

The Stairway (Short Story Excerpt)

by Wesley Baines

Leaves clouded the air and piled in great brown heaps like rotted snow on the old Maine road, disturbed for the first time in months by a lone, black SUV. It plowed its way slowly across the asphalt, the black surface cracked and hoary with years of neglect, past a decrepit wooden sign that read, *Inritus, Maine*, the faded white lettering barely legible. Great mounds of stone rose up at times to either side, breaking the monotony of bare trees. The passengers bounced in their seats with each pothole, buckle, and rut.

“How much farther is it?” asked Daniel from the back seat. He closed the book in his hand with a sigh, bushy dark brows drawing together beneath a high forehead. The print was tiny, and he lost his place with every bump. Beside him, little Michael snorted in his sleep. A small, skinny boy, his head was a mess of tangled blond hair and he shifted slightly with each bump.

“You’ll be able to see the clearing in another half mile,” spoke the driver, a man in his early fifties. The back of his head, like Daniel’s was a cap of tight black curls and his hands engulfed the steering wheel as if it were a child’s toy. The features that Daniel could see in the rearview mirror were like roughly carved stone. “I think this is the place where the house is going up.”

“I think so, too, Will.” Beatrice was tall and willowy in the passenger seat, her face dominated by a long, but elegant nose, her frame dwarfed in girth by her husband, but not in height. “It’s the perfect spot.”

A perfect spot would be closer to civilization, thought Daniel, and remained silent.

They rounded a bend in the road; the trees gave way to a large open area. They turned off onto a dirt path, leaving the broken trail of asphalt that continued to wander deeper into the darkness of the

woods, on to Inritus. At the borders of the forest surrounding the twin ruts of the path, decrepit remains of fences and barns told the tale of what was once thriving farmland, many years gone to ruin. There were some odd sights as well. Daniel spied an old well near the forest line, its heavy stone top crisscrossed with rusted chains, attached to enormous stakes driven into the ground. Daniel saw no animals. The squirrels and birds that had so populated the forest behind them were absent now, lending the place a deep silence. And ahead, something rose into the clear air like a dark finger in the distance. Despite the warmth of the car, Daniel shivered.

"Dad, what *is* that?" he asked, pointing to the thing, which lay directly in their path, at the end of the driveway.

"That," spoke his father, "is something the contractors couldn't get rid of."

As they drew closer, Daniel could finally see what it was.

What?

The stair stood alone in the middle of the field, a blackened monolith surrounded by ruin. Streaked faintly with soot, it rose twelve feet into the cold air, a hulking mass of mossy stone that cast a long shadow in the red light of the setting sun. Its first step rose from the soil, the rest zigzagging up from the stony earth, unsupported. The SUV slowed to a halt before it. The wind gusted and dead leaves skittered across the ground like insects as the trees clapped their bare branches together to the music of a dying season.

"Why couldn't they get rid of this?" asked Daniel as he gently shook Michael awake. The boy groaned and pushed at him, trying to lie back down. They climbed out of the vehicle, the wind immediately cutting through their clothing.

Will looked up at the stairs. "It wasn't for a lack of trying. Come here and look at this."

Daniel followed his father around to the side of the stairs. They looked enormous and primitive up close, without the very human context of walls and floors.

"You see these scratches?"

"Yea."

"After they realized they couldn't just knock it down with a backhoe, they wanted to drill holes into it and fill them with explosives. I told them to go ahead, but they kept breaking drills on the thing. All they did was scratch the stone up. Don't even look as bad as the day they did it." Will ran his hand over the faint swirling scores in the stone. "Anyway, we're going to build the house around it, and use the stairs in the design. They're certainly solid enough.

"You've decided this is the place, then?" asked Daniel.

Beatrice spoke from behind them. "Yes. This piece of land is huge, and the price is low. Almost unbelievably low. Will and I decided last week that this is it."

"Not the best place," said Daniel.

"I wouldn't worry, Daniel," said Beatrice. "You'll find a job and be moved out before you know it."

You'd love for me to leave, wouldn't you?

"If you feel like you're ready, you could even try graduate school again," she said. "I'll bet you'd handle it just fine this time if you really tried."

Daniel's fists clenched harder, remembering what happened. "Beatrice, you have no idea wha—

"—Whassat *noise*?" cried Michael, cupping his ear dramatically and leaning to one side.

