

Black Harry

I don't know why I am writing this. I guess because I'm tired and afraid. No, no, that was the wrong way of putting it. I'm tired of BEING afraid. Yes, that's it. The most silly thing is to have fears when you are sixty, especially if they're from your childhood. And yet here I am, putting this crazy story on a paper.

My name is Edward Zikawitz, I'm a lonely old man who has nothing more than his apartment and his pension. Oh....., and yes, his memories, you can't get rid of those, even if you try.

You could make a list of the drawbacks of being a lonely guy and probably would come up with enough of them to fill up a book. But I could always think of one advantage to it- you never have to worry about seeing your close ones sharing your failures, your grief, your FEARS. That's what I believed anyway. And I'm sorry for doing this to you, my reader, for placing my burden on your shoulders. But I have to leave some record of what happened, because I'm already starting to feel that none of it was real.

Ok let's start. It was the thirties, time of the great depression and New Orleans like any other part of America or the entire world for that matter, had its fare share of hardships. But it's only now, looking back, I can see that it was a bad time. Then I was a kid, who saw life only through the prism of constant struggle for survival. Hardship was a norm of the day. I won't lie and say that I have no good memories about my childhood. However, even though some of them still make me smile, I wish no one a similar fate.

My father left us, that'd be me and my mum, when I was six. My mother died not long after that from lung cancer, leaving me, an eleven year old boy, homeless and alone with no clue of what to do. Now, you have to agree that these days it happens rarely, if ever, that a kid of such age left on a street without proper care. But back in those days it was not so uncommon. In fact there was a whole bunch of us roaming the streets of New Orleans trying to get by. I had some good friends, boys of the same age as me, orphans like me and we looked after each other as best as we could. The good memories I was talking about earlier, mostly involved spending time with them. Except for those that bring me back to the fruit shop and the girl behind the counter. I'd better tell you about her, I suppose, as she is the major part of my story.

Angela Rossi, oh boy was I nuts about her. She was fourteen, a year older than me. And she was the most beautiful creature I ever saw. I still dream about her. I always wake up crying. But I don't want to get ahead of myself. As I said she was working behind the counter serving customers in her father's fruit shop. He originally came from Italy about twenty years before the event of my story, but he lived in New York. He ran into trouble with some gangsters of the neighborhood and had to leave. Angela told me they had some relatives in New Orleans, who helped them to settle down. Her father had some savings

on which he managed to start his business and that was when I met Angela. I had a job at that time selling papers and considered myself a respectable, well off man. Funny thinking about it now. I've done so many things since then, was involved in many projects, not of a least importance, I might add, but never in my life I felt so proud, so important, as I did when I was screaming out headlines, trying to sell papers. Anyhow, I trailed off. I was going to my usual spot when I saw Angela talking to a woman who looked awfully like her, (turned out to be her mother). She was a lean girl of average height, almost as tall as I was, still too young to be considered a women, but old enough to be considered the idol of beauty for a boy of my age.

With dark thick hair, that lay strait almost to her waist, silky-olive skin and big hazel eyes that when you looked at them the only word came into mind was VELVET. She was nothing short of perfection, at least that's what she seemed to me.

I spent the whole day just staring at her from the other side of the street. Hell, why don't I just be honest and say that I spent the whole week. Almost got fired. You can laugh if you want, I would if I was in a laughing mood. The funniest or better yet stupidest thing was, no matter how much I wanted to talk to her I could never master enough courage to do so. And there probably would be no story to tell if one day she didn't come up to me.

It was six in the morning I just got into my usual spot (right across the street where I had a clear view of the counter) when I saw her coming toward me , looking so natural in perfect harmony with everything around. Years after, I saw a gazelle once, walking through the wide space of savanna, moving so gracefully and yet so naturally. That's what Angela looked like as she walked, crossing the road, her eyes fixed on me with the smile on her face. My heart stopped, I was so overwhelmed that I seriously doubted if I'd be able to speak once she get closer.

"How much?" the sound of her voice was like heavenly music to my ears, but you probably figured I'd say that. Well, I swear to God it was.

I was staring at her like a fool, for so long that her confusion grew into understanding and the laughter followed. I won't bore you trying to explain again, what her laugh sounded to me. I was so consumed by her beauty that didn't care enough to feel ashamed.

"I'm guessing it's not for free" she said still laughing " otherwise wouldn't be much of the point for you to sit here all day."

"Yes there would." I responded instantly, surprising her and myself.

Her eyebrows went up "What do you mean?"

"It's five cents." I said quickly interrupting her thought. Embarrassment has finally caught up with me and I felt my face starting to burn.

Trying to recover I pushed myself to say " You're the first girl I've met who's interested in newspapers."

"It's not for me, it's for my dad" she said casually, as if it wasn't some stupid remark I tried to squeeze out of myself to save my face.

I was putting away five cents as I heard her saying "Oh my God. Again? It hasn't been a week."

I raised my eyes and saw her staring at the front page that read the headline " THE NIGHTMARE STRIKES AGAIN" showing the picture of a smiling young couple next to it. That's what they called him. Jesus, they didn't know how right they were. He killed eight people in six months, all couples some younger some older. They all bore the evidence of things done to them, I wish not to repeat. They found him eventually "THE NIGHTMARE". Hell, what am I saying, of cause they didn't, I just like the rest of them, fooled myself thinking he could be rid of that easily.

"They found them two days ago on Julia ave. You know I knew the guy, he bought a paper couple of times. His name was Greg, looked like a nice fella, left me a good tip too. Shame what happened to him and his girl."

Angela was frowning, eyes still on the paper, reading. I wasn't even sure if she heard a word I said: "My father wouldn't let me and my mom out after six because of this maniac. How can we live like that. Always in fear. And what if he never gets caught, what than?" she looked up and her scared look made me hate myself, as if it was my fault for letting some crazy guy trouble her.

I don't know what she saw in my face but her worries blew away replaced by a blushing smile. Without a word she turned and run back to her father's shop. I saw her turn and her smile was a little more forward this time. My mood turned into happier direction in an instant. It amazes me how even a minor things can take your troubles away when you are young. As you get older, of cause, it gets harder and harder to find a reason to be happy.

I still gazed after her when one of my friends, Donald Stevens, ran from the corner screaming "Edie, Edie, come quickly, they found another one. It would be a second pair in a week."

I only heard him with half an ear, my thoughts concentrated on Angela's smile. It was only after he grabbed me by the shoulder, shaking and calling my name, before he got my full attention.

" What, what" I was annoyed with him. Donny was always over excited about everything, running and screaming even when it was uncalled for. And today his enthusiasm was more inconvenient than ever.

"Didn't you hear what I said? They've found another two"

"Christ" I finally grasped what he was talking about "Whata hell are you so exited about?"

Donny calmed down and frowned in puzzlement as if he was considering my question, "I'm not...I mean..." he shook his head " You coming to see or not?"- his thoughts were back to their usual flow. He could never concentrate for long.

"Yeh, yeh, lets go" I started to gather my things. Donny was moving around trying to help to speed the process. I finally couldn't take it anymore, "Will you quit moving around. You making me dizzy."

"Just trying to help"- he threw his palms up defensively with irritating smile on his face.

"Well don't, you making it worse"

"Hurry than" -he said, becoming annoyed himself.

I didn't say anything, just continued doing what I was doing with the same speed. I wasn't particularly thrilled to see what was out there Something was telling me it was best to stay away, but I was thirteen and there wasn't much of the chance I would listen the voice of reason.

When I've done putting papers in the bag I folded the table taking it under my arm "Where is it anyway?"

"Few blokes over. Come on hurry" he was walking in front of me constantly turning to speed me up.

"You could've help, you now." I called after him "We'd be moving lot faster"

Without a word of response he rushed back to me grabbed my table and sped up again.

It took us about five minutes to get there and panting we turned into a valley full of people. Mostly cops. Although there were some paramedics and reporters moving around.

"There is no way we'll get passed all these people, let alone yellow tape. Why in a hell did you bring me out here?" I was pissed at Donny for drugging me all the way up here for nothing. "I knew I shouldn't have listen to you. I would've sold half a dozen copies by now, you know". I lied. It was still a good hour before street would start to fill with people. But I wanted to make him feel bad. My effort was for nothing; Donny didn't seem to listen " Donny are you listening to me?"

"Quit whining, will you. I've got an idea. Lets go."

We got around the corner, went inside the building and climbed on the roof. Donny turned to me and whispered "We can leave your things here"

"Why are you whispering?"

Donny made that confused frown again than shook his head in a same gesture as before "Come on", he said not whispering any more but annoyed. I smiled and followed.

Donny threw his leg over the ledge of the building and stepping on the fire escape turned to me pressing his index finger against his lips. I sighed and went after him.

