Specter’s Penitence

Living on the streets is not for the weak of heart. It requires the ability to improvise, adapt, and overcome. Otherwise you drown in despair, you go insane, or you die. However, the rules of life are different. You do not trust anyone. You expect to be shunned. You learn to see yourself as a piece of trash littering the streets. You are nothing but an unfortunate side effect of city life, an aspect that makes visitors uncomfortable, eyes shifting, hands clutching purses and wallets close. You keep your head down. You avoid eye contact. You learn to rotate, to stay away from rebukes by angry business owners who claim their fiscal failures are your fault, yet you learn quickly not to venture too far into unknown territories. You must be careful not to run into trouble with the long-standing homeless men who strategically staked their claim on a street corner decades ago, and have not moved since. These are the people you very quickly learn not to cross. Their seniority gives them permission to do anything to the rest of us, without consequence. But above all, Rule One of living on the streets is do not tell anyone your name. Not anyone.

The world sweats red, white, and blue. The colors drip from the Austin sky, cover every white picket fence. Every shimmer of false hope lying in waiting for gullible eyes above the steaming pavement sparkles red, glitters white, twinkles blue, before it fades away and allows reality to go on. I trudge onward. Each bead of sweat gathering, swelling, lingering, and finally rolling down in sudden ecstasy for a moment, no more, glints those three revered colored, or perhaps is that simply imagined?

The road is not crowded; surely everyone else in this city is gathered with loved ones with flags whipping about in the wind and little children laughing as they create shimmering gold hearts in the air with their sparklers. The sky is unusually pink, ferociously beautiful, and yet I am the only one to watch it burn as I trek along the pavement in the still-searing heat. My feet, so accustomed now to this daily route, move without direction as my mind wanders and my eyes study the holiday decorations strung across the tall, intricate gates around the houses on either side of me.

I feel another bead of sweat roll down my neck, and I brush it away, noting the streak of blue paint on the back of my hand. No, I decide after studying it for a moment, that isn’t the perfect match for her cerulean eyes. Tomorrow, when I return to the maze of columns, the practical mausoleum of marble, I must correct that. I glance sadly at the mansions. Tomorrow would be my last day trekking through these streets of ungodly opulence. Tomorrow would be my last day of passing the mansion.

It catches my eye as I round a corner, sitting all alone atop the perfectly manicured hill. The lack of decorations does not surprise me, though it stands out awkwardly from the others, not festooned with a single tricolor streamer, without a single flag waving in the wind. The turrets, unlike those of the other mansions, are not adorned in their very best Fourth of July finery. I wonder for the thousandth time what recluse from society had banished himself from the world to take up residence in such a palatial prison. I envy his determined self-capture. But this, I remind myself, this penance inflicted on me by my own steady hands and the unrelinquishing determination gripping my resilient mind is sufficient.
I study the mansion a second longer, mesmerized by the blushing pink windows glinting
in the last shining moments before the sun’s ethereal rays slip below the horizon with an easy
grace and a promise to return tomorrow. Yet I know better than to trust promises. I know better
than to be so naïve as to look upon tomorrow as certain, as hope, as opportunity. I know better
than anyone how quickly the world can turn on you, can destroy you, can ruin you. I know
better.

But I must go, I told myself, admonishing myself for my slowed pace. I certainly could
not wait around here in the seething heat and waste away my days studying some edifice.
Perhaps in another world, another life, I could dawdle here, lost in thought and swept up in
speculation. But not in this life. This life necessitates my expedient return, or there will be
nothing to return to tomorrow. This life is accountable for the streak of lingering blue paint,
mocking me; and for the long, flowing skirt that the breeze abuses mercilessly as the fabric
slowly suffocates me; and of course, for the wretched talismans clinking together, even buried
depth in my bag, in a haunting song of mockery.

The damned medallions do not cease their derisive hymn until I reach my alley.
Naturally, my domain of the past weeks has been stolen, but unlike the other times, this is not
some newcomer, someone inexperienced at this lifestyle. One glance at the elderly man nestled
comfortably into my home for the past week – sheltered from most of the glares of the citizens,
the disdain of the visitors, and the sympathetic stares of the bleeding hearts – and I know to
move on. This man is the original Austin specter, the phantom who was appearing in every part
of this city with his cup and his sign before any of the rest of us second-class apparitions were
learning where Texas was on the map in elementary school.

The medallions laugh as I turn on my heel wordlessly, my paintbrushes clicking together
in my bag as I set off with meandering steps to find another home for the night. I stop in a
convenient store, keeping my head down. The clerk glances up at me, but his gaze passes by me.
At least I am not as grimy or unkempt as the other ghosts. They are seen sometimes. I, however,
remain unnoticed as I buy my evening meal of a sausage biscuit, an apple, a bottle of water,
scooping change out of my bag and letting it fall like raindrops on the counter. The cashier looks
exasperated, but counts my coins all the same.

My bag, the old linen one with the faded words which I can’t make out anymore, is empty
of currency when the bell jingles behind me, but I hold my head high and carry on as if I am the
richest woman in the world. Perhaps in a different life. But I deserve this one, so a biscuit and
water it is. I am better than self-pity. I will never sink so low. Anything would be preferable to
such a horribly shallow, self-centric existence. Death, even. I only say that because no one would
be touched by my death, by the eternal disappearance of an ugly eyesore on the city streets, the
evaporation of a ghost. Because if there were one person in this world whose life I would affect
by the loss of my own, I would preserve it with the utmost care, protecting it with unceasing
attentiveness. Surely everyone ought to have that decency, to recognize their life belongs not to
them but to those around them. Surely, I pray you, please convince me, that people are
considerate enough to see that. Please.

I put the desperate thoughts from my mind as I settle on a bench, resting my feet. The
walk to the wealthy neighborhoods is not a short one by any stretch of the imagination
God knows I’ve endured worse in my life. I keep my head down, praying my daily prayer that I might
avoid recognition.

