

DADDY'S LITTLE DEAD GIRL.

By Keven Albers

I keep her locked in the basement, not because she's a bad girl, but rather because she is a good girl. If she were a bad girl I would have her securely chained and locked down out back in the shed. Despite what Lana keeps screaming into my ear as I try to clean the bite wounds on my forearm with disinfectant, my girl is a good girl and she will remain in this house, *and that's the end of it*, or so I scream back at her. Lana gives me that stare, even in this god-forsaken world, this out-of-the-blue age of decay and destruction, which dropped on us only a few years earlier like an atom bomb. In fact it was an atom bomb, a nuclear mushroom that set in motion an over growth of nuclear fungi which in turn sent most of us to hell in a hand basket, and rest of us to hell on earth.

But I digress; one has little time for history when ones very existence, what little of it there is, is threaten on a moment-to-moment basis.

And yet, there was that stare. Lana had a way of looking at you with her icy blue optics, which stated that she's too smart to be duped by such lies and fables of my variety. The stare also had the effect of forcing you to see them for what they *were* too; and one could instantly smell their own bullshit, followed by a feeling of shame for even trying to peddle them onto her. Always without fail her stare gave this result. But one couldn't help but tell these little white lies, a coping mechanism. Like, *everything is fine* or *it was us or them* and of course, *she is a good girl*. But before this fledgling notion could grow into a sturdy argument, her gaze would stifle it.

We stared at each other for a quite some time, then one of us blinked, I'm not sure whom, but dollar to donuts it was I who blinked first. Now, with my conviction shaken and authority challenged by that stare of hers, I returned to my flesh wound as a way to deflect the whole situation and those icy blue eyes. But I

soon realized as I stared at the black pus oozing from the red teeth indents on my arm that there was no deflecting this situation.

Lana sits on the toilet seat, lights another candle to replace the one that is about to die out. We don't say another word for quite awhile, instead we just quietly listen to the low thumping and thudding that is coming from the basement. Then, finally, finding myself not being able to bear the tenacious blows against the foundation any longer, I mutter, *it's not her fault*. Lana either didn't hear me or just ignored my utterance, either way I could not bring myself to verbalize the statement again in fear of that stare. Instead she lights another candle to get better luminance, then she leans in close to my arm for better inspection.

"Does your arm hurt?" She asks, holding the candle's flame to the wound that is now purulence.

"No," I reply. Becoming aware of just how numb my arm was actually feeling, or in this case *not* feeling. I could, however, feel my heart pumping a little faster and my head becoming a little lighter at the implications that having no pain had, especially, when dealing with a wound of this nature.

"I can't feel my arm at all," my words scrape along my throat and vibrate with nerves. Lana removes her belt from around her tiny waist and wraps it around my bicep just above the elbow in order to cut off the blood circulation and in turn, hopefully, the infection.

"We have to saw it off, now," she affirms. I know Lana could at times be as icy as her baby blues, but she said this with the composure of a sociopath. An unsettling habit of hers that I could never quite get use to, and in fact was the cause of many unpleasant impasses between us in the past, before the world went from shit to completely fucked up. However, in this context, in this world, this was the appropriate tone.

My brother had it completely wrong when he expressed his concerns to me in confidence on our wedding day.

"Don't get me wrong little bro," he always prefaced his gauche comments to me. "But are you sure you want to marry *her*? I've met some ice-queens in my

day but she takes the ice-queen cake.” Or it might have been, “Ice-cream cake”? I wasn’t sure, nor did I care to clarify at the time.

My reply to him was my standard retort when on the subject of my wife; *you just don’t see her for who she really is. She’s just misunderstood, is all.* Sometimes I would abridge this response but never veered from it.

I can admit now that I was semi-blind when it came to the inner workings of my wife, and on many occasions I had completely misunderstand her. But despite all my failings in our marriage, my ignorance in regard to her needs and all my transgressions, she never budged from my side; she never showed signs of waning from the vows she had made to me. And if my brother were still alive today, I would tell him what I could not before.

“You have it wrong, David,” I would assert, “It isn’t that she lacks empathy or prefers apathy but rather her innards are a hot mess of passion and emotions, she feels so intensely that if she doesn’t put a lid on it, she would cease to function all together.”

My wife’s years of discipline and self-control, forged by being brought up in a supportive, yet emotionally absent home had made her pragmatic, a voice of reason, and the rock in which I needed to anchor to in order to survive. And if I hadn’t killed David he would have eventually seen the true Lana. He would have seen the error of his offhanded remarks about her. Sure it would have taken the world ending for it to crack my wife’s husky exterior, but she would have been revealed to him at last. Poor David. *It was us or them*, I had declared to Lana once, which then prompted that stare of hers.

