



MIKAEL BOUCKAERT

The Bone Stripper

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He woke to a starburst of pigeons, his head wedged against a dumpster. His right foot was covered in what had the smell and viscosity of urine, possibly his own, possibly not. He described the *taqueria* he'd wandered up to as specializing in the burrito for the gringo, *el plato del dia* for the initiate. Glass window front. Flat-screen monolithic in the center of the dining space. Whir of the blender. The sizzle and sultry waft of scrambled eggs. Tortillas pop and are regularly flipped to avoid the scorch. The petite Mexican waitress broke off depositing salt and pepper and went to the door and Marten gave her six dollars for *Huevos Rancheros*—"Keep the change!"—she shrugged, smiled and went back into the hall throbbing so bright with fluorescents and sun that her braces had barely sparkled through the bleached day when she'd been given the seventy-five cent tip.

"Come back here, darling!" And again the faint sparkle, this time for an even dollar. And Marten ate. And

Marten thought, This is what it means to be a man. He watched his *huevos* confetti the sidewalk. He imagined himself in the strip club/gambling hall he'd been in the night before, his fellow gamblers guessing the weight and placement of his bet by his twitches and the quantity of his sweat as the tide of the game flowed back and forth, the gamblers like gauging a derby horse's flanks, as if they gave a shit about some donkey's one-time three hundred dollar gambling spree.

He remembered the smooth clean curve of Elliott's body curled next to his with her smiling eyes on his, her hand softly in his hand, redwoods towering cathedral-like, soft light over the red-furred bark.

He remembered beginning to notice the difference in Elliott, laying awake at night and feeling her laying over him like a warm and sweet cloud of melted flesh, hearing her steps in the hall as she got up to piss like the hunter hears the deer over the dry leaves, waves of warmth rising and flowing from her room as the night progressed and he knew she'd any moment open her door and then open his door, and in the morning he'd sit across the breakfast table reading knowledge of the morning's bird serenade and of the merged warmth of their astral bodies in her every smile and toss of the hair as he grinned at her psychotic.

He'd started to make plans, plans hatching out of other plans, one of them being that he'd spray-paint various walls in their neighborhood with the lyrics to a Leonard Cohen song and then he'd take Elliott for a drive and they'd drive in circles until she noticed the lyrics.

"What if she doesn't notice them?" I'd asked.

Keep driving. Keep driving until she notices.

But he hadn't executed that plan. He hadn't executed any plan. Instead one day he'd simply *decided* and had rode his bicycle from wherever he was back to the apartment they'd shared and he'd gone up to her sitting at the kitchen table and said, "I love you."

"What?"

"I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

Her hands went to her face and she froze and eventually she said she was shocked and then that she was honored. And then that she was in shock and then that she felt deeply honored. Shocked and honored, honored and shocked. She said those words each five or so times with sparse few other phrases in-between, glaring at Marten like he'd simultaneously killed and birthed her. Then they went on a walk.

"She could walk?" I'd said. "Was this part of the plan?"

Very much so. She said, "I want to rule the world with

you." We sat on a bench and talked about having children and traveling together. So that was that, I thought.

He curled into a ball on the concrete and moaned.

But love, he wrote, to someone so unfairly deprived of it, doesn't rush forward like a stream, it curls back on itself, explores all the various tributaries, sometimes shimmers so bright, sometimes so subtly, it slips past, you don't even notice, poof!, it's already gone.

He scooped the last of his *huevos* and lazily threw the food against the wall like testing it out. No luck, he couldn't act his way into insanity, relieved at least of knowing what was killing him. He nodded to the construction workers streaming in for their pre-work meal and the men seemed pained, greatly embarrassed at the degeneration of their fellow.

Marten was losing his bet, then he was winning, then he was losing again. The basketball fans on the TV were painted blue, screaming, weeping, holding each other as they twitched like invalids or recently abandoned children.