Climbing down to the end of the fire escape we tried to step as quietly as possible. Noise on the alley helped us to position ourselves unnoticeably right above the crime scene. I glanced down and the shock from what I saw rendered me breathless. The terror was so thick in me I could taste it. It was close to after vomiting sensation in the mouth only, much more intense. The victims' bodies were still on the site. And it so happened that they were laying right below us, with their glass-like eyes right at us. I felt judgment in them, as ridiculous as it sounds, I felt blamed.

As for the horrific part, I don't want to get into details. But to give you an idea: bodies were cut and rearranged in a manor that females parts of the victim were grotesquely attached to the male victim and vice verse.

We were so consumed by what we saw that didn't notice when one of us (me or Donny, I don't remember who exactly) made a noise.

"What in God's name...?" came the voice from below "Hey, get a hell out of here you little bastards."

We didn't bother to look who was yelling. We ran, ran like the NIGHTMARE himself was after us. We were half way downstairs when I remembered about my papers. I stopped and called "Donny."

He turned: " What?"

I just stood there staring at him speechless .

"What?!!!"- he asked again, also scared- "Come on, lets get out of here."

He turned to run again when I called "My papers, I've got to get my stuff"

"Are you crazy, they'll catch you. They probably on the roof already."

"I can't leave it, otherwise I'll have to pay for it." finally making decision I turned back telling Donny "You go, I'll catch up"

I didn't bother to wait for the response and run. Moment later I heard Donny's puffing behind me : "You're insane you know that, and I'm insane for following you."

I remember feeling as close to him as only a brother to brother can feel. When we got to the roof it was empty. No one obviously bothered to climb up. And yet as scared as we were we expected them to show up any second.

Donny waited near the entrance of the roof while I ran to the ledge to grab my things.

"Come on Edie, hurry"- he urged me.

We ran all the way to our place without stop at much greater speed we were going to the alley, I might add. When we got there Donny leaned against the wall and started vomiting. I wasn't far from doing it myself. "Take it easy Donny, we got away, its over."

He wiped his mouth with a sleeve " Man, I cant even make sense of what I saw, some freaking mutilation. What was that?"

"I don't know. I don't want to think about it. Christ, It was a bad idea to go there. I can't go sell papers now."

"Fuck your papers Edie. We almost got caught because of you." the late anger bubbling inside his voice.

"Take it easy. No one was after us."

"Yeh, you say."

"If they were, they'd be on the roof by the time we got there." I barked just as angry

Donny waved his hand. We looked at each other and suddenly burst into laugh.

It was mostly hysteria talking but we felt better nevertheless.

"You shoulda seen your face. When we went back on that roof" I said still laughing

"Look who's talking. I could smell you shiting your pants"

When we stopped and looked at one another we saw a mirror image of each other. Our eyes showed us what we looked like, the same unwholesome feeling projected through them. Something fragile was broken inside us, something that can never be fixed. For the first time in our lives we faced the product of madness and the memory of it's victims' stare was drawing us back to the edge of the bottomless pit where this madness was born. All that I'm describing coming from knowledge of what this PIT is all about: FEAR, indescribable, maddening fear. And the longer we stare into it- the less chances for us to come back to normal life. You probably heard the saying *If you stare into the Abyss long*

enough the Abyss stares back at you. Well for me it is a point of the fact than just a scary observation.

Of cause back then we could understand none of it. We just sensed something was wrong with us and it was not a good idea to dwell in this feeling. I was the first one to talk:

"I better go and try to sell some papers." figuring it might take my mind off of what I saw.

Danny tagged along having nothing better to do. And, I suspect, he didn't want to stay alone, believe me, no one could blame him.

I didn't want Danny to see me stare at Angela all day, so we went to my other selling point. Neither of us said a word about what happened and by the time we got back home we almost forgot this morning. The building we lived in was two storey house half ruined and deserted. Although it wasn't exactly empty. All sorts of people found shelter in it. Be that a drunk bum who hasn't a proper home for a long time or a nice normal family who in this hard times hadn't had money to pay for rent. In any case our half broken house was always full. We occupied the corner on the first floor right under the stair way. 'We'- that be me Danny and the other four boys like us.

Ricardo Garcia a Porto Rican kid was the youngest of us. His mother died giving him birth and he was raised by his father. They migrated into States when he was ten and lived together for a year until his father was killed in a bar fight. That's when we found him. He was fiery kid, could be offended by slightest joke, especially one with any implication to his name. He hated if anyone called him Ricardo demanding to call him Ricci.

Leonard Shultz or simply Leo was German Jew like me and like me he lost his parents to the illness. Same age as me, same build as me, which would make you believe we were closets of the whole bunch. Yet you couldn't be more wrong. Apart from our background, age and appearance we were as different as apples and oranges. Where I was quiet and calm, he was zealous and pushy, where I was responsible but shy, he was juvenile but companionable and popular. We fought constantly and although cared for each other much we were never close friends.

Casey O'Byrne was Irish. The strongest and biggest of us all he was not yet the oldest. Casey never knew his parents. He told us that whoever they were they could rot in hell for all he cared. He was left on the footsteps of an orphanage where he was raised by nuns. Casey told us it was no picnic living in that place. He was hit constantly and when he grew big enough to stand up for himself, he was thrown out on the street. Never complained old Casey and although he wasn't quickest of wits, he was big, strong, loyal and dependable.

Chris Murphy was a negro, this term may seem harsh to you, I know we use African American nowadays, it don't matter to me what term you use. He was a brother to me, no

different than the rest. His father was a drunk and used to beat him up badly. It became unbearable when his mother left and his father told him he was a bastard of the child conceived out of his mother's sin. Chris ran from home, which was fifty miles west of New Orleans and ended up with us a month later. He was a quiet boy with kind and generous heart.

I already told you much about Danny, the only thing left to say that he as most of us shared a misfortune of loosing his parents. His father died in the accident at the factory where he worked (something to do with steam machine, that's all Danny knew, his mother didn't like to talk about it much). His mother had to work twice as hard to feed them and finally gave up. She could carry no longer. Danny found her in the bathroom with the note in her hand, which said two words: "I'm sorry." Danny was too small to understand and to grieve. Out of all of us he lived on the streets the longest and knew how to get buy, where to get food, what place best to stay in different seasons. And if not for his irritating impatience, he'd be the leader of the group.

These were my brothers, my family. They are not the major part of this story, but they were the major part of my life. I wish I could tell you about years we spent together, but I'm running out of time. I can feel it.

So as I was saying me and Danny came home when the rest of the gang was already waiting. We said nothing of this morning because neither of us wanted to feed the horrible memory of our little adventure. We all ate whatever we could salvage this day, laughed at Ricci, pissing him off, which in it's turn made us laugh even harder, and went to sleep with no worries of what happened today or what will happen tomorrow. But at night, in my dreams, fear was far from settled.

I dreamed that I was back at my old spot selling papers. It was afternoon by the feel of it and I sold half of my daily stock. Just than this young couple came to me with smiles looking all around happy. I recognized them straight away: Young fella was the same guy who used to buy papers from me, Greg I think his name was. And the girl's happy face was the same as in the picture that was in morning newspaper right next to Greg's:

"Hey kid, give me the Post" he said with cheerful voice tossing coin into my hand. I looked at the couple and could sense something was wrong. They smiled with their lips not with their eyes. I turned to grab the Post when I heard him saying "Hey Edie, me and her are getting married tomorrow."

I felt my heart missed a beat. How does he know my name, we only chit-chatted couple of times. I heard once someone calling his name that's how I knew him. We certainly never introduced ourselves to each other, why would we. We were from different worlds. So how did he know my name and why such a familiarity. To him I should be just a 'kid'. I froze for a second trying to think what do I say to his announcement. Hell why should I care: "That's nice" all I could find to say.

The instance I raised my head to look at them I knew this wasn't real, which theoretically should've brought me some relief, well it didn't. You know when you having a bad dream and you know it isn't real and yet you still want to scream. It was like that, I felt that somewhere in the real world I laid in my bed and I was screaming in my head like crazy, but in my dream I stared silently at the horrific vision that stood before me. Both of their faces were as white as snow, their eyes dead, covered with a thin, almost indistinguishable layer of white film, which made them look insect-like somehow. Greg was still smiling and his teeth that were of normal color before now appeared as baked beans, rotten and dirty. His girl wasn't smiling anymore, she stood there stiff, staring at me with that horrible eyes and for some reason I felt as if she was blaming me. Blood dripping down her dress, it's trail started in a level with her breasts and by the flatness of her chest and how the wet material stuck to her body outlining the edges of two holes in it, I knew her breast were cut out.