I digress again; receding back into ancient history, (okay maybe not ancient) but history none-the-less and we don’t have time for that right now because my very existence is being threatened.

“We have to cut it off before it spreads,” Lana reiterates with absolutely no trace of panic in her voice. Her words are true, despite my need to see them as lies, especially when she speaks them like a sociopath. My mouth and my mind seem

to have fallen out of touch with each other, so Lana takes my silence as my concession that this is the only and best option.

She returns from the basement with a large medical knife that has a fine-tooth blade, designed for a medical operation of some sort, I guess. The strange thing is I hadn't even realized that she had left for it, yet here she was now propping my arm against the edge of the bathtub on top of a wooden cutting board and lining up her cutting tool just below my elbow and against my flesh. She hands me a wooden spoon.

"Bite on this. It's gonna hurt like a motherfucker. That means I'm cutting in the right place and you'll be okay," She says with a tone now slightly different: optimistic, reinsuring, comforting.

So I bite down. After all, her words are always true and she is always true to her word.

I pass out three times, but I'm awoken each time with a violent shock of pain that strains my vocal cords with, what I can only surmise to be, me screaming. Although I never knew I could make such a noise before, and if I wasn't too busy being in excruciating pain I would have been frightened by the sound I now know I was capable of producing.

I pass out one final time.

It's pitch-dark and I'm not sure if I have my eyes open or closed but I know I'm no longer unconscious for I can hear the drum of a young person being slammed against the cement wall two stories below me. I then feel a cooling, damp cloth on my forehead and the slender fingers that can only belong to my wife stroking my hair. My arm hurts a little so I go to touch it but I only grasp air where my forearm and hand once was.

"You'll live," Lana tells me. I still want to believe that she is lying to me, but I know better, I know her words are always true. *I will live.*

"I gave you a sedative," She continues. Although I didn't think of it initially, but now that she mentioned it, it would explain my general malaise and lack of sharp pain I figure I otherwise should be feeling.

“We need to kill her,” She then whispers in the dark. I can feel her hot breath graze the hairs on the back of my neck. She is lying next to me I gage; I try to work out her exact location.

“But she is a good girl, Lana,” I let the words fall out of my mouth. Knowing I can’t see her stare in the darkness. Yet I find myself still being able to feel it. I know I trust her words more than my own. I know how easy it is for me to lie to myself. And there is no competing against the truth, and there was no denying the truth in Lana’s words either.

I then realize that it’s not her stare after all that is the true culprit for making me feel this way, but rather it is the bad taste in my mouth caused by the residue left behind by every untruth thought, word, and sentence I forged and sent forth from my lips.

It came to my attention that Lana’s fingers had stopped. Her hand was still pressed against the back of my head but her fingers had gone silent. I also could no longer feel her hot breath tickle my bare skin. And what I thought at first was my own heartbeat, I soon worked out was in fact the rhythmic thud of my daughter being thrown against the basement wall over and over. I was losing my orientation, my sense of where Lana was in relation to me. I’m not sure if it was the sedative but I was starting to lose all sense of where I was in relation to world, and in relation to my own existence. Meaning was being dissolved like a sugar cube in a cup of coffee.

“Okay,” I finally say, wanting to speak it before my tongue passes out. My voice was barely above a whisper, “Let’s talk about it in the morning.” I no longer cared to work out where Lana was or if she had herd me or not, all I wanted now was rest, but more important than that I wanted to escape all things related to killing my little girl. So I close my eyes or perhaps they’re already closed and so I just continued to stare further into the void of darkness until my conscious slips from me altogether.

Like all good sleeps, I remember none of it. But I’m more incline to believe this was due to the drugs Lana had given me, and perhaps in combination with the

significant amount of blood loss from the night before, rather than if I had gone to bed with a clean and clear conscious, a rare commodity these days.

But as morning came, or rather more accurately put, as the darkness lightened, so did a dull, throbbing pain in my freshly amputated arm, which awoke me like a buzzing alarm clock, except I could not slap the snooze button with my phantom hand to shut it off. The best I could do was moan until Lana came with a syringe, a tranquilizer from her stash of veterinarian medical supplies. She promptly pulls down my pants and injects it into my buttocks, *my snooze button*. She then sits with me, cleans my wound and changes my bandages and strokes my hair with her fingers.

I thought perhaps she hadn't heard me that previous night for she made no mention of killing Samantha to me that next day, nor the next day after, or even, that entire week. It wasn't, of course, until I was more myself, or more-or-less myself, minus obvious extremities, that she then blurted, *we should discuss Sam*. I was still in bed and in mid meal, spooning tomato soup into my mouth, albeit shakily and messily, with my "good" arm, when she blindsided me with the remark. I knew that she calculated the timing carefully as to when best to broach this subject. Although, I was unsure how she came about choosing this particular moment. Did she know I would handle it better on a full stomach? I know I didn't know if I would or wouldn't. But I did come to trust the simple fact that she knew me better than I knew myself.

