

o u r l o n g w a l k
i n t o t h e s u n

We don't have a home in the traditional sense--like a place where you sit down and pay bills and heal up after faking the day away, but we do have our own little spot carved out in the city. We named our home The Shack but it doesn't much resemble a shack. If you wanted to pick bones about it, it's more of a cave.

As far as I can tell, the area surrounding our place is an abandoned construction site. Maybe the funding for whatever project dried up or maybe the process of plowing through the city and erecting giant concrete structures was just a jobs program with no real goal in mind. It doesn't matter. It belongs to us now.

A wide drainage ditch runs through the site. I've seen similar half-tunnels in other places around the city as well, as if some huge worm ate a path through the streets and after it had its fill it burrowed back underground. The ditch slopes slightly downhill and ends at a sheer wall with giant grates. The grates funnel runoff and rain water towards the reservoir.

So, if everything is quiet, our cave whistles like a seashell in the wind and the water gushing towards the reservoir makes it sound like you're on some raft drifting towards a powerful waterfall. Sometimes I close my eyes and my stomach tenses up for just a moment as I feel myself sailing off the edge into some misty canyon.

A train track runs over the ditch, suspended by a thick bridge. The Shack is in the crook underneath the bridge. I'm not sure what our cave was initially intended for. It's almost perfectly cylindrical, or it was after we emptied out all the cinder and concrete. Maybe the worker who was about to pour concrete into our cave paused and for a moment stood paralyzed by a vision of what would one day be.

The entrance of The Shack is about twenty feet away from the ditch bed and can hardly be seen unless you stare directly at it. Even then, unless a person knows what they're seeing, the entrance is a sight they pass by without the slightest acknowledgement. There are lots of places like that in the city. In every city really, and probably even out in the country. I have keener vision than the average person who holds a job and who struggles to keep track of their viral obligations.

I could walk down the street right now and discover any number of runaways, and those who've given up their former lives, or those who've lost everything and burrowed

into the earth only to find out that's where they should have been in the first place.

People have walked by our place before and glanced at the nearly reflective tin sheet door of The Shack--they just keep going like it's not even there. The thought that something is behind it probably never registers. The tin came from a mechanic shop halfway across the damn city. It's layered and heavy as hell. I found it a couple years ago soon after I met Firefly.

The days were muggy and the nights were just cold enough that it was difficult to situate myself in any comfortable way, or fall asleep with just my jeans and hoodie to keep me warm. I'd grown hungry over the last few days. I'd sold all the last of my stuff--even the school backpack I'd held onto. I didn't have any money left but I couldn't tell my stomach that. I wandered the streets following the smells of foods that streamed warmly on cold downwinds. I mostly just breathed it all in, and let my mouth water as I swallowed over and over.

A dark burly man with a fat belly, hairy arms and a stained shirt trudged up the stairs of some underground bar wearing an apron and talking to himself. He gripped two garbage bags in his hands. The aroma of deep fried food saturated the street--you could smell it from miles away. I

was having a hard time suppressing my appetite. My stomach was coaxing me to beg, but that just wouldn't happen.

At the time I had no scavenging skills. I was green, weak and accustomed to walking into a kitchen and deciding what I wanted to eat. When introduced to real hunger you think differently about food. It scrambles your brain. I take pleasure in watching people who've never been really hungry go hungry. Especially those haughty religious lecturing types. They find out their ethics are a luxury-dependent fantasy.

The man flung the bags into a back alley dumpster and slammed down the lid. He kicked the metal housing and the entire dumpster rolled a bit on its wheels. He was probably pissed from dealing with drunks and feeling smothered by the need for a paycheck. I didn't get it. There wasn't anything physically keeping him there. Why not just throw down the apron and walk off? It didn't strike me that he was weak, but maybe he and I were operating on different wavelengths. If I could get him to tune into my station maybe he would change. He probably felt the same about someone like me.