He won the bet, went to the gambling hall/strip club, gave a homeless man fifty dollars to pick up his own four-hundred fifty and went back and gave the stunned Mexican waitress one hundred dollars, explaining to her that a year ago he'd been standing in a kitchen dis-

cussing the events of the day, unknowing this moment would soon be removed from that which gave it life to hang bloodless and cold in a distant room in the minds of *these* two people—he tapped himself on the chest and pointed across the Bay—who alone will either close that door or find each other again—“That’s why I’m giving you this money, I’ll try anything, toss a penny into a well!”—or go completely mad. The waitress smiled at the drunk or eccentric man.

He stopped typing. His face seemed to darken by several degrees.

I remember I once told Elliott I was afraid, I’d never been this close to someone before, and she’d said she was also afraid, and then I’d *fallen into my own stomach*.

I nodded my head. I didn’t laugh. I even understood. Not romantic love, god no—what, One Ball?—but rather how the particular dramas of all those conversations while sitting in this same City with Marten and/or with Elliott were all forgotten now, only having slipped past then, inconsequential, and what had mattered then and what remained now was the absolute certainty of the presence of a *true listener*. Like the stomach strips food down to its essential proteins and nutrients or how lines compose themselves into an image. Exactly.

The traffic calmed, the clouds held, all aligned and

released like the body clenches and releases in pleasure. I nodded to this thing which was inside me and which I was inside, and it nodded back in a pulse of lights, a sweep of wind. I realized I’d been craving this genital lock with the world all day, probably much longer. It was even nicer now than ‘in the moment,’ when everything had been ‘natural,’ that is, utterly taken for granted, uncultivated, meaningless as a bullet through the skull of a foraging deer. The recognition of having known love and companionship and to know thereby that the heart still beats for more. How memory feeds the flesh. A fleece of wind danced a flap of skin off a lamb-bone. And yet the very fact that I’d ‘made room’ in my life to ‘remember what was important’ showed how little room there was and what was really important, the deafening roar of the million tiny pressures of my modern existence—good god, *by my own choice!*—pinching every last orifice of the world shut. I winced, assaulted by my own thoughts, thinking how strange it was to walk around in a place where essentially nothing happened except these things on the ends of everyone’s spines waged war on their owners, on everyone, constantly.

“I have to go back inside now,” the waitress had said.

“I can’t go in any buildings for a year. I made a promise to myself.”

“I return.”

A fat little Latin man stood at the end of the alley as if obeying some code of decency too fundamental and basic to name and he and Marten waved to each other. The man whistled a half-remembered tune, sad and light. He held up his pack of *Lucky Strikes*. I flashed my pack of *Pall Malls* and he vigorously shook his pack at me and smiled in solidarity. He popped the cap off a beer he'd hidden in his coat. His concerned gaze over the sunny street vanished as he yelled, “Three o'clock Sunday is very late for the first beer!” My smile raised his. “But this fourth beer, maybe five, so OK!” His smile widened, then the concerned look returned. It was as if he saw cracks in the sun, some sort of problem there. He glanced back at Marten like he was checking what he'd understood about the sun against what he saw in Marten, face flashed through joy, pain, sadness, confusion, was Marten failing the sun or the sun failing Marten or—I felt like a voyeur onto some sort of deep intimacy, the glances and whippers unnoticed by those involved, unintelligible to those outside (it could also of course have been the reverse, the old man keeping a respectful distance from the excited intimacies of the still young). “*Todo Los Dios, Dia Dos Muertes!*” the man said to me, this being the name of the

bone-cleaning project, although Marten hadn't cleaned or sold a single bone since my arrival. “Marten,” the man said. “Five o'clock.”

Marten nodded yes.