Her blue eyes gaze at me from an arms-length away, as she patiently waits for a verbal response. I put down the soup bowl and turn to stare out the window and at the grey world beyond it. The lead sky forever overcast with the clouds of ash, which produced a light, but constant black snowfall. I haven't seen the sun since it all began, or rather *since it all ended*.

"Do you think we're the last ones?" I ask.

"Perhaps," she replies, "but we still need to do something about Sam," she continues, channeling the conversation back to the matter at hand. "It's time we finally did it," she adds.

“Could we just let her wonder out there on her own?”

“No.” She snapped, “we need to end it.”

Her vocal cords cracked and her words trembled on this last set of words. This concerned me a little, for I hadn't heard this underlying vulnerability in her voice since I first got my real glimpse into the nitty-gritty of my wife's frailty those few years back. The lid was slipping, the fatigue settling in. Perhaps it was the dismembering of her husband's limb, or that she nearly lost me, but Lana was cracking beneath the surface. I turned into her blue eyes and saw that my suspicions were warranted. The strain, the worry, the exhaustion, they were all there, iced over but thawing quickly. I had missed these tall-tell signs because I had made an effort to avoid those powerful and stunning windows into her soul.

At one time I would never have thought to avoid those eyes, which had ensnared me, nay, smitten me so long ago. They were a source of solace and wonder to me, beautiful and elegant, filled with wisdom, love and acceptance. But that was in a time and place that now felt like a fairy tale to me.

“I don't hear her,” I say.

“I put padding on the walls,” She explains.

How was it that she had put up with Samantha all these years? I wondered. How did she put up with me? *She loves me* I answer my own inquiry. She loves me, and Samantha is not her child, therefore it's not her place to end her life, it had to be me. It then hits me like the atom bomb, which mushrooms in my mind until it consumes it entirely. *I'm torturing her*. I'm torturing my beloved wife by keeping Samantha. *I'm torturing myself*. There is not much of a life to live in this abandoned world, but this surely wasn't how we should be living it. Not for our sake, not for Samantha's sake either. God only knows, but I might just be *torturing her too*.

“Yes,” I finally say. “I will do it.”

Lana kisses my lips and presses herself against me, wrapping her arms around me tight. I could feel the wet droplets of her tears trickle down my neck. I could feel pressed against my bony chest her rib cage and her beating heart therein. And as we held each other, I felt my own heart beat fall into sync with

hers. Or perhaps it was hers that adjusted its timing to mine. Or perhaps, even, both our hearts found continuity together.

What happens next is quick but compact with a melting pot of emotions. Lana makes the gesture for me to climb inside her. She kisses my lips again and over and over, then guides her hand under the covers and in-between my legs. But perhaps it was the painkillers I was on, or that I had just conceded to killing my little girl, or both, but she found I was in no condition to perform my husbandly duties. *I've failed our marriage yet again.*

She retracts her hand and climbs off me in a manner befitting more a mortified and humiliated teenage girl, than that of my wife, but before she could get too far I grab her wrist with my good arm.

“I love you,” I say. My words carry with them a strength that had been absent for a long while now. Words made from truth, and therefore indestructible, words for which were a foundation to build a tower on, a tower that could ascend straight up to the heavens.

She smiles, and somehow the whole room brightens.

I think some history might be in order, for context purposes. Or at least to bide one's time with as I sit here alone, well not quite alone, but sitting at least, sitting and staring at Sam chained to the basement wall, which in fading memory was once the place where Lana, a veterinarian, would care for the animals on our farm, nurse them back to health. But this was no longer a place of healing; instead it's a place of extirpation.

She had her practice here, she performed operations here, and here was where she nursed Bart back to health after he got kicked by one of the horses, the poor mutt.

Lana had studied at a prestigious school in the big city and it took some convincing but when I finally managed to, she settled in nicely out here on my family's farm, which I had taken over out of dutifulness, David, after all, was too busy.

Lana quickly became a favorite among the other farmers, more because of her skill as an animal doctor than her conversations. After all, she had a bedside manner more suited for animals than humans. Although, her stunning looks didn't hurt either, amongst the men that is. Some farmers even took her beauty and introversion as license to divulge their entire life story to her as she cared after their animals. No one particularly cared how emotionally removed she seemed to be, or how cold or clinical her demeanor always appeared, not as long as she saved their livestock and in turn their livelihood. No one cared except for Sam.