He wiped the sweat from his nose with an annoyed snort. His sandpapered face and deep carved wrinkles made him look tough and sad. It wasn't a unique look. I'd seen it before on subway trains and in war documentaries. His anger seemed to shield some hard kernel of dignity and self

worth. I bet he hoped there would be something to come along to make him so angry that he would take some drastic action and change something--anything, about his life. He trudged back down the stairs with his shoulders slumped as if he were carrying sandbags. Smoke and fried foods again wafted up to the street. I closed my eyes and sniffed in the oily air like the foggy-warm night breath of a sewer grate.

I flung open the dumpster. Four trash bags rested at the bottom like fat and slouching little piglets. I jumped up and landed with my belly on the dumpster's edge. I teetered back and forth, grasping for the bags. They were still about half a foot out of reach. I rocked forward a little bit, extending my fingers. I tumbled over inside with a dull thud.

It was my first time inside a dumpster. I lay there and thought about what a jackass I was. I chucked the bags out and crawled back outside. During all my fucking about, I'd managed to scoot the dumpster a few feet crooked.

I clawed open a bag. I scowled and rummaged quickly through it, discarding clearly inedible items. There were cigarette butts and beer cans, some plastic plates and crumbled remains of deep fried foods. I ate the chicken skins and gnawed at a few bones. One plate had fries long since ketchup-logged. I ate them in a hurry, licking the vinegary sweet grime from my fingers.

I'd been homeless for about a month and a half. I'd left a note at my folks home saying to never look for me. I had survived until then on the hundred and seventy dollars I scored when I pawned all my stuff. I'd been out on the streets for a while but the last few days seemed to be the first time I was actually alone, as I had no money and nowhere to go. Recently, I had been worrying about what I would do and what would happen to my resolve through the morbid stages of starvation and bodily decay.

The scavenger food was gross at first, but there was a special triumph in eating it. A sense that I needed no one on the planet. If the cities fell and we were all left out in the woods, I could gnaw at squirrel bones, pine straw and roots. Then after everyone else didn't make it, I would eat them too.

I ripped open another bag and found a cardboard chicken basket with an entire breast and two hardly touched drumsticks. I went at a drumstick like a mangy three-legged wolf. In the flurry I bit my finger and dropped the food to the ground.

I froze. There was someone watching me from about twenty feet away in the alley. A girl dirty like she'd been changing out carburetors, staring at me with these pixie eyes and a slightly open mouth. She was scrawny and looked even hungrier than me. I looked away from her and kept eating. I swallowed the mush in my dried mouth and the

sound seemed to echo in the alley silence. I held still for a moment and waited to see what she would do.

"Quit givin me the bug eyes." I shot her a what the fuck look.

She opened her mouth to say something, but she didn't speak. Her sunken eyes were glazed. The dark gunk on her face had clean stream lines running from her eyes down her chin. "I said stop fucking looking at me." I threw a can at her and she scurried back.

I ate. With her staring at me I couldn't even tell if the chicken was good or not. I just didn't want to be hungry. I felt her eyeballing me as if every movement I made was being recorded. I turned my back to her and crouched over. After a while I looked over my shoulder.

"Jesus fucking Christ, what! Fuck off." I jumped up with a bag in hand and I hurled it at her. The bag hit her and she doubled over from a seeming lack of energy. I sat back down and ate angrily.

She slowly got up and then she started to pull at the skin of the bag. The plastic stretched thin but stayed together. She clenched her teeth and pulled harder. It finally broke open and she dug inside. Her scrawny arms disappeared into the trash. She pulled up small scraps and ate them quickly. Her hands trembled. The wind blew by and her teeth chattered.

I found myself motionless with the chicken in my hands as I watched her. She couldn't find any real food. She turned over cans and pulled out cigarette butts. Even small items shook in her tiny hands as if she were lifting heavy rocks. Her jeans and once-white tee shirt were rotten and gray.

She was ruining everything. My pulse beat in the back of my throat. I didn't know what I was thinking. I huffed and placed my chicken back inside my bag and held the plastic shut over it. I walked over to the girl and snatched her bag away from her as if I would hit her and she raised her hands to protect her face.

