



All But The Ties Eternal

"All waits undream'd of in that region . . .
Till when the ties loosen,
All but the ties eternal, Time and Space,
Nor darkness, gravitation, sense, nor any bounds bounding us."

—Walt Whitman, "Darest Thou Now O Soul"

Afterward she spent many hours alone in the house for the purpose of making it emptier; it was a game to her, like the one she played as a child, walking on the stone wall of the garden, pretending it was a mountain ledge, not wanting to look down for the sight of rocks below, knowing certain death awaited her should she slip, a terrible fall that would crush her to squishy bits, walking along until her steps faltered and she toppled backward, always thinking in that moment before her tiny body hit the ground: *So that's when I died.*

She always had laughter then, as a child, sitting ass-deep in mud and looking at the wall.

All the house had was the hole Daddy left behind, and there was no laughter remaining.

Yolanda stood looking at the small hole in the living room wall, wondering when it would start bleeding again. It only bled at night, at twenty minutes past twelve, the same time her father had —

—a stirring from the bedroom. She listened for Michael's voice. He would have to wake soon; he always did whenever she got up at night. She peered into the darkness as if it would warn her when he awakened, perhaps split down the middle like a razor cut and allow some light to seep through, and in that light she would see her father's face, winking at her like he often did before letting her in on a little secret.

He'd let her in on all his little secrets, except the one that really mattered. She found it hard not to hate him for it.

Nothing came at her from the darkness. She turned back and stared at the hole. It was so tiny, so silent.

The digital clock blinked: *12:19.*

She took a breath and watched as the numbers changed—

All But The Ties Eternal

—then looked at the hole.

It always began slowly, like a trickle of water dripping from a faucet not turned completely off: one bulging droplet crept to the edge and glistened, almost wiggling the same teasing, impatient way a child does before pulling a harmless prank, then it fell through and slid down the wall, dark as ink.

She watched the thin stream crawl to the floor, leaving its slender-thread path for the others to follow. And follow they did.

Pulsing out in streams heavier and thicker, they spread across the wall in every direction as if from the guts of a spider until she was staring into the center of a web, admiring patterns made by the small lines where they dripped into one another like colors off a summertime ice-cream cone. Strawberry; vanilla.

A soft groan from the bedroom, then: "Yolanda? Where are you?"

She looked once more at the dark, shimmering web, then went to the bedroom where Michael was waiting.

He saw her and smiled. She was still naked.

"Where were you? Come back to bed."

"No," she said. "I want you to come into the living room and see it for yourself."

"See what for my—? Oh, yeah. Right."

"Please?"

He sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes. "Look, Yolanda, I've been telling you for days—you've got to get out of this house! Your father's dead and there's nothing you can do about it. You've got no reason to stay here. The sooner you get over this, the sooner you can get on with your life."

"I thought you left the social work at the office."

"I only mean that—"

"*Goddammit*, stop patronizing me, Michael! Get your ass up and come look at this!"

The anger in her voice made him do as he was told.

As they entered the living room, she saw the last of the web slip into the hole and thought of the funny way her father used to suck in the last string of spaghetti.

As the last of the streams pulled back into the hole, she gripped Michael's arm and pointed. "Did you see it? Did you?"

He placed his other arm around her bare, sweaty shoulder, pulling her close. "Take it easy, Yolanda. Look, it's been a rotten time for you, I know that. It's why I came over and—"

"I didn't ask you to come over!"

"I know, but, Jesus, you haven't even so much as *called* for ten days! I figured you'd need a little time to yourself, but I never thought you'd start to ... to ..."

She pulled back and slapped away his arm. "Don't you dare talk to me like that! I am not one of your screwed-up runaway teenagers who just needs a shoulder to whine on!"

"I was only—"

"I know what you were *only*, thank you. I'm not one of your fragile children who might shatter if pushed a little, and I am not *imagining* things." She crossed to the hole and stuck the tip of her middle finger in, feeling the moisture. She pulled it out and felt the trace of a smile cross her lips: there was a small droplet of blood perched between her nail and the flesh of the quick. She faced Michael and offered her evidence.