It had been only four years since Sam's mother had passed away that I then introduced Lana to her. The meeting was a standard one, or so I imagined as standard as any of these types of introductions would be. But following that meeting, the year after, then our wedding and the years after that, the two would become further and further divided; a chasm so vast that it could swallow the Grand Canyon, was wedged between them. They, for the life of themselves, could not understand each other, and often were at wits end with each other, and I who had to channel the dark oceans between their islands, was a poor mariner and even poorer interpreter, and most certainly at times made things worst.

We were happy when it was just Sam and I, and we were happy when it was just Lana and myself, but when it was the three of us or just Lana and Sam, which was more the case than the former, happiness was a foreign language to us. Family was but a picture on a puzzle box we tried to mimic but couldn't get right. Our time spent trying to fit the pieces together, but none of us realized the three of us had different versions of the puzzle itself. Then the bombs dropped.

At first I thought we were lucky. We seemed to be unaffected by the fall out. Some how by some miracle our little corner of the world was saved. But as I will learn later, in retrospect, every miracle that I had thought to be a miracle was in deed not one, but instead a curse. *Lucky?* I scoffed in my own brain, was the completely wrong word for our situation.

My brother David and his wife Megan had landed, out of the blue, on our doorstep one morning not too long after the conflagrant booms erupted. I was happy to see them and gladly asked, no, insisted that they stay with us. We had a

big house and property, animals, and plenty of supplies. They gleefully accepted. We also figured we would be better off in larger numbers, although we never did again meet another soul.

It was around this time that Sam fell ill to some fever of some vicious nature, which plagued her for an entire month. Lana barely moved from her side, except to fetch her medicine and food or to catch a wink of sleep here and there, which most of the time was by accident. I would carry her to bed when I found her passed out next to Sam, and then in the morning I would awake to find her gone. Lana, I reckoned, was by Sam's side, and yes there she would be.

Despite Lana's determination and willpower to revive her to full health and steal her back from the clutches of death, she could not. We buried her out back with a makeshift cross, made from two white planks ripped from our fence. I etched her name in the wood; it took me three hours to do so, and when I approached the fourth hour I stood back and looked at my handiwork, I was unable to carve beyond the three letters S A M.

A thought festered and rattled in my skull, *was David and Megan responsible for this? Did they bring death with them?* I quickly swept the thought into some unused corner of my cerebral dome. Although I would catch myself staring at them for long periods of time in a haze thereafter, in which the thought threaten to forge itself forward from the shadows.

For the next week, I was able to preoccupy my grieving mind during the day with chores but at night I fell completely to pieces, and Lana had yet another person to tend to. I had tried to keep my weeping to a minimal volume, usually by burying my face deep into my pillow. I didn't want to wake the house, I especially didn't want to wake Lana, but Lana was a light sleeper. She would put her hand on my back, which faced her, and with her other hand run her fingers through my hair.

"I'm sorry," I would always say muffled by the pillow.

"Don't be sorry," She would reply.

And we would lie there in the quiet in the dark listening to each other's breathing. This became our nightly routine.

It was on one such a night that a strange noise interrupted our new tradition. Lana and I jolted upright in bed but this did nothing to help us see any better in the pitch-black darkness. *Intruders* I instantly thought. I wiped my eyes dry, and then put my hand on Lana's hip.

"Stay here," I demanded. Then I fumbled for the matches and a candle on the nightstand. Once I got the flame on the wick, the contained illumination allowed me to glide into the hallway where David was already waiting for me.

"What do you think it is?" he probed, gripping tightly onto a baseball bat in one hand and a lit candle in the other.

"I don't know," I answered. "Could be a loose animal," I then remarked.

"Do you have a gun?" David asked, obviously not believing it was a loose animal.

I did, it was locked away in my office on the first floor. So David and I moved together down stairs. The noise was becoming louder as we stepped onto the main level, it sounded like something, or someone was banging against the back door. I quickly retrieved my revolver from its locked case as fast as I could. Then David and I moved towards the back door. The banging was more of a thud but it repeated itself with determination.

"Don't get me wrong little bro," David prefaced in a whisper. "But maybe I should hold the gun, your aim sucks."

I traded him the gun for the baseball bat. I had preferred it this way anyhow, holding a gun always triggered my nerves causing my hands to shake which probably accounted for my terrible aim.