"You can't have that bag. It's mine. You can have this one, I'm done with it." And I tossed it down in front of her. She didn't move for a moment and she then looked up at me. I walked back over to my spot and sat cross legged. I broke into another bag but there wasn't much inside. I pawed through the sorry contents and glanced up.

She shyly opened the bag and her eyes opened wide. She held the chicken breast up and it seemed large in her hands, blocking out most of her face. She ate and coughed. She lowered her hands. Her cheeks were full and she swallowed with some effort and then looked at me and grinned. I quickly looked down and kept rummaging. I picked at some other things occasionally glancing back at the

girl. A bottle crashed on the wall behind me in a glassy pulse.

"What the hell are you little rats doing?" The man threw another bottle and it clanked off my knee, shooting a throbbing through my bones like kicking the edge of a bench with a pinky toe. I yelled and picked up the bottle and hurled it back at the man. He ducked the whishing bottle and stormed towards me. I limped back into the alley. As I passed the girl, she followed behind me. I reached into her bag and produced another bottle. I held it by the nozzle and smacked it against the wall. It clanked loudly but didn't break. I smashed it again and it just bounced back in my hand. I hit the wall like I fucking meant it and the bottle broke into pieces. I picked up the broken nozzle and ran back into the alley.

The alley was a dead end with a single light shining down over a metal handleless door. The man ran around the corner. I pushed the girl behind me. I held up the broken nozzle and stood there heaving breaths. The man looked at me, the jagged nozzle and then at the girl and he furrowed his brow. He shook his head, shooed us away with a lazy hand and walked back down into the bar.

I thought he would call the police right away. I wasn't about to be taken anywhere I didn't choose to go on my own. I winced and rubbed my knee. The girl's scrawny arms wrapped around my waist from behind. I like to feel

cold and everything but I'm not stone, I let her finish her hug so she'd get it out of her system. Maybe she was just like me, only not physically strong enough to make it. I was small but muscled and durable. I could fall into dumpsters, tumble down a few flights of stairs, bang my head in doorways and then just brush myself off. Maybe it was nature's apology for making me thick headed. I felt like an old car door that had to be slammed shut sometimes. She seemed fetal and glassy, like if you picked her up the wrong way something would break.

"Anyway. I'll see ya. He's probably calling the police. So if you're looking to go home or something..." I said.

"I'm not going back home." She tensed her jaw and stared at me with a little fire.

I considered it for a second and half grinned.

"Well, you'd better get outta here then."

"Can I go with you?" She lightly gripped my sleeve.

"Oh, fuck no! What're you, stupid?" I shucked her off and rolled my eyes.

The man again trudged up the stairs and we backed up into the alley. He held two styrofoam boxes in one hand and a square drink holder in the other, with two straws stuck into a pair of giant cups.

"Hey honey, I shouldnta thrown that bottle at you."

"Two bottles, you fucker." I stepped forward and the girl tugged at my sleeve. The man sighed.

"You should get back home. This isn't a tree house or dollhouse or whatever."

"Dollhouse! Fuck you, I didn't ask for your advice. For all you know we'd be going home to fucked up, abusive drug addicts who touch us in bad places. But that's okay. Whatever. You know, so long as you don't have to see it."

The man squinted in the streetlight as if he were staring into the sun. His sweat dripped from his forehead and I could smell his musky body odor across the alley like popcorn and piss.

"Maybe. For all I know you're right. And for all I know you're also lying through your teeth...I ran away when I was sixteen." He sighed and set the boxes and drinks down. "Take it. It's cold but it's good. Listen, don't come back. Don't be like some sorry mutt and come back for food, because you sure as hell won't get any. It's not a nice place. You should know better."

He turned and walked off. The girl looked down at the food and ran down the alley a bit.

"Thank you very much!" She waved and smiled. The man waved and gave a half smile over his shoulder. She opened one of the boxes. 'Look at all the food!' she said, her voice cracking gleefully. The man lingered for a moment and

smiled at her. I watched him walk down the stairs and he threw me a quick pilot's wave.