Everyone quieted. In the distance, there was a low booming, barely perceptible, a rhythmic pounding that seemed to come from deep within the earth.

"That's the ocean," said Will. "We're close to the shore—it's only a fifteen minute walk through the woods." He proudly pointed past the stairway to the line of trees in the distance, where an overgrown trail could barely be discerned.

"So we have a beach here?" asked Daniel.

"More like a cliff," spoke Beatrice, fingering the silver cross she wore about her neck. The shores in this area are all stone drop-offs. The sound you hear is from the waves booming in the hollows of the rock face. The realtor said that there are networks of caves and tunnels all through the rock here, and they probably amplify the

sound. You'll get used to it." She put an arm around Will and kissed him. One of his big hands went to her small waist and he smiled, chuckling as they separated.

Daniel's fists clenched and he looked away. *He used to kiss mom like that.*

Daniel had moved back in with his family after his first semester at Stanford, back to a home he no longer recognized. His mother left the family just before he began his undergraduate studies, and his father had met Beatrice and Michael two years later at a literary conference.

His thoughts were interrupted by Michael. He ran up, out of breath, his green eyes as wide as his smile as he held something out to Beatrice.

"Look! Issa chicken bone!"

Beatrice snatched her hand back. "*Drop that*, Michael. It can give you disease," she said, punctuating each syllable with a slight forward motion of her head, causing her straight blonde hair to quiver all the way down her back against her white coat.

Michael reluctantly tilted his hand until the small bone slid off, landing in the dirt. He pressed his lips together and crossed his arms, his face a mask of solemn childishness.

Daniel stooped to look at the fragment. "Looks like it's from a small animal. Squirrel maybe. It's old—I wouldn't worry about catching anything. Where did you find it, Michael?"

The five year old boy pointed to the far side of the large, broken stone rectangle, behind the stairway. That rectangle, as the elderly realtor had pointed out, was once the foundation of a large manor, destroyed by fire in 1866. The flames had spread through the forest after consuming the home, going on to lay waste to Portland, eventually burning out over Munjoy Hill, putting nearly ten thousand residents of Maine out of their homes. The original inhabitants had been the only two casualties. The realtor had explained that land had been passed down in the family of those inhabitants, but they hadn't visited it in over eighty years.

After telling Michael to stay out of the rubble, Will knitted his hands behind his head and stretched, digging his fingers into his curly black hair. “Well, let's get going. I want to talk to the architect tonight. We'll have the new home built right on the foundation of the old. We know the ground is stable here.

“As if there isn't any stable ground here, dad. You dig a foot down and hit rock.”

Will chuckled. “That may be true, but in other places, the caves Beatrice was talking about undermine the stone. This—this is the perfect spot for us. Right in the middle of this clearing with trees on all sides and the ocean behind. Plus, we get a free stairway. The contractors who tried to pull it down said it's not just sitting on the ground, but was actually cut from a rock formation. Its foundations go deep and join with the bedrock of the land. Anyway, it will be gorgeous after a little cleanup. You can't get any more perfect than this.”

Beatrice made this decision for you. Mom knew you so much better.

They walked back to the dark Lexus SUV, brown grass crunching beneath their feet, leaves still running from the wind's cool breath. Michael tugged at Will's pant leg, and he picked the boy up and carried him on his back, laughing. Daniel felt a twinge of jealousy toward the blond boy, and ran a hand through his own dark curls.

The home was up by December. It was Beatrice's idea to go with the Tudor style. Daniel thought the large house looked like something out of the dark ages, but he kept this opinion to himself. He stood where he had two months earlier, but now the circle of rubble had transformed itself into a two story home, white stucco with decorative half-timbering, a steeply pitched roof and two heavy chimneys from which the ghosts of burned wood danced into the cold air. The windows looked out at Daniel in the pale light of the waning sun. The downstairs windows blazed with light, but upstairs, the large panes stared like lidless black eyes, blank, dark, and shuttered. He started towards the house's brown double doors,

giving out a shrill whistle as he walked, his breath sending gouts of fog into the air before him.

“Come here, Faith,” he called, and gave his leg a slap. A long, lean greyhound came leaping out of the woods at the edge of the circular clearing, bounding up to Daniel and dragging her wet nose all over his left hand. He wiped it on his pants and rubbed the dog's head affectionately, opening the door and allowing the dog to run in, claws scrabbling on the polished hardwood floor.