"Look for yourself. Blood."

He lifted her hand closer to his face, squinted, then turned on a small table lamp.

For a moment she saw him hesitate.

There was, indeed, blood on her fingertip. He stared at it, then brushed it away. "You cut your finger on the plaster."

"I most certainly did not."

"You did," he said. "Look." He lifted her hand; she saw the small gash in her fingertip.

Something pinched in her stomach. Her eyes blinked. Her arms began to shake. She swore she wouldn't start crying.

Making no attempt to touch her, Michael said, "If you insist on staying here, why don't you just fix the hole?"

She took a breath and wiped something from her eye. "It's not that big. It's just not... that big."

"You must be joking, right?"

She stared at him.

"It's not that *big?*" he said. "Christ, honey, I could stick a pool cue in that thing." He pointed and she followed with her gaze—

—remembering she'd only been able to press her fingertip against the hole before, never inside it, never—

But Michael was right.

The hole was bigger. Not much, less than a quarter inch in circumference, but bigger.

Her voice came out a whisper when she said: "I remember thinking it should have been bigger. I mean, he used a bullet with a hollow point, right? He sat in his favorite chair, put the gun in his mouth and... and the hole was so small. The sound was so loud. It was like the whole ceiling turned into thunder. I was in my bed, I heard Dad mutter to himself, and then..." She took a small breath. "Then it was over and the sound stopped ringing in my ears and I... came out here."

She stared at the hole. "I didn't look at him. I looked at the hole. It was all I could see. It looked like a mouth. It was... *eating* everything."

She stood hugging herself, transfixed. "The blood, the tiny pieces of his skull and brain, the hole pulled them in. It was like watching dirty dish water go down a drain. It all swirled around the hole, got closer and closer till there should have been nothing left—but it was still there on the wall, his blood and brains, all the pieces were still there and—"

"Yolanda, c'mon—"

"... wanna know why he did it, Michael, if I did something to upset him—but I don't think I did. I loved him so much, but that wasn't enough. I guess he missed Mom too much. I told him it wasn't our fault that she walked out, that she didn't love us back. He didn't ask me for much, he never did, he always gave, and I wish he had... I wish he would've asked me for help, said *something*, because he was always there for me and when he needed someone I was... was—"

"You need rest."

She felt hot tears streaming down her cheeks, but she didn't care.

"... I just want him back! I want my father back, all right? And all I've got is this fucking hole that took him away from me. It sucked him in, left me alone, and it's... not... *fair!*"

She buried her face in her hands and wept, feeling the fury and sorrow mix, feeling a bellyful of night making her shudder and she hated it, wanted to destroy it.

Before she knew it she was against the wall, pounding with her fists, feeling the force of her blows ripple through her arms like electric shocks but she didn't care, she kept pounding as if Dad would hear her and call out from the other side.

Then Michael was behind her, his arms around her, easing her away; she didn't want him to, so she whirled around to slap his face, lost her balance, suddenly falling from the garden

All But The Ties Eternal

wall again, her arms flailing to protect her from the rocks below as she fell against the wall—

—and saw the hole swallow four of her fingers.

It was still getting bigger.

Michael was all over her, picking her up like she was some goddamned helpless pathetic frail child. She swatted at his face because he wasn't looking at the hole, he didn't see the small globule of blood peek over the edge as if saying *wait until next time*...

Once in bed, she fell immediately asleep.

Then woke, Michael at her side.

Then slept. And woke. And slept.

And woke—

Daddy was there, just between the beams of moonlight that slipped through the window blinds, smiling at her, his mouth growing wide as he stepped closer to the bed, whispering It's the family comes first, you and me, that's all, honey, because family ties are the most important ones, then he was bending low, his mouth opening into a pit, so wide and deep, sucking her in—

She slept—

No sense to her dreams, no rhythm to the words spoken to her there by figures she didn't recognize, moving slowly past her like people on the street; no purpose, no love, no reason, empty here, this place, yet so full of people and place and time going somewhere but she couldn't tell, wouldn't tell—

And woke—

—massaging her shoulders, Michael was massaging her shoulders, his hands strong, warm, and comforting, his voice close and tender, "I'm not going anywhere, baby, I love you, just sleep, *shhh*, yeah, that's it," like talking to a frightened child; she loved him but when would he start treating her like an adult?

