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Crossroads

Ryan Frabizio

Colleen watched the dark drops fall into the sink, spattering into tiny puddles. The blood tickled her as it rolled from the fresh cut along the flesh of her palm. After letting it flow a little while longer, she washed away the blood and washed the blade, then returned it to the back of the bottom drawer of her dresser, tucked under an old gray sweatshirt. She looked again at her palm, and felt the sting as she tried to close it even the slightest. Her hand felt limp. The whole arm felt limp. She felt limp. From the top of the dresser she took the few paper towels that she had brought from the kitchen to use to stop the flow, but they could do nothing for her pain, and she soaked the bandage with tears after the blood had dried.

The phone on her nightstand rang. She listened intently as the answering machine took a message that never came, then settled on the edge of her bed, wiping a few still welling tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. The phone rang again. Her chest tightened as she stared at it. She reached for it slowly, biting her bottom lip, and paused an instant before her uncut hand pushed itself to grab and lift the receiver, taking a breath as she raised it to her face.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Colleen?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey. It’s Chris. Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You sure? I mean, I know about what happened and all, and... y’know, I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I wanted to let you know that I’m real sorry about Joe, I know it’s a hard thing to have happen and all...”

She choked back a short sob and re-gathered her thoughts from the impulse to ask him to not talk about it, and to say that she

just wanted to be left alone. “It’s okay, Chris, I’m fine. Just a little upset.”

“You sure? I mean I understand if you don’t really wanna talk much about it, but...y’know, if you ever do want to talk about it or anything, I’m here, okay? Just give me a call or say something to me in the hall before class or something, all right?”

She stared blankly at her foot for a moment then blinked. “Okay.” She knew he was not convinced, but she did not care as long as she could get rid of him.

“Well...okay, then. I ah...I guess I’ll see you later, all right?”

“Yeah. Sure. See you. Bye,” forcing a small smile to make herself sound a little cheery before hanging up quickly, lest he might break the short silence again. She sat still for a moment, then shut her eyes as she felt another onrush of tears behind the lids, and lay back across the bed, thinking of nothing while staring up at the ceiling. She got up after a few minutes to walk back into the bathroom, wiping the back of her hand under her nose and her palm over her eyes, and blinked a few times as she leaned forward to examine herself in the mirror. The whites of her eyes had turned completely red around their sea green irises. She washed her face with cool water and felt the stiffness in her cheeks caused by the salt of her tears vanish.

She retreated back to her bed, flopping down across it on her front, legs bobbing in the air behind her, and burying her face in folded arms. She knew it was childish to be acting this way to everybody, but what did they care, she thought. Nobody understood how she felt, nobody ever could and nobody ever would, but it was still nice of them to try to look like they did. Her brother Michael was just too young and her parents were just not in touch with what she thought and felt. They were too busy pushing her about school and chores and other responsibilities. Joe had meant everything to her. He was her best friend, like an older brother to her, someone she found who she could look up to.

“He was my fucking angel,” she shouted into her muffling arms and quilt. She thought of the day she had met him at a summer

Christian camp. She knew nobody, and it seemed as if nobody really wanted to know her either, until she met him. He was one of the camp leaders. She had found a basketball and was playing at one of the hoops by herself when he walked over, and when she told him she did not know anybody he asked if he could play with her. They played “twenty-one,” and she was sure he let her win, which was sweet of him. Since that summer, she still saw him often since he lived two blocks away from her house. The few friends she did have liked to tease her about how often she was with him, but she never actually felt attracted to him in that way: he was twenty-four while she was fifteen, but she liked to tell herself maybe she would try her luck in a few years if he was still available. A little longer than a year had passed since then and she was only one year older, but now he was more than unavailable: he was dead, blown away by a drunk driver like a leaf in the wind. He had not even been on the road, but was on the sidewalk.

Colleen had just come home after school, but first visited the spot where his body had its last experience of life only last evening. The estimation of the distance from impact to the body’s landing spot was thirty-five to forty feet, and she could still see the tire-tracks on the pavement and spots of blackened blood. Looking around she imagined what would have happened had Joe only been a few feet away from where he was then. The driver would have hit that big tree instead, taking one more sinner out of the world instead of someone who deserved to live. It was unfair that the murderer was only going to get prison-time for his fifth DUI and killing a pedestrian. Joe had made her believe in the good of people, to believe in the rightness of things. He was her cooling stone when she would get heated and angry, the safety on her mouth when she felt like unloading whether on one person or the entire world. He made her believe that things were as they should be, and that it was better to look forward to relief than to focus on frustrations and pain.

Above all he had made her stop cutting, and he never even knew it. For months she had confided in the dagger she had bought

at a Renaissance Fair, through failed relationships, failed classes, and heated arguments with her parents over her grades. Pints of blood had run from her scarred palms into her bathroom sink. She had watched the scars on her palms fade away, and now they were reopened. There was no reason they should stay closed now. There was no right anymore. What little right that was left went with him, and she would give anything to have that back. Exhausted, she closed her eyes and drew her body up into a curling position.

In a moment she opened her eyes and found herself lying in a patch of grass. She started up into a sitting position and looked around. She found nothing but rolling grassland stretching toward the horizon in every direction, with the exception of a clay dirt road a short distance away from where she sat. She stood and brushed at her blue jeans, then walked toward the road and, deciding to go left, followed it. After several minutes she saw in the distance that the road met with another, but still saw nothing but the same dusky landscape. The wind had risen to a hollow howl and was lifting and swirling dust from the road about her, and as she reaching the crossing, she found there was not even a sign to follow. She stood in the intersection squinting to try to see as far as possible for any sign of anything. She could not decide whether to keep following one of the roads or to turn back.