The inside of the home very nearly redeemed the entire affair for Daniel. Even now, dark and empty, the layout was a miracle of interior design. Beatrice had always had a penchant for the dramatic. The inside of the home had a medieval flavor, with roughhewn ceiling beams and huge, exposed timbers connected with pieces of intricately engraved dark iron. The furniture was a combination of ancient and contemporary pieces, all strewn about to give the place a historical air, but modern comfort.

Daniel shut the door, hanging his jacket on a nearby peg. He was in the living room, a monstrous place with a high, vaulted ceiling and one wall dominated by an enormous Sony plasma screen. He strode across the dark oval of carpet in the middle of the room, grabbed one of the paint cans sitting against the far wall, next to the immense stone fireplace, and exited the room, turning right. He stopped.

He looked up at the stairway. The grey granite had been cleaned and polished until it shone, and not a trace of the fire's soot remained. The staircase fit the aesthetic of the home well, the edges of its stairs were lightly cracked and pocked by untold years of weather, but were still a work of fine craftsmanship. Yet Daniel knew that where the rest of the home feigned antiquity, the stair held it true. It was an ancient thing—when Will had, at first, asked the contractors if they might be able to tell how far the base delved into the earth and how easily it might come up, the men had set up a small ground radar machine a few days later and had taken a scan. Daniel thought about the puzzled look on the foreman's face, the way he had scratched his balding scalp nervously, the way he had

checked and rechecked the readouts from the lawnmower-like device, pushing it into different positions. "These stairs go deep," he'd said. "They go beyond the range of the ground radar. They're carved from the indigenous rock, probably a big boulder or pillar that stood here. The thing that gets me is that this is showing the stairs are carved *all the way down*. The steps keep going below the soil, on and on. That tells me that they were here before the top layer of soil was." He had shaken his head. "Weird stuff, man. This thing is *old*".

Daniel took a step, the frigid cold of the granite permeating through his sock, into his sole. "These steps are always so *cold*," he whispered, to no one in particular. He climbed the steps, all twenty of them, counting as he went and reached the top of the landing, the paint bucket swinging in his hand. Faith stood at the bottom of the steps, her normally jovial face all full of canine seriousness.

The second story held Daniel's bedroom, as well as his brother's, although Daniel had seen neither as of yet—this was their first day in the home and Daniel had not bothered to explore past the upstairs hallway and into the closed rooms. The rest of the family had left a few hours ago to pick up a pizza—the restaurant wouldn't deliver to such a remote location—this served only to add to Daniel's annoyance. Inritus was the very definition of "the middle of nowhere," with only the one lone road leading in and out. He had never seen the town proper, and didn't intend to. The outskirts were depressing enough.

He set the bucket down and flipped the switch to the upstairs hallway light, letting out a sigh as nothing happened. The two light sockets were among the last things to be installed, and the contractors wouldn't be back until Monday. Daniel could see well enough by the light of the window. The hallway was bare, as were the rooms. The moving truck that contained the remainder of the family's items was running late.

Daniel set the can down beside a small pile of similar, but empty, containers, and pried at the lid with the claw of a nearby hammer. The lid of the paint can came off with a pop and Daniel poured the

white liquid into the pan. He picked up a fresh roller from the floor and began to spread the paint across the ceiling. "How many times am I going to have to do this," he muttered as he worked. He was at it for about half an hour before he heard, faintly, the *ka-chunk* of the huge front door opening, and the commotion of three voices invading the silence. The sounds were muffled, as if heard through a heavy blanket, even though they emanated from the room just to the left of the bottom of the stairs. Daniel thought this queer, but attributed it to the acoustics of the house.

It wasn't long before Daniel heard his father plodding up the stairs. "Pizza's here and so are the movers—Beatrice gave them instructions on where to put everything, and there's like a hundred guys pouring out of the truck, so it should be done by the time we're finished eating." He looked up at the ceiling, at Daniel's latest efforts. "Still grey, huh? It's the weirdest thing. What's this, the fifth time you've tried coating this ceiling today, even after the contractor's work? I've never seen anything like it; we had no problems painting the downstairs hallway's ceiling." The big man paused for a moment before continuing. "Daniel, come down and eat with us. Let's eat together, for once. I know it's hard for you to accept Beatrice, but you'll learn to like her. I just want us to be a family again, and I think it would do her so much good to know you've accepted her before you move back out.