She balanced on the edge of sleep, sensing her father. And the ceiling. And the walls. And the hole.

She could feel it growing, slowly sucking air from the room, Daddy's voice on the tail of moonbeams *most important because they're the ones that last*...

Finally the darkness swirled up to take her where there was only safe, warm peace. She slept without dreams.

When she woke it was still night. But deeper. The covers were moist and warm. She moved back to press her shoulders into Michael's chest—

—and was met by cold space.

She blinked several times to convince herself she was awake. "Michael?"

No answer. She turned onto her side. The cold space grew. Michael was gone. The ceiling rumbled. The other side of the bed looked so vast.

Maybe he'd gone for a drink of water; she often did that in the night.

She pulled the pillows close, waited for him to return. The clock ticked once. Forever passed. It ticked again.

"Bring me some water too, please." There was no response. The gas snapped on. Something cold trickled down the back of her neck. The ceiling rumbled again.

A slight breeze drifted by the bed, tickled her shoulders, then went toward the open bedroom door, through the corridor—

—toward the living room. The beams of moonlight pressed against the foot of the bed to tip it over and send her sliding down to the floor. She closed her eyes, feeling the tightness of her flesh.

"**MICHAEL!**" Her voice reverberated off the walls and left her ears ringing. He *had* to have heard that.

No answer.

Maybe he slipped out, thinking she'd be embarrassed when she woke in the morning because of her behavior; yet he said he loved her, that he wasn't going anywhere—but how many times had Dad said the same thing?

The force of the breeze increased.

She rose, put on her nightgown, and shuffled into the corridor.

The breeze grew stronger, pulling at her.

Once in the living room, she refused to look at the hole; that's what it wanted, for her to stand staring as the streams flowed out and—

There was a stain on the carpet; a dark smear that hadn't been there before.

Was it really moving like she thought? Perhaps it was just a trick of the moonlight casting her shadow, for it seemed to grow larger then smaller in an instant...

The stain kept moving. Slowly. Back.

As if being dragged.

She put a hand to her mouth, breathed out, reassured by the touch of her warm breath against her palm; then she snapped on a light.

She remembered a prank she'd played as a child on a neighbor who'd sent a dog to chase her from their yard; she'd come home and cleared the vegetable bin of all the tomatoes Daddy had bought at that market where he and Mom used to love shopping and thrown them against the neighbor's house, laughing when they splattered every which way, the seeds, juice, and skin spattering, widening with each new throw and moist *pop!*, some of the skin sliding off to the ground.

The living room wall looked like the side of that house.

Only the skin was *crawling* along the floor, being sucked back into the hole—which was so much bigger now, so much wider; she could probably shove her entire arm in up to the elbow.

The breeze grew violent, edging her toward the wall.

She saw Michael's Saint Christopher medal, still on its chain, near the wall. He loved that medal, always wore it, wouldn't even take it off to shower.

The breeze increased, becoming wind.

The ceiling rumbled.

The hole was swirling under the seeds and skin and juice, opening wide with Daddy's smile on the tail of moonbeams...

Yolanda turned, caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror over the fireplace. She nearly shrieked, thinking how right her father had been.

She looked a lot like her mother.

The stain backed toward the base of the wall, nearer the hole.

She could easily stick her head through it now.

The wind almost knocked her off balance—but she held firm, knowing something about feelings and night and love and tears: all of them could only be judged by what they drew from suffering.

So long as that suffering never drew them back.

—and if you can leave through a hole you can *come back* through one, even if it's one piece at a time. But she loved him—and weren't you supposed to help the ones you loved put the pieces back together?