In the boxes were hamburgers, large piles of fries and pickles. Huge sodas sat on the side. I liked the idea of the survival food, and at first I thought I should refuse this charity meal out of some pride in my own newfound self-reliance, but I quickly decided refusing free food wouldn't be in keeping with any sort of scavenger code.

We sat and ate. I couldn't remember anything ever tasting so good. The girl stopped about a third of the way through her giant hamburger and held her belly and sipped at her soda. She had been drinking it for a while, but the massive cup was still almost full as if it would take her a week to choke down.

"Eat your food. It won't keep." I nodded to her.

"I'm so stuffed."

"You're scrawny as hell. Eat it already."

She picked up the hamburger and took a few more labored bites. I finished my meal and coaxed her along. We sat there listlessly sighing every now and then.

I stood and said goodbye. She looked at me longingly and I walked away. I followed the street that would eventually lead down towards the ocean. There was a dock I'd been sleeping at. A warm breeze blew in from the ocean for a few hours each night.

The night sky was mostly clear and glowed orangishly from the city lights. A handful of the brightest stars shone dimly through the fiery veil and I eyed them as I made my way. I felt pretty good. Full belly. A slight headwind blew comfortably in my face. I squinted like a satisfied dog hanging its head out of a car window.

A light cough echoed off the buildings behind me. I looked back and the girl was there, holding her dumbly huge soda cup. She stopped when I looked at her. I turned forward and kept going. I had the impulse to set her straight, but decided instead I would make her give up on following me. I had at least a seven mile trek ahead, and I knew she wouldn't make it. I picked up the pace, marching aggressively forward. I built up a light sweat.

For at least a mile I kept a solid pace that was just short of a jog. I didn't hear anything for a few minutes. Then her coughs carried on the wind behind me.

"What the fuck." I walked faster. One of those walks that's like running for some people. I even lost my breath for a second. I slowed down and enjoyed the wind.

I knew she'd be better off in a bear cave than with me. She would have to stop somewhere and pass out for the night. It would be good for her, a big meal and exercise. I imagined that tomorrow she would wake up in some alley feeling stronger and full of life. Far better off. I'd already done a great deed by helping her. I convinced

myself it would be better for her to lose track of me quickly with no further thought.

The coughing returned. Worse this time. Loud, sharp and phlegmy sounding. I looked back at the girl. She propped her arm against a building and puked all over the sidewalk. What a fucking waste. I shook my head. She walked towards me again with glazed eyes, breathing heavy and holding her belly. I licked the salty sweat from my lips, said fuck it and broke out into a run.

"Wait!" she cried out in the distance.

By the time I reached the harbor I was nauseous and sweating all over. I tied my hoodie around my waist and rested my hands on my hips. I peered out into the ocean. The city lights rafted calmly on the surfaces of dreary waves. I paced back and forth. I'd been sleeping outside of a hut on the harbor. It had rotten wood walls and a tin roof. Once I'd cooled down I sat on the corner of the small hut and crossed my arms. The water beneath the dock sloshed around. My skin felt sticky and I fantasized about a shower.

The more I listened to the ocean, the more I imagined hopping in for a quick swim. It would never happen--I'm deathly afraid of water that I can't see through. I wouldn't tell anyone that but my fear of sharks is vivid, mostly ridiculous I know, but every time I dip into dark water I picture myself being eaten in horrible detail

starting with my feet, feeling my ankles crunch and pop from the force of the bite pressure. The dock dropped off into deep boating waters, so there would be no knee high wading. I convinced myself I was too sleepy to take a dip. I crossed my arms and closed my eyes.

At least an hour passed. Clouds swept in from over the ocean. Big thick clouds that blocked out the orangish tint of the sky. The wind picked up and cawed over the water as if some flurry of dark birds was headed my way to peck the flesh from my bones. I grinned and closed my eyes again, content with the sensation that I lived alone like some cursed creature that lurked only on haunted nights.