Daniel bristled for a moment, but softened at the unveiled emotion on his father's face. "Okay dad. Let me just finish this and I'll come down."

Will looked back and smiled before starting down the steps. "Love you, son."

"Love you too, dad," he said, without hesitation.

Dinner had always been such an organized affair when mom was still around. Now though, meals were more akin to a Golden Corral buffet than a fine French restaurant. It grated on Daniel. Will and Beatrice sat at one end of the long, wooden dining room table, talking. Michael ran around the table, holding a slice of pizza above his head, making airplane noises. The dining room was monstrous,

a long room lined with art prints and a great hearth at one end in which a fire blazed merrily. His mother would have hated this house, with all of its needless decoration. Beatrice had brought not only money into the family, but her own style. It wouldn't have brought Daniel such ire if he felt that she had earned even a single penny of it.

"Sit with us, Daniel," she beckoned as he entered the room. Reluctantly, he took one of the wooden chairs, the legs scraping against the stone of the floor, the sound echoing off the walls. He took a slice of sausage pizza, and took a bite, chewing slowly, focusing his gaze on a print of Hobbiton from Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings". Such strange tastes Beatrice had.

They ate, much of the conversation upheld by Beatrice and Will. Even Michael interjected more than Daniel did. Beatrice noticed his sullen silence.

"Daniel," she said, "I think we need to talk about something".

Oh great. Here it comes again. You'll find a job, Daniel. You're a great kid, Daniel. Even though you're a twenty-four year old who had to move back in with his parents, you're successful!

"About what happened to you in graduate school. And about your mother."

Daniel's face went cold, his expression carefully blank. He remained silent.

"Look, Daniel, what happened to you could happen to anyone. You overburdened yourself, took on so much responsibility. And I know that, even though it's been a long time, you were still thinking of your mother. You're *so* smart and *so* talented and you did so well at Stanford, at least at first. I want you to know that you're not a failure. Please don't feel like you are." There was a pause. "You don't have to be your mother."

Daniel's face went from white to red. When he spoke, his voice was low and slow. "You don't know *anything* about success, Beatrice. My mother *earned* her money. What do you do? You write books. Escapist *trash*. Nothing useful.

“Daniel,” his father warned, a rare hint of anger showing on his craggy features. “Why do you hate Beatrice so much? Help me understand, because, right now, all I see is immaturity and unfounded anger.”

Beatrice was silent for a moment before she responded to Daniel, her slender face unmoved, her green eyes downcast. Outside, the sun set behind the skeletal trees, and night began to fall. “Daniel, your mother left this family behind,” she whispered. She abandoned you. Twice. Is that really the kind of person you'd rather have in your life?” Will took her hand.

Tears forming in his eyes, Daniel got up, violently shoving the chair backward. As it toppled to the floor with a loud clack, he rushed from the room, determined not to let Beatrice see his pain. The dog ran up to greet him as he ran down the hallway toward the stairs, but he dodged her. He ran up the cold, stone stairway, driving his fist into a heavy wooden wall panel as he reached the top. He shook his hand out, his thick brows drawing together, his brown eyes narrowing as tears flowed freely. He kicked at a paint bucket along one wall, splattering white droplets over the great squares of mahogany. Moonlight streamed from the large, round window at the end of the hallway, silvering the air around him, the newly installed furniture throwing shadows across the floorboards.

He made his way down the hall, which was bisected down the middle by the lengthened shadow cast by a cross that rested on a table before the window. One of Beatrice's ornaments. His door was at the end of the hall, to the left of that window. Daniel pressed the archaic latch and the dark wood of his door silently gave way. Once inside, he groped for the light switch to the left of the door, finally finding it and flipping the light on. His eyes widened.

His room was arranged just as it had been when he left for college five years ago, complete with all his old posters, everything from the big cloth Stanford wall hanging to the framed poster of the New York skyline. His large bed occupied a quarter of the room on one end, but on the other, beneath the windows, there was a new piece of furniture. An enormous, ornate desk squatted there. A

neatly tied bow rested on its surface, along with piles of books. As Daniel read the covers, he began to feel waves of guilt wash over him. Beatrice had left these, and they were books that Daniel had wanted for a long time—everything from business texts to books on improving leadership traits. On top was the admissions handbook for the Stanford Graduate School of Business. These were books that he had once asked his mother for, but never received.