Tonight I find myself near the river, my bag tucked under my head, my body pressed
against the warm concrete as I resign myself to sleep in the conspicuity of the sidewalk. I try
with all my might to melt my frame into nothing more than perhaps a shadow cast by the
skyscraper, the last thought lingering on my mind before I drift away into dreams a silent plead
that no police officers will wake me with questions, that I am not gently wakened by the hand of
a concerned social worker. I could not be caught, or they would try to help me.
Thankfully, I wake still undisturbed, though the city sounds arouse me before the sun even breaches the sky. And so, swinging the bag over my shoulder and brushing dirt from my long skirt, I set out into the hazy city, illuminated by a painter’s palette of dyes swept across the Austin sky. I stopped at a water fountain, reveling in the semi-cool water’s touch as I scooped it up and scrubbed it on my arms and face until, in the dim reflection of a building’s enormous windows, the stranded young woman I saw looking back at me seemed presentable enough to cast an illusion of one possessing more than four paintbrushes, the clothes on her body, the mocking trinkets still laughing at me even this early in the day, and the faded linen bag commemorating some event from her past life. But, I reflect as I dig about in the regular dumpster for the baker’s unsellable, hardened bread, that life is gone, never to return again. This is what I deserve.

I finish my painting in good time and exit the marble mausoleum with a smile on my face and a substantial envelope of money that I tuck into my bag without a second glance. I am jobless now, but I am free from this world of horribly shameless wealth.

I am not, however, free from the stifling, suffocating heat that weighs upon me and makes my every breath labored. A beat of sweat rolls down my temple with crisp precision and determined purpose, and I wish I had thought to bring water with me. I close my eyes, willing the heat-induced nausea to go away, but it persists. When my hand rose to forehead, willing it to stop burning, I note wearily that it is shaking. My head throbs. But I have endured worse, haven’t I? Much worse, not in this life but in the last. This is nothing compared to the running until I threw up, and even running after that. But the resurfacing memories, those memories I tried so diligently to bury, to lock in some dungeon deep in my consciousness, do not ease the spell of illness descending on me with the heavy air.

I must be hallucinating, too, I realize calmly, for there appears to my eyes to be a silhouette in the mansion’s turret window. The heat is playing with my mind. I stop, mulling over this new possibility, trying to breathe away the nausea. It is a long, hot walk back to the city.

Something clatters against the pavement. The damned medallions, the manifestation of the horrors I ran from, have escaped their captivity! Quickly, quickly, stop them! But my rebellious fingers drop the other, too, as the heat makes me black out for a moment as I lung to detain the felons again, to return them to their incarceration for the sins they committed.

But the speeding car, rushing from nowhere, strikes me first.

I feel my right side crunch from the impact.

I am flying through the air, I note placidly.

The pavement is hot.

My body hurts.

A car door slams.

Voices.

Voices wanting to know my name, to know if I am alright.

They cannot know my name. They cannot.

I cannot tell them whether or not I am alright.

My gaze catches for a second on the mansion, but the turret is empty.

Now, perhaps if I were still floating along in my past life before it happened, the silhouette would materialize as an angel at my side to give me water and soothe the strange, burning pain in my side, perhaps it would carry me with the greatest ease into his magnificent refuge, lay me gently on some exquisite leather couch and gently nurse me back to health. But that girl is no longer alive. She died months ago, when the bullet was released into the horrible reality of space for the fraction of a millisecond before confidently finding its mark.

Maybe, I reason, if I die now, I can stop my penance.
But that wouldn’t be fair, would it? I deserve this life. I don’t deserve such an easy exit. And I must think of the driver of this car. This is not his fault. He ought not to suffer for accidentally killing a specter.

And, I tell myself with a sigh as I lift my head, I am very much alive. I am certainly well enough to evade this well-meaning, invasive human. He must not know. I must escape with the wretched trinkets before the ambulance arrives. I clench my fist in determination, and using all my carefully-perfected willpower, spring to my feet. I am completely oblivious to the man’s reaction. I utterly ignore him as I bend down — ignoring the searing pain in my side — and grab the two talismans from the pavement, holding them so tightly in my fist that I feel their cursed shapes imprinting on my palm. But it doesn’t matter now. And so I run. As fast as I possibly can, tapping into the speed of my prior life, digging into the endurance I practiced in that life, I run off the street towards the one un-gated length of freedom. The mansion’s hill.

I hide behind the turret when the ambulance comes. The frantic man explains his situation, but after a half-hearted look around, the police and paramedics have him fill out a report and they are gone, letting me breathe easier.

But I linger, brushing my fingertips over the turret’s stone walls, all the same. If I am caught, they will break me. Telling them would break me. I cannot shatter myself further. But it seems my ribs have been shattered. The pain accompanying each breath is consuming, but it is distant, an explosion on the farther horizon, unmistakably present in immense glory but removed from my mind all the same. I have felt worse, I reason. I have felt far, far worse, not just physically. I endured it. Somehow, I survived it, I tell myself as I start walking again, the hem of my fading skirt brushing against the manicured perfection of the too-green lawn. It is horribly green. Make it brown, make it dust, make it swirl up about one with every uncommon breeze, every step. But it is disobedient to the pleadings of my mind, and I sigh, resigned to its disobedience. The sigh, however, makes my side burn like a small explosion and I double over in pain, demanding my ribs to right themselves.

“Are you alright?”

The voice makes me bolt upright, and pressing my hand to my side, I start off at a run away from the inquiry.

My feet hit the pavement hard as I leapt into the road, the talismans mocking me with a cacophony of clicks.

“Stop, don’t worry, I just…” He is closing in on my, and I curse myself for my impediment to my former speed. My lungs struggle to inflate, and I am suddenly dizzy, so much so that the pavement seems to sway like a ship’s deck.

Fingers clench around my wrist, and though I am tempted in those seconds to lash out, I fight my instincts. This firm grasp, however unwelcome, keeps me upright. And, I must admit, I am intrigued by this long-imagined recluse who must have with such admirable determination banished himself from society into the palatial prison; the mysterious inhabitant of the mansion studied day after day on my long, hot walks.

He makes to let go, but he must feel the way I wobble, so he instead asks again, “Are you alright?”

I remain silent, keeping my head down, restraining my urge to study this ghost.

“I see you pass by my house every day, and I saw the car and then you disappeared and there’s no way in the world that you’re well. Please talk to me.” He pauses somewhat uncomfortably. I wonder if he notices the way I start when he says he saw me. How can it be that a human see a specter? “I won’t call the... anyone.”

I nearly flush, realizing what my escape from the police officers must have looked like. What kind of woman this man might mistake me for. But when I open my mouth and try to
force out words, my voice cracks, a reminder that I haven’t spoken in days. Weeks? I can’t recall the last time I spoke in this life. The chatter of my prior life is long gone. So instead I shake my head, trying not to betray my pain or my identity to him.