The night before, Marten explained to the waitress, he'd been led to a dark booth where two quarters raised a metal grate to reveal a woman in lingerie on a plush, mauve-colored couch seen through a sheet of plastic scratched full of names, genitals, cartoon animals and declarations of undying love. A black plastic trashcan filled with crumpled wads of the cum paper that you could pull from a wall-mounted dispenser. Pendulous breasts that betrayed gravity and betrayed space and common sense with their call to Marten. Warm cave glistened in the cold shade of cavernous thighs. Her eyes and mouth were cut into trapezoids and diamonds by heavy eyeliner and lipstick, a face eaten alive by geometry. The platform the couch was on slowly rotated to present the woman to each booth. Marten was hidden from the other customers as they were hidden from him. Their gestures and character he surmised from the woman's coy smiles, the drop of a bra strap, the placing of her hands on her slowly spreading knees, the calm and measured movement of her lips in mute conversation with the men behind the

various panes of plastic, who spoke to her about wine, politics and sex in English, French, Russian.

Her image detached itself from her self to crawl in and out of the rooms, copulate inside the minds of the other men. She laughed, leaving them bursting with an abundance of rude health. They joked and laughed in the glittering bright rooms where all passed free and easy, especially the genital glide.

She rotated to Marten's booth and her face curdled as Marten continued to think of Elliott bent over the sofa or the bed or the kitchen sink—"I want," she'd once told him, "to fuck on every surface of every place either of us ever lives"—looking back at him with the innocence and trust of the child he'd sworn to be kind to as she had to the child in him as Marten smiled at the frame of the two thighs, the blue and black lace held taught between the ankles, the impossibly thin aperture of the vagina which flooded the image with light.

He entered.

The slight raise of her timid smile. The gape of the mouth, wider. Her lower lip damp on his shoulder as she laid soft and weightless under him, spine suspended on the tips of his ten fingers. Soft and steady waves of breath moved through them. Smiles and laughter mirrored, falling over themselves, tumbling down grassy hills. Purely

and delicately moving through layers of resistance that always parted to deeper and fuller light, causing them to cackle at the power manifested *through* them, body parts and emotions they didn't know to whom they belonged, if anyone, everyone—

—"Just keep looking at me, *keep*—"

Once she'd come back and Marten had held her and said that they didn't have to figure anything out, they could just sit and talk and *breathe* and she'd breathed long and slow and started to smile, yes, *she'd* then also remembered, and told him to make love to her *right away*, and he'd said that if he did that he'd want to do it every day for the rest of his life—"You better make love to me *now*"—and she'd looked at him *inside her* (that's exactly how I imagined it, Elliott observing a miniature version of the Marten making love to her like an unborn child safe inside her own fleshy walls), and she'd said that he looked like he *meant it* and he'd said that he did and that he always would and she'd held his cock and said, "This is mine now."

The stripper implored Marten with a raised hand. He rummaged in his pockets and found a couple quarters to deposit in the slot and raise the screen. The woman shook her head and turned away.

He'd demonstrated for the Mexican waitress how

he'd stood there swinging his limp dick round and round like a boy with a rope of taffy. He hadn't taken out his dick for the waitress, of course, he'd just made the circular swinging motion in front of his crotch, but she'd understood enough to go back into the burrito shop after trying to return the money, which Marten refused.

"You couldn't get it up," I said. "You were wasted."

Two years, Marten wrote. No wood. Unless I think of her and I do.

I managed to look unimpressed. I'd been perfecting the look all afternoon, the last five months, really. Preparing for this perhaps. Because there was obviously nothing I could do or say that would change anything in the slightest. But, all on his own, big boy Marten seemed to calm down, take a breath, relax back into the absurdity of his story, of his life, how he'd gotten up, walked around the corner from the first Mexican place and gazed through the window of another *taqueria* at a man using tongs to lift and turn green chilies on a grill. Marten's knock on the window raised the man's head and the man pointed to the door. Marten pulled out a twenty. The man slid open the window. Marten started to speak English and the man held his hands aloft and rushed off.