I heard Greg's voice again " Isn't she beautiful Edie?" he lowered his face to my and winked "Isn't she beautiful?"

I leaped up on my bed. Image of the girl's accusing stare still fresh in my mind and her boyfriend's words "Isn't she beautiful Edie, isn't she beautiful" echoing in my head. I looked around and saw I was alone. My friends gone and the place was unusually cold and dark. And then I saw HIM. He appeared in the doorway. He was looking at me and smiling. Don't ask how I knew this, I just did. As disturbing as my first dream was, this was much worse, much- much worse.

I woke up again. I remember being finally able to let out a scream (I could still scream back then. Now my fear much less sudden running deeper in a constant suddenless flow), I remember Chris asking me what was wrong, I remember Leo telling us to shut up, Casey's snore, Ricci mumbles. And I remember the sound of Donny silently weeping.

As amazed as I was, the morning showed no changes, everything was normal, the world went on about it's way and that meant that I had to do the same. Donny's face bore the evidence of a restless night, which gave me a pretty clear picture of how I looked myself. If any of our friends remembered my nightmare screams or Donny's weeping, no one mentioned anything or showed any signs of caring for that matter.

Me and Donny looked at each other neither of us saying a word to one another. Years to come I often wondered if Donny had the same experience I had. Had the Nightmare show himself to him. Matters not, I suppose. We all have our demons to wrestle and we can run from them for a while but eventually we do have to face them. Personally, I say it is better to do so early in life before they grow strong and get a good grip of you. I've learned this wisdom the hard way. Well, hell, advices are rarely listened to, no matter who gives them. We all have to live our lives and each and one of us carries a tiny hope in his heart that maybe he can slip through all the bad stuff and somehow come out on the other side without any fight at all, unharmed. I've never seen examples of such in my life.

So whoever is reading this, decide for yourself. I'm here not to preach, but to tell you what happened, to warn you of the danger, to make you aware- he's amongst us even if we don't see. I understand maybe more than anyone, that last thing you need is to be scared. No, you need to be prepared, prepared for the fight that God willing you will escape, because if it happens that you won't and the demon does show himself, do not run, stand fast, be still and calm, show no fear as he feeds on it. You face him, calculate your actions carefully and then hit, hit hard, don't let him get up. You stamp on him like you stamp on a cockroach, squash him once and for all. Listen me talking, all my life I thought I've been chasing him. Turned out I was running away. Only so far in my life I realized that. I don't blame you if you judge me, but before you do, let me tell you the rest of my story and maybe it somewhat redeem me in your eyes, or maybe not.

Anyhow, where were I. Oh yes, the morning after. I know I've said it was a usual day, nothing unordinary: the sky didn't fall, the ground didn't shake, but one surprise did await me when I came to my selling spot. Surprise, which I might add was the final shove that pushed me over the edge (I've never regretted it happened though, not for one day). I remember it clearly, I've just settled in my seat when I saw Angela crossing the road in my direction. I forgot all my worries instantly, seeing only her nothing else. This time I was actually bold enough as to start the conversation. and when she came closer I shot the question "Your dad sent you for the paper again, you guys sure wake up early, I've just started to set up over here."

She ignored the question and with a business tone pronounced "My dad is looking to hire a delivery boy. Are you interested?"

I was a bit abashed by such greeting, but forced myself to answer

"Sure am"

A job like that meant stability and security. It meant never to worry if you'll have enough money to go through the winter. Really, a job like that was nothing short of a dream for someone in my position.

"Ok, then" she said nodding still serious as ever "you should come and introduce yourself. If my father likes you he may hire you." She turned to walk off and I was just sitting there not sure whether it was an invitation to follow or should I come by later.

To my relief I didn't have to guess, as Angela turned and raising her eyebrows questioningly asked "Are you coming?"

I thought it would be unwise to make her wait long. So quickly folding my table and stacking my papers in the bag I picked it all up and hurried along.

Her father's shop was neither big nor small. Just right size to be appropriate for the businessmen of his status. The room was about 30 square meters with the shelves full of fruits on every wall. The air was cool with aroma of freshness and ripeness. The counter

was on the left corner right next to the exit. On the far back there was a door, which naturally led to the storage area and as I later learned to the stairs to the above rooms where Angela and her parents resided.

Angela's father, whose name by the way was Orazio Rossi, stood behind the counter with writing pad and a pen in his hands. Angela approached him and in a cautious voice said: "Pa, here's the boy I told you about, remember. You said the other day we need a delivery boy and I suggested that this boy, who sells papers... I said he looked dependable enough. You thought...."

"Yes, I remember." Orazio interrupted his daughter in a calm voice. "It was a good idea and I trust your judgment, nothing changed since yesterday."

Angela didn't smile, but her face lit up full of pride, her father's approval obviously meant a lot. Orazio put a definitive dot in the pad sticking it hard with the pen and raised his head.

I must tell you about Orazio, not because he has a significant part in this story, but because he deserves to be remembered, if no one than by me. Orazio was a hard man whose character was forged in the very heart of hardship. I don't know the whole story and certainly have no time to tell it, but let me say this, my own circumstances did not bring tears to his eyes. In fact he regarded them with banality, like only a man whose life was a constant battle could.

I once heard a saying "character is an immune system developed around man's strengths and weaknesses to deal with outside world." That applies to Orazio if to no one. So the man looking down on me bore a serious face that hardly ever stretched to a smile. Piercing eyes and slight frown between bushy eyebrows. I must confess, I was petrified to meet that man for the first time. Feeling that didn't last long once I recognized the kind heart behind this hard shell.

He kept quiet for a while and then asked just as calmly as he was talking to Angela earlier "What's your name boy?"

"Edward, sir" my voice gave away my nervousness.

"What's your father's name?"

At first I didn't understand the question. I looked at him puzzled.

"Your family name?" he asked never losing calmness.

"Zikawitz, sir. Edward Zikawitz." I answered rapidly

Orazio nodded "I see you already have a job Edward, would you have any problem giving it up?"

"Not really sir, if it's for something better, and job like this would be for sure"

My thoughts were jumping and words spoken started to become more confusing than explanatory. I noticed Angela found my awkwardness humorous, she tried to hide her smile and remain serious, but was doing a poor job at that.

There was no humor in her father's face though. "Are you sure? What if this job won't work out? You'll be in total loss"

My next sentence showed that I had at least some wits about me: "you won't get anywhere unless you take a step, and it's always a risk, Sir"

Orazio's frown deepened. His gaze became more focused. He drilled me with his eyes for a good half a minute, my anxiety grew.

Finally he nodded again and said "All right, if you ready you can start today."

I was caught by surprise. If not by getting a job so easily, than by getting started so suddenly.

"I have to take my stuff home, if it's all right?" I asked scared to change man's mind.

But Orazio responded by lowering his eyes to his writing pad and saying in dismissive tone " You can put your things in the back room for now. Angela'll show you."

The back room was a little smaller than the shop, with a storage area on the side. And as I mentioned before stairs leading to apartment above.

"You can leave your things here" -Angela regained my attention. I turned to see her pointing at the closet under the stairs.

While I was putting my things away, she walked to the storage and took a peace of paper pinned to the wall.

"These are the first couple of orders for this morning. You'll find all the information you need. Take a paper wrap from the closet and grab what fruit you need from storage area. Caring bags also in the closet." she paused for a bit to see if I fallow "There'll be more orders to came today, so you need to hurry."

Suddenly her seriousness broke into a smile and Angela said " Congratulations on a new job, good luck" than she just as suddenly turned and walked off, leaving me wondering if all of this was some cruel joke. How can that be. They don't know me and yet they are leaving me here by myself as if I worked here all along.

I looked down on the peace of paper left by Angela and found two columns of hand writings with numbers, names and addresses.

'Should be easy enough' I thought to myself and went to the closet.

I found the wrap and carrying bags straight away and was retrieving them from underneath some boxes when I heard footsteps above me on the stairs. I got out of the closet and saw Angela's mother (the woman, I mentioned earlier, was talking to Angela). Up close she looked even more like her daughter, almost uncannily so. She smiled as she noticed me and I could see the difference between her and her daughter now. Sofia Rossi was the gentlest soul I've ever met in my entire life and that including this very minute I'm writing these words. She was kind, in many ways softhearted woman and although she lived through a few dark days in her life it did not harden her. Sofia's compassion was resilient to any hits that life sometimes brings to all of us. Her obvious beauty paled in comparison with her overflowing feminine side. That was the distinction between Sofia and her daughter, who was more juvenile, boyish. And Angela's youth made this characteristics stand out as much as Sofia's femininity made her gentleness and compassion the main attributes of her personality. The mother and the daughter were two sides of the same coin, when you saw them they appeared the same, but when you know them you can see the difference. Maybe Orazio was more lively in his younger days and Angela took after him or maybe it was a gene of another relative, who knows. The point I'm trying to make: the woman that seemed so similar to her daughter at first now stood smiling at me and she didn't look that similar anymore.