“What’s your name?” he asks after a pause.

I shake my head fervently. I will not lie, but I certainly will not tell the truth.

He glances around, the sunlight bathing his face in rays of warmth. “I’ll admit, I’ve watched you walk by my house for weeks now. I feel like I already know you.” He paused. “You’re obviously not well. Would you like to come inside?” He shrugs as if truly indifferent, which I appreciate, as he motions toward the commanding manor sitting proudly atop the perfectly green hill.

If I thought I could walk back to the city center I would turn away and escape from this man forever, but I see no choice but to nod and docilely follow him back to his horrifyingly grand mansion. Perhaps he would turn out to be a ghost, too. Perhaps he, too, had imprisoned himself in some half-life in reparation for his sins. But I hope if this is the case his might be forgiven through penance. Mine will never be righted.

But, I remind myself, is it not part of my penance that I cannot find a kindred spirit? I must be alone. I must feel every pain for myself. I must grieve alone. I must seek that elusive idea, reparation, on my own.

I feel suddenly colder towards him, vowing to remain nothing but an enigma to him, and to flee as soon as possible. Yet still I trudge along the too-green grass until I reach the bottommost step of the grand staircase leading to an even grander oak door. I take one step, and another, and another, trying to move my torso as little as possible, but my lungs threaten to abandon me. The man, however, makes no further move to help me, so I drag myself up the stairs, ensuring carefully that the long, albeit worn, skirt continues to cover me. But when I reach the doorframe I am forced to rest against the wall to try to catch my breath, to attempt to suppress the pain.

“You’ve…” My throat is chalky from disuse. “You’ve seen me walk by?” I push myself onward as he opens the door just open enough to allow me entrance.

He nods, and pulls the heavy door shut. We stand in a grand foyer of rich woods and vaulted ceilings. My ears discern the faint hymn of classical music breathing life into the air between the rich walls. The enchanting melody sends a shiver down my back. “Where do you walk every day? It’s fascinated me.”

“I’m an artist,” I murmur. “I’ve been working on a painting for an elderly woman nearby.”

“You live close by then?” His shining black oxfords are soundless as he leads me across glistening floors.

“Something like that,” I say, and I feel his hand instinctively go to my back as I sway. “You really ought to lie down. Here.” He points to the nearest couch, a leather settee. I do not deserve this. This is far too grand for me. But he is insistent that I at least sit, and so I reluctantly take a seat. He calls for his housekeeper, then sits on an ottoman across from me. “Is anything broken?”

“I can’t say,” I murmur, arranging my long skirt carefully. “Should I call for a doctor?”

“I’ll be alright.” I try to straighten my posture to make my statement more convincing, but I wince.

“If you’re sure…” he says hesitantly.

“Quite,” I tell him, interlacing my fingers. “But thank you…?”

“Chase,” he supplies. “Chase Caldwell.”

He waits, but I do not share my name. It is a horrible name, which no one else ought to be burdened with. “Thank you, Chase,” I say with as much grace as I can summon.

5
“I saw you get hit by that car,” he says after a pause. “I saw you hide behind my house. I saw you run from the cops.”

“And how long exactly have you been watching me?”

“Forgive me, that sounded… stalker-ish.” He laughs, and I manage a smile. It wasn’t funny. I ought not to be noticed.

“And what do you do that you are able to spend your days staring out your windows? Watch the rest of us pass by like shadows from your perch on the hill?”

If he is taken aback by the tone of my questions, he doesn’t show it, for he is mild as he replies, “My father made a few good investments. I made a few more.”

“He’s quite the young mogul,” a woman intones as she bustles into the room. “I’m Mr. Caldwell’s housekeeper. He told me you aren’t well?”

I nod, trying to remain impassive as I grasp my side, as if I might physically hold in the pain.

“No, she was run off the road by another crazy driver,” Chase says, and I am surprised by his lie. “She tripped and she thinks she may have hurt her ribs.”

“That’s correct,” I affirm softly. “I’m sorry for the trouble. Perhaps if you have aspirin and could give me some ice… I’ll be on my way soon.”

“I’ll get some right away,” she says. “But I’m sure you’re welcome for as long as you’d like, right Mr. Caldwell?”

“Of course,” he says, and I am impressed by his ability to lie again so smoothly. When the housekeeper has retreated, I turn to him again. “I’m sorry to intrude. I can go now-”

“Stop apologizing!” he says. “I wouldn’t have brought you all the way up here just to throw you out, would I?”

“I suppose that wouldn’t be very logical,” I concede.

He rubs his jaw thoughtfully. “So what kind of art is your specialty?”

“Oil paintings.”

He glances around the room. “Do you think oil paintings might make this room a little brighter? I’ve always thought it rather dark from the wood.”

“I think so,” I tell him, and use it as an excuse to study the extravagant chandelier overhead. “And what kind of investing is your specialty?”

He sighs. “Nothing in particular. They said I had a special prowess for it in general, but I didn’t like it at all. So now I am practically a twenty-four year old retiree. Maybe I ought to take up painting.”

“It can be rather enjoyable. Though it depends, of course, on your subject and your employer.”

“Well, if I were to hire you, what you like to paint?”

“That’s not my job to chose,” I say with a shrug.

“What was your last painting?”

“A portrait and a landscape. Alaska. She was pining for the cold.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Understandable, what with this heat. And have you been to Alaska? Sounds like an excellent opportunity for a ‘work trip’ to me.” He laughs easily, and before I can think of a reply the housekeeper returns, but Chase insists on taking the ice, washcloth, glass of water, and little pill bottle from her. He holds the glass and two of the pills out to me. “Here, these should help.”

“Thank you.”

“And here, she got this wet for you. It will help you to cool off a bit.” He puts the washcloth on my forehead, and though I am taken aback by his touch when his hand brushes my
forehead, I instantly feel the heat seeping away from my forehead. It doesn’t even register to me until now how cool it is here, in this coliseum of wealth, where cost is of no avail in any subject.

“Aren’t you hot in that sweater?”

“No,” I lie, pulling the cardigan’s familiar fabric closer around me. “But the ice will feel good.”

It stings and I winch, and I can he is trying to distract me when he asks, “How much are you usually paid? I think I’d very much like to see what you could conjure up for me.”

“Commission is based on the project. And really, I insist, if you want me to paint, you must tell me what my subject will be.”

“How soon could you start?”

“Whenever you’d like.”

