was on. The noise got louder as she closed her eyes, something that usually didn't happen. Dee jumped up and reached for the Advil bottle by her bed; maybe this was just a combination migraine-haunting. She walked over to the light switch and flicked it on so she could see well enough to undo the child proof cap. Staring back at her through the bedroom window were the eyes of the old woman. Dee screamed and fell to the floor. The face was gone by the time she revived, and so were the voices.

Aaron came to the conclusion that the only way to reach Dee was to discredit her savior; he hoped the events of last night would have been enough, but Dee seemed to prefer the theory that the voices were just trying to keep her

from getting rid of them. He found himself across the street from the woman's house mid-afternoon. Dee had been scared enough to give him the address, at least, and he prayed he might find something that would scare his friend out of going there at all. The house seemed normal enough; obnoxious garden gnomes littered the lawn, the curtains shielding the inside of the house from dog walkers and joggers were overly frilly, and the birdhouse resting in the branches of a tree was full of stale breadcrumbs. All it proved was that this was, indeed, the house of an old woman. Aaron was disappointed; he had hoped for pentagrams and cauldrons, even a mysterious looking mound of dirt in the back yard would do. Hoping a neighbor might have uncovered something about the woman's habits that might work just as well, Aaron walked over to the next house.

"Well, hello there," an elderly couple answered the door, looking kind but confused as to why he was there.

"Good afternoon," Aaron smiled and tried to think of a good excuse that would get him inside, "my wife and I are thinking of moving into the neighborhood, and I thought I'd check around to see if this was good neighborhood for families. You know neighborhood dynamics, friendliness, things like that," Aaron chose this lie for no other reason than that he thought the old couple looked nostalgic, maybe remembering their young love would cause them to let their guard down. The more he thought about it the more transparent his story seemed, he didn't drive here, so he obviously already lived close enough to walk, and he wasn't wearing a ring. Aaron was about to turn around and run when he realized the door had opened wider; the scheme had worked.

"Well, I don't really like to gossip," the old woman smiled as she offered him a chair. The husband caught Aaron's eye and winked, as if to say there was nothing his wife loved more than to pretend she never gossiped.

"It's not really gossip though," Aaron tried to smile, suddenly realizing he was extremely nervous.

"It's just that," the woman wasn't paying attention to him anyway, "she's just so odd."

"Who?"

"The woman next door."

"Really?" Aaron forced himself to suppress a grin.

"Ever since she moved in, strange things started happening. Odd noises coming from her basement. And that music! Whenever she has the windows open you can here it, awful stuff. I'm sure it must be classical, but it's just so depressing. And then, there are the rumors."

"Rumors?" Aaron really had to work to keep that grin from coming out.

"Well," this time it was the husband that spoke, as if to let Aaron know that this was worth listening to, "the place she told us she's from, my grandkids looked it up on that Google site after hearing my wife say she seemed strange. There're all these stories about people in her town going crazy; a bunch of young women, they went crazy and then just disappeared. There's no connection between any of 'em either, 'cept that old woman. They all seemed to know her somehow, but they couldn't blame anything on her. Guess she got so sick of the talk she moved out. Seems like she's nice enough, not strong enough to hurt a fly, but I'm sure glad my grandbabies don't live 'round here."

Aaron was pale before the man finished, it wasn't so much the story as the fact he saw Dee walking into the house next door through the couple's window. She had lied to him about the day of her appointment. She didn't wait for the next week. So like Dee, always wanting things finished as quickly as possible.

"Dee!" he ignored the couple's look of surprise and rushed outside, praying it wasn't too late. The old woman's door was shut tight by the time he reached it, and Dee had disappeared behind those deceptively innocent frilly curtains. "Dee!" he slammed his fist against the still covered window, but the glass was too thick for him to break without something more solid than his hand. He eyed one of the larger garden gnomes.

"Did you hear that?" Dee turned to face the window, not able to see Aaron behind the curtains.

"It's just the voices, child; they don't want you to be rid of them. They'd do anything to get you away from me," something about that last sentence caused Dee's blood to run cold, and she reached to push back the curtains, but the woman steered her away before she touched the fabric. Then the record player in the corner turned itself on.

"That music! That's what they made me listen to," Dee looked at the woman in confusion, not sure whether to bolt to the door, listen to the voices, or keep trusting.

"Stupid girls," the woman growled as she turned the record player off.

"What?" Dee looked at the old woman, not entering into the room any further and paying more attention to the banging on the window.

"Dee! If you can hear me, get out!" Aaron screamed; the gnome wasn't making as much progress as he had hoped. The voices decided to help him out, and Dee started to hear a resounding chorus of 'listen' echoing through her head.

"It's Aaron," Dee sighed out loud, looking frustrated and put out now that the voices had come back and Aaron had found a way to interfere.

“Who’s Aaron, dear?” the old woman ushered her towards a paisley couch.

“My friend, he didn’t want me to see you. He thought I was crazy,” Dee began to relax. She decided all her anxiety was caused by Aaron’s fears. Still, something in the urgency of the voices and the persistence of his banging caused her to wonder.

“LISTEN!” the voices screamed and Dee turned away from the woman, covering her head in pain. She saw something silver in the old woman’s hand but didn’t have time to process. The voices stopped.