"You must be our new delivery boy" her voice very much suited her character, it gave me a feeling of warm blanket.

She had no accent. She was brought to America when she was 5, so English was pretty much her first language, although she spoke Italian just as perfectly, at least that's how it sounded to me.

"What's your name?" she asked and seeing my shyness made her smile wider.

"Edward, mam" I found myself answering. Suddenly I remembered Orazio's interest in my family name and hastened to add " Edward Zikawitz."

"Well Edward my name is Sofia. I'm Angela's mother, but you probably figured that out. Are you hungry?" she asked and straight away answered " Of course you are, why am I asking. Let's go to the kitchen and find you something to eat."

I was no stranger to hunger. In fact hunger was inseparable part of my existence. Something that you become so used to, presence of which ceased to be noticeable. Yet noticeable or not I always welcomed food for the very reason of lack of it. But not sure how well it will sit with Orazio, me leaving my duties on the first day, I hesitated for a second.

Sofia understood- " Don't worry, the keeper won't mind, the work can wait a little. You have to have energy to run all day. I wonder how can you still keep up, you're skin and bones. Come, let's go."

That was enough for me I followed without any further delay. The apartment upstairs was not to say spacious, but for such times considerable enough to transform these three average rooms into respectable size household. The kitchen was small, fitting only a four sit table, a stove , a kitchen sink with above and below cabinet and small refrigerator in a far corner of the room.

I'm sure it's no news to anybody about difficulties of the 30's. Things we take for granted now were luxury those days and simple snack such as peanut-butter jelly sandwich I viewed as feast of kings. I remember once me and the boys bought jelly for Richie's birthday. That was the day to remember.

You can easily imagine how quickly I rustled my sandwich and then another one and another. I finally heard Sofia's soft laughter " Chew silly, it's not going anywhere. You eat like you storing it in advance. Don't worry you'll always have something to eat here."

I stopped. A feeling hit me. Not ungratefulness, I was grateful, grateful almost to the tears. And not pride, pride I always considered as of somewhat a substitute to the ungratefulness, so I never let myself get carried away by it. No, the feeling was in a line with self awareness, self control and reasoning. Feeling that carried me on through life, kept me sane, kept me going.

"Thank you mam." I said wiping my mouth.

She looked at me with concern thinking she might have hurt my feelings." You can eat as much as you want, I didn't mean to offend you."

"No, mam" I yelped in the pure protest" It's not that, not that at all. You're right I was eating too much" I was getting angry at myself and upset that instead of showing gratitude it looked like a prideful rebuke.

" I better get going"- I squeezed final words now fully hating myself.

Sofia reached and stroke my hair. A gesture so natural and kind I felt motherly love again. "I'll make you couple more at the end of the day" she said and smiling waved her hand " Now shoo, go get busy."

"Yes mam. Thank you again, thank you kindly."

"It's Sofia, don't you forget it."

When I came downstairs Orazio only glanced at me once without saying anything and went back to inventorying. Just like that I become part of their life. Job wasn't too hard: just fill up the order, that mostly came from rich old ladies with enough money to buy, but not enough will to carry the bags, then run those orders down to the address.

Me and Angela became close friends and although I still felt myself awkward and shy around her that didn't cause any problems. She talked most of the times, telling me all sorts of stories, asking all sorts of questions and once I told her about my brothers she started to ask about them constantly. At first it was sort of fun, you know how it is; jokes and feeling of superiority, like you're special, a leader of the gang. But then slowly I became jealous, for not receiving as much attention and interest as the boys she knew only from someone else's words. I didn't want to share her, you see, even on such a harmless level. Angela must've felt it because she stopped talking about them so much, satisfied by asking one or two questions.

As for my brothers, they were more than happy with my new position. We always had something to eat now and often even delicacies. Any other details didn't interest them much. They had their own things going on in their lives. In the end I was glad just to be near Angela if nothing else and although I could sense that our feelings towards each other differentiated significantly it didn't discourage me, as my youth and innocence made me understand little in matters of love between men and women and thus let me go on blissfully in my ignorance. All that changed one day, filling my life with confusion, anguish, hope and anger. In other words all the colors love has to offer.

It was a week before Thanksgiving, busy time for any tradesmen and Orazio's shop was filled with people. Orders coming from all over the neighborhood (Orazio's shop started to become increasingly famous). On days like that I wasn't enough to make all the deliveries in time, so Angela helped me, running down to the closest addresses, which left me dealing with the ones further away. As I was coming back to the shop after making a delivery I saw a group of boys from the corner of my eye. Four of them, gathered in the alley pinning someone to the wall. At first I didn't give it much thought, those days as I said a lot of orphans were living on the streets and many of them chose a lot more mischievous ways to get by than me and my boys. Theft and robbery became their bread and butter, so living on the streets you become used to seeing these gangs in action. One thing I should probably mention to explain my initial disinterest. You see, living side by side with each other all of us had to learn not to step on one another's toes, therefore there was sort of silent agreement that they don't touch us and we don't interfere with their business. So you can understand my lack of compassion to the poor soul being bullied and I almost turned to walk away. But suddenly a familiar face flicked in between heads of the hoodlums. It made me concentrate and look harder into the whole matter. I saw her.

Something strange happened then, something I've never felt before, something that later on followed me throughout my life, occasionally surfacing in my mind. In each of those occasions I did things I wish to forget. In each of those occasions I would become someone I didn't ever want to be, no one ever would want to be.

How can I explain it. A cold rage, murderous rage, a feeling of distraction, of insanity, of chaos. One step, one shove and you are falling, forever. And if that would happen you would want to kill everything, EVERYTHING. That's as close as I can describe it. Maybe it was alike to the Nightmare or whatever he represents, maybe something else. I

never had a desire to analyze the feeling. All I know I fear it just as much as I do him and that is the reason I never became close to anyone.

Now, I can't say I remember much of what happened. I remember Angela's face, her scared desperate eyes, I remember thinking nothing can ever be worse than seeing these eyes. How wrong I was! Anyway, next thing I know I crushed into the group of bullies so hard that two of them hit the wall and sunk into unconsciousness, then I grabbed another one by the hair and hit his head against the wall sending him to the same state his bodies were. The last member of the group seeing such brutality from the boy 3-4 years younger and considerably smaller in size, fled in understandable panic. I looked down on my deed and the feeling went away just as suddenly as it appeared, bringing me back to my old self.

I blinked and turned my attention away from hoodlums to Angela. She was looking at me with fear still dancing in her eyes, although now relief started to bring some color to her face. She did not cry, maybe because she was in too much of a shock, but I like to believe she was too proud and brave to show weakness. By the time I helped her up she regained control of her emotions enough to thank me, to say she was all right.

"What happened, what did they want?" as soon as I asked I was sorry I did.

She looked at me and fear started to dance in her eyes again. She said nothing and I didn't press the matter, but slowly I started to realize those bastards wanted something more than just her money, would I come a little later, well... you get the picture. That's what spooked Angela so badly. Somehow I can't image her being so scared if it was just some bullying. The more I was thinking about it, the more I was sinking into the dark feeling I've experienced earlier. I forced myself not to think about it knowing that if I let my mind go I would sink fully and then I would go back and won't stop bashing their heads until there was nothing but bloody pulp.

Well, I had to see Angela to her mother. That's what I kept saying over and over till the murderous feeling went away. Once we got to the shop Angela ran upstairs and I didn't see her after that for two days. I stuck around for a bit thinking someone would want to talk to me. But Orazio was so busy helping customers he didn't really notice me or Angela. You probably can image why Sofia or Angela didn't come down. I went through the day on autopilot, sort of going through motions. Each time hurrying to the shop hoping that Angela came down, that she's all right or at least one of her parents would say something. That's how I went home, still hoping.

Another day went by, not Orazio nor Sofia said anything. Angela was nowhere in sight. I couldn't take it anymore. Next day as soon as I got to work I came to Orazio myself:

" Morning sir."

"Morning Edward" he responded without looking at me, keeping on sorting fruit on the shelves. "lots of orders today boy, better start straight away"

"I wanted to ask about Angela" I said determent not to give up until I got my answers.

"Yes?" he kept on sorting

"How is she?"

"She's fine Edward, don't worry"

"But sir, she was attacked, didn't she tell you?" I started to sound desperate

Orazio finally turned his attention to me. He looked at me first serious and then his eyes grew softer as he saw my genuine distress.