“How about we say whenever your ribs have healed?”

“I would prefer to start sooner than that. And besides, it’s not too bad.”

“You don’t have to just say that.”

“I’ve experienced much worse, I mean,” I tell him.

“If you’re sure... How about Monday?”

“What time should I be here?”

“Eight, then.”

I pull the ice away from my ribs, inspecting the numbing area. “Then I guess I’ll see you then. I really ought to go, though. I’m sorry for taking some of your time.”

He stands, and helps me to my feet. “Anytime,” he says.

We cross the shining foyer again, and he watches from the window as I descend again into reality. When I glance back over my shoulder, he gives me a faint smile. I continue along the road, and when I can’t resist looking back again, he is gone, as if he really were nothing but a ghost. Perhaps that is all Chase Caldwell is: an apparition.

When I knock on the imposing door Monday morning, Chase’s housekeeper answers, smiling brightly when she sees me and inquiring immediately after my health. I assure her that while I may not be completely good as new, I have certainly been restored to greater wellbeing. She asks me my name as she leads me to the room where her employer wants the painting, but I evade the question by instead asking after the nature of the room – what instruments does he play? How long has he been playing? She begins to explain as she guides me through the mahogany castle, but soon enough I can tell. The melodious hymn of a grand piano fills the space with a sweet melancholy that echoes about the mansions and slinks around corners and slips under door cracks. I wonder whether Beethoven himself had sounded so lovely at his instrument.

I find myself standing in the doorway, bag of paintbrushes slung over my shoulder, just watching the way his fingers glide over the keys and how the jet-black piano murmurs the heartbreaking melodies with such diligence and precision. He continues playing, and I wonder if he sees me, but I do not have the heart to bring the music to an end.

After a minute or two I realize the housekeeper has disappeared, and as the music softens to barely a whisper, I say softly, “Mr. Caldwell...”

He holds out the final note for a moment longer, then swivels around on the piano bench. “Call me Chase.”

“Chase, then. I’m sorry to interrupt.”

“Not at all.” He pauses. “How long did I keep you waiting?”
“Don’t worry about it,” I tell him. “It was beautiful. Now, where and of what would you like your painting? Also, I am accustomed to working in-house if that is alright...”

He shows me a stretch of wall, explaining the nature of the desired piece.

“I’ll have a room set up for your work,” he tells me. “But until then, would you like anything? I might be able to find some scones.”

“No thank you,” I tell him, but I surreptitiously press my hand to my side, trying to quell the dull rumble of my stomach. My last meal was a salad and bowl of soup yesterday, a treat using some of my commission money, but an expensive enough one to not spend any this morning.

But when the room is made up he places a china plate of scones on a table all the same before leaving me with a smile and a promise to come check on the work’s progress as soon as he’d successfully evaded a conference call.

But he only appears for a few moments before being called away again for some purpose or another, and I spend the remainder of my day alone with my paintbrushes. When I reach a good stopping point for the day, I leave my canvas and, bidding that she tell Chase goodbye for me, promise the housekeeper I will return tomorrow.

I come the next day, and the next, and the next; each morning I am greeted by the piano’s murmur, and find myself alone in a magnificent little room, left to brush my imagination onto the canvas. I am nearly finished, focused now on the details, when Chase steps into the room and pulls over a stool, taking a seat beside me.

“It’s perfect,” he tells me.

“No, not quite yet,” I say softly, swirling colors on my palette. “But soon it ought to be.”

“When do you think it’ll be completed? No rush,” he adds.

“Tomorrow evening,” I estimate after studying my handiwork. I wipe my hands on a towel, and brush my hair behind my shoulder.

“Could I take you out to celebrate then? Tomorrow, I mean.”

I glance down at the old skirt and blouse, my only clothes, on which I’m surprised he has not commented. Certainly these are not nice enough. “To dinner?”

“We can go wherever you’d like.”

“Maybe,” I tell him, holding in a sigh. “Might I think about it?”

“Oh, of course.” He grins. “I don’t go out much, I’ve become something of a hermit. But I ought to get out, and we might as well celebrate your accomplishment. It makes for a good excuse.”

“Alright, then,” I concede. But a single drop of hope tints my stoicism.

I spend the night below a streetlamp, re-hemming the long skirt I bought last evening for a good price on account of its manufacturer’s flaws. But by the next morning, as I float along the streets, hardening bread in hand, I regret my answer. I must be free of this world of wealth; I cannot allow myself to be treated thus. I cannot go out to dinner with this man. The former me had rarely indulged so; certainly it was unsuitable for me now to go.

So when I see Chase, I wring my hands, searching for some way to explain that I cannot go. However, before I can begin he apologizes profusely.

“I’m so sorry, we can’t go tonight. And you look so lovely, too,” he laments. It makes me want to dishevel my hair further and ruin this skirt, a damned symbol of my vanity. “Emilia called, and she’s insisting on coming tonight.”

“I see,” I murmur. Good. Perhaps his girlfriend deserves to be taken to some exquisite restaurant, one I would never belong in.
“She heard, too, that I commissioned a new painting, and she’s quite insistent on seeing it this evening.”

“Of course, I’ll return to my work right away.” I flit away, nearly running to the solitude of my work, glad to rest after the long walk. For all my protesting of health, I know my ribs will not truly heal for weeks, a fact they enjoy reminding me of with every step. At least the sky this morning was cloudy, the sun not mocking me like every other day. I did not have to stop before reaching Chase’s neighborhood to whisk away the inevitable sweat and allow my traitorous red face to fade again into an innocuous pale.

When the raindrops wake me in the middle of the night my initial thought, pieced together by my mostly-asleep brain, is thanksgiving that perhaps the stifling heat and the inescapable stench of the city’s trash might now finally be washed away by a good, steady, cleansing rain. I used to love rain in my old life, I remember vaguely, as though someone else had confided in me this secret long ago and now just barely tugs at my memories.

But as I rise and swiftly seek shelter below the plastic roof of the bus stop, I inspect my skirt and blouse, already spotted with heaven’s spiteful tears, and gaze up at the pitch black sky. The streetlights glow yellow in defiance, and against their determined shine I see the raindrops increasing in vehemence as they throw themselves down to earth. I fall asleep regretting my choice to ever hide behind the turret, to ever meet Chase, to ever agree to paint for him.

