The Preservation of Innocence (through Times of Hunger and Doubt)

by J.M. Whalen

Alicia waited for her dad's voicemail to start, hit the red button, hit the screen lock button, and put her iPhone away. He was out to dinner. She opened the storm door just enough and slipped through.

She kept the music off while padding up the stairs, quiet as loneliness, and turned it back on in her room. She didn't want her mom and Ronnie to hear her.

“Color your heart with what's not there… Strange you never knew… I think it's strange you never knew,” she sang along, quietly.

Cat wheezed in Alicia's lap as she ingested her Facebook feed. She ignored a message in her inbox, savoring the not knowing, stretching her eyes taut away from the red notification box like pulling on a slingshot or an ear ring. Her dad called back. She watched the phone vibrate to the rhythm he'd customized on their last visit, but she didn't pick it up.

They didn't have much to say, but it was nice to know he was there. The purr of the iPhone was enough.

She walked to the bathroom, sifted through the bottles, and took a 10mg Ambien. Cat rubbed through her legs in an infinity sign, and he rolled over and yowled when she put the bottle back.

“Shh,” she scolded, “You don't have to be so fucking dramatic.”

She bit through another Ambien, swallowed the half that remained in her teeth, and let the other part fall to the bathmat. Cat chawed it greedily, lips pulled back, eyes closed, and slunk to the bedroom.

Alicia stepped on the scale, stepped off, waited for it to reset, and stepped on it again. Then she brushed her teeth and scrubbed her face. She leaned in, inches from the mirror, peering and probing,

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/jm-whalen/the-preservation-of-innocence-through-times-of-hunger-and-doubt»*
Copyright © 2012 J.M. Whalen. All rights reserved.

wishing her pores would close. She sighed, bored, and turned the shower head so that it would spray Ronnie in the face when he turned on the water in the morning.

She went back to her bedroom and read the Facebook message: “Hey Alicia.. everything ok? I thought I was gonna see you tonight.”

Ben's profile picture was him on a mountain with another baseball guy. She read his wall, clicked on some of his friends, read their walls, and woke up on the floor, drooling, to her iPhone alarm. Cat was sapping warmth from the Macbook keyboard, his eyelids flickering like dying light bulbs.

Alicia changed into her favorite shirt, combed her hair, put eyeliner on over the grogginess, took a 15mg Adderall, and walked downstairs. Her mom was doing Yoga to an instructional video. The woman's black compression pants, pink waist-slimming tank, and breast implants held back time about as well as a spider web holds back the wind. Alicia watched until Downward Dog, and then she snuck out the storm door.

She walked downhill to the school building empty handed. A car beeped, and she waved without looking—probably other seniors with first block off. She held her ID to the plastic window by the door, and the slug on the other side buzzed her through with a turgid grimace. She retrieved a thin notebook from her locker in Pod EE, walked to Spanish class, and scratched down some subjunctive conjugations. She raised her hand.

“Sorry, Señora, I wasn't paying attention when you collected the homework.”

“*¿En Español, Margarita?*"

“*Lo siento, Señora, yo pienso que yo olvidé darte este.*”

“*Gracias, Margarita.”*

Alicia read Emily Dickenson through the rest of class, returned to pod EE for lunch, and continued her reading there. Ben came by to look for her.

“Hey, Alicia.”

“Hi, Ben! I'm so sorry about last night. My mom's boyfriend left his headlights on at work, and I had to drive to Newington to get

him," she invented. She touched Ben's arm, and he flinched. They normally only touched after parties.

"It work out ok for him?"

"The *car'll* be fine, but *he's* terminally stupid."

Ben blinked.

"My dad taught me to jumpstart and whatever, so…"

"Oh. Uh, anyways, I'm going to the beach with some people after school, if you want to come." He scratched his head nervously, mouth open.

"For sure! That sounds nice. I have APUSH fourth block."

"Right on, I'm in 80s in America, so… I'll see you by the social studies door?"

"Okay! See you."

"Uh. Bye." He lurched away, looking over his shoulder, pausing once to make sure the conversation was over.

Alicia got to third block early and scribbled down some of the derivatives homework. Other kids trickled in intermittently, drifting to their seats like impurities getting caught in a filter.

Alicia got up to go to the bathroom before the teacher arrived. She called her Dad, waited for his voicemail to start, hit the red button, and hit the screen lock button. It was still early morning in his time zone.

She put an American Spirit Medium in her mouth and got all the way to the side door without anybody seeing her. Then she walked to The Path, where some kids cutting Shop and PE were smoking cigs and one-hitters. She bummed a light, followed The Path through a fence to the adjacent low-income housing development, and walked home from there.

She didn't open the storm door enough, and she felt the broken handle prick her waist. She looked down at it and pulled herself through slowly, without opening the door any wider, holding her breath. She shivered at the end, and dots seeped into the fabric of her shirt like a little red caterpillar.

“You hungry for lunch, sweetheart?” Her mom called from the kitchen sink, not realizing that lunch break had ended half an hour ago.

“No.”

“You'll never have anything to put in that bra if you don't eat, honey.” The Xanax smoothed out her smoker's laugh out like shrink tube on frayed conduit.

“I know.” Alicia padded upstairs, quiet as certainty, while her mom continued to wash the backup of Tupperware, Teflon-coated steel, and painted ceramic. She always told Alicia to 'do good in school' so she could follow her 'dreams' some day; Alicia had once seen her use Ronnie's pliers to tear the license plate off a double-parked car.

Alicia went into the bathroom, stole two of Ronnie's 7.5/325 Percocet, crushed them onto a parachute of toilet paper, balled it up, and swallowed it with water. She stepped on the scale, stepped off, waited for it to reset, and stepped on it again.

She lifted up her shirt in the mirror, looked at the messy scratch on her abdomen, and smeared Chap Stick into it so it wouldn't heal soon.

She pulled Cat's ears back and played with his mouth like a talking dummy—he didn't resist. Then she lay down on her bed and looked to see if her dad had tried to call her back yet. He hadn't; he was at work now.

She used her iPhone as a remote to play music on her laptop. Then she switched her phone off, dragged a fingernail along the scratch, and turned toward the wall. “You remind me / of someone's daughter. / I forgot her. / I forgot her name, ashamed,” she sang along, quietly.

She hated the beach. She'd probably see Ben that weekend at a party, or after one.