He extended his arm and when I took it full of confusion he shook mine and said "You were always a good kid, tough and honest, I could sense it the first time I laid an eye on you. But what you did was an act of good man, brave and strong. You're not a kid anymore Edward and should not be treated as such. So, as man to man I thank you for saving my daughter. Yet I must advise you because I'm older and more experienced: do not dwell in the past, learn from it yes, but do no make it your dictator. You made a decision, you acted on it and then you must let it be. No point in worrying of what happed, only what needs to be done from this point on. Angela is with her mother now, you've done a man's duty. Now you have a responsibility to keep on building your life, no one can do it but you. Do you understand Edward?"

His logic was undeniable, more so, it was compelling, inspiring. I never felt so independent, so grown up. With a serious face I nodded and saying nothing I went back to my work. Orazio, as if nothing happened returned to his.

My life was never simple after that day. Although living in hardship I was leading a life of a kid, never worrying about the next day. All my thoughts revolved around present, earn enough to eat today, find a place to sleep, spent time with my friends. That life was gone, my mind was full of confusion now. Thinking about different choices, decisions I had to make and what kind of future those decisions would bring. But first and foremost my confusions started with Angela's behavior.

Two days after our talk with Orazio Angela came down and started to work, that I might add was all she did. Outside of absent "hello" she paid no attention to me. In fact she went out of her way to avoid me. She wasn't exactly cold with me, but rather distant. I didn't press her, which didn't mean I wasn't hurt. I convinced myself Angela blamed me for what happened and the fact that Orazio's words were the only acknowledgment of what had happened did not help the matter. It made me angry, it pained me, but most of all it confused the hell out of me. It got so bad I seriously started considering quitting. And if by now you don't see how close I became to this family, you probably wouldn't understand how badly I felt to want to rip myself out of their lives. Nonetheless I would've done it if not for Sofia.

She brought me lunch that day, something that usually Angela did. But after what happened Sofia took over, or if she was too busy Orazio would come get me, sat beside himself and we would eat, often in silence. So as I said Sofia brought me a plate of meatloaf and putting it on the box we used for a table sat next to me.

"Eat, my boy" she said when seeing question in my eyes. Her voice quiet and sad. I frowned and started eating.

"It was very brave what you did, Edward. And the only reason I said nothing to you all this time, because I want you two to forget what happened. I don't want even a slightest memory of this in your life."

"She blames me" my voice thick with sorrow and anger. I couldn't bring myself to look up.

"Nooo" I felt her hand on my head "You're a man Edward you can never understand the helplessness us women feel sometimes. Angela just experienced that feeling for the first time in her life, it shocked her. Just give her time she'll learn to trust you again"

"But why?" I raise my head and there was no anger in my voice anymore, only sorrow. "I would never do anything to harm her, how can she think that I would."

"She doesn't. She is just confused, you'll see she'll come around. I don't want you ever to think any of that was your fault. No one blames you Edward" she looked at me closely cupping my cheek with her hand " You're special boy. Know this." she straitened out "Now eat, food's getting cold"

She got up to walk away and the question jumped from my mouth "Anything like that ever happened to you?"

She smiled tired and sad "I don't want you to think about it anymore, eat". She turned and walked off.

So I stayed and just as Sofia predicted slowly by slowly Angela's mood has changed. Our relationship did not go to friendship as it used to be, but to something else. She stopped avoiding me, started to bring lunch to me again, talk to me. However she became shy around me. So all of the sudden our roles swapped, I was the one to lead the conversation and although she always answered my questions, she never looked at me directly and her juvenile jokes and teasing seized completely. I was not used to the new Angela, so my confusion grew stronger and at this point life could not get stranger for me.

So much to tell, so little time left. I don't know if you would want to read about the first and only love of some street boy and fruit shop girl. But I sure would've liked to tell you about how we grew closer to each other, how finally my friends saw us and constant teasing started. First kiss and the only sweet moments I had in my life when we just sat and looked each other in the eyes. I would really like to mix a piece of my paradise into

this horror story. But my life is a war and before I march on, I need to leave this note behind, a note I was here, a note of what I am. Thus I stay on topic, skipping sweet moments and finally getting to the part how my war begun.

Remember I told you that Orazio came to New Orleans to escape troubles with New York gangsters? Well, New Orleans had criminals of it's own. And soon enough they come to realize that Orazio's shop was doing well enough to be noticed. Did you see *The Godfather*? All this *Honor the Code* bullshit. I never took it seriously, but one thing I can say about it: nowadays there is a lot more structure to crime, meaning these organizations base themselves on the notion of running a business. Unreasonably destructive ways were left in the past.

Now, Orazio, being a realistic man that he was, understood: paying someone to work in peace was the way of the world. So when one of the gangsters approached him, Orazio paid as he paid to a police officer making rounds in the neighborhood. He probably thought, that was it. Territorial masters took their claim and he would be left alone for a while. There was no such luck. There were no rules back then, no structure. Everyone just wanted be handed the money, no questions asked. Many businesses were ruined because of unreasonable demands. Some struggled just to keep going and only few lucky ones were doing well enough to pay off as often as those demands came.

So making long story short the same gangster came back for another pay off not long after the first one. Orazio had no patience for unreasonable men. He showed him to the door. The gangster left with a smile on his face promising to come back. Orazio mentioned the incident to the policeman that was on the take. The policeman listened full of outrage. He promised to take care of it. Of course Orazio on his part has to show sign of friendship and pay him what the gangster demanded. Orazio did not understand, he had paid both sides already, now both sides came back for more not a month went by. His response to the policeman was the same as to the gangster. The policeman's outrage was genuine this time.

Next day, two gangsters walked through the door of Orazio's shop. This conversation was even shorter than the previous one. I remember they were saying something and one of the bandits pointed towards Sofia who was talking to the old lady by the apple section at the far side of the shop. Orazio calmly walked around the counter and politely invited the gangsters to talk outside. Thinking that Orazio came to his senses and wanted to discuss business in private, they followed without objections. I watched through the window how three of them turned the corner with Orazio leading. One minute later he appeared again, alone this time. He walked back to the shop straightening out his apron. I watched him getting behind the counter as if nothing the matter. I didn't understand what just happened, until two gangsters showed up few moments later and limped away one supporting another.

It happened, you know, rarely but happened. Some people stood up to those scums, but it certainly wasn't easy. In fact in most cases it was fatal. And it wasn't just the question of strength because in the end it made no difference how strong Orazio was, he was an

owner of a small business, more importantly he was a family man. His circumstances constricted him, he was not prepared for war. I can't really say, maybe Orazio took those gangster for some bunch of hooligans that bark worse than they bite or maybe he was confident enough to deal with your ordinary criminals. Unfortunately what came was neither ordinary nor criminal.

Harold McNealy was an enforcer, I suppose you could call him. He would come only to those businessmen who proved to be most difficult. At that point I only heard stories about him, never really meeting him in person. No one refused him. That was his reputation. The strangest thing about Harry was that no one liked to talk about him and a few stories that I heard didn't involve anything brutal. In fact he was as polite as they come and was able to persuade people in quite a civilized manner. That being said, stories suggested there was something more behind polite words, something dangerous. Well I guess Harry didn't earn his nickname through politeness.

Folks called him black Harry, supposedly because of his unusually black hair and even darker eyes not often seen in Irish people and if not for his extremely pale skin, which only accentuated the color of his hair and eyes, he could've been taken for the Spanish or Italian. But it wasn't his hair or eyes, not really, people thought his soul was black and that's where the nick-name came from. I so badly wish that I could be like the rest of them and only see the evil man, not the evil inside him. The truth is what was inside this man had no color, it had no name, no shape, it had no concept that our mind could conceive. When I looked at him that day, really looked into his so called black eyes, I saw no black in them, I could see nothing. It was like looking into a muddy lake and seeing it's fuzzy surface you could not see the deep, no matter how hard you try. But the crazy thing is you know there is something in there, in that deep, lurking around only occasionally disturbing the water. And knowing that, feeling that, fills you with wonder, with frightening, nightmarish wonder if you are going insane and if your insanity feeds this shapeless monster.

Ahh... forget it, you can't explain it, why even bother. All you have to know is it has nothing to do with our weaknesses, our vices, our sins or whatever names we try to give to define the destructive way of people. No, it has something to do with madness, something that does not answer to our logic. Something that sucks the thoughts out of us and throws our thoughtless souls into the river of horrible screams with no ability to do anything but to get dissolved in them.

This is starting to sound like drivel of a mad man. Well maybe I am, but it does not make what I say less true and truth is the doorway to the land of second chance, as to walk through it is a personal choice of each and everyone of us. Me, well I sure as hell wish for the second chance. In fact I've been waiting for one since that cursed day.

