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Man of Steel

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Man of Steel

Bryan Furuness

A COMMERCIAL CHANGED MY LIFE when I was ten years old. I was watching television in my living room, which really meant that I was tossing a basketball in the air distractedly while slipping in and out of daydreams. Sometimes, during commercials, I would sink so far inside my own head that by the time the show came back on, I would have forgotten what I was watching. But this commercial caught my attention. I don't remember what it was selling, but the product's beside the point; the point is the commercial itself.

It began with strange, warbly music and then, rising from a kind of fog, a simple pencil sketch of a man's face, but then it wasn't a man's face at all: it was a creature with large, almond-shaped eyes and a ridged brow and a pointy chin. This, said a voice -deep and pleasant to listen to-was a creature from outer space, an alien, a traveler from a distant star. "Who knows," said the voice, "what's really out there?"

The basketball fell out of my hands and dribbled away across the carpet. Now a woman looked straight at the camera-into me-and explained how, on an ordinary morning, she'd suddenly felt a blast of burning pain in her hand, when, at that exact moment, a thousand miles away, her son had burned himself on a stove.

"Coincidence?" said the voice.

I shook my head.

Then came the clincher, the part that changed me: a woman stood in her kitchen, looking at a plane ticket in her hand. Something told her it was a bad idea to get on that plane. She stared at the ticket for a long moment before finally putting it down on the table. The camera zoomed in on the ticket as the voice announced that the plane had crashed and there were, sadly, no survivors. My skin prickled .

I turned off the television and stood there listening to the little snaps of the tube cooling off. I was no stranger to disaster, but I had never considered that I might be able to do something about it. In my best announcer voice I said, "No survivors," and gave myself goosebumps all over again.

That was the day I became a devout listener to my own internal warnings. It turned out there were quite a few, apparently just waiting for an audience.

In those days, I spent a lot of time in the bathroom. I called it my "refuge," a term I had picked up from comic books. Superman had his icy fortress at the top of the world; I had a bathroom with a cheap lock and a loud fan. It wasn't glamorous, but it did afford me the privacy to imagine a tickle fight with my babysitter Missy, who had stopped doing that with me right around the time I started suggesting it; or to stand on the edge of the tub with my back to the mirror so I could see what my butt looked like to other people.

In a larger sense, it seemed important to have a place where I could brood and argue freely with myself, if only in a whisper-a belief I hold to this day.

My father came around every once in a while to knock on the door and ask if I was all right. He probably thought I had an intestinal parasite, an illusion I encouraged by flushing every ten minutes or so and issuing the occasional gratuitous groan. My father wouldn't have understood the importance of a refuge, not in a million years. But I knew

he would consider what I did in there to be weird behavior, and so I had to hide it from him. He had become so sensitive to that kind of thing ever since my mother ran away. Ever since my mother *left*, I suppose I should say, but "ran away" is what we said then, and it's still the first phrase that comes to my mind when I think about her. It's a mean thing to say, I guess, talking about her like she was a kid running down the street, blubbering, with a backpack full of peanut butter sandwiches -but now I think the term carried some hope, too. Adults who leave don't come back, but runaways sometimes do. When I saw the commercial, we'd been waiting nearly six months for her to come back from Hollywood.

But the bathroom-that's what I was talking about. I spent so much time in there that I should not have been surprised to receive my first warning while sitting on the toilet lid. It was morning, I remember, only a few days after the commercial. I was flipping through a ratty issue of *Ironman* while the shower warmed up. That's when I heard the words as clearly as if someone had spoken them inside my own head: *something bad at school today*.

I sat very still, waiting for clarification. In the commercial, the warning had been detailed. *This plane, this crash, don't do that*. But my warning, the one in my head, was about as specific as a fortune cookie.

To the ceiling fan, I said, "Can I get another clue, please?"