I wake with the early sun, hoping the rain has ceased its taunting cascade, but it continues in a steady pour, drenching the empty streets, swirling into puddles along the abandoned sidewalks.

So it is with a sigh that I step out into the rain, arms dangling at my side, not even trying to hide myself from the sky’s wrath, a useless occupation. Droplets roll down my face, water drenches my hair and clothes, my little flats slosh with water with each step. The walk seems longer than usual, and I try to think of some excuse for my appearance to tell Chase, but my mind is blank as I am wet so I trudge onward, letting the hem of my long skirt brush the wet pavement as I make my way towards the grand mansion.

When I arrive I glance at the windows, searching for the specter’s gaze, but I do not find it so I duck behind the turret, catching a break from the rain as I hug close to the stone. I smooth the flyaways of my hair as best I can, wring water from my cardigan, and shake out my skirt a bit. I give myself a moment longer to breathe freely, then I resolutely brave the rain again.

I hold my head high, letting the rain nearly drown me, as I wait for the imposing door to be answered.

“Who are you?”

One glance at the woman behind the cracked open door, her fingers gripping it imposingly as if afraid I might try to push my way past her, and I instantly avert my eyes from her sharp gaze.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” I murmur. “I’m here to see Mr. Caldwell.”

She studies my appearance. “Why?”

I clutch my side as the old haunt twinges with pain. “I’m sorry…”

“What are you looking for, food and shelter? This is not a homeless shelter,” she tells me, and shuts the door.

I turn to walk away, but I find myself running, tripping over my skirt as I fly down the hill again. For the last time, I tell myself. This is the last time.
Living on the streets is not for the weak of heart.
Penance is not for the weak.
To survive like this is not for the weak.
Then why do I feel so weak?
Perhaps the imperfect repair of my bones it to blame.
Perhaps it is the endless stream of paintings I must create to keep money in my pocket.
Perhaps it is the lack of human interaction these last few weeks, ever since Chase’s door was slammed in my face.
Perhaps, though it is good for my penance, such loneliness, such isolation, is not good for a pretty young woman.
And so the tears suspended in my eyes now are justified, I reason as I wander along the side of the road.
But, I argue, I have not cried since that day. This is all too familiar. These horrible pricks of salt water as they spill onto my cheeks are too reminiscent of the day my world ended. These tears and the damned trinkets. But the latter cannot be erased, can they? Yet these can, these betrayals of my dignified penance. So I rub the tears from my cheeks, lingering for a second, eyes closed, counting the heartbeats in my fingertips.
“Why are you crying?”
My eyes shoot open at the voice. Chase stands up on the hill, gazing down at me from the marble steps.
“It doesn’t matter,” I murmur, but my voice catches on emotion, my throat dry.
“Why did you never come back?” He is moving down the perfect manicured lawn now, approaching me.
“That doesn’t matter either.” I wipe away a single tear.
“It does to me.”
“Did Emilia like the painting?”
“She thought it was beautiful, and I was sorry you never came because she wanted to commission one.”
“I’m sorry,” I say as he steps onto the pavement, finally at my level.
“Though you did dodge a bullet,” he laughs, and I hope he doesn’t notice the instant tension in my body. “She would be a horrible employer, so it probably is for the best.”
“Emilia would be?” I run my hand over my hair for something to do.
“She was a strict mother, so I can only imagine how she would act towards-”
“Your mother?”
“Yes, of course,” he says, putting his hands in his pockets. “She believed in a rather totalitarian approach to parenthood. She still does, too.”
“Oh.” I let a little breath out. “I thought... You never said... I thought she was your girlfriend.”
He laughs. “Of course not. You didn’t think I would ask you out to dinner if I were in a relationship, did you?”
“I thought.... I thought you meant... I don’t know.”
“I’m still waiting for you to take me up on my offer.”
“Maybe,” I murmur, trying to still my rapid heartbeat, trying to suppress the pleasurable warmth seeping through my body.
“I just can’t believe I finally caught you. I’ve been waiting for you to come again.”
“Why would I? Are you not pleased with the painting?”
“Of course it’s not that. I wanted to see you again.”
“So you could ask me out again?”
“Maybe,” he says with a smile and a little shrug. “Or how about this. How would you like to come to a dinner party my mother is forcing me to have here on Saturday? She always insists
on throwing a birthday party for me as an excuse to invite all my past partners and clients to try and convince me to go back into investing so she can become even richer.”

“It doesn’t work?”
“She always holds out that it will, and I break her heart every year.”
“These aren’t my kind of people, Chase.”
“You’re a person, they’re people. Money doesn’t matter to me. Occupation means nothing to me.”
“They mean something to everyone else.”
“Then come for me. Not for them. Just for me.”
“Alright,” I concede with a smile, though I damn myself silently for betraying my penance. “Only because it’s your birthday.”

He grins. “Fair enough. It starts at seven, and as my mother is receiving guests that is not a suggestion. It’s formal, but I’m sure you’ll look lovely in whatever you wear.”
“I’ll see you then,” I tell him with a smile, and turn away to hide the blush.

He calls after me once I have made my way down the street a few paces from him.
“It doesn’t matter anymore,” I lie.

The remainder of the week I attack my projects with a new energy, an inspired creativity, that carries me to Friday in a rush of anticipation, even if it is carefully masked behind a façade of even stoicism. Yet when the day comes, the trinkets remind me that while I might be allowed this one day, I must return tonight to the littered streets. So I sigh, and make my preparations with as little emotion as possible.

I braid a bit of my hair into a bit of a crown, but it makes me feel too regal so I loop the rest of my hair into a careless bun. I spend nearly all the remaining money from the painting commission on a plain purple maxi dress which, when I slip in on in a restaurant bathroom, nearly covers all of the worn-old ballet flats I can’t afford to replace. My other skirt and blouse are wadded up and carefully tucked in my bag. I refuse to look in the mirror at my reflection, however, and quickly slip away before I can be tempted to call myself anything resembling beautiful.

I keep my head down as I braid past throngs of strangers, men who slyly look me over, the homeless who watch me, wondering why the woman in the purple dress seems distantly, yet distinctly, familiar.

I savor the long walk to the mansion on the hill tonight, relishing the swish of the flowing material and the pale moonlight gleaming on my skin, a gleaming juxtaposition against the purple gown.