It was a spring day. Sunny. Warm but not hot, perfect in every way. A week went by since the incident with the gangsters. I was coming to work a little bit later than usual. As I was crossing the street walking towards the shop I saw Orazio talking to a tall man, with broad shoulders, big triangular shaped head and very short neck to support it. Although

the man was slouching he still towered over Orazio like a misshapen giant looking down on him from the height close to 7 feet. Two of them created an extremely weird picture. Orazio, not slightest intimidated by the height of the man, drilled him with aggravated stare. Where as Harry holding his hat to his chest with his huge hands, looked back with eyes full of apology, I would even say a plea. His entire posture reminded of a servant who brought bad news to his master and now expecting to be punished.

That's the first impression you would get looking at them two. I did say first impression, because as I got close enough for Harry to notice me he turned and gave me a look. Till this day I can't understand how could Orazio remain so calm with such eyes fixed on him. Maybe he didn't see what I saw, maybe he was brave enough not to care, who knows. Me, I was shocked to the very core. And you know what, Harry noticed that straight away. He understood that I recognized him for what he was, that madness inside him. He squinted his eyes slightly and gave me a smile, which for anyone would seem like a superior but kind smile of the grown man given to a child, but me....I heard screams, screams that had no resemblance of anything human, a mixture of horror and madness among which I could still depict my own scream joining this cacophony. I was hypnotized, standing there shivering like a mouse looking into the eyes of a great snake, unable to move. I don't know what would have happen if Orazio's voice didn't release me from this horror.

"Edward go inside" I heard as if from a distance "Edward you hear what I'm saying, go inside" he repeated sharply when seeing me not moving. I blinked coming back to reality. Harry's smile disappeared, slowly he turned his huge head bring his gaze back on Orazio. And there was no plea in it any more, no fake. There was hatred, pure maddening hatred. Harry burned Orazio's forehead with it, but it was all for null. Orazio was looking at me with anger and concern mixed together. When I finally saw it I was myself again: able to understand what's happening around me. So without any word I turned and, fighting the urge to give the last look to Harry, I walked off lowering my head, not looking, which was a very smart thing to do.

I never heard what they were saying and of course you'd never guess what was it all about by Orazio's face. He was as calm as ever. I didn't even know who was that visitor, you see. It wasn't until later I was told the reason of his visit and to the one that followed. The official explanation the one everyone accepted, everyone but me. In any case all of that was later, at this point I was still in the midst of the mist, my mind clouded by fog of confusion and fear so badly I had to force myself to focus on my daily tasks. Not even Angela could gain my attention fully, which didn't please her much I might add. I was walking through the streets feeling like a ghost, searching the faces, looking for the unlikely explanation to what I just experienced. With no sound logic behind it I hoped to see resemblance of Harry's eyes. You might say it was stupid to look for something that gave me such a fright, but I thought if I noticed anything similar in others that it would be my mind that was going crazy. Can you imagine how scared I was to wish for insanity rather than facing the fact that I saw a true monster. Not monster of the man, but demon, an incarnation of madness. What I was supposed to do with that knowledge? I certainly

wasn't a white knight defender against evil. I was a thirteen year old boy and homeless at that.

I was all in my thoughts when I went home. Could hardly keep conversation with any of my brothers and of course couldn't get a wink of sleep. I was tossing and turning for hours when finally decided it was enough I got up dressed and went to Orazio's shop. It was 4:30 in the morning, but Orazio was usually up by five, I figured I'll wait by the entrance a bit until he wakes up and opens the shop.

As soon as I got to the place I sensed straight away something was off. The shimmering light was coming from upstairs and darkness of the street was the only reason I could see it. There was no reasonable explanation to my unease because after all Orazio could be up already. So light on its' own should hardly be of any concern to me. And yet there I was peering through the window worry growing in me with every moment. I went around the shop to get through the back door and as I saw it open I was convinced that something was very wrong. I hurried inside and upstairs without much thinking. The whole apartment was in the dark except the light of the bedroom, which was actually bright enough to be noticed from downstairs. You know how watching the movie you always annoyed by the people who clearly sense the danger and yet let their presence known by saying the most stupid things like "hello". Well that's exactly what I said. In my defense I must add that the entire situation was putting me further and further into distress. In my experience people unlikely to act rationally when they are in distress. I'm telling you this so you can understand why I was compelled to walk to the bedroom and why I froze at the first sight when I finally walked in. The body of Orazio laid by the foot of the bed, his face bulged to an unrecognizable pulp, his blood spread beneath his head in the form of lake, black lake, not red. That's what blood looks like when the vast amount of it comes out. I looked at it and looked at it, hypnotized by it's blackness and it's thickness and it's unlikeness to anything else in this world until Sofia caught my eyes. Laying on the bed motionless and breathless, her arms spread and her eyes closed. In all this madness the thought of Angela sprung through my shocked mind with bite of a snake. Panicky I started to scan the room with my eyes when I saw her. Angela was sitting in the corner with her arms wrapped around her legs rocking back and forth as if trying to trans herself to sleep. Her eyes...my God.....not just empty...not emotionless....hollow, her whole spirit sucked out of her. Now, I told you I was shocked the first moment I entered the bedroom, but when I saw Angela like this the part of me died: the kind part, a part that believed in good, that was full of hope and joy, the human part. I was standing there looking at the remaining shadow of the girl I once loved, when I heard his voice

"You found your girlfriend, how interesting"

I felt the hit in the head before I could turn around. And then darkness. I don't know how long I was out maybe a moment maybe hours As I came into, through the blurred vision I saw the huge misshapen body of Harry covering the delicate small body of Sofia. I don't want to desecrate the memory of the wonderful woman by describing you what he was doing, I am just hoping with all my will that she was already dead. I was gaining and loosing my conscience for sometime before I finally got my bearings. By then Harry was

up and about. I watched as he entered the room taking a big bite of an apple and started to chew it loudly. He wiped the juice off his chin, turned and saw me looking at him. "Mmmmm, you're up, I've been waiting for you" he proclaimed enthusiastically with his mouth full.

Coming up to me Harry squatted to my level and looked at me with his soulless muddy eyes. I heard screams again and my own scream among them becoming clearer and clearer.

"You see me, don't you?" he said with a smile " I mean real me" he waited for me to answer, I of course didn't give one. His smile disappeared. He squinted slightly with a corner of his mouth twitching: "don't wanna talk ha? well I tell you what, I'll let you stick it into your pretty little girlfriend over here, what do you say?" he waited and again with no results. Harry reached behind his back and drew a gun. "You better fuck her with your thing or I'll fuck her with mine" he said grinding his teeth and swinging his gun from side to side "if you know what I mean"

He started to turn his head toward Angela and his gun went with it. At this moment the feeling of rage took over me, a special kind of feeling that I described to you earlier, the feeling that made me into a special kind of monster myself. Whether it was adrenalin or some other more supernatural explanation, I can not say, but with the strength tenfold to my normal boyish one I jumped on Harry pinning him to the floor. As I did so I grabbed him by the hair and started to bang his head against it. There was pain, shock and confusion in his eyes, but it was the fear that topped them all. And it wasn't just Harry that got scared, not only his human part. That thing inside him got scared too, maybe it saw that there is another demon strong enough to challenge it, perhaps even beat it. But of course it wasn't that easy. It would take a lot more to kill it, I couldn't do it and not for the lack of trying. Only now I know that there has to be more than just a rage to take black Harry down. Later on you'll see what I mean by that. As for now it suffices to say that Harry started to come to his senses, I could see that I won't be able to hold him much longer and soon enough he'll get me and after Angela too. I had to act fast. I had to get her out of here. So I got up and grabbing Angela by hand I was on the run in a matter of seconds. There was small consolation to Angela's state, she caused no delay, which at that moment would've been fatal. She ran after me obediently with no hint of panic in her, just indifference.

When I got outside I looked around. There was very little time to think. I could hear Harry was up and rushing down. So yanking Angela after me I ran to the corner of the building around which the rubbish bin was standing against the wall. I lifted Angela with an unusual ease and practically dumped her in to the bin. Luckily it was big enough to fit her. It was big enough to fit both of us actually, but even with a feverish panicky mind I knew I should not get in, because if Harry didn't see me running on the street he'll start looking around and it would be only a matter of time before he'd find us. On the other hand if he does see me he might not worry about Angela and only chase me. My plan worked as you probably guessed. Harry saw me and didn't think twice about Angela. He started to run after me yelling and cursing, painting pretty disturbing images of what he would do to me. Most of it was a gibberish I couldn't understand, the rest I wish I didn't.

The whole street was empty as if we were the only ones left on this planet, everyone else gone. I know it sounds unreal, but I can assure you at that moment it was exactly what it looked like. And it wasn't the fact that it was very early morning and everybody was asleep. I felt alone, utterly alone. Just me and the monster chasing me.