Steam tumbled over the top of the shower curtain. The comic book softened in my hands. When no further instructions came, I stood and turned slowly in a circle, raising my hands to see if that might improve my reception. Then I caught sight of myself in the mirror, arms raised like an orangutan. I pulled them down, embarrassed.

Maybe that wasn't a real warning, I thought. Maybe I didn't have the power. Maybe I shouldn't spend so much time alone in the bathroom.

"Look at me," I said to the mirror. Reluctantly, I met my own eyes. "Do you think Spiderman was on top of his game the minute after he got bitten by that radioactive spider? And what about Batman? He trained for years in the Batcave before he went into the night. And Hulk, well ... he never really got a handle on his powers."

The lady in the commercial had probably started off small, I thought, with a cloudy vision of a falling teacup, or a voice that suggested that an umbrella might not be a bad idea today. Only with time and practice did she work her way up to transatlantic airline disasters. And yet, here I was, expecting total mastery right off the bat.

I nodded in the mirror, humbled. "You're right," I said. Then I pursed my lips, to see what I would look like if I was about to kiss someone. I decided to stay home from school that morning. It wasn't hard; I think I just told my father I *don't feel so hot* in a woozy voice. He was susceptible to bad acting, which goes a long way toward explaining why he had married my mother in the first place.

Before he left for work, my father-who meant well but did not know how to deal with a sick child, even a fake one-came into my room with an armful of bottles and tins. Yap-a-Rub, cold cream, Dexatrim, cough drops in oily wrappers, Tinactin, and the giant bottle of aspirin that used to rattle like a snake on the days my mother took to bed: it looked like he had just cleared off an entire shelf of the medicine cabinet.

"Just fluids," I rasped before he had a chance to make a recommendation or concoction. He left and came back with a root beer. *Thank you*, I mouthed. He nodded, pursing his lips so they disappeared under his moustache. When he started backing

away, I looked into the middle distance and shot a trembling hand in his direction, like a movie cowboy dying of consumption. I said, "Father ..."

I guess I wanted him to take my hand, or to pull it down and tuck it under the blankets, saying *There, now*, or some other comforting nonsense, though I should have known it would only weird him out. I watched him struggle for a moment. Then he picked up the root beer and inserted it into my outstretched hand. "Don't spill," he said, and left my room without looking back.

I spent the morning watching reruns of *Gilligan's Island* and *What's Happening Now?* Really, I was waiting for my commercial, but the daytime ads apparently didn't deal in the supernatural. What they dealt was mainly correspondence courses in TV/YCR repair and discount testing strips for diabetics. I saw a world that needed to maintain its machines and sugar levels. By the time *Donahue* came on, I was bored, and itchy with curiosity about the warning. *Something bad at school today*: was it real? And how bad were we talking here? If it was fatal, the warning would have said so, right?

I got dressed and walked to school through the blue light of falling snow, hoping I hadn't already missed the terrible event.

I got to school in time for lunch. I went through the line, got my hot pack, my cold pack, my red box of milk, and joined my classmates back in the room. Everything looked different, though I couldn't say exactly how. Nothing was new, nothing seemed out of place, but everything looked just a little *off*, like when you play around with the contrast knob on the television. Then I understood: the difference was me.

I was seeing the classroom with the brooding wariness of a superhero. Just yesterday the room's only threat was boredom; now it teemed with danger. The rust on the metal edges of the bookshelves screamed of tetanus. The aisles between desks were strewn with pencils as sharp as punji sticks. My own desk, allegedly cleaned with disinfectant every night, bore a pencil sketch of the Chicago Bulls logo that had lasted for three weeks with only slight smearing. And this is where we ate lunch. "My God," I muttered.

The surprise was no longer that something was going to happen to me; it was that I had escaped harm for so long.

As I pried at the top of my milk carton, I pitied my ignorant classmates. I could see, but they were still blind, and probably always would be. *You fools*, I thought, and just then the flap of the carton tore open. Milk spilled across my desk, and, before I could push my chair back, down over my crotch. Timmy Fox, born with a piercing voice and a keen radar for humiliation, jumped up and yelled, "Oh, man! Revie peed his pants!"