When I confront the line of expensive cars parked along the street and in the grand driveway I breathe deeply, steadying my nerves, reminding myself that I must heed the invitation since I accepted. Perhaps I ought to have avoided this altogether. But it is too late for those thoughts, so I float up the hill and find myself ascending the steps. Warm yellow light pours from the transom and the windows glow, bathing me in light as I tentatively knock. When I hear footsteps, I try my best to hide my old warn bag behind me in case anyone but Chase answers, and I wonder momentarily if I would again be recognized by his mother and again turned away.

The door swings open and I hold my breath as even more light is cast over me. “You came.” Chase looks genuinely surprised, but pleased.

“Happy birthday,” I murmur nervously, unsure why I decided to come in the first place. I do not belong here.
“I’m glad you came,” he tells me, looking at me intently. “I told you I would.” “Last time…” “Chase who are you…?” The sharp voice fits the sharp gaze I recognize, and I bow my head as Emilia approaches. Before he can say anything, however, a light of recognition comes into her eyes. “Why is she here?” She motions to me as if I am an object. “I sent her away last time, and I thought you would understand clearly this is a private home and a private party, but obviously I was mistaken in your abilities.” “I invited her here.” Chase says sharply. “And you didn’t even tell me she was here last time?” He looks at me regretfully, understanding now. I remain silent. “She obviously wanted something, why else would such a girl be around?” “She’s the artist I told you about!” “How was I to know that! And certainly that does not help your case of inviting her here.” “Who did you think she was last time?” “I don’t know, Chase, from the absolutely ragged clothes and the mess she was in I thought she was some beggar or woman of the streets. And I see even now you’re still wearing those wretched shoes.” She looks triumphant. “Get out of my house,” Chase growls, and the anger in his usually passive face scares me. “Don’t overreact, Chase, how was I to know? She’s obviously your charity case-” “Don’t say another word, woman, or get out of my house.” He seems ready to tear her to pieces. I wonder for an instant if he’s going to strike her. “I’ll go,” I murmur, turning away. It is not fair me to come between a mother and her child, even a woman like this. “No, please stay,” he tells me, his features softening a bit, though he doesn’t stop glaring at his mother. “Go back to your little party,” he tells her, and after returning the glare for a few more seconds, she goes wordlessly. “Come in,” Chase says once she is gone again. “I don’t think I should.” “I want you to.” “I don’t belong here.” “You belong here as much as I belong.” He bites his lip. “Please.” “Aren’t you going to wonder who I am and where I came from like your mother did? I wouldn’t blame you.” “I just want you to have a good time tonight.” “Alright,” I concede, and follow him across the threshold. He puts my bag somewhere inconspicuous at my request, and he guides me through the swirling sea of people spilling into every room of his grand house. “What do I say if they ask me why I’m here?” I ask him softly, straightening my dress. “Tell them I invited you.” He smiles. “Now does this pass for enjoyment?” “You don’t like parties?” “Would I live alone and hide from society if I did?” “I do that, too,” I tell him, though I know he must be partially joking. I am not. “Then we can pretend together then,” he says, straightening his already perfect suit coat. “I suppose so,” I say. But when he leaves me, called away by the sharp voice to greet guests and play his part, I am stiff and uncomfortable, wondering how I am to act. The talismans in my bag, even tucked away somewhere, still manage to mock me. I look left. I look right. People laughing, people talking, the warmth of old acquaintances and the murmur of easy conversations all around me. But I do not belong here.
We are called to sit at the gleaming table, and once I take my seat I play with my hands, wringing them uncomfortably in my lap. Luckily, no one questions my presence, too caught up in conversation and the anticipation of a grand meal to notice the quiet young woman in the purple dress. But even in my silence I can hear the damned trinkets mocking me, their haunting echo filling my head, making my posture slump with the crushing weight.

But Chase approaches, so I do my best to throw back my shoulders and appear at the greatest ease.

“How are you doing? Do I still look as if I am enjoying myself?” He strikes a ridiculous pose, and I have laugh.

“You look fine,” I tell him, and I am surprised as he sits beside me.

“And you look better than that,” he says, and unless I am imagining things, he seems nearly incapable of resisting his hands from touching the crown of hair encircling my head. I realize he has never seen me in anything but the old maxi skirt and blouse.

Not knowing how to respond, I give him a small smile and busy myself with unfolding my napkin and draping it carefully across my lap. “Shouldn’t you sit with your important guests?” I ask after a pause of conspicuous silence between us.

“See that man across the table,” Chase tells me, and I nod. “I worked with him for one month three years ago. The man sitting next to him was a friend of my father. That one right there, the bald one, I’ve never seen him before in my life. These people don’t matter to me.”

“And so why do you choose to sit beside me, then? Why not beside someone who matters to you?”

“Can’t you understand,” he says, looking at me softly, “that’s why I’m here, beside you. Because you matter to me.”

“I have failed,” I cry after a moment, lamenting the loss of my penitence. Throwing my napkin down, I nearly run out of the room, avoiding his eyes. I flee to the first empty room I come upon, one clothed in rich mahogany and swimming in the distinct smell of ancient texts and dusty novels bearing within their simple covers the greatest pains. It is not simply another room, it is another world. Noticing a simple wooden chair, I take a seat at the table that sits amid the vast sea of bookshelves and attempt to calm my heart by studying the globe which emanates somehow a spirit of studiousness and an air of transcendental dreams. But I know better, the world is no such beautiful, forgiving place. But I ought not to dash Chase’s enduring optimism against the cold stones of reality.

“What do you not like the party? If you’re not having a good time I’ll send everyone away and...”

“No,” I say quickly, running a hand over my face, seeking composure. “Of course it’s a lovely party.”

He gestures around the mahogany realm. “Do you like my library? I’ve been working on collecting rare editions and manuscripts.”

“It’s a beautiful room,” I say softly.

He looks as if he is coming to show me something on his globe, but he stops and kneels down in front of me. My heartbeat spikes, and though I want to look away from his eyes, I find that I cannot.

“It’s not the room that’s beautiful,” he murmurs, and he plays with a piece of my hair that has escaped the loose bun. We are so close now that I can smell the taint of wine on his lips. His soft eyes study me intently for a moment or two, and then he is leaning towards me.

But before he can kiss me a wave of crippling nausea arises from the depths of my fractured heart and push past him roughly, but I barely make it three steps before I double over in pain and throw up, tears streaming from my eyes as I retch horribly.
“What’s wrong?” Chase is at my side, alarmed, unsure of what to do. I barely register how there was nothing in my body for me to throw up, or how embarrassing it is to ruin this perfect room with the burning stomach acid.