To add to my surreal feeling, no matter how fast I was running, Harry was gaining up. And yes I was a fast runner in case you wondering. I had to get away from cops once or twice in my life. I can assure you it wasn't very hard. The oversized brut like Harry.....what can I say, I should've been gone before he could say boo. Yet there I was breathless with a maniac on my heels. That's why my run was so hopeless.

You see all of this was very much real and it wasn't a fair game. I was in his world playing by his rules, which he knew all too well. By then I started to realize that I wouldn't get away, that Harry would get me soon. I could hear him so close: "I will suck on you guts boy, and you'll be alive to feel it". There was so much triumph, satisfaction in his voice and something else as well... I don't know how to describe itThirst could be a word. But not only that, every dirty evil instinct known to man was in the mix. It wasn't human I can tell you that much. I was about to give up knowing that my run was futile. If nothing but for the fact that my lungs were ready to explode. Although there was much more to it. The truth was I felt everything was against me: the wind screamed in my ears to give up, the ground underneath felt like sand sucking in my feet, even the humidity created lack of oxygen to breath in. But there must have been some other force at work. A Force that decided that it was too early for me to die. And so, I saw a glimpse of possible escape, which seemed very thin then. About fifty yards across, on the right side stood abandoned house, I knew there was a hole underneath the porch. The reason I knew it because me and Donny tried to squeeze through it one day and Donny being the skinnier of two didn't dare to push through in a fear of getting stuck. So you see, there was no way I could have squeezed in even if I had time, which I didn't. The miracle of my escape laid in the fact that the size of the hole looked anything but bigger than the day I last saw it and yet I managed to get through practically on the fly, hardly feeling scratches from the edges.

The second I went though I felt Harry's arm reaching after me missing my leg by couple of inches. He kept shuffling with his hand for a while still hoping to get me, when finally realizing that I was out of his reach Harry sprung up and started to whale like a wild beast. He ran around up and down the deck for more than five minutes trying to find a way to me while raving in lunatic unintelligible curses. In the mean time I crawled to the corner and laid in my small refuge of the space trying to shut all thoughts from this madness. I was concentrating so hard that I didn't notice how he quieted down. I listened the silence and traitorous hope started to creep in. Hope that maybe Harry was gone. Hope that maybe I will wake up. That didn't last long. I saw Hurry's huge head in the opening of the hole. He seemed calm now :

"Hey kido, I think we've got on the wrong foot here. I didn't mean to come out as all that scary. I like you Edie. And that's God's honest truth. Why do you think I stuck around in the shop for so long? I waited for you. Now listen" he moved closer to the hole "...listen,

I had to kill Italian, that's what I was sent to do. I tried to talk some sense into him, you saw. But he was unreasonable. He should've paid. It's not my fault he was so greedy. I mean it's my job you know, it was nothing personal. And the woman..., Edie..... I didn't mean to do her, she jumped me, I was defending myself, I'm telling you kid, you gotta see it this way. But hey, I didn't touch the girl, I knew you're kinda sweet on her, so I let her be, I even tried to hook you two up. She would've love it you know. But you had to go all defensive on me." He sounded genuinely offended.

"Hey I understand I went over the line, sorry buddy, I just tried to help. Listen Edie you have to forget about them, me and you we can be a team. Tell you what you come out of there and I'll show you things, I'm telling you, you ain't never wanna go back to your old life. Come on kid, what do you say?" He waited for me to say something and I have to tell you he sounded so convincingly friendly, so soothing it was hypnotic. I would've gone to him, make no mistake. But no matter how magnetic his speech was I saw his eyes. I saw what lied behind them. In the darkness they sparked like eyes of an animal and insanity of unreasonable cruelty and hatred shoot through them, filling me with paralyzing fear.

Harry waited for a while looking at me, expecting me. When he saw my unresponsiveness, a grimace of fury in all sense of the word shifted his face. His muscles stretched skin on it into mask of such a rage it was palpable. "You better come over here, you little shit"- he didn't shout this time but whispered in a snake like voice- "because if you make me come to get you, you'll beg me to kill you before I'm through. You get what I'm saying?" I didn't move, but it wasn't by choice you see. I just couldn't. He disappeared again, but it wasn't for long. The first light of the dawn started to show. Whether it was for this reason Harry decided to leave or something else moved him, but before he went he popped his head down to the hole one last time and in the same inhuman whisper said "I'll get you, you little freak, I promise you that. Sooner or later I'll get you." Than he was gone and I stayed, stayed and stayed. Stayed under the porch for two days. Didn't come out to drink, didn't come out to eat, didn't come out to shit (pardon my French). This small space became my whole world. The life went on outside. I heard cars buzzing, kids laughing, people going about their way. But it meant nothing to me. Somehow I was convinced it was Harry's trick to draw me out. Crazy I know, but you have to understand that it wasn't just some unfortunate circumstances where a kid came across brutality of a crime. As terrible as it might've been, it would be reparable. I was literally thrown into a reality of a nightmare and in the land of nightmares all impossible evils can come true.

So you see I had no intention of ever coming out of my small sanctuary. In fact it was in pure instinct for survival that I ever did. I vaguely remember crawling out through the hole after which I passed out not far from the house. As I was told woman found me and made sure I was taken to the hospital. The rest was a fog, from which occasional visitor popped out: a doctor, a nurse, one or two of my brothers, once even a cop. I had no sense of time in this fog, it felt eternal. Until it was not. Fog evaporated and I suddenly found myself on the hospital bed looking at Chris sleeping in the chair. He seemed tired and worried. I looked at him intently for several minutes, which he must have felt because his eyelids quivered and he opened his eyes. He looked around as if out of place for a second

until his eyes met mine. Then realization filled him and he sprinted to my bed " God almighty! Edie you up. How you feeling? Just wait ok? Just hold on, let me call a nurse." He started in the direction of the door than turned and again said "you just hold on Edie, ok? Don't you go sleeping again."

He was obviously torn by worry of making the wrong choice: whether to let me out of his sight or failing to call for help. I, on the other hand, knew exactly what I needed. I simply could not let him leave. If I did, God only knows how long it would be before I found out what happened to Angela. "Wait up Chrissy. I'm alright, no need for nurse"

"But what if you get this compa again (he meant coma, I'm telling you his way of talking because I often found Chris's ignorance not so much funny as endearing. And I still do. That makes me miss him terribly. Painfully so). You were out for a long time Edie. The doctor said you may never wake up. Listen I'll be quick alright. You just wait, don't go sleeping." he turned to the door. I had to say something or he would have go and most probably wouldn't be allowed to come back "They won't let you stay Chris, you know that." That stopped him short "They'll make you leave." He turned around and I could still see doubt in his eyes "Look Chrissy I'm ok, I truly am. How is that you here anyway?" I tried to steer his attention away from worrying about me.

"We all took turns. Nurses let one of us stay with you, Leo's job. You know Leo, he can convince a priest to take a drink before the Sunday mess."

"So how long I've been out?" I asked ignoring his remark

"For couple of weeks now. What in the God's name happened to you Edie. Everybody been looking for you. You just vanished. Police was here. They got some questions. Not only them actually. What..." he suddenly stopped, I could sense his nervousness. I didn't wait for any more questions instead gave him mine "What happed to Angela?"

His eyes shifted from mine "I don't really know Edie, they found her in the dumpster, she wasn't talking. She was taken to the hospital, that's all I know." He looked at me and asked again "What happened Edie? Why were you hiding?"

I stared back at him as if he was an imbecile "Do you know what he's done to them? You asking me why I hid." I shook my head looking away.

"Who's he?" I heard him asking and suddenly realized that nobody really knew about Harry.

"It was Black Harry Chris, you know him don't you? The enforcer. Only you don't know that he's much more than just that, I tell you. He is.....listen Chris, you have to make sure you tell the police.....they have to protect her from him" I sat up in my bed rambling in nervous jabber. And I would go on like that if Chris didn't stop me

"Take it easy man, it's all right. You don't need to fear for him no more"

The feeling of overwhelming relief hit me making me dizzy. I lay back saying "They caught him, thank God"

"Well it wasn't very hard on account he was laying on the floor with a cracked skull" Chris shrugged with his shoulders

The feeling of relief was gone just as suddenly as it came. I leveled my eyes at Chris again. My own motions seemed eternally slow. "Found him where?" I asked dreading to hear the answer.