Marten explained to the manager that *she* lives on the mainland across the bridge which can only be crossed

by car, a sort of moveable building, if you think about it, and he had to stay far fucking away, on this island of San Francisco, so he, Marten—Marten tapped his own chest—had decided he wouldn't enter any buildings, cars included, for a year and therefore could not purchase the two enchiladas he, Marten, wanted for lunch, but he would pay extra for having them delivered through the window, and he also wondered if he could use the alley next to the *taqueria* for an art project for which he, Marten, wanted to purchase as many bones as possible—cow, chicken, pig, goat, whatever the fuck they had.

"Povre Hombre..."

Marten pulled out ten twenty dollar bills.

On the typewriter he'd stolen from Elliott the night of the auction, Marten now wrote that he spent his days scrubbing all sinew, blood and gristle from the *taqueria's* endless pile of bones and typing variations on bold telegraphic injunctions to guilt employing the history of war. He sold the bones and cuts of the scroll. His black clothes were covered in the white streaks of gristle, wet with the foam of the soap, plastered here and there with fragments of bone and flesh. It was precisely, clearly, definitely a man hungry for death.

I remember, he wrote, seeing her eyes sparkling for the first time in months from across some room, strangers making

her smile and laugh and even feel, sure, but not too much or only the good things, the easy ones, that's key. This was right near the end, I think about it still, all the time, those eyes sparkling, that smile. I'd slammed a beer bottle on a table earlier in the night, sometimes I did things like that because she'd be distant a lot and I'd occasionally lose my patience. A bit of silence or a wrong word, nothing serious, but these were the things she recalled from months ago when she was ending it, nevermind she called me a motherfucker, fuck off, asshole, she had a mouth, I never said those things, but I'd be the last to say love is fair, there's no one you hate more sometimes than your one true love, it's confusing, I know. And, you see, I kept thinking how I used to make her smile like that, her eyes sparkling, but also a lot more, that was the problem. Because of course we camped under the Sequoyas, on the beach, I'd wake up early to make her tea, watch her at peace, asleep. The ocean heaving, running along the beach, or pierced by the sun raining down from those great trees, frozen in the middle of the forest, you know, dinner with friends, holding their child, smiling at each other from across the room or else grilling eggplant in the pissing rain and taking pictures of each other moving inside each other in the tent that night, it all dies so hard, day and night these wholly personal worms moving under the skin, groaning somewhere deep inside me, deafening loud, angel sounds, little birds coo coo. Things like handing

her her dentures and waiting for her to mumble, "Tanks..." die so hard because, basically, my life was complete, it was more than enough for me, I was very happy. Maybe she was too, who knows anymore. We had a past, the present, a future. The whole package. But more than any of this, I also saw her in her pain, where she thought she was so ugly and useless she shouldn't even be alive. No one had really seen that before, not as raw—god, what ugliness, her face distorted like a Goya, all dripped flesh, horror in the eyes, you know, in a moment nothing's really happening, nothing outside—I'm bragging, it's horrible, but she even told me as much, I think she didn't think I could love her, she even hated me a little for seeing that, even though I often thought the same, about myself of course, although also about her more and more these days, and I was every bit as in pain and scared as her, and surely as nuts too—he made a gesture to his general surroundings—and you know I love her absolutely, I'd do absolutely anything for her, no one deserves it more than her, fuck it, it makes me feel good, loving her, a dog's love perhaps, all that for a pat on the head, a couple scraps, fine, not too impressive, I'd gladly take more, but lovers aren't given too many choices, just, Here's my heart, all my support, be kind. That or nothing, nearly nothing, fine, a little genital friction, fluid exchange, brunch with plenty of life history and understanding and kind deeds, words, an adventure or two or a year and then one day, "Goodbye!" And,