“Let me... I can...” When I glance at him, even with the salty tears blurring my vision, I can see the unmistakable fright in his eyes. “Let me take you to lie down...”

He reaches to swing me into his arms. “No!” I push him away from me as hard as I can, and even in my pathetic state, I am stronger than he expects.

He is helpless, he is lost, he is panicked. Who is this horrible woman he has invited so kindly into his magnificent home, he must wonder.

But I can do nothing but press my hands to my face so hard it hurts, the pain reassuringly familiar to my being. Yet it fails me. The emotional pain is too great to be distracted by something so wearily common. The threads, woven into a tapestry of the fragile essence of consciousness are finally not just fraying, no longer simply threatening, but they are unraveling. The careful knots holding me together since that day are snapping under the strain.

“I’m...sorry...” I gasp out, silent tears still dripping down my face. “Forgive me, Chase. Forgive me, forgive me, please.”

“Are you alright?” He asks, but we both know the answer, so we stand in silence.

“I can’t let you kiss me until you know my name.”

“Alright,” he says, guiding me back to the chair.

My voice trembles. “Rem...” But it gives out before I finish, and tears splash onto the floor. He cups my face in his hands, brushing away the tears with his thumb.

“You don’t have to,” he assures me, and taking my hand helps me to stand up. As I try to quell the explosion of pain in my chest, he deftly summons his housekeeper from an old-fashioned rotary phone retrieved from beneath the congeries of novels and journals on the desk.

Chase leads me up a back stairway, avoiding the remains of the party. Reaching the gallery we remain masked in the shadows, and a tiny part of me wondered at how if I were another woman, bearing any name but this accursed on that suffocates me every second of each day, we might be darting together from one shadow to another, avoiding the eyes of prying guests, for a quite different reason.

Yet this is eternally exceeding in beauty, with the faint hymn of Pachelbel’s Canon emitting from some hidden stereo somehow both crushing my spirit and raising it above the bounds of fallen humanity to the ethereal realm in which I am free. My legs give out, my strength failing me, but Chase is there, clinging to me. He wraps his arms around my waist and carries me gently across the gallery until he lays me down gently on a vast canopied bed. He sits down on the edge, stroking my cheek; even with my eyes closed, I feel for the first time in this life that I am not alone. That my misery may not have been scared away, but it does not scare away this young man as he caresses me gently.

“I know you felt it,” I murmur without opening my eyes. “When you picked me up, you felt it.”

“It’s alright, my beautiful mystery. You needn’t explain.”

“But I must.” Yet I cannot force myself up, so I remain lying with my eyes close as I sigh. “You know now. My leg is not real. My right leg is gone. It’s just a prosthetic.”

“It doesn’t matter to me,” he says. “That doesn’t make you flawed. It makes you even stronger than other women.”

“No. It is no great symbol of endurance. It is just an artificial leg.”

“So what?” he asks.


He is silent; I know he wants badly to know, but does not want to pry.

“I can’t tell you,” I cry out, rolling over to hide my face. “But perhaps,” I whisper after a moment, “I can show you.” But I clench my hands over my ears, trying to suppress the echo of the damned medallions’ mocking songs, but it doesn’t help, I can still hear their whispers, I can
still detect their voices. “Bring my bag here,” I tell him, twisting in torment, trying to escape this all by burrowing deeper into the bed.

Soon, far too soon, he is beside me again. When he holds it in his hands it looks so small, so insignificant, but the jingle of the talismans makes the tears come again.

“I feel I’m not helping at all. Perhaps you should just rest until you are well again, and then I can take you home.”

I roll to face him, but keep my hands over my face, trying to keep the tears from staining the red cashmere bedspread. “I have no home.”

“What did you say? Where do you live?”

I take my hands away from my face and intertwine my fingers. I might as well try to keep up my appearance of dignity. “I have no home, Chase. I am homeless. I live on the streets. I have nothing except what’s in that bag.” When he says nothing, I say more fervently, “Don’t you understand? I litter the streets. I am just a specter. I am nothing.”

“Why? Why do you...?” He grasps my hand, as if checking to see if I am real, if I am constructed of flesh and bones, and metal of course.

“Look in my bag,” I say. I notice distantly that the music has begun again, repeating its list of songs with admirable diligence.

“What am I looking for?”

“The damned trinkets.” I say it aloud. It feels good to. “They ought to be in the pocket.”

I sit up a little, propping myself up with the pillows. I must see them, mustn’t I, when they emerge for the first time since that day when the world ended for the silly young woman.

“Oh my God.” He holds them reverently in his hands, staring at them in wonder.

“Once upon a time,” I begin, nauseated by the dread, as I smooth back my hair, “there was a silly little girl who thought she could do anything. This little girl joined the army, and as soon as it became legal, she became an infantryman. She was one of the first women to see direct combat. One day, however, her commander buckled under the pressure when they were cornered by the enemy. She did not think; somewhere in those hazy minutes of impending death she took control, and they say she got every man out, whether they ran out or she dragged them out. They say she four bullets found her, but she never believed that was true. They say she fought off Death when he came for some of her brothers.

And then one day the little girl returned home, and another day came, when she was handed the Purple Heart.” I try to gesture to the purple and gold ornament in his hands, but it mocks me and so I return to my story, closing my eyes, but then it is too real. “And more days passed, and then the little girl finds herself standing before the president, and another damned medal was pressed into her palms. But she didn’t see the medal, she saw her commander’s heart-stopping shame. So she slipped it into her bag and promised herself she’d look at it someday. But she never did. Do you know why she never looked at it?” I swallow a sob. “Because that very night they find Lieutenant Bryan Kinkaid with a bullet in his brain. They allow a good man to die, and reward a war criminal for her crimes. She was a hero, they say, but she was not. They tried to convince her, but the silly little girl died that night too. The specter, the remnant of her broken soul, haunts the streets because she does not deserve comfort. She does not deserve happiness. It is her penance.”

“Remedie Hewitt.”

“Don’t say that name,” I order him, but the tears stream down my cheeks. But when I at last open my eyes, there are three beads of liquid sorrow tracing his jawbone.

“Remi, then,” he murmurs. “The newspapers never called you that.”

“I don’t... I can’t.... I need to...”

