Shadows on the Horizon

Jessica Yehle*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©2012 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
I'm hungry, she says, not with her mouth, but with her eyes. I study her body, quivering with pain, or maybe just cold, huddled on the couch. She's always hungry. It's where her beauty comes from - her dark, hooded eyes and marionette wrists. There's a make-shift bandage wrapped around the left one, and her skin is hugged so close to the bone that when she moves to adjust it, I can see her joints shiver. She has the look of someone who has traveled at unsafe speeds, the heat from her heels rising against the trail of jealous words and broken hearts that litter her path.

We shouldn't work, but we do. She is beautiful, and I... well, I'm a sucker for a pretty face. Beyond that, she is an outlet for my hero complex, and I am a sounding board for her madness. She is wearing a ring that I spent two months’ paychecks on. It slides up and down her finger, caught in limbo between root and first joint. She twists it nervously and looks up, catching my stare. She is a witch, and her bloodshot eyes cast her spell. Hastily, I look away. We both know the danger in the locking of eyes, the unfamiliar sensation of another being catching glimpses of your soul.

It pains me to do so, but I make my way to the kitchen. I wasn't prepared for this. We don't have much in the way of food. Every trip over the last week has been seared into my mind. I know how many steps it takes. I anticipate the feeling of carpet changing to linoleum. The edges of counters and contents of cupboards are laid out before me in my mind's eye, despite the dark. This is important: it's always dark.

I am silent. The only sounds that echo through our halls are the ghosts of footprints past: the heavy clunk of my work boots after a long day, the dull thuds they made when she threw them down the stairs that night she kicked me out. There, in the dining room, is the faint tap of her stilettos against the mahogany as we danced on the night we were engaged, and in the bedroom, the dainty clatter they made as they were tossed to the floor. The sounds that haven't been made, I fill in with imagination: the slow patter of the steps our firstborn will never take, the stealthy tip-toe of a teen breaking a curfew we'll never set.

I take a can from the cupboard without looking. Our stores are too small to be
picky, and the power has been out for days. Even if the lights did work, it wouldn't be worth chancing them. The drapes are pulled; the doors are locked. We have done everything that we can to remain inconspicuous. There is a flashlight in the living room, for when we can't bear the shadows anymore. When we turn it on, the flies buzz around it - tiny scavengers eager to bask in its artificial flame.

She frowns as she opens the can and dips a finger in. It's all I can see of her, that frown. She is a set of lips without a face. I study the cracks in them, crusted with the faintest remainder of her red-lipped façade. It is the first time I've seen her without lipstick on. With the paint peeled away, her mouth proves to be made of dust and drywall underneath.

“Isn't there anything else?” the frown asks, and it sounds like an accusation. “I don't like refried beans.” Of course she doesn't like them. She doesn't like anything. She is a woman of plaster and fiberglass, a beautiful mansion with its insides gutted out. She clings to her hunger like a Christian to a bible. She's replaced the Hail Marys in her rosary with “I'm not hungry.” She likes ice water and diet coke, please and thank you, and no, I'm full, I already ate.

“We're lucky to have this much,” I tell her, leading by example. The beans are cold. They taste like chili thickened with mud. “Aren't you glad you were going to make that dip?” I think of the engagement party that we'll never have, and force a smile that she doesn't see. I'm not sure that she sees anything anymore; even in the dark, I can tell that her eyes have glazed over with white. She can't see me. To each other, we're nothing more than dark forms moving around in darker spaces. I wonder if she even remembers the lines of my face.

It dawns on me that we will never marry.

“My arm hurts,” she says, and all I can say is, “I know.”

Morning comes slowly. It always does when you can't sleep. The day lightens the room, but not her mood. We keep the curtains drawn. It's safer that way.

“A few days,” said the man on the radio as I rushed home from work. That was weeks ago. They promised that this was “a small incident, of little concern,” and we believed them. We believed in the military, in the government, in God. A week in, she broke down.

“They're not coming,” she said, pushing her face in her hands, her cheeks streaked with watery mascara like mourning paint. “There's no one to save us.”

I don't think she believes in anything anymore.

I kiss her face, breathing in her scent. The water hasn't been working for days. She used to smell like lavender, but not anymore. These last few weeks have stripped us of our luxuries, but not our humanity. She used to smell like perfume. Now she smells like skin.

I get up, clean my pistol, check the dressing on her wrist. It's getting worse. The makeshift bandage, a dishtowel she embroidered the third time she went to treatment, is soaked with blood. The wound reeks of rot and pus. When I touch it, she stirs.

“Is it over yet?” she asks sleepily. I move my hand away, discreetly wiping it on my jeans.

“Almost,” I answer with regret. I wrap my arms around her and let her sleep.

Hours later, she calls my name. Like a beacon, it guides me as I wake. “I'm hungry,” she gasps. It is the first time I have ever heard the words leave her lips.

“I'll get you something to eat,” I promise, getting up, stumbling toward the door. “No,” she says, and I stop. Her eyes look like glasses of milk laced with blood. There is no danger in her stare anymore, only pity. She coughs, decorating the sheets in a light spray of blood. Pity, and maybe shame. Her lower lip quivers. “Pull the curtain?”

I oblige. The windows in our bedroom are covered with the dark, thick comforters of the guestroom beds. I tug them down, revealing dainty drapes of white underneath. They cast lacy shadows, scattering precious beads of sunlight across the hardwood floor before they are eclipsed, engulfed as a figure wanders past the window, limping.

It's a stranger, dressed in a suit of black. There's a flower in his lapel, a dark
shriveled thing. It was probably a rose, weeks ago, but it’s dead now. I stare at his lopsided bowtie, his bloodstained tuxedo shirt. It might have been his wedding day, save for the gaping shotgun wound in his chest where his heart should have been.

I survey his face: the slackened jaw, the sinewy cheeks. Boldly, I meet his eyes. Beneath their murky white depths, I see a look of hunger I know far too well.

He lets out a moan and throws himself weakly against the window, barely making a thump— but that thump attracts the attention of another, and another, all limping in unison, an army driven by hunger, and hunger alone.

I can hear a pulse, and it takes me a moment to realize that it’s my own. I am afraid.

“Hold me?” she says, her voice tiny and faint. I curl up behind her, relishing the warmth of her body pressed against my own. Her skin burns with fever, but I can hear her teeth chattering. Nuzzling her neck, I squeeze her tight with whatever comfort can be found in my arms.

“I love you,” she tells me, her breath slowing. As the sun dips below the horizon and the shadows of the dead grow longer, I reach for my pistol, thinking about love and what it really means.

Jessica Yehle is a sophomore in English. She likes coffee, passive-aggressive pop-punk, and red lipstick. She exists primarily in black t-shirts, because she has no fashion sense. Despite her extreme social anxieties, she still hopes that all of this makes you think she’s really edgy and cool.