anyways, being a pillar like that for someone, if the person has never had anyone remotely reliable, you can't waver, not an inch, and I was utterly committed, of course, but slamming that bottle, saying a word here and there, a little moment of inattention, it was only like a flagpole goes an inch to the left, the right, it's only natural, there's winds, you can't control them, you have to move a bit or the pole snaps in two, human nature, but, for her, it was enough, too much, it felt like the whole world was shattering, and it got worse every time she left, threatened to leave, I came to expect it, my world was shattering too, all the time, I begged her for reassurance—that's the worse sort of wavering, real weakness, a woman simply won't allow it in a man, nevermind he shows his fortitude in all matters that truly matter, nevermind he be strong through her weakness, nevermind he keep the accounts and make the plans and lift the heavy burdens physical and metaphorical, keep your—what?—keep your vulnerability, your tender little heart, to yourself. So she ended it, I ran out into the pouring rain, barefoot, even made it seven blocks or so. If I'd remained calm right then we might have had a chance, who knows, that's one of the million things that haunt me. And if she'd realized we're all afraid, in pain and completely out of our minds, and never more so than in love. Then she might have been able to forgive, without which love doesn't have a chance, seeing as human beings tend to fuck up every now and then—he made

a gesture to his general surroundings—because once you can forgive, you can relax, breathe, life can begin, before that, nothing's possible, no love without forgiveness and no life without love, sorry. I tried to create that space, we both did, for a while we even succeeded. We could show each other anything, everything, and be loved. It was the most precious experience of my life, magical, perhaps it will come again, that's what people say, first it'll seem possible, then one day you'll open your eyes and... be back where I was. Which is why I'm still stuck here. Because I can't see why anyone would leave, why, if there were a few problems, you wouldn't fix them. Obviously she saw plenty of good reasons to leave—funny, she recalls a certain time as horrible, but then why was she talking about babies and houses during that same time, that's the part that really stings, six more months of falling in love with her—no, six more months of falling in love with someone already gone, a ghost, why did she always let me fall in love with her again after she'd left so the cut would always be deeper when she left again like she really is simply a sadist who just can't seem to cut daddy deep enough to staunch her own wound, nevermind the random victim quivering in front of her, that's not pain, this girl knows pain—perhaps, people see what they want to see, there's no use going over it again and again, even

though that's all I do... As for everything since, I can't say anything except it's the same for an eighty year-old man whose lover leaves him, for a child whose mother walks out the room, yes, from the cradle to the grave, as concerns heartbreak, we never grow an inch or learn to utter even one intelligible word, we just weep. Weep and weep and weep.

What he'd felt in his dream of walking into the Red Sea was only the surface of what he now tried to drown in, blurred into the City's night motion of light, glare, haze and luminosity, the streetlights and walls of tumbling washing machines like signposts into deeper and deeper layers of utter disappearance and of random connection, the City always throwing itself ahead of him to catch him in the distractions he needed, his utterly profound thoughts of the oils stains left in every space of every parking lot like blood attesting to the City's daily war, *incredible* thoughts of the constant migration of City dwellers in thick streams of excited speech he imagined he could lose himself in, or else the solitary and serious man he imagined he could be the double of, trekking off into the hills with a backpack, never to see another human face, thank god—*never* losing himself or escaping, only walking and thinking in an empty landscape that was nothing but the soul of their shared life taunting

from the trees that are like the trees he wandered under with her, a phone on the other end of which was a voice that could return the structure of bones, the warmth of blood, to the rotting heap of muscle and fat that was his broken and *not* melodramatic self—because although he was always practicing the broken face he'd show her when their paths crossed, he couldn't seem to help it, he wished he was acting, sometimes he even forced a smile to try to break the loop.