The bed did not squeak as he sat on it and a heavy silence reigned in the room. Still reeling with guilt and confusion, Daniel reached towards the bedside dresser, across the untouched leather cover of a Bible Beatrice had left for him, fixing his eyes on a book with a shiny golden cover—one of the few things his mother had ever bought for him. It read, *You're Going Somewhere: A Guidebook for Achieving Your Ambitions*. He laid down on the bed, pulled out the bookmark—a worn photograph of a woman, her face severe, silver streaking through her tightly pulled back-hair—and began to read. He read until his eyelids drooped. How long it had been he could not tell, but something brought Daniel suddenly out of his stupor. A sound.

Doom

Daniel listened, alert now. There it was again—a faint boom. It was the same sound he had heard outside earlier, the sound of the ocean's waves carried through tubes in the earth, a sound that spoke of unimaginable depth.

And it seemed to be emanating from the hallway.

He rose from the bed, his socked feet making no sound on the polished wooden floor, and slowly made his way to the door.

The sound of the door latch was barely audible, muffled. His socked feet slid over the hallway floor, slowly. The cross's tall shadow had grown, engulfing the hallway, already dark in color, in near blackness as the moon moved across the sky, to the other side of the house. *Why couldn't the contractors have finished the hallway light fixtures up here by now?* He heard the sound again, faint, washing up the staircase. He looked down over the railing toward the steps.

Then he saw it.

There was something moving at the foot of the stairs. It moved so slowly he could scarcely see it in the night's blackness. But this thing was darker than a mere absence of light, so dark as to be visible to some sense he didn't know he had. It crawled—Daniel could think of no other word—and seemed to shimmer like a mirage. Daniel wondered if he were hallucinating. It stopped about halfway up, and without the movement, Daniel saw only inky blackness. He felt something, though, the way he felt something when his eyes were closed and someone held their hand inches from his face. He could feel it peering at him from the darkness, peering with eyes that did not exist, peering from the darkness of the stairway. Legs weak, he slowly edged his way back into his room, closing the door, the click inaudible. He felt cold spreading through his limbs.

What was that? A trick of the shadows on the stairs? It had to have been.

He put his hand on the door handle and slowly reopened the door, peering out. He made his way out into the hallway and again looked over the banister. Only darkness greeted him. He peered into it for a long moment and finally retreated to his room, climbing back into bed after closing and locking his door. It was long before he fell asleep.

He awoke in the morning light to a loud banging. Slats of sunlight streamed in through the shutters, dust motes playing excitedly in the beams. Startled, Daniel sat up in bed as his door shook beneath another pounding. A voice came from the other side. The voice of a young boy.

“Daaaniel,” Michael called. “It's snowing! Will you come out with me and help me build a snowman?”

Still dazed with sleep, he got up and unlocked the door, and Michael came bounding into the room. Daniel picked him up and spun him around. “Sure, I'll come out with you. Just give me a little while to get dressed and eat some breakfast. Get a head start and start rolling the base for me, will ya?” The little boy nodded

sagely, his curly hair still a mess from sleep and his eyes squinty. "And don't forget your gloves or else your hands will freeze." Michael ran from the room.

Daniel scratched his head, feeling disgusting for sleeping in his clothes. He left his room and began to walk down the hallway, but stopped when he reached the top of the staircase. The memory of the night came rushing back to him, taking the strength out of his knees, even now in the bright light of the sun. There was a bark, and suddenly, Faith was there, whining at the foot of the stairs. Daniel started, and, all at once, the tension eased out of him like air escaping from an overfilled balloon. It was *the dog* he must have seen. He felt ashamed for passing out, and vowed to keep it to himself. He came down the steps and rubbed the dog's head. "You scared the crap out of me, dog." Faith only grinned up at him. Something nagged at him, though. The thing he saw hadn't looked like a dog. Just in case, he grabbed a flashlight from the kitchen pantry and ran it up to his room, putting it in his dresser before coming back down.

He made scrambled eggs for his breakfast and ate alone at the enormous table. Afterward, as he washed his dishes, he shook his head, attributing the strange night to a lack of sleep. A smile returned to his face as he saw Michael outside, rolling a snowball taller than himself. Daniel threw on his coat and boots, and went outside.

"I'll roll the midsection if you'll roll the head," he said to Michael. The boy ran over to a patch of unused snow and began to roll as Daniel worked at his own snowball. All was well until he heard Michael suddenly cry out. Daniel ran to him.

"What's wrong?"

"Stinky snow."