Now ready, we approached the back door and once we reached its small square window, we both leaned into it. I had to rest the bat against the wall to free up my hand in order to push the curtain aside for an unobstructed view. I could make out the top of someone's head as it slammed the body it was attached to against the door creating the now familiar *thud*. David looked over to me perplexed and I must have had the same expression because David then proceeded to unlock the back door. I grab hold of the bat again and raised it above my head as David was watching for my signal; I gave it, then he twisted the handle and

swung open the door. The small person in mid motion followed their inertia through but instead of hitting the door, which was no longer there, they flopped onto the floor cracking their face against the tiles. I instantly bent down on one knee getting closer to the prostrate body that was face down. I recognized the nightgown this tiny person was wearing, it was covered in dirt and mud but there was no mistaking the bunny pattern printed on the cotton fabric.

“Samantha?” I blurted. The sound of her name was crisp and sharp in my ear. I quickly turned her over. It was in deed Samantha. However, I know now that it was only her body that had return to me, and not Sam herself. The empty carcass or whatever it was that took over her fleshy vessel was an abomination. Although I didn’t see it at the time, all I saw was my little girl.

“How is this possible?” David uttered. It took some five minutes or so before the question registered in my consciousness, but by that time I figured why bother answering him now.

I didn’t care about the *how* at the time; all I cared about was that she was here in my arms *alive*. We took her to her room and laid her down on her bed, but she refused to stay on her back. She quickly got to her feet and moved into the corner of her room. I tried talking to her, but she would not respond. *She’s tired*, I thought, *exhausted from having to dig her way out of a grave*, I rationalized to be the reason, *but why then won’t she go to sleep?* My mind inquired, but I instantly shook the question loose.

She would never sleep, never speak but she would moan, gargle, growl, and hiss at you. In time I would learn to associate these audio queues to various moods of hers, it was like communicating I supposed, like you would with a dog.

When I returned to bed that night Lana hadn’t moved an inch from where I had left her, and as I walked through the door, she smiled in relief.

“What was it?” she asked.

“I’ll show you in the morning,” I exclaimed. I then crawled back into bed and kissed her on the lips. “You won’t believe it.”

“What is it?” she persisted.

“I’ll show you in the morning,” I persisted in turn and blew out the candle then lay down on my side. I felt Lana’s arm wrap around my torso as she pulled up close to me pressing her self against my body. Her finger found their way snuggling between the strains of my hair. I laid in a quiet and happy reverie; a smile worked my cheek muscles and liquid slid down the side of my face from the corners of my eyes.

“This ain’t right,” David blurted out the next morning as all four of us stood around Sam who was knocking back and fourth against the two walls in the corner of her room, ignoring our presence as she was accustom to do now. “She’s been buried for a week. This is wrong. This is very wrong,” he followed up.

It was evident that Lana shared David’s sediment, glaringly evident by the way she stood, her hand to her mouth as she bit at her thumb, it was evident that Sam’s miraculous return was bothering her as well.

What followed those next few months consisted of me defending Sam’s return to the others as a sign of something good. And since it was I, and me alone that wanted Sam in the house, I was the one who had to care for her, no one else would take up the charge, not even Lana volunteered. She had already put in her time I suppose.

There was not much caring needed for her it turned out. She never ate or defecated, she never spoke, she never slept and she never would acknowledge my existence when I addressed her. Which didn’t stop me from caring on with anecdotal stories and random facts like any father would with his daughter. But a twitching in my brain, a knotting in my stomach, and an empty feeling in my heart all added up to the opinion that she was not at all the same Sam I could call my daughter. She was, instead, like a doll, a walking doll that would knock her body into the walls all day and all night, every day and every night and that’s all she would do. We added padding, or I should say, I added padding to the walls in her room, as to dampen the sound of her constant crashing rather than out of concern for her safety. Slamming her body into the walls seemed not to affect her in the slightest.

My weeping had worsened. I replaced my pillowcases every morning with fresh ones and Lana even made me wash them there on in due to the frequency. Lana eventually had to move to the couch downstairs to sleep because I would thrash about in my nightmares, even smacking her a time or two.

Sam never seemed to improve; she remained in this state, this condition of being a body vacant of a soul and mind. She was just a sack of flesh and bone flinging itself against the walls and doors nonstop. It had to be out of some rudimentary, involuntary reaction to the life that was our hell, I thought. It was the only hypothesis I would accept anyway, the other being that she knew exactly what she was doing, and that notion was too absurd to believe.

Megan, David's wife, one morning took the opportunity, while the rest of us were out scavenging for supplies, to enter Sam's room with a kitchen knife in hand. She would later tell us, as she lay dying from an infected bite wound on her neck, which continued to suppurate, that she couldn't take it any longer. *She's getting into my head and eating me from within*, Megan wheezed. Then with one last gargled breath she exclaimed, "She's the living dead." Her last word might have actually been *devil*, I was unsure; she had trailed off and slipped into oblivion garbling that final word. I looked to Lana, but thought better of asking for consensus.