The absolute necessity of her presence in his life would sculpt the chaos of the City, pulling her green minivan out the sea of traffic like some great watery beast several times daily, the crystallization of some revelation locked into place in *her* distant head, breath sucked out of her and all manner of bird song returning her to their Eden—and stars sparkled in *his* world. It was only the *fall* from the violence of this desperate hope that would cause him to lurch and crawl the streets, gaping for air, holding himself up against buildings, relentlessly beaten by his own ridiculousness, how pathetic he was, how much sense it made that she would dispose of such a useless burden, and teasing always at the corners of his mind like a spider on the periphery of a web, tip-toes sending ripples and pulses through his center, somewhere she simply walked. Because it wasn't that he had

any great mythology about her perfection or evil character. He knew exactly the thing he longed for constantly, ordinary and magical as an evening stroll—ah, pathetic man!, he wanted nothing more than to bask in the fact of their being, their existence, even if it were now a dusty shrine, cob-web cloaked, some third-rate deity missing an eye, a leg and every last devotee except Marten, knelt before it, hands clasped in fervent prayer, licking the dust and bugs off the feet, polishing the entire body with his tongue, lips moving to the rhythms of unknown tongues—“I love you, I love you, I love you”—day and night, whatever the body did, the heart and mind weaved this consistent thread, himself having no idea of the full scope of his words and knowing them without doubt to be the truth because they weren’t words, just a pulse: I love you, I love you, I love you.

And he imagined her burst into tears in the pure light of their love, reborn from the ashes it had been flickering in, winking through all their lonely nights. Her in his arms. Her walking with purpose through a crowded room, limbs lubricated by sex and support. He imagined everything one imagines. All the visions harmed him and he opened his eyes always wider so that the shrine would glow brighter, even as he grew cold and began to shiver.

From a glance at a woman sitting across a room or

else from one step of another woman’s walk, even a hundred feet away, he could know it wasn’t her and this other being vanished. And it made no difference that she lived in a box now, the silhouettes of his mind still crawled across every brick wall and through every crosswalk of the City. This was where he lived now, a home—they used to tap each other’s chests, say, “*This is my home*”—a home of constantly shifting walls, caving rooftops, floors that crumbled underfoot. He walked in a world populated by no-one *and* by her, whom he was always trying to make his way to, whom he never found, constantly mumbling his desperate prayer, thoughts looping a noose round and round the lunatic’s neck.

And, deeper, he took midnight pilgrimages to the Eucalyptus’ of Australia, or else the delicate symmetry of the Japanese garden, imagining his spirit elongated by those tall trees, brought into a semblance of order by the carefully snipped Bonsai. He reminded himself he was alive in the absence of her. So alive, he felt absolutely no need to enter the *Conservatory of Flowers* in Golden Gate Park, one of his favorite structures and one which he hadn’t visited in years, because at three or four AM the whitened glass of that whale-like Victorian gently throbbed with the moonlight glazed over its steel ribs, the magnificent beast asleep, glowing and humming

with all the smiles that had reflected within its iron, glass and concrete guts during the course of the day. And one of those smiles had to have been hers, the one outshining all the others. Marten sitting on a hill and imagining sharing her million mirrored smiles with her as he held her and curled up in the grass, horribly alone.

Morning he always woke up with his body twisted all wrong, trying to form some idea of the nature of the gash an inch right and down from his heart like a man just shot refusing to move for fear it might worsen, left with no alternative but the uselessness of knowledge in the face of total catastrophe. Frozen as such, he would begin to sense all manner of sharp-toothed, eyeless worm swirling in that dark and deepening well, his wound, and he would then continue his vigil because these beasts seemed to guard some secret he could learn and which would thereby return her. This was why he never thought of anything but *him and her*. It was idiotic, but not impossible, and it beat the hell out of the alternative. So that his horror was not at the sinister movement of his dream burning away in the dawn of liminal space, which would have seemed a blessing under other circumstances, but rather precisely because this elusive key, these fierce guardians and this bottomless black hole were *leaving him* to get up aching and uncertain as to

what to do in a world wherein his first daily action would never again be to roll over and ask the woman he loved how she had slept, then watch her eyelids open. Creepy, he knows. So then he goes off to scrub his bones.

“You got American bones in there?” a couple of patriots had one day asked.