A cough carried in the wind. Full on hacking and gasping for air.

"No fuckin way." I glanced around the corner of the hut and saw the girl as she limped her way down towards the dock. I hid quietly in the dark shadow of the hut. I couldn't tell if she saw me or not. She paced for a long while and then sat next to me.

"Hi, again." She sucked asthmatic breaths and smiled.

"How did you find me?"

"I looked everywhere! I started over by the shops and then went through the alleys and then..." She pointed with her eyes mostly closed. "This was the only place left."

"Why're you following me? You know I don't know where I'm going any better than you do, right?"

"That's okay. I just wanted to come with you."

"Why me? You can't come with me. I wander around. Trying to keep up with me just one time almost killed you. You'd never make it."

"I can keep up."

"You wouldn't want to."

"But can I just stay with you this one night?"

I thought it over and clearly imagined myself sneaking away before she ever woke.

"All right, but only if you leave tomorrow. I'm sure as fuck not taking care of you. I got enough problems."

"Okay, I'll go tomorrow. If you really want me to."

"I do."

"Okay."

I closed my eyes and slumped over. A few moments later she leaned against me. I almost shoved her off but just sighed instead. The wind grew cold. Colder than all the other nights I'd been through so far. Soon the girl was shivering, and I put my hoodie back on. She sort of balled up into my side like she was trying to sneak into my pocket. Then it rained. Lightly at first and it picked up to a ferocious downpour like some sort of tropical island bullshit.

I kicked in the rotten door of the hut, but there was an inch of rainbow surfaced water on the ground and it smelled like gasoline. I painted a miserable mental picture

of me and the girl standing in a puddle all night shivering and I slammed the door in frustration.

We marched down the street. It seemed no matter which way we turned the wind caught us headlong, as if it were trying to lift us up like kites. She took my hand and we pushed forward, leaning into the wind.

Then I saw the long drainage ditch and the bridge of the abandoned construction site. Lightning struck damn near on top of us. The girl yelped and grabbed me. We made our way under the bridge and walked towards the crook. A streetlight shone faintly close by and illuminated the small inlet. We crawled inside. It was mostly dry, but one stream of water dripped down from the bridge, directly into the small cave.

"We're so lucky that we found this spot." She shivered and smiled.

"Are you stupid? It's cold as shit and we're soaked." My jaw shook. Still she smiled. She held my hand for a moment.

I took off my hoodie and wrung it out. Then I wrung out my jeans and socks. The girl did the same. I couldn't stomach putting the freezing wet clothes back on, so I just crossed my arms and sat there naked and slumped. She hugged me, her shivering wiry torso pressing up against my side. Soon she felt warm and I put my arm around her. Things started to feel okay. The storm howled under the bridge and

horizontal rain blasted outside but it was calm enough in the cave.

The girl didn't move for a while and I thought she was asleep. I kept still so I wouldn't wake her. She shook and cried silently for a long while. I couldn't think of anything in the world worth being so sad over. She held onto me as if I were some wild animal that would never come back once she let go.

She fell asleep in my arms. The bronze streetlight shining into the inlet cut off. A moment later it came back on again. It flickered off and on, again and again. The bulb was dying.

The murk had washed from the girl's pixie face. She glowed celestial in the pulsing light. Her mouth moved and she mumbled incoherently. The light cut off and beamed again. Her partially opened eyes darted about, shining with an opal glint through her lids like the razor edge of a waning eclipse.

I watched her through the night and each time it occurred to me to leave before she woke, I held off and stayed just a little longer. She woke and shivered in the morning. The wind whistled by the door but the rain had stopped.

"If we don't put our clothes on they'll never dry out." I forced myself back into my freezing clothes and she

did the same. My socks weren't as bad as I imagined they would be.

The inlet was almost a perfect place to sleep. I surveyed the angle of the bridge and considered why water had leaked directly into the cave all night, but nothing came to mind. Just an unlucky placement. A tarp over the entrance would work great, I thought.