Daniel looked down, and realized that Michael had rolled his ball right through a pile of Faith's leavings. He chuckled, shaking his head and walked toward the garage, the door automatically opening as he neared. "Let's go ahead and pick it all up while we're out here.

Michael only nodded. Daniel emerged from the garage with a bucket and shovel, handing the bucket to Michael as he used the shovel on the leavings.

"Daniel, do you miss your mommy?"

Daniel looked up, surprised at the five year old.

"Well. Yes. I do."

"Do you hate my mommy?"

Daniel didn't answer for a long moment, searching the boy's green eyes. He finally decided on honesty. "Your mommy took the place of mine, and that makes me upset sometimes."

"Didn't Virginia do something bad to you? She made daddy cry a lot." Michael pronounced Virginia, Vir-geen-yah.

"Mom wasn't the problem. Me and dad were the problem," said Michael as he shoveled another load, and began looking for the next. "Dad didn't want to move to California for her new job, and neither did I. We didn't know she would leave like she did."

"That isn't your fault," Michael said, looking down at the ground and drawing his brows together.

Daniel found himself irritated at this boy had taken his place after he left, after Beatrice moved in and married his father. He decided to change the subject.

"Where are dad and Beatrice?"

"They went to see the ocean. Can we go see the ocean later?"

"I don't feel like it."

The boy's shoulders slumped and he put the bucket down, and went inside. Daniel finished up, emptied the bucket in the woods, and came back inside.

It was all awkward silence when Will and Beatrice returned. Daniel knew they were both angry about the previous night, and so was he. So she thought she could buy him with a desk and some books? The guilt of the previous night had evaporated with the sunrise, but Daniel was resolved to at least regain some semblance of unity in the family, if only for his father. Will had been devastated when he awoke one day to find the note that changed all their lives. It had been hard to explain it to Daniel. The pain still

gripped him sometimes—he had been close to his mother. Now he hardly saw her, unless business brought her back to sign some papers or have a tense meeting with Will. She had done what she needed to do, though. Daniel, Michael, and Will—they just weren't good enough for her.

He had to restore the peace, at least until he moved back out. Daniel wanted his father to have a good life—they had been through so much together. He decided he would drive into Inritus to see if he could grab a contribution to dinner. Something that his father liked.

The land around the home *was* beautiful, even Daniel had to admit it. He crunched through the soft snow, climbing into his father's black SUV. He made his way through the winding roads, the landscape white and sparkling around him. Fat snowflakes flashed like silver dollars in the daylight, billowing past his windows as he pulled out onto the dark, broken road toward the town. Only one road in.

Such a strange place.

He had a vague feeling of unease as he began to pass the first dilapidated buildings. The homes were clearly occupied, but some appeared thoroughly rotten, falling in upon themselves. The trees grew huge and twisted in the stony earth, and the air was filled with the smoke from a multitude of thatched roofs that could be glimpsed every now and then between the trees, in a valley below the road. Everything was hemmed in by the trees, enormous and overbearing, trees that told Daniel that this town had not seen full sunlight in a lifetime.

Just past the first line of houses, he found a general store, a long, low building of grey planks. He pulled into the unmarked dirt parking lot. Inside, the store was resplendent with hams, syrups, jams, and fruits, and tended by a motherly looking elderly lady. Daniel expected to find his nose filled with the scents of a country kitchen, but the only thing he smelled was dust. Immediately, Daniel's eyes lit upon a large apple pie resting in a tin on the counter.

“How much for this?”

The woman looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. “Two dollar,” she rasped.

Daniel smiled at the price.

So there are advantages to living out here.

He handed over the money and watched as the woman took it to the back. As she opened a door, though, Daniel caught a glimpse of something that horrified him. A man, ancient and gnarled as the trees outside, sat in a wheelchair, breathing feebly, his eyes rimmed with black. He looked close to death, but this was not what horrified Daniel. He saw something in those eyes that reminded him of the thing he saw on the stairs. He couldn't figure out what the connection was, but it was there.

The woman came back out with his change and he left the town quickly.

Everyone was already in the kitchen when Daniel returned, preparing sandwiches for lunch. Beatrice was slicing ham while Will toasted the bread and Michael spread the mayonnaise in sloppy swaths across the slices. Will went over each one while Michael wasn't looking, and scraped off the excess. Daniel entered with his pie in hand and set it down on the table, forcing a smile. “I brought you guys something,” he said.