I can't say for sure, but there may have been a half-smile on my face as the class hooted and pointed. There could no longer be any doubt: I had a special power.

I began to spend more time in my refuge. Developing my powers of premonition required a good deal of solitary brooding. After turning on the fan and the shower to cover my voice, I liked to look into the mirror and say gravely, *You have an obligation to develop this gift*.

Then I'd make a face of what I imagined to be great turmoil, clenching my hair and shaking my head. *No, no, I just want to be normal*. Then I'd stop and hold my own gaze for a long moment. *You must*.

I repeated this performance until I felt wonderfully burdened with secrets and duties. A few days after the milk incident, something else happened that confirmed my power, but also its limits. I was waiting for the bus to take me to school when a warning came to me

in the image of blood dripping down my finger. The vision was so clear that I actually checked my hands, then jammed them into my pockets for safe-keeping. All day long at school I kept my hands in my pockets, even during lunch, when I feigned a stomachache so I wouldn't have to eat my food like a hillbilly in a pie-eating contest. I didn't even take my hands out after Timmy Fox marveled loudly at how I reeeeeeeally must love pocket pool.

I'd made it almost home, safe, unharmed, feeling slightly dizzy with hunger but also pretty smart, when I tripped getting off the bus. Because my hands were still in my pockets, I fell like a tree and hit the street with my face.

The bus driver scrambled down from his seat, frightened and angry. "What the hell are you doing, falling like that?" Dazed, I reached up to touch my throbbing nose. My hand came away bloody. Holding it up to the driver, I said, "Coincidence?"

So I couldn't save myself like the lady in the commercial. So I couldn't alter the course of destiny. Even if my power never got any bigger, I had a heads-up on personal tragedy. I was a dowsing rod to the bad vibrations of the universe: nothing bad should ever catch me by surprise again.

I only wished I had known about my gift earlier so I could have braced myself for my mother's departure. The warning signs were right there, if we'd just understood. The past spring, she'd started spending more and more time in her bedroom, sometimes coming out as late as dinnertime, still in her kimono, which was really just a shiny housecoat she had embroidered with a long, thorny rose. This wasn't every day, understand. On her good days, she was as dynamic as ever, staging tea parties, kaffeeklatsches, cocktail parties, just the three of us, ties and jackets required. On Charade Day, her own holiday she declared sometime in May, she refused to utter a word while the sun was up, even when we were in public, going so far as to act out *sweet potato* for the poor stockboy at the grocery store. "Two words," he said. "First word, rhymes with . . . feet?"

But on other days I would come home from school to hear the television blaring behind the closed door of her room. Once, I cracked the door and saw her sitting propped up against the headboard, eating salted celery and watching *Dark Victory*. On the nightstand was a frog palace of coffee cups and bowls. The smell of spoiled milk lapped over me like a warm sea, and I almost gagged. My mother, though—she was anything but a mess. Her blonde hair was perfectly set, and she was wearing makeup, heavy on the lip liner and eyeshadow.

I thought I was a careful spy, but I guess I wasn't. My mother turned her head, just slightly, and looked right at me. That's when I realized she wasn't eating the celery. Her jaw was moving because she was mouthing the words along with Bette Davis. I closed the door, spooked.

"Every engine sputters once in a while," my father said when I told him about this, and asked if she was okay. "She'll smooth out soon enough."

That was back when my father didn't mind strangeness so much. That was back before I knew how to pay attention to warnings.

I'm sorry, I told myself in the bathroom mirror. My nose was still swollen from hitting the street and my eyes had these little saddlebags. Behind me, the shower thundered away. I reminded myself that Batman had to watch a mugger kill his parents, and

Spiderman had to lose his Uncle Ned. My mother's leaving was my Tragic Wake-up Call to My Power and Destiny. I said, *But that's the way it had to be.*

Someone knocked on the bathroom door and I jumped.