As David buried his wife out back, refusing our help and determined to go at it alone, I stood in Sam's room watching her. Still curious as to what Megan's last word was supposed to be, *dead* or *devil*.

I then noticed, for the first time since she had returned to me that Sam was standing in one place, her feet anchored to one spot in her preferred corner. Her breathing was labored. Her chest raised and fell with a quick pace, and along with it the kitchen knife that protruded from her sternum. Then something miraculous happened, as I stood there by the door, pondering and studying her, she turned her head toward me, her eyes, slightly milky, met with my own. She cocked her head, like a dog would, in recognition of something, however vague that recollection may have been, this was progress, perhaps, hope even.

I rushed over immediately, got on my knees and hugged her. She did nothing but stand there; however, allowing me to hold her was good enough.

After some time had passed, I looked up at her darling face, pale as it was, her skin slightly translucent allowing the veins beneath to present themselves as black squiggly lines. Then my eyes moved to the knife imbedded in her. I was suddenly filled with rage. *She deserved what she got.* I found myself rationalizing.

I then stood up, gripped the handle of the knife, and looked at Sam. "I'm sorry, baby." I said to her. Sam said nothing; her head still cocked, but her eye line had failed to follow me to my new position. I yanked the blade from her chest. She made no sound, but there was a sort of black oil, which oozed out of the newly made opening in her chest. I studied the putrid blood oil for a moment, but then feeling a presence behind me, I turned around and there was Lana standing just outside the door with eyes that gave me that all too familiar feeling, my heart felt as if it were made of lead.

Things escalated quickly, and I'm not sure why, but Lana put herself between Sam and David. David, with an axe in his hand, was screaming at Lana to move aside so he can put Sam right by returning her to her grave, *as it should be.* He roared, but Lana wouldn't budge. And when David went after Sam, regardless of his delicate but steadfast obstacle, raising the axe over his head and charging toward them. I found incredible aim and sturdiness in my own hand as I squeezed the revolver, putting a bullet into David's brain, incapacitating him evermore.

"I didn't mean to kill him," I pleaded, "I have bad aim," I explained. Lana eased herself to the floor, sliding her back down the wall to do so. She stared at David, now frozen in time it appeared, except for the blood that trickled down the side of his head. "It was us, or them," I kept talking. She no longer had the willpower to give me her stare.

I buried David next to his wife, but I had to stop mid-way because it became too dark out. So I left him uncovered in his resting place until morning when I could see better. But when morning did come and I had light enough to see, I walked back outside to his grave and peered down into it. Something had

picked away at David's face during the night, exposing his bone structure down one side. A predator of the dead it seemed. I picked up the shovel and continued what I had started. I made sure the dirt was packed solid as to make sure whatever beast carried off half of David's face with them would not be able to get the other half.

It was just Lana, Sam, and myself now. Sam picked up her habit of chronically knocking herself against the walls of her room again, and Lana had started to act strangely. She had stopped eating, she would sleep all day, she barely said two words to me, and she would barely look at me.

We both now wept during the night together and soon I would find myself placing a hand on Lana's back and stroking her hair. My eyes would dry up but hers would keep going well into the night.

This was the first time I had seen my wife like this, and it scared me, I've never been this scared before. For if I ever lost her. I shudder to think of it.

I awoke one grey morning with the phrase *She's getting into my head and eating me from within* hovering above my frontal lobe like a fog. I could not make sense of much else beyond those words. I couldn't remember my name, where I was, what I was. But the cloudiness soon dissipated along with the sentence and I gained clarity again, my faculties reclaimed.

"Lana?" I called as I rolled over on to her side of the bed, which was empty. "Lana?" I repeated slightly louder.

I relieved my bladder of its burden as was customary for me to do first thing in the morning, then walked down the hall towards Sam's room. Her door was open a crack and all was deafening quiet, until suddenly I became aware of a commotion happening from therein. It was as if someone turned off the mute button on the TV allowing it to scream at full volume in my ear.

Next to Sam's overturned bed was Lana lying on the floor pinned under Sam's mattress, which she was using as a shield of sorts to protect herself from Sam, who was on top trying to savagely get at Lana. Sam was hissing and snapping her jaw, frothing at the mouth, trying to tear her way through the

stuffing and metal coils in order to dig through to the other side. Lana was screaming with all her might for help. I gripped Sam's shoulders from behind and yanked her off Lana, throwing her against the wall, which she bounced off of and smacked onto the wooden floor. This gave me enough time to help Lana to her feet, but when we turned around, there was Sam upright again. She darted towards us, lining herself up with Lana. I intercepted, using the mattress as a barrier to push her back and up against the wall.

“Go,” I screamed at Lana, holding Sam in place. “Get out of here.”

