

Wayward Souls

by Foster Trecost

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Goodbee:

My name is Father Lipscomb. With much sadness I write to inform you Katie has passed away. She was a special girl, and you have every reason to be proud.

I'll always remember the day she found me, early on a rainy morning, the first of many visits. She loved you both, but now I am sad to say she is gone.

I Remain,

Father Francis Lipscomb

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"All the bottoms are taken."

"Sorry." She pulled her suitcase from the lower bunk, and swung it up to the one above. "I just got here, I didn't know. My name's Katie."

"I'm Jessica," said the stranger. "The church makes us clear out everyday, but we come back to the same beds. It's kind of an unspoken rule, and all the bottoms are taken. Where you from?"

Katie knew about clearing out, it's what she had just done; cleared out, cleared away, clear across the country. She looked at the stranger, and wondered how she should answer. "Just a small town."

Jessica let it pass. "You hungry? Around the corner they serve free soup. I'll take you."

They left the shelter and rounded the corner, but Katie went no further before stopping. Never had she seen so many people, heard so many horns, or looked up at buildings so high. "Don't worry," said Jessica. "I'll take care of you." And that she did.

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It was warm, but the breeze helped. Not the gusting kind, rather constant and steady, as if generated by an unseen box fan. A piece of paper danced past, then a plastic cup, each with its own melody, yet somehow fused. "It feels good when the wind blows," Jessica said. "It's going to rain," she added. They walked toward the shelter.

"Let it, I like the rain," said Katie.

The rain continued into the night. Late that evening, they sat before an open window. Jessica noticed the tear form on the outside corner of Katie's eye. It held tight for a second, then crawled down the cheek, leaving a faint, damp trail. Jessica asked, "When were you supposed to go home?"

"Last month."

"Have you called? Written?"

"No. My dad knew when I was supposed to go back, but you know what he said? 'When will we see you again?' He knew I wasn't going back."

"What about your mom? She must be going crazy."

Katie laughed. "She's already crazy. Sometimes I wish I were dead. Then I wouldn't have to worry."

Jessica's dark eyes darkened. "Be careful what you wish for. Bad things happen to people who wish they were dead."

Katie contemplated these words. Though she often wished she were dead, never could she kill herself, even if only because an agreeable method eluded her.

"Does it bother you that they worry?"

"Yes. Sometimes I want to make them proud. Sometimes I want them to suffer. I wish I could do both."

After a fitful night, Katie found herself at the rectory. Drenched, she knew the rain hid her tears. "Can I help you?"

Katie stared from unblinking eyes, then asked a question: "What's your name?"

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"It's a beautiful letter, Father Lipscomb."

No response.

"It's so brave for you to write her family, she was so special." The envelope was addressed to Katie's parents. "And she'll be missed so much-"

And that was enough.

"-Shut up, Jessica. Don't you know when to stop? Give me a stamp, I want to get this in the mail."

Moments later Katie dropped the letter in a mailbox, and looked back while she walked away. She was dead. She had found her method, and with it a way to make her parents proud and to make them suffer, both at the same time.