"Open up," said my father.

"Can you speak up, please?" I said, holding my hand over my rabbit heart. "It's hard to hear you in the shower." I nodded at the mirror, congratulating myself on some quick thinking.

He said, "You're not in the shower."

I reached into the shower and adjusted the spray against the wall so it would sound like it was hitting a body. He said, "Now you just turned the nozzle toward the wall." How the hell could he tell that? Did he have a power, too? Could

he actually see me right now? I stuck my head inside the shower curtain and said, "Can't a guy get some privacy? Geez." There was a pause, long enough that I thought he might have gone away, then he said, "I can hear everything you're saying. Through the vent."

I didn't have to look at the mirror to know that a flush was crawling up my neck. My embarrassment intensified as I thought back to what I'd been saying only a few moments before. *Mr. President, I had a vision . . . no need to thank me for the last one, sir . . . I'm seeing submarines, a bunch of them, coming together just off the coast. On the side of each sub is a picture of a . . . hammer and a sickle. Does that mean anything to you?*

My father said, "Revie, open the damn door or I will open it."

I didn't take him seriously. He was far too gentle and cheap to knock down a door. Later I would push him beyond even that, but at that moment I didn't believe him capable of violence. By the time I heard the metallic click of his Swiss Army knife picking the lock, it was too late to do anything smart, so I jumped in the freezing shower with all my clothes on.

My father tore open the shower curtain and shut off the water. "Son, what is wrong with you?"

I was sitting in the tub, shaking with cold. I'd managed to pry off a single shoe before I realized there would be no good explanation for a pile of wet clothes at the bottom of the tub. *Oh, these? I was just trying to save on laundry detergent.*

He said, "I know what you've been doing. This premonition thing? It's got to stop."

I glared at him in what I hoped was a defiant way, though I must have looked like a drowned rat. Comic books were full of people like him. Fearful, small-minded people determined to limit you to the boundaries of their own tiny lives.

He said, "They're not real, you know."

Clenching my teeth so he wouldn't hear them chatter, I said, "Except they are."

He closed his eyes briefly, then opened them and jerked his thumb toward the door. "Towel off. Get dressed. We're going to the store."

At that moment my powers took another turn. I saw a vision of a falling anvil, and heard the words *Look out below.* "How about I just-

"I'm not leaving you here alone with the mirror," he said, and hauled me from the tub. I slogged into my room, feeling gut-sick. Disaster awaited me if I went to the store. I

remembered when I'd walked around with my hands in my pockets, nervous and scared all day. The waiting, I decided, was the worst part.

I went to my bookshelf and pulled out the Webster's Unabridged. I took it to my closet so my father wouldn't hear, whispered *Look out below* and swung it with all my force onto the crown of my head.

For days my father harped and harped about the premonition business until finally I said *Geez, all right already* and promised I would stop. Which was a lie. Why would I stop, now that I was finally getting a handle on my powers? After clobbering myself with the dictionary, nothing fell on me at the store. And the next day, when I scored my palm with an X-Acto knife-lightly, barely enough to break the skin-I didn't plant my hand on a broken beer bottle like my vision had suggested.

Throwing myself into a briar hedge, dropping from the top of the monkeybars onto my hip, eating half a pinecone, sticking my own head into the toilet (after cleaning it first; I wasn't *crazy*)-when my visions did not come to pass afterward, I came to believe that I had dislodged them with my own ersatz tragedies. An ounce of prevention, etc.

My system worked so well that I started doing harm to myself even when no warnings came. I thought of it as working ahead. If I could just bank enough pain, I thought, there would come a point where I would have clear sailing for the rest of my life, not one twinge or heartache until the moment my spirit left my body in a painless yawn. In one fantasy, I experienced all the pain of my life in a single second, like a lightning bolt.