"It's cold." She bounced up and down under the bridge.

"I know. If there was a roof that would have worked really well." I stared at the entrance, wringing out my hoodie a little more, though no drops fell from it. It was just wet enough to be perfectly miserable. "Help me find something to put over the entrance."

"Okay!" she said and smiled with a little too much enthusiasm.

"You don't have to. You can go already if you want. You're still leaving today."

Her expectant look faded and she nodded.

"Oh, I know. I know that."

We wandered a long way into the city. She kept trying to hold my hand and I kept slapping it away. I hoped to tire her out so much that she'd never make it back. The sun broke through the clouds and shone brightly. The air became moist and swampy.

There was a mechanic shop and junkyard area with slabs of tin strewn alongside it. Cars were lined up everywhere,

and in the distance the sounds of clanking and talking echoed from metal corridors. One of those pressurized air gun things that screws bolts on kept whizzing off and on.

I looked around and pulled a big square piece of tin from the wall. It was much thicker than I'd imagined--double plated with something inside. It was heavy, and I knew the girl would drop dead if she had to help carry it.

"This should work," I said.

"Really? Isn't it too big? And it looks like it belongs to somebody."

"Bullshit. Lets drag it away from here and then we can carry it back."

She clenched her jaw and nodded. I pushed the slab along the dirt and out to the empty street. We then proceeded to try to hoist it up. I lifted my side of the slab but she couldn't get under hers. When she finally did, she couldn't lift it. In one burst of energy she lifted it up to her knees and the slab fell back down again. I stared at her expectantly while she tried to lift it over and over. She fell down. I smirked at her and she got back up and tried again.

The sun started to beat down with an overexposed brightness like a fucking atom bomb slowly exploding around the corner. Sweat dripped from her face. I pushed the slab up onto a trash can and then we were able to carry it

together for about fifty feet. She collapsed under the weight and cried out.

"I can't," she cried into her sweat. She coughed and hyperventilated and tried to lift it with her trembling arms but it didn't budge.

It was just like I'd planned but when I turned away she latched onto my leg and pleaded for me not to go. For a while we didn't move. We both knew this is where I would leave her behind.

"I'll do anything, just let me come with you." She closed her eyes.

"Yeah, anything except help me carry the roof I need. You're fucking worthless. Just go bother somebody else already."

I pried her from my leg and propped her against the wall. She stared down at the slab as if it were a gravestone and I walked away.

I didn't get very far. Something about her expression had me considering what it really was that I had wanted to say to her. I hadn't so much planned out what to say, I'd just imagined what it would look like, but this wasn't it. What I meant to say was something that would've sent her naturally flying off like a bird that I should've never handled in the first place. But I'd fucked it up. I'd fucked a lot of things up.

Fine, I thought. She stared up at me as I walked back. I tied my hoodie around my waist and wiped my hands on my shirt.

I dead lifted the slab and turtled my way under it. I clasped it with my hands behind my back and lunged up. I fell back to my knees and lunged up once more as explosively as I could, and then I stood there, slumped over with the thing upon my back like some ant trying to carry off an entire potato chip.

"Well? Don't just sit there. Come on," I said.

"You're so strong!" She jumped up and cheered. Her mouth hung open. She looked ecstatic and high with her wide eyes like she was witnessing some great feat, but I knew I was just some idiot with a slab of metal on my back. A tarp would have worked just fine.

I adjusted and the strain buckled my knees a little when I dipped down too low. It wasn't long before sweat dripped from my head. I stared down at my big square shadow and focused on not tripping.

Downhills were harder than uphill. On down hills I felt like I was in danger of smacking down face first. I knew if I fell, it would be impossible to lift the hunk of metal again. The heaviness seemed to increase with every step. It felt like I was hauling the moon on my back.

My forearms burned. My forearms never burned. I could fall asleep while hanging on a bar. I could tighten lug

nuts with my fingers and open those jars that you hand over to the biggest and dumbest guys. Of all things, my grip never gives out.