Beatrice eyed the pie. “Your father can't eat that. Didn't we tell you the doctor diagnosed him as borderline diabetic? Perhaps we didn't. I wouldn't feel right with us eating it and him being left out. Thank you, though. We can always give it away.”

Daniel instantly became furious. Somewhere, deep inside himself, he knew the feeling to be irrational, but he didn't try to tamp it down.

Instead, he fed it.

He grabbed the pie, pulled it back, and threw it at Beatrice as hard as he could. It struck her in the shoulder, and she cried out, dropping the sandwich in her hand. His father, having seen what happened, was with her in an instant, and, in the next moment, was on Daniel, gripping the young man's arms in meaty fists.

“How dare you? How *dare* you? What's wrong with you? Why do you always go after Beatrice? She's done nothing but try to love you. She's a better person than your mother ever was. All Virginia ever did was pursue her own self-interest. You know that, toward the end, she told me she married me just so I could put her through college? She left her morals and humanity behind to pursue her own ambitions. She destroyed our family, Daniel. Beatrice has begun to heal it.

“If you had been good enough for mom, then none of this would have happened,” Daniel whispered. The look of hurt on his father's face gave him an instant of sheer satisfaction, followed by guilt. He had no room for guilt now, though. Angrier than he had ever been, he turned and strode toward the hallway. Faith came bouncing up him, wiping her wet nose on his hand and he struck her hard with the back of his fist. She fled from him with a whimper, and did not return.

He counted the stairs as he climbed, as was his habit. He couldn't help it, especially if he was tense, as he was now. A puzzled look came over his face when he reached the top, however. He had counted twenty-one steps where before he had counted twenty.

He shook the feeling, however, and stomped down the hallway toward his room, stopping only when he heard the rapid slap of small bare feet on the stairway behind him. The small boy slid to a stop and looked up at Daniel, tears in his eyes. Daniel felt the briefest moment of guilt.

“Michael, what do you want?”

“You *do* hate mommy,” he whispered, his voice cracking.

Daniel's lips pressed together into a thin white line as he closed his eyes and tilted back his head. “Leave me alone, Michael.

“*Why* do hate mommy,” the boy asked, punctuating his words with frantic shakes of his hands. “She loves you.”

“She hates me. You all hate me.”

“I *do not*.”

Daniel looked at the boy, at his straight blond hair, at his green eyes and narrow nose. He could feel heat rising into his face and

began to speak quietly, staring into the little boy's eyes. "I want more than anything to finish graduate school and get away from all of you but I can't. Do you know *why* I can't? Because of dad and Beatrice. Because of *you*. My *real* mommy knows that all of you are failures and she won't have anything to do with me because of it. I can't do it without her. I can't and it's all of your faults". Daniel narrowed his eyes. "I hate you."

Michael's face slowly crumpled. He never made a sound, only back into his room and quietly closed the door, tears on his cheeks. Daniel stood there for several minutes, the guilt that had flashed through him so briefly making another, longer appearance. He dragged it behind him like a great chain as he walked into his room, eyes on the floor.

He locked the door. There he stayed until nightfall, packing up his belongings, preparing to leave, to go anywhere. He sat at the desk and began to read once more from his book, in the light of his single lamp, setting the worn picture he used as a bookmark to the side, still seeing flashes of Michael's tear stained face when he blinked.

"I'm leaving," he mumbled. "I'll do just as well as mom does. I don't need Beatrice's money." He read for hours, fueling his ambition with the words between those golden covers. He was, at first, afraid at the prospect of leaving, but as the night went on, his confidence grew. He would find his mother, and she would take him in. She would, this time. She would see how good he was, how successful he could be. He remembered the breakdown he had after her last rejection, when he had asked to stay with her during graduate school. She hadn't wanted anything to do with him, wouldn't even talk to him. It had destroyed him.

I'll prove myself to you.

He shut his eyes after a while, his head aching from emotion and reading for too long. When he opened them, he gasped in shock.

The colors. Everything around him was washed out. The desk was a pale shade of its former dark mahogany, the white of the walls as grey as the hallway outside, becoming more pale closer to the

doorway, as if the color was being pulled from the room into the hallway, flowing like a sluggish stream. Even the light seemed dimmer. Daniel struck himself in the chest a few times to ensure his wakefulness. Then came the call.

“Daniel.”