Then came the day that my powers grew beyond myself. I was sitting behind the wheel of my father's Impala, parked in the driveway. It was evening, and I could see my father in the low light of the front room, watching television. He thought I was out here pretending to drive-a small bit of imagination he tolerated as rehearsal for the day I *would* drive, though it's more likely, I think now, that he needed the occasional break from me -but the truth was that the Impala was my new refuge. Cold as hell on a February night, but at least there were no vents to carry my voice to his ear.

I was playing with the cigarette lighter, pretending my car was jammed in a snowdrift in the Rockies, and I had to keep myself warm until the Mounties or whoever found me in the morning. I'd pull out the lighter, warm a hand over it until the coils darkened, and then plug the lighter back in for another round.

When the vision came, I didn't even recognize it as a warning at first. After all, previous warnings had starred me. But in this one I saw my mother. She had dark hair, bobbed to her shoulders, but it was unmistakably her. She was walking along a darkened street, glancing behind her, and I could tell she was frightened. And then I saw why-a man slipped along in the shadows behind her. He didn't seem to be hurrying, but he was somehow gaining on her.

The noise of her heels echoed off the shuttered storefronts. His shadow lengthened until it was around her like black water. When she looked up the next time, it was into the camera-into me-and I saw that she was asking me why I was letting this happen to her.

A small noise escaped my throat. The lighter popped out. I plucked it from the dash, yanked up my coatsleeve, and applied it to my wrist.

I heard the *shh* of searing flesh before I felt the pain. It took a second to hit me, like my nervous system couldn't believe this was happening, but when it hit, it was unbelievable, the sharpest thing you can imagine. My feet bucked out. My mouth

opened all the way, but no noise came out. Waves of light cascaded down over my eyes, like suds going down the windshield in a car wash. Even when I dropped the lighter, my wrist felt like it was still on fire. I writhed in the seat, holding myself at the hand, maybe trying to pry off the arm that was bringing this fire into my body.

Eventually the pain subsided, of course, but only after a long time, and even then, gradually. When I checked my wrist, I expected to see a piece of blackened meat, but what I saw was a shiny, crinkly ring, like a piece of plastic. I wondered if my mother, three thousand miles away, had felt this pain, too. I wondered if she knew I'd saved her. When I went inside, my father said, "That was a long time to practice driving."

He didn't look up from the television, but I could tell he wasn't paying attention to that. I said, "I was practicing for a long trip."

"I kept seeing the little light come on, the one from the mirror."

After burning myself, I'd kept checking the lighted mirror in the flap, to see if my face looked normal enough to go back into the house without arousing suspicion. But every time I moved, my sleeve brushed the burn, and my face went pale, my pupils turning into blasted holes. Finally, I was too cold and tired and afraid I might receive another vision about my mother to care about looking normal.

My father adjusted himself on the couch, then looked over at me. "You and mirrors," he said. "You have a history."

"A little freaking privacy. Is that too much to ask?"

"Any more premonitions?"

"I told you I stopped."

We stared at each other for a minute. On the television, Lynda Carter tossed her golden lasso around a man, which meant that he could struggle all he wanted, but he'd have to tell the truth. My father said, "Privacy's bad for people. Especially people like you."

And your mother was the part that was left unsaid, but I could hear it in the air, clear as a warning.

This is how it all came to a head, the night my power was forced out of hiding.

My father and I were eating dinner, my specialty: spaghetti *li la* sink. It was basically a giant bowl of spaghetti that we ate directly over the sink. No dishes, and clean-up pretty much consisted of aiming the sprayer toward anything that fell out of our mouths. I made this dish at least three times a week.

When the doorbell rang, my father looked up. His moustache was daubed with sauce, like the end of a paintbrush.

"I'll get it," I said.

Normally a doorbell in the evening meant a sympathetic church lady with a cellophane-wrapped casserole or some kid hawking M&M's for band camp. But as soon as I placed my hand on the knob I got the sense this was different.