She ran to the wall, called his name into the aperture, watched as it gulped everything in like a last breath before dying. She jammed her hand through, hoped he might reach out to take it and come back—leave all the memories and pain behind like Mom had left them,

All But The Ties Eternal

without a backward glance of regret.

She pushed in deeper, felt something close round her wrist, something so very strong, yet so gentle and loving.

Suddenly the pressure of the grip turned to the prick of razors and sucked her arm in up to the shoulder.

The ceiling started to thunder.

She yanked back, knowing one of them would weaken soon because the stain and pieces were nearly gone now, and when they were gone the hole would . . . would . . .

. . . would keep growing until it had her, would still send the wind and thunder and memories and—

She wrenched away with all her strength—

—and felt herself pull free.

Yolanda fell back-first to the floor but didn't wait to catch her breath, didn't look at the hole; she sprinted out of the room, knowing how she could get him back. She couldn't do it with her hand, didn't dare try that again, yet she could make the hole bigger, help it to grow—and Michael would see the way out, he'd come back to her because he loved her, didn't want her to be alone, never again *I'm sorry, Daddy, that you missed Mom so bad but Michael is my family now, all the family I've got left*—

She ran through the kitchen, into the bathroom, unlocked the door to the basement, flipped on the light, and took the stairs three at a time.

The shotgun. She hadn't told the police about Daddy's shotgun, they'd only taken the pistol, but that was fine because she needed the shotgun now for Michael and—

—she ripped open the door to her father's work cabinet and found the twelve-gauge under a sheet of canvas. She grabbed the shells and loaded the gun, smiling as she pumped back—

—*cb-chick!*—

—and felt the first round slide securely into the chamber.

Back upstairs. Fast. In the living room.

In the mirror she saw the reflection of her mother gripping the gun that had killed Daddy; she tried to work up enough saliva to spit in Mom's face but her mouth was too dry so she hoisted the shotgun, pressed the butt against her shoulder, and pulled the trigger—

The ceiling thundered again as Mom shattered into a thousand glittering reflections. Yolanda looked down and saw how small the woman looked, staring up from the floor, shiny, sharp and smooth and empty-eyed pitiful.

She readied herself—

—*cb-chick!*—

—and aimed at the hole.

The wind slammed against her with angry hands, but it would not stop her. Nothing would.

Again and again and again the ceiling thundered as she blew the hole apart, her shoulder raw from the pounding of the shotgun's stock, her chest full of pain and fear, but she kept firing until the force of the blasts weakened her, knocking her from the garden wall.

She dropped to the floor, gazing at the hole.

Wide, dark, bloodied, she peered into the mouth of the web and saw forms moving within, like people passing on the street, and she listened for the sound of Michael's voice but instead heard different voices beckoning her to her: *Empty here, so empty without you, I love you I miss you I want you back please come*—

The hole began closing.

She tried to rise because they were in there, Daddy and Michael, but she was too spent, too hurt and weakened by it all. She fell back, saw a thousand reflections of her mother's face glaring up at her—

—and knew what to do.

"Wait for me," she said. Whispered. Weakly.

She wanted to be in there with them, away from all the draining strength of suffering and the memories whose warmth was tainted by it. She fell forward, groping with shaking fingers for the shotgun, grabbed it, dragged it toward her, and sat up.

The hole was so small now, so tiny—one shimmering globule was on the edge, winking at her, *hurry, hurry, get across the ledge.*

She propped up the shotgun between her knees—

—*ch-chick!*—

—and shoved the barrel deep into her mouth.

The globule smiled, then winked at her like Daddy letting her in on some little secret *that's my girl just get over the mountain, don't fall off and I'll tell you something special, because you were brave, you made it back to me—*

From the corner of her eye she saw a thousand images of her mother, all of them screaming.

Then Daddy's voice again: *Almost there, honey, keep your balance, don't slip, don't fall away like Mommy did because I'll never leave you like she did, I'll always be here, I'll be right here waiting for you and always—*

—the ceiling thundered one last time, and a new web spread across the wall—

—*love you....*