He knew the voice immediately. It was his mother's voice, against the backdrop of that deep, low noise. The picture that sat on the desk was the only object to retain its full color, and it stood out brightly. The voice came from the hallway outside. Confusion and terror overwhelmed him, but Daniel's voice held a note of hope as he called out in response. “Mom?”

Silence.

Shoving the small book into his pocket, he crept once again into the hallway, this time completely black save for the narrow rectangle of light thrown from his doorway. A fleeting thought tugged at Daniel's mind, that the moon was supposed to be full tonight and the sky clear, according to the weather channel. He could only focus on the stairs.

The thing was there again.

This was no dog. Daniel silently, but wildly cursed himself for thinking that in the first place, for even coming back to his room when he had seen something so horrifying. Faith never came up the stairs—she would sit at the bottom and whine, but she never dared touch the stone. This was not Faith.

Daniel forced himself to stay where he was. The thing that was darker than darkness moved slowly up the steps, creeping, inching, crawling. Daniel's breath came quickly, but he did not flee this time. He did not flee until the thing reached the top floor landing and *looked* at him. There were no eyes, but it saw nonetheless. Daniel suddenly found his courage running down his leg as he stumbled back into his room, slamming and locking the door. The sound, the barely perceptible *doom* now came from the hallway. Frantically, Daniel looked around himself, running hands through his hair, the light in his room so dim now that he could barely see, all color gone to grey. In a moment of clarity, he fumbled in the dresser,

grabbing the halogen flashlight. He flew to a window, seeking a route of escape. The shutters stuck at first, but Daniel finally pried them open with strength born of sheer desperation.

But something was wrong.

Outside was blackness. Not the mere darkness of night, but a void that was reminiscent of the thing he saw on the stairs. The muffled booms grew louder, like a great drum beneath the earth, rhythmic now, rhythmic in a way the sea could never be. In a panic, he pulled open the window and leapt out onto the roof, flipping the switch on the flashlight, relief flooding through him as the bright beam flickered to life. He instantly wished he hadn't turned it on.

There was nothing. The beam went on and on, striking *nothing*. He directed it where the ground should have been, where the trees, the vehicle should have been. There was nothing but the roof and the wall behind him. Then he felt it. Something in that void, something incomprehensibly vast and terrible. The beam of the flashlight finally lit on something in the distance, but he flicked it off immediately, fearful of what he might see. Of what might see *him*. There was something in this void, something worse than the thing on the stairs. He couldn't face this desolate, hopeless, lightless *nothing*. He turned and dove back into the house, wildly slamming the window and shutter and turning on the precious flashlight. The door of his room stood ajar.

Gripped by panic, he flew for the door, banging the light against it and cursing as it went out, calling for help, shouting the name of his father, of Beatrice, of his mother. Daniel soon found himself standing at the top of the stairway, peering down into the dark. There was no sign of the thing. He had to get downstairs.

Daniel stepped from wood to stone.

He ran down the stairs, taking them two and three at a time. It wasn't for some time that he noticed that he was counting under his breath. He had reached forty-two. He felt his hands and face grow cold and numb as he continued to run. He looked behind him. With mounting horror, he realized that he was still in the middle of the stairway.

"I'm not going anywhere," he whispered.

And then the thing appeared.

It crept from the darkness at the bottom of the stairs, casting a dimness the way a lamp might cast light, a living blackness that stood out in the dark. Daniel could only stand and gape and shiver as it approached him, could feel it reaching, groping. Finally, when it was mere feet from him, as it reached for his face, the freezing cold of something worse than death wafting from its form, Daniel turned and ran. He ran and ran, coming no closer to the top of the steps, but leaving the thing behind.

He ran until he collapsed, chest heaving with exertion. With what little energy he had left, he called once again for help, but the sound that emerged was scarcely audible. The darkness swallowed it. And there, at the bottom of the steps, the thing crept on, slowly, but inexorably. Unavoidable as mortality.

Tears streaming down his face, Daniel crawled on, but the entity gained, coming faster now. Invisible eyes opened up again in the darkness, and Daniel felt the edges of madness in his fear. Shaking, wild eyed, he leaped up and tried to run once more, but his tired legs betrayed him, and he fell, rolling down the stairs. He felt, rather than saw, the creature rise up to embrace him in the darkness, both the thing and the darkness incomprehensible.

And then Daniel struck something solid, and stopped.

--Ending being edited-- (Sorry!)