I heard a distant buzzing, like electricity humming through power lines. My heart did this funny tripping thing: *tha-thump, tha-thump thump-thump*. And the scab on my wrist began itching furiously under the Band-Aid.

Something big wasn't on its way; it was here.

"Who is it?" yelled my father from the kitchen.

I placed both hands on the knob and closed my eyes, trying to get an image of the person on the other side of the door. The doorbell rang again. My father yelled, "Are you getting it or what?"

Pressing my lips to the gap between door and frame, I murmured, "Place your hand on the knob, please." If I could just see who it was, I'd know how to steel myself.

I heard my father's boots scraping across the kitchen tile. The doorbell started ringing over and over. My heart fell down three flights of stairs. When his boots thunked in the hallway, I squeezed my eyes shut, ready to settle for the most general prediction. "Good or bad, good or bad; good or-"

Whoever was on the porch tried the door and it swung right open.

"-bad," I finished. It wasn't my mother. I cannot say now, for sure, if that's who I really thought was going to be there. But it wasn't. It was Missy, the babysitter from down the street. She was a big girl with a pretty face that shone with good cheer and acne.

"Hope you don't mind me barging in like this, Revie," she said. "It sounded like you were having trouble with the door."

I felt a hand on my shoulder and looked back to see my father wiping at the sides of his mouth. "You're early," he said to Missy, then bared his teeth at her. "Anything in my teeth?"

As Missy squinted, I noticed what I had missed while eating next to him at the sink. He was wearing his good white oxford shirt. His boots gleamed. And was that the crease of an iron in his jeans?

"What?" he said. "I'm going to church."

"It's not Sunday."

"So? Does the Bible say to stay away from church during the week?" I cocked my head like a television detective. The day wasn't the only cause for suspicion. Even when my mother was around, we hadn't been the most regular churchgoers. And now that she was gone, we didn't go at all. My father was a devout reader of the *Sunday Tribune*, a five-pound monster he read cover to cover with the exception of the Arts & Entertainment section, which he threw in the garbage on account of the link he had made between arts, entertainment, and the destruction of family. Every Sunday I recovered the section and tucked it under my sweatshirt, making my way to the bathroom with the paper's ragged edge rasping seductively against my belly as my father shouted out suggestions for changes to my diet.

"Well," he said. "It's not church-church. It's more of a meeting."

"What *kind* of meeting?"

He looked at Missy, but she suddenly became interested in the floormat. "It's a support group," he said at last. After a moment, he added, "For divorcees."

"Whoa," I said. "You're not divorced. Nobody's divorced here."

"I know that," he said. "Don't you think I know that? But it's not like they offer a group for guys who were-I'm just looking for a little help right now."

He lowered his voice on the word *help* like some people lower their voice on *miscarriage* or *rehab*. He gave Missy a furtive look and finally she stepped forward to steer me into the front room with a suggestion that we play some games. "But you're not divorced," I called over her shoulder. I wasn't exactly cooperating with Missy, but still, I was moving backwards. She was a bulldozer in a sweater. "Yahtzee?" she whispered,

her voice tickling my ear. "Uno?" My father shrugged on his coat and I felt everything slipping away from me.

I planted my heels. My voice came out thick and deep. "Look at **me,**"

Missy pulled her hands back as if she'd been shocked. My father stopped buttoning his coat.

All around me was a buzzing noise, loud as a jar of hornets. I said, "Great harm will come to this one if he goes to that meeting tonight."

"Great harm?" said Missy. My father's hands slapped down against his hips. "Jesus, *this* again?"

I raised my hand toward the corner, where a dusty cobweb fluttered like the softest thing in the world. I knew my sleeve was slipping down to reveal my bandage, but I didn't care. The time for secrecy was over. "I see two drinks on a table. Two people, leaning against one another."

My father said, "It's a church, goddammit, not a pick-up bar."

But I knew all about divorcees. Mr. Ray, our neighbor who liked to point to brown spots in the grass and accuse me of pissing on his lawn, favored the phrase "hot to trot." A bunch of divorcees in one spot, I knew what kind of place it had to be.