“Stay with me.” It is not a suggestion. It is not a command. It is a plea, as if he needs me as much as I desperately need him.
“Is that all you are going to say?” I brush away the final tears. “You are not throwing me out of your home, or running to the press to tell them you found me, or saying anything at all about it?”

“No,” he whispers, dropping the medals back into the bag. “Because it doesn’t matter to me. I need nothing from you, except that you stay with me. Please.”

“I will.” I shift towards the middle of the bed so he has enough room to sit beside me, resting his head against the headboard. When he encircles my shoulders with his arm, holding me tight as if he never intends to let go, I do not resist.

I stare at the ceiling in silence, wondering why I had for so long thought it so difficult to breathe. Chase, too, remains quiet, listening to the rise and fall of the music. “When I said stay with me,” he murmurs, “I didn’t mean just until you feel well again. I want you to stay with me. Here. Tonight. And tomorrow, and the day after that, and after that. I want you to stay with me. Not just for one hour, or one night, or one week.” His voice cracks. “I want you to stay with me.”

“I am a ghost, Chase,” I whisper, but my head has fallen onto his shoulder, and I am far too weary to lift it. I can still smell the faintest tinge of wine on his breath. “I don’t belong here.”

“Of course you do. Because I need you to be here.”

“What do you mean, stay the night?” I ask softly.

“Just… be here. With me. I didn’t mean anything scandalous.”

I smile a little, shaking my head. “No, I understood.”

“However, I can’t imagine that dress would be very comfortable to sleep in. If you’d like, you can borrow something of mine.”

“But what would your mother think if she were to come here? Wouldn’t she misunderstand?”

“She doesn’t live here, Remi.”

“And what about your housekeeper? What would she think if she were to find me here, in your bed, in your pajamas tomorrow morning?”

Chase shrugs a little. “She wouldn’t think anything of it.”

“Of course you do. Because I need you to be here.”

My heartbeat quickens. “I see.”

He is silent. Perhaps he doesn’t know what to say.

“It’s alright,” I murmur as he shifts his arm. “You don’t have to pretend like I’m the first woman who’s ever been in your bed. You are young, Chase, young and rich and single. You needn’t pretend for my sake.”

“You are the first,” he murmurs back after a pause. “She will not think of it because she knows me. She knows me well enough to know that I will wait until I am married. And I am not single. Anyone could have told you, that for months I have belonged to a woman whose name I never shared.”

“But you’re… you. I’m me.”

When he turns to look at me, there is pain in his eyes. “You are everything. I can’t breathe when you’re not here with me.”

“I see,” I say, though I don’t really understand.

“Are you sure you’re alright in that dress?” He asks after a spell of silence as he pulls back the coverlet. We both kick our shoes onto the floor.

I tousle my hair until it is loose and crawl under the blankets. “Yes, I’ve learned now how to sleep in anything.”

He takes one last long look at me, scanning my messy hair and the drying tearstains on my cheeks. “You are too beautiful to be unhappy,” he tells me. I smile. He switches off the lights, and the room plunges into darkness.

“How can the world live with itself knowing you were unhappy?” He muses aloud. “How could humanity allow you to be tormented?”

16
“It doesn’t matter now,” I say, studying the faint outline of the canopy in the darkness. This is all so new. Lying beneath a roof, lying in a real bed with soft blankets, lying next to a man. “None of that matters anymore.”

The next morning I wake to find my head still nestled on Chase’s shoulder, his arm still encircling me, holding me close, reminding me I am not alone.

I lay for a few minutes, savoring this feeling, before Chase rolls over and opens his eyes. His dress shirt is rumpled, his tie loose, his hair messed up, but the first thing I notice is his little smile as he looks me over.

“Good morning, Remedie Hewitt,” he murmurs.

“Good morning, Chase Caldwell,” I say.

We throw off the cashmere blankets and he makes the bed neatly as I retreat to his en suite to trade my now-crumpled purple gown for the old maxi skirt and blouse.

When I push the door open, however, Chase is gone. I follow the sound of the piano’s purring melody, creeping down the grand stairs, and when I find him at his instrument I slide onto the piano bench beside him, my fingers itching to touch the keys.

“Do you play?” He murmurs without pausing in his song.

“Not since…” I trail off, and he wordlessly guides my hands across the keys, showing me the notes.

When night falls once again, I pass by the room prepared for me by Chase’s housekeeper, instead sliding under the soft blankets beside him and nestling my head against his shoulder. The t-shirt he lent me smells like him.

Again and again we find ourselves lying beside one another, returning to the platonic comfort of one another under the grand canopy as if incapable of staying away from this place, our own world.

Pachelbel’s Canon floats on the air, and we lay together in the darkness, silent for a while, listening to the murmur of the melody.

“Am I really the first woman to ever be here with you?” I ask aloud. The blush creeping in my cheeks is thankfully obscured by the darkness.

“Of course you are the first.”

“And how long will I lay here?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“How long can this fantasy last? How long until I must descend to reality?”

“This is reality,” he says, but I don’t believe him.

“For you,” I tell him. “It’s alright, Chase, you needn’t worry. I understand this can’t go on forever.”

He sighs, and I wish his face weren’t obscured in the darkness. “No, I suppose it can’t go on like this forever,” he murmurs.

“Thank you, though,” I murmur. There are no tears to cry. “No matter how short, this life with you has been beautiful. But I will leave in the morning. I cannot be your charity case forever.”

“You are not my charity case, Remi.” His voice cracks. “You were never my charity case.”

“But all the same, I must go now, oughtn’t I?” I rub his hand reassuringly.

“I don’t want you to go. I told you then and I will tell you again now. I need you here. Not just for this past week. Not for just one more night or week. I need you here.”

“But you said it yourself, this cannot continue like this forever.”

“I don’t want it to,” he tells me, and I feel him shift to face me. We are inches apart. “I don’t want you stay here just as my beautiful enigma.”

My voice fails me, but I try again. “And what do you want me to be?”
“More. Redemie Hewitt, you are the first and last woman I will love in all my life. And I want everyone to know it.”

My heart misses several beats. “What did you say to me?”

I feel his warm hand on my cheek, tracing the faded tear streaks. “I said I love you, Redemie Hewitt.”

I cannot say on account of the darkness whether or not the kiss is unexpected, but our lips meet and I am filled with the sweet sensation of completion, savoring this feeling until we unwillingly break apart. “I love you, too, Chase Caldwell,” I tell him, resting my head on his shoulder. I am no longer just a specter. I have found my anchor.