Chris's eyebrows went up: "Orazio's bedroom of cause." My shock confused him, since everyone was sure I knew . I could tell them, but my story would do anything but shine the light to what happened

"I thought you saw what happened. I mean what this Harry character was doing there, was he after some money Orazio owed, then who killed him?" I could hardly hear him, my pulse thumping in my ears as loud as bells. And with every beat one word was hitting me again and again: Crazy Crazy Crazy Crazy. Was that hopeless run just a nightmare? Hallucination? It certainly seemed real. Was I going insane? Because assuming to be chased by dead man would be a clear indication. Question after a question with no answer. My silence didn't discourage Chris though, he kept on talking

"None of it makes sense, the brutality. You know the most bizarre part?" Chris turned around grabbed the chair, dragged it closer to the bed, sat himself and leaning towards me said: "Black Harry is the Nightmare." At first I thought he read my mind. It took quite a few seconds to realize what he means. "They found all sorts of things he kept from all those poor people he killed. Police said it was trophies all them things, that's how they knew it was him- Nightmare I mean."

I was listening and it started to make scenes. Not the crazy part,- the part where Harry ran after me while lying dead on the floor of Orazio's bedroom,-but the part that explained Harry's abnormality. I felt it to the very core of my soul. And even understanding little at that point in my life I still knew there was something out there that did not answer our logic, that did not obey to the order of things. But knowing it left me with a few words if any to describe my experience. So please bear it in mind while you reading this because no matter how long I'd be writing this or how vividly clear I can put my story together it would be only pathetic attempt to make you understand what it was like to stare nightmare into face.

Well pathetic it might be I still feel obligated to finish what I started. And you are probably tired by now, but I ask you to stay with me a little longer. There is not much left to say. As you can image I didn't say police anything or anyone else for that matter. What was there to say? Besides I tried my hardest to forget Black Harry, True black Harry. And for a while I believed I succeeded, for a while he didn't show himself to me. Several years to be exact. In those years I managed to finish a night school and get myself into a community college. Leo and Shawn got proper jobs and were able to rent an apartment

for all of us. In fact they took care of all us, putting Chris, Richie and me through school and college. As for Donny he kept running the streets, mixing with dangerous element, eventually becoming one. Being always one of us, he distanced himself further and further. Who knows what nightmares visited him. We never talked about our adventure, spending little time together in our adolescence. That's pretty much the short description of those several years, years of calm before the storm, so to speak.

One night we were celebrating Richie's graduation from the night school and acceptance into college (the same one I got in a year earlier). We drank a little too much. So Leo feeling extra generous decided he wasn't going to walk home and hailed the cab. I remember me and Chris were getting in the cab with Shown behind us holding the door while Leo at pub's entrance yelling at Ricci and Donny to come out. At that very moment driver turned around and there he was- Black Harry same as I remembered from that night, live and well, with triumph, hunger and unsettling evil madness in his eyes "Where to?" he said grinning, looking as if he was mocking and snarling at the same time.

I vomited, spited my guts out, felt like it. Dizziness and paralyzing terror took over. I could hardly see anything. But I could hear taxi driver saying

"Woa,wao. what a hell, whose gonna pay for this? Serves me right picking up drunken kids." the voice was completely different from Harry's. I raised my eyes and looked at the face that I admit had some resemblance with his, but it was definitely a different person. Hard to mistake for Harry. Yet I was sure I saw him. I could never confuse those eyes with anyone's.

"Don't worry I'll take care of it" -I heard Leo's voice and came back to reality completely. I saw concerned faces of my brothers, so I forced myself to smile "I'm not drinking with yours no more" -Shown roared with laughter, Leo grinned and turned to Donny and Richie who finally came out from the pub: "Come you two, lets go. You'd love the smell" Shawn laughed even harder. The taxi driver mumble angrily turning away.

"Are you ok Edie?" Chris being Chris was the only one who noticed there was something off with me.

"Eh" was my only response.

That night I dreamed of Angela, how she was the first time we met: beautiful, full of life. She was smiling at me, so happy. Then she turned around and walked away into a fog. I didn't tell you much about her, did I? I am trying to avoid this subject, because I feel broken hearted as well as ashamed. Till this day I feel responsible for being too late, for not to be able to protect her. That's why I stopped visiting her after a while. I couldn't face those empty eyes. I found out later: Angela died that night, the night she visited my dreams and I can tell you I don't believe in coincidences I knew than it was Harry's doing. I proved my theory through pain of loss further on in life, each time Harry showed himself, one of my close ones died. Until eventually there was no one left. The paradox is although I've got nothing to lose I'm still afraid. Fear imprinted into me so deep it became

a second nature. But like I said there is one advantage on my side, fear is mine. That being said I do feel tired of such existence and knowing that this chapter in my life is coming to end I feel relieved. There is one last encounter I have to tell you about, which will put the dot to my story and perhaps shine the light on why it reeks with such an inevitability. So listen up.

It happened yesterday. I moved to my old neighborhood not too long ago. Perhaps because I realized that the further I ran from my past the more it haunted me; or maybe I tried to reconnect to happy part of my life when everything was simple, tried find the point where it all went wrong. In the end reasons don't matter. It had to happen. My journey had to come to a full circle. In any case I was walking through streets of my childhood and I could hardly recognize the traces of New Orleans of the 30's. I turned the corner to the street of Orazio's shop when I noticed the flicker of familiar shape among moving crowd, painfully familiar. I quickly turned the street and started following what seemed like a figment of my imagination appearing only for a moment and then in a flash gone, disappearing among bodies of moving people. Yet I knew too well to disregard this phantom. It was Harry of course and he was leading me somewhere. After following him for a few minutes I noticed he gradually moved further and further away as if trying to loose me. I broke into light run. As crowd grew thinner I could see Harry clearer and by then I guessed where he's leading me. He was going to the old house where I escaped him under the porch so many years ago. Only of course there was no house any more. It was demolished and on it's place built parking lot for the shop across the street. Or so I believed. I told you before, that the world of Harry does not follow our rules and so as I ran closer and closer to the spot, I started to notice an odd site. Within concrete jungle that became my neighborhood I saw an old house that even in the 30's seemed out of place. You can imagine how it appeared in the present time. The vision was frightening, mocking the very fabric of the logic. It only stopped me for a second though, leaving in fear for so many years, there was nothing he could show me that would shock me. I was so close to him, closest he ever let me come, I actually felt the victory of catching him, of finally able to grub him by the throat. My rage started to bubble in me. Only a few meters left. But he was only taunting me of course. As I extended my arm to grub him Harry jumped and squeezed himself through the hole that was way to small for him. To explain in a lamest way, his body became soft as a marshmallow squeezing through, as if boneless. I roared in rage when I saw him getting away and you have to understand my disappointment. After chasing his shadow for so many years having him within my reach and missing him by inches. I lowered myself to the hole and looked in. I felt a breeze of time on my skin. I smelled a smell of the past. I heard the noise of my childhood. Behind disgusting smiling face of my enemy I saw the street of the 30's.

Harry waved his hand and said "Come Edie, let's have some fun"

At that instant I knew what's waiting for me, I understood that everything in my life led me to this moment. My battle only about to begin.

I got up, walked back to my apartment and started my letter to you. I can't be sure what's going to happen, after all I've been fooled so many times, but I know one thing: I'm done

being afraid. I'll follow Black Harry to the end. I'll take the fight to his doorstep and because I lived through hell I'll have my chance to set things right, no matter what I have to face.

I have to go know. He's waiting.

Doors into the patient room opened. A nurse and a man in early thirties walked in.

"He's been in catatonic state for as long as he was brought to us. His super found him like this, no indication to what happened"

"Was there any improvement?" the man asked

"Sorry, Mr. Stevens. You won't get much out of him. You said he was your father's friend, what was his name again?"

"Donnald Stevens. My father told me about him a few times before he died. Asked me to find him. He's wrote some letters to him. But I suppose no point of reading them. Shame."

"Oh, you reminded me. Edward had a letter of his own on him when he was brought here. It wasn't addressed to anyone in particular, but we all felt wrong to open it in case one of his family showed up"

"My father told me he had none" Edward Stevens looked at the old man by the window and could hardly believe it was the same person his father told him about. In his stories he made him a giant of the man, unbeatable. What he saw was just an empty shell. He didn't want to stay here anymore, he felt uneasy. So turning to the nurse he said "You think I could see the letter?"

Donald Stevens ran from the corner screaming "Edie, Edie come quickly, they found another one. It would be second pair in a week."

Edawrd Zikawids turned and saw his friend running towards him; Young, innocent, whole. He quickly spun searching for someone until his eyes found a pretty girl crossing the street to the fruit shop

"Didn't you hear what I said? They've found another two"

"I'm coming Donny" Edward responded to his friend without taking his sight off the girl.

"Hurry up then"

Edward looked to the left away from the girl and his friend. Looked far into the street at nothing particular, smiled and his eyes of not a boy, but a man, a warrior, lit up with readiness.