"I see the two bodies again," I said. "But something's happened. They're not moving. I think they're . . . broken."

It was satisfying to see Missy raise her hand to her mouth. It was satisfying to see my father squirm. Beyond that, I didn't think about what I was saying.

Now Missy was backing toward the door. "I heard about this kind of thing on a commercial."

"This isn't the real thing, Missy," my father said. "These are just lies that Revie likes to tell himself. He thinks he has these powers, but it's just-I don't want to use the word *crazy*, but-his mother, she pulled the same kind of-I'm thinking of having him tested."

He tried to step in front of Missy, but my father was trim as a whip and stood no better chance against her than I had. She brushed past him, yanked open the door, and turned around on the porch to huff righteously. "You can go if you want to, Mr. Bryson. I can't stop you. But I, for one, will not be a party to your death, you and whoever you're leaned up against."

At the mention of death, I stiffened. That's when I remember the limits of my powers. Once the warning was out there, I could steel myself, I could hasten it, but what good did that do now? What could I exchange for death? Nothing, not all the pain in the world.

My father watched Missy disappear down the hill. He stood for a long time in the open doorway with snow swirling gently around his feet and dissolving on the warm tile. Finally he closed the door softly. I wanted to call out to him, but something was clutching in my throat. When he turned, his face was terrible with anger. Never in my life had I seen him like this.

"You," he said.

I threw a fit going to the car. He carried me in front of him, arms wrapped around my chest and legs like I was a log. I screamed and swung my heels and bucked my head until he shoveled me into the passenger's seat, and when I fled back toward the house, he tackled me in the yard.

It was dark, but the streetlights were on. If Mr. Ray had pulled a curtain aside to check out all the commotion, he would have seen the same scene replayed again and again: the car door flying open, a boy jumping out, a man wrestling him on the lawn, the boy getting stuffed back into the passenger's seat-until my father wedged me into the seat with his foot and tore off the pop-up lock.

My father watched me for a second, breathing hard, then retched a little before limping around to his side. I probably could have slid across the bench seat and tried another escape out the driver's door, but I was sick with exhaustion and doom.

After Missy had left, my father had pulled me into the kitchen and sat me down hard in a chair. Opening the cabinet, he said, "You saw what, two glasses? Well, help me out here, Revie, were they water glasses, shot glasses, pilsner glasses? Or are the details kind of fuzzy?"

If the details were fuzzy, I wasn't about to admit it. When I didn't answer him, he brought down a dusty bottle of Glenlivet and two water glasses, pouring a tall dose into each one. "Bottoms up," he said, draining one and then the other.

"Maybe we should stay here in the house," I said, trying to control my voice. "Just for a week or two."

He made a face as he swallowed, then wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Oh, no," he said, his voice roughened by the drink. "We got a prophecy to fulfill. "

In the car I touched my fingers to my puffy lip. It had its own heartbeat. My left arm felt like it had been torn out and stuffed back in its socket. When my father slid in, I saw blood streaming from his nose. He reached across me, grabbed Wet-Naps from the glove box, and stuffed one into each nostril. They hung down like tusks. He looked demented.

He started to put his seatbelt on, then stopped. "Fuck it, we're going to die anyway, right?" "The two bodies could just be in a coma," I said quietly, though I didn't believe it.

"Nope, you called down death on this one, my man." He started the Impala and said, "Now tell me what road to take. I don't want to drive around all night looking for the scene of our accident."

As my father laid on the horn and we swept from lane to lane through the snow, passing a station wagon on the shoulder as the woman driver gaped with her mouth open, I waited for my life to pass before my eyes, or to feel that sense of overwhelming peace you hear so much about. When the Impala shuddered with unprecedented speed and my father said, "Wouldn't want to mess it up for you and just get injured," I looked for the Angel of Death to come swooping down in the darkness alongside my window. But I saw nothing, and felt little but plain fear. In the end, all I could do was squint ahead, straining to see the car, the ditch, the bridge abutment that was our end, as though spotting it from the passenger's side would make a bit of difference.