Lana ran from the room, and once she was gone I backed myself up, dragging the mattress with me, until I got to the door, where I discarded it and slipped out, slamming the door shut behind me.

I didn't bother to ask what happened, I knew that Lana was in no condition to tell me anyhow. After thoroughly inspecting her for bite marks and being satisfied there were none, I took her to bed and wrapped her in blankets and sat with her for a few hours. I even read to her from one of her favorite novels. She had always remarked on how beautiful my reading voice was, it reminded her of when her father would read to her as a child.

I had finished a chapter and put down the book on the bed so I could light a candle because it had started to get dark, when Lana reached her hand out from under the blankets and placed it on my arm. I turned to her, her face wet, her eyes red, and her lips quivering. *Please, kill her.* She whispered. Then receded back into her blanket cocoon. I sat back down on the edge of the bed and then curled up next to her not bothering to light the candle, but instead I let the darkness of the night engulf us both.

I attempted four times to pull the trigger and put a bullet in my little girl. But my right hand, it seemed, would shake uncontrollably as I raised the barrel, lining it up with her small head. Eventually I had to put the gun down altogether in order to reclaim control of my arm. Not knowing what else to do, I finally decided to put her out back in the shed and chain her down, making sure she was secured. Then I boarded up the windows and anchored three locks on to the outside of the shed

door. The entire time I was prepping her confinement Sam would convulse and twitch her body, trying to snap her limbs free from the chains, or the chains free from the studs. She would growl, then moan and groan. I had stopped my work on three occasions during which I would sit and just watch her in silence, and it seemed every time I did so she would ease her temper. I was unsure if she sensed that I was looking at her, or that she didn't sense me at all and thought I had left, therefore feeling no need to further make a scene or fuss. Then I would return to the work and she would rile up again.

Lana was not pleased when I told her my arm refused to be a coadjutant in killing Sam, and that I was inept in my resolve to return her to her grave where she belonged. Although she never said a word or was unable to bring her eyes to mine, she didn't need to, because I just knew as I confessed to the lump in the bedspread in the shape of my wife in a fetal position, that she was troubled by the thought of Sam still being *alive* and as animated as ever.

Sam would remain out there in the shed for the next few months. I would see her once a week or so to make sure she hadn't loosen her chains or that nothing had disturbed her, nothing ever did. She never seemed to age or decay, she remained the same pale-faced little girl, hissing, growling violently flailing about in a spasmodic fit. At times there were lulls in her furious thrashing, usually when I would be sitting very still and quietly studying her, she would settle down and pace back and fourth in her tiny circle, with a low rumble, like an idling engine, emitted from her throat.

The rest of my time I spent next to Lana's side. I would read out loud to her every night; it eased her sobbing, or at least distracted her from it. I must admit I did enjoy hearing my own voice express the full range of articulation. Flexing my vocal cords, playing my larynx as if it were a finely tuned instrument, having the words dance in my ears, but more importantly it helped to fill the empty silence that echoed through out the rooms and halls.

The absence of sound was everywhere now, not just in the house, but outside as well. There was only a silent, static, grey world left for us, void of all

life, especially since all our livestock were now dead too, dead partly because we killed them for food, and in part due to some mysterious, fatal agent.

The world had come to a complete stop, or so it behaved as if it were put on pause and muted. There were no gust of winds anymore, or gentle breezes either, nor was there rain, or snow, it was never hot, nor cold.

From time to time I would hear the rattling from the shed, as if Sam knew she was about to slip from my consciousness and wouldn't stand for it, making herself ever present in my mind. I had even taken up reading out loud to Sam in the shed, it passed the time I suppose, but I had hopes it would sooth the rattling, but it's calming effects didn't work on Sam as it did with Lana, in fact it was the opposite and I had to compete for coherency of my spoken words, climbing my voice to a significant volume, which was above the chains and banging. I could never sustain this level of intensity for long and found myself giving up fairly quickly, only to return the next day or week to pick up where I left off.

Over time Lana became herself again, we had moments of laughter and jubilation, exchanged loving smiles, her eyes opened up to me once more, and I could see the blue skies and sunshine in them afresh. Our day to day gained some sense of normalcy, or as normal as it could get in this bleak world. I can't say all was good, but tolerable, nothing would ever be good again, but tolerable was acceptable. Lana, after awhile, would even take to reading a chapter here and there to me. I found my self in elation as I listened to her speak, not realizing just how much I had missed hearing her voice until she started using it again, it was filled with life, love, and hope as she read her favorite stories aloud.