Certainly, Marten had written. Somewhere in here, just got to dig around a bit. Not many, but I'm sure there's one or two, although of course every bone is a tragedy and pain is never relative, you know, for every 9/11 bone there's about one hundred and sixty-seven to three hundred and thirty-four Rwandan bones, which I realize is darker meat, but they sort of bury the lighter—and he'd just watched from above and felt only compassion for these people who had to resort to shoving him over to stomp his ribs and crack his jaw when faced with such a simple truth as the relative lack of casualties America has suffered compared to those it has inflicted, or those of other peoples all together, as if Americans couldn't stand the fact that in at least one category, suffering, the world had them beat.

He lifted his head. His pupils pulsed way back, shivered with fear, hiding from the life their owner felt duty-bound to expose them to. His cheekbones jutted out like the bars of some totally defective and extremely fragile protective headgear. *I wanted* to ask him about

the beatings, to undertake a more caring inquiry into his impotence. I also wanted to beat him myself. Beat him absolutely bloody and senseless. But he of course wanted to be beaten. For *failing* her somehow? Because what, oh cruel world, could life possibly mean without her? And about that he was right. Life could never mean what it meant with *her*. That was dead now, a corpse giving a couple last twitches before it returned to the soil, gave life to flowers, deer.

A nuclear family stood at the end of the alley, the heavy-set father had Marten in his cross-hairs and he was clicking. The father put his camera down, put a hand on the shoulder of his daughter, and she shrugged off the hand, greatly embarrassed and offended. The daughter looked at Marten for several minutes, shoving forth her indifference, not a muscle in her face moving except she fiercely chewed gum.

“Satisfied?” the father said. “We’re going to miss the god-damn Ferry.”

The girl rolled her eyes. “*Al-ca-traaz...*” The trio carried on their visit to San Francisco.

I’d managed to give little attention to the crowds gathered at the ends of the alley, the braver ones approaching and hovering over Marten as he typed. I’d just stared at the words being formed, as if there was some

sort of safety there. Few people had joined me in my observation, which would have necessitated them standing directly behind Marten, which must have seemed intrusive. Mainly, they took a couple photos and left. Some tried to read the words upside down, but the story, which I’ve condensed and tried to make coherent, was far more jumbled and winding than the easy guilty pleasures they’d come here for. They must all have been greatly disappointed. No war dead, no provocation, no bone-cleaning and absolutely shit-all to buy. Just some mute psychotic furiously tapping away like if he jabbed hard and fast enough he’d kill off what was haunting him, the thing he was feeding with his every word and thought, absolutely refusing to let it die.

My gaze upon the words had placed me in a relation to the psychotic and deeply pained child, a relation of privilege, of communion or even co-authorship, some deeper, more interior aspect of the experience than I thought I desired. Sometimes I wondered if he interacted with me only because I carried traces of her, which he fed off in secret, in the middle of the night, on his crate atop a heap of bones. What a sick mind.

“*Pssst,*” I heard. The endearingly pudgy Latin father figure stood at the end of the alley. “Five o’clock. *Andele!* Bring your friend.”

Marten peeled the duct-tape from his mouth. Little white bumps dotted the raw, pinkish skin around his smiling lips. There were red marks and scratches all down his back. Looking closer was like pulling back the fridge and turning on the lights in a roach-infested home: Welts and a few cuts. He kept smiling at me. What, I thought, is the body when the spirit has gone? I looked at his wounds. He smelled horribly, festering, either him or all the other flesh his bones were draped in. There are times, I thought, when one is truly dead in the midst of life. *Dead flesh*. And I remembered catching Elliott with a soaped-up dish suspended in her hand, staring at the white wall in front of her in deep pain. Her head had dipped as if the neck had snapped. My head dipped as if the neck had snapped.

Marten told me I looked horrible. He told he'd come upon a solution, an idea. I didn't know what he was talking about and followed him anyways, thinking that was love.