By the time we came flying into the church parking lot and fishtailed up next to the dumpster, my fear had run down into weariness, or maybe that's just how helplessness feels. Not so for my father. He threw the car into park, fumbled with the keys, then left them in the ignition as he punched the steering wheel four or five times. With each blow, a strange squeaking noise came from his throat. *I guess we'll crash on the way home then*, I thought in a detached way.

"A woman needs her privacy," he said in a sharp, mocking way. He tugged the wet naps from his nose and tossed them toward the ashtray. One hit the edge and stuck. The other shot like a meteor into the darkness around my feet. "Otherwise, how's she supposed to keep her mystery?"

He used to say this all the time, whenever I'd pester him about where my mother was, or what she was doing up in the attic, or if she was going to stay in her room all day. Why he was saying it now I had no idea. His voice was high, almost hysterical. I thought he might have snapped.

"Oh, she's so playful, I'd tell people. Such a kidder, what a healthy imagination, it really keeps the marriage alive." He pounded the wheel again and the car honked. A few people straggling through the parking lot looked up at the noise, then ducked their heads again and went down into the church basement through a propped open door that looked like a square of burning light. Above it, in the sanctuary, a single candle burned. "And when she went to her bed, I brought her take-out and turned down the sound on the TV and I said -I said to *you*, do you remember what I said? I said, Give her *space*. Well, I'll be *damned* if I make that mistake again."

He looked at me like it was my turn to say something. But what was I supposed to say? She was gone and we were going to die. I said, "I don't think you have to *worry* about that."

"I'm talking about *you*. I see your ... tendencies, where it's all leading. And I will promise you this" -his finger was up, his eyes were white and huge-"the last thing you'll get is space to let that weird stuff grow, I don't care if you do want me dead."

I opened my mouth to tell him I wasn't my mother, but then I stopped.

"Wait-you think I *want* you dead?" "After what you pulled tonight, what the hell am I supposed to think?" I didn't know how to tell him how much I loved him, so I said, "That's just, well, that's just stupid."

We looked at each other, then we had to look away. We were both miserable. Though he didn't say as much, I was sure of it then and even more sure now. We sat in the car and listened to the ticking sounds it made as the snow came down in the gray light, the world like a snow globe of ashes. I looked into the darkness of the sanctuary and saw the rounded shoulders of the pews, the felt tapestries on the walls, the looming shadow of Jesus. It was strange to see Jesus in the dark like that. He reminded me of a hospital patient after visiting hours, everyone gone, the lights flickering low, the TV shut off by the night nurse, the noise of a get-together downstairs filtering up through the ductwork. He had given his body for those people. They were still as screwed-up as ever, and now he was alone, in the dark. My father picked up my hand and turned it over. "You did that to yourself, didn't you?"

The bandage on my wrist was half-off from the fight. I looked at the raw flesh, hesitated, then nodded. In admitting it to him, I admitted it to myself, too. These weren't real warnings, they didn't help anyone; it was just something I had done to myself.

He said, "Take off your seatbelt."

I did, and he pulled me to him, on the wide front bench of the Impala. He put his arm around me, making me feel all the heat inside him. Snowflakes landed on the windshield, fat as moths, then burned away. My father put the car in gear and pulled away from the dumpster, toward the street.

He didn't say much to me on the way home. He might not have said anything at all. When I think of this night now, years later, what I remember first isn't the fight in the snowy yard, or my prediction, it's the ride home. And when I think about it, it's like I'm in two places at once, in the front seat with my father, and beside the car, too. I'm flying alongside through the soft, gray streets of town, like a superhero, or an angel of memory. I see dashes of snow in the headlights, and inside the windows of the car, blurred with steam and speed, a father and his boy, two bodies leaning against one another.