How it came to be that Sam was now in our home again and chained in the basement was this. I had been reading to her out in the shed and doing an adequate job of it too considering the racket I had to contend with, when my tongue stumbled and my mind tripped on the fourth word in the sentence I was reciting. I am still not sure what the word is or was but I know I could not make heads or tails of it. I tried resetting myself to the beginning of the sentence, and at

times, the paragraph, but found I would become hindered in both speech and thought as soon as I got to that word again. I tried speaking each letter separately within the word, and managed to do so with ease but when I tried to put all the syllables together it would not stick, it refused to be uttered. I couldn't pass over the word either, skipping it didn't seem to be an option, because every word, sentence, and paragraph thereafter would fall apart, becoming gibberish and nonsensical. I found myself becoming frustrated and tempered, throwing the book against the wall and screaming at the top of my lungs. And as I vented, spewing profanities, Sam became still and began to moan; a low growl from deep within her throat, which became a steady reeving of an engine. *Eeeht, eeeht, eeeht, eeeht.* I stopped my wailing. *Eeeht, eeeht, eeeht.* I was transfixed on Sam as she intoned. *Eeeht, eeht, eeht.* Then I was taken aback by what I thought was yet another miracle. *Eeeht, eeht, deeaadt, dad.* My mouth was awestruck, did I hear her right, did she just say *dad*? It might have been *dead* but what did it matter she spoke her first word, her first since she had reawakened. I felt the tightening of loose skin on my face; I was my smiling.

I could not get Lana to enter the shed but she did agree to stand just outside it. I kept the door open so she could hear clearly, and after a few moments of Sam's reeving.

"See?" I said, stepping out from within the shed.

Lana stared at me incredulous, a bit anxious, and a plenty concerned.

"See what?" she asked.

"She spoke, Sam said a word. Didn't you hear it?" I prodded.

"Audio pareidolia, is all that is. You're hearing something that's not there," Lana coldly put it. Then walked back into the house.

"She spoke to me," I insisted. But by then Lana was already inside.

I went back into the shed and listened intently to Sam's reeving for proof that I was not crazy, I did not get definitive proof I must admit. I then returned everyday to the shed that week trying to teach her to say another word other than *dad*, or perhaps it was *dead*. I annunciated simple words like *cat* and *red* repeating them over and over again like a mantra. On a few occasions I repeated a word too

many times that it gummed up my brain and the word lost all meaning for a spell or two. Although she never managed to learn to speak any other terms, if she had indeed spoke in the first place, all my time and attention had seemed to help Sam cease her frantic thrashing, for the most part, which had allowed me to caress her cheek or brush her hair to the side without so much as a twitch. She was behaving like a good girl again, and I thought she deserved to return home.

I grip the revolver tightly in my *good* arm, my only arm. I'm not even sure if I can shoot my gun with any accuracy, my *good* arm use to be my bad arm and I am still ill practiced with it. Sam continues to knock about, rattling her chains as per her forte. The padding helps deafen the sound of the blows, but only if your on the upper floors. Here in the basement it does little to ease the nerves, accentuated by the fact the world seems completely void of outside sound. Sam's clacking and banging, growling and howling are all I can hear now. I've waited long enough, drawn in a long breath, stand on my feet and step to Sam, raising my arm, and in extension my gun, I steady my aim on her doll like head. I hold it, I'm not sure for how long, but it feels like a long time of me just holding a bead on her and breathing.

Then Sam quiets her thrashing and becomes still, she cocks her head in my direction, her milky eyes not able to pinpoint my own, but she loosely pivots them in the right direction, as if she is sensing me from behind the glossy white balls. *Can I do this? I wonder, put her right? I must.* I demand of myself. Lana then appears in my peripheral. I turn to her standing on the stairs. Then I turn back to Sam waiting for me to make up my mind—I squeeze the trigger and the bullet rips through Sam's skull exploding out the backside of her head along with a good amount of oil blood, bone, and brain matter, which splatter all over the padded cement wall behind her. She goes down.

There is a ringing in my ears and sickness in my stomach. I shrink to my knees on the floor and hang my head low. I feel the slender fingers of my wife wrap them selves around my shoulders, then her slender arms around my torso. She says nothing; she doesn't need to, for I know with out words that she is right.

She is always right. We sit there in the quiet, just holding each other, listening to our own breathing; the air is still, and very stale, a taste of metal on our tongues.

Then a rattling of chains slices through the air like a chainsaw through butter, and we both look up to see Sam, rising to her feet again. A deep rumble seeps from the back of her throat, she rolls her pearly white eyes in our direction, her left eye slightly sunken and turned up into her socket and half flooded with a oily black liquid, the bullet hole in her head just above her eye oozes with the same slick sludge.

Eeeeeht, eeeeeht, eeeeeht, eeeeeht. She taunts, *Eeeeeht, eedeead, deeead, dead, dad,* I hear.