Soon I was sucking wind like a horse trudging through some vast desert. I looked over to the girl. She sweated in the sun. The trip was hard on her too, but every time she glanced at me there was this amazed look in her eyes and she smiled.

"You should take a break. Your face is red."

I shook my head and sweat flung to the ground over my seaweedish black hair. I knew it was a bad idea. Once the slab went down, it would stay down. I tried to walk in a straight line. Straight lines are the shortest distances, I thought.

I closed my eyes and when I opened them I had veered off course. Even when I stared directly where my next step would be I found myself careening to the left and right.

In the distance I saw the harbor and tried to calculate how long it would take to get there. It was like an island that seems much closer than it is, and I was stuck rowing against the current forever towards it. On the backdrop of the ocean the far portion of the dock seemed as though it was floating in the air.

I counted my steps first by the hundreds and then by the tens. We took a left turn once at the harbor and made it five blocks. I thought we found our area but we had

taken a wrong turn by about a block. I screamed all sorts of curses in my mind and held my head low as if I were plowing a field. Everything became dark for a moment and I widened my eyes and took deep breaths. We found the drainage ditch and the bridge. I walked up to the edge, looking down into the ditch. My legs would give out if I tried to walk down the slope. I turned around and let the slab fall. It slid about halfway down and stopped. I raised slowly upright as if I were a hundred years old.

My hands were still clenched mostly shut. I held them in front of me and I couldn't open them. Blood had dried over them and the imprint of the metal was etched in my skin.

"Let's cool off," I said. I nearly fell and then side stepped.

"Yeah." The girl squinted and followed me towards the dock. Her skin was sunburnt but it made her seem healthier. I knew she'd be hurting later.

I washed my hands in the ocean. They burned as if I'd dipped them in acid. I was too tired to think of sharks or being eaten even though it was probably more likely as I washed my own blood out to sea. I hurt so much all over that I could only hope a shark would come by and bite my head clean off. I splashed water over my skin and then lay face down on the dock with my arms hanging over the side. I

stared into the water's surface. My vision grew dark again and I widened my eyes.

I passed out. I'm not sure for how long, probably only a few moments, but it took me a while to realize where I was when I came to. My arms tingled. Every part of me shook as I stood up and my fingers were still curled and stiff as oak.

"Hey, over here!" the girl said. I followed her to a water hose wrapped on a building next to one of the boats. We drank about a gallon of water each from it and washed one another off. She laughed and sprayed me in the face. It felt good and I didn't say much. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, feeling like my brain had been cooking steadily at 350 degrees.

The sky was clear.

"We can put the door on tomorrow. The cool air feels good," I said. I couldn't have lifted the slab again if I wanted to.

"Okay." She smiled and she stared at me with adoring eyes. "I've never seen anybody so strong. That was a really long way."

It grew dark and we retreated to the cave. My belly was empty but I couldn't manage to move. My legs cramped up in excruciating surges and I stretched them silently with my eyes closed.

"Maybe tomorrow won't be so rough," I said.

"What's your name?"

"Nikki."

"Nikki?"

She considered my name for a moment, whispering it to herself over and over. Then she said nothing.

"Well..."

"Huh?"

"What the hell is your name, you idiot?"

"You really wanna know?" She smiled. "Everybody calls me Gabby." She trailed off and looked outside the cave into the night sky as if she could see the 'everybody' she was thinking of in the distance. Her hair blew gently in the wind as if she were sailing on calm waters. Moments later her eyes closed slowly, her head dropped down and then she snapped back awake.

She rested her head on my belly, threw her arm around me and closed her eyes. I yawned and balled up my hoodie for a pillow. The gray night gradually grew pitch black. I felt a thumping pulse upon my side. A whistling wind sent chills over my skin. Even with my adjusted eyes I couldn't see a thing. Then the streetlight hummed like the distant sound of twisting metal and it flickered on. The girl glowed for a moment and then all was dark again.