“Hello, Colleen.”

She whirled around. Her eyes widened and her mouth opened as she stared.

“Joe!”

He nodded, holding a gaze down on her from his six-foot high view. His short black hair whipped about. She looked up at him in confusion.

“Joe. You’re...but you’re...dead. Aren’t you?”

“Of course I am. You saw it yourself.”

“Then what...”

“What am I doing here? I’m here to save you.”

“S...Save me...?”

“Yes, save you, save you from what you’re doing to yourself.

It's not right, it's too soon for you to give up on life before it gives in on you."

She shook her head violently and felt her throat clench. "There is no right anymore. You always told me about things getting better, things getting taken care of in time enough, that there's good in everybody. But I know now that there's nothing at all, nothing!"

She felt her knees giving way as she shook with rage, and fell on them and looked up to see those eyes still gazing down at her. She shut hers tightly and bowed her head. She gritted her teeth to hold back a sob, which escaped her as she started to weep, and brought her hands up to her face. She felt something creeping into her brown curled hair and slipping through to her face: Joe's hand. She shut her eyes and turned her cheek to his palm.

"Colleen," he began, in the low and consoling voice she had listened to so many times before. "I'm already dead. There's nothing right or wrong in it, it's just kind of...there. The guy who hit me is gonna die someday no matter what. But you still have life, and you shouldn't give up on it, not for anything. And I know you won't, because you cried out. That's why I'm here."

The wind screamed louder, sending her hair flapping across and around her face. The ground beneath her rumbled. For the first time not only now but ever, she reached out and held Joe around the knees. He reached down to her and helped her to stand. He looked around him and then back to her with an alarmed expression.

"Colleen, you have to get out of here. He's coming."

"Go away...? What? Why? Who's coming?"

"Look, I can't explain it to you, okay? Just listen to me, Colleen. You said you would give anything to bring me back, and that's why you're here, but you can't. Just go, and don't worry about me: I'm dead, and just remember the things you've been able to do for yourself. Maybe you think I caused them, but you did it. It was all you. God wants you to live. Go! Now!"

Colleen heard him, but she felt planted into the ground. She turned her head to look behind her, looking for something to come, but there was still nothing, just the grass and the horizon. She did

not know what to do, and turned to ask Joe at least one more thing before she would go only to discover nothing, not even a sign of footprints, where he had been standing. She looked straight ahead, thinking she might see him in the distance. No. She turned and took the closest branch from the intersection, only to dig her toes into the ground after a few steps before she walked straight into the mass blocking her path.

“Oh! Joe!”

He raised a finger to his lips to hush her. “Come on,” he whispered sharply as he reached out and took her by the shoulder firmly.

“Joe, I don’t understand. What the hell is going on? Who’s coming? Where am I going? Tell me!”

“Colleen, we can’t do this right now. You have to listen to me. You’re in danger here.”

“In danger of what?”

“Of losing your soul.”

Her eyebrows shot up, and then she narrowed her eyes. “My what?”

“Your soul, Colleen. Come on, we’ve got to get going.”

“But why?”

“Because this is where it’s done, the crossroads. You come here when you’re going to lose your soul. Come on now, let’s go!” He let go of her shoulder and snatched her hand and began walking, dragging her clumsily behind.

Colleen wriggled and tried to resist being pulled. “Joe! You’re hurting me!” She thought she felt her hand beginning to come loose in his, and so she put all her energy into one violent yank as she pleaded with him, and was both surprised but relieved that she had finally escaped his grip though it did jar the joints of her shoulder and elbow.

“Joe, stop!”

He whirled around and glared down at her, his brown eyes like two hot cattle brands, and growled in his throat. “You fool! I don’t

have time for this anymore!” He shot his arms out and grabbed her around the waist, lifted her up and over his shoulder, and began walking closer to the crossroads.

“Joe, where are you going? You said this place was bad. I don’t understand. Just tell me wh—”

He brought her down to her feet again at the middle of the crossroads, still holding her in place firmly by the shoulders, then released one hand and raised one of hers with its palm turned up.

“I can wait no longer,” he said, and brought his index finger to her palm. Colleen saw a long nail extending from the finger, coming to a sharp point at the tip. She screamed as he dug it into the cut she had freshly made and dragged it along the length from below her little finger to her index.

The nerves throughout her arm were on fire, spreading into her chest and she shut her eyes as her head began to swim while she struggled weakly, feeling drained of all energy but still screaming. “Joe, what are you dooiiiiiiiing?!!”

She heard nothing but her own screaming, which did not even echo but was lost to the endless horizons, betraying her hope that someone would hear her. She heard a low hissing voice pierce through her screams.

“Your soul...”

“No! No!”

Her limbs shot out as the shriek died into the vast and empty bed. She lay motionless as she allowed her heart to gradually slow itself and for the film of sweat on her face to fade. She rolled over onto her rear on the bed, propping herself up with both hands, and shook her head slowly to the sides and rubbed her eyes to chase away the images still imprinted behind her eyes. She turned up her palms and looked at them. Nothing but the cut she had made a little while ago. She dropped them and rose from the bed, and began pacing aimlessly around her room, trying to gather herself.

What was all that? Am I going completely crazy? My soul? I know he’s dead, but...what if all that was really some kind of warning? Every time I have a

dream about something, it happens, even stupid things like that time Mr. Fielder dropped that eraser on the floor and tripped picking it up. Am I... am I going to go to Hell if I...

She turned and went to her dresser, opened the bottom drawer and pulled out the dagger from beneath the old sweatshirt. She brushed a fingertip along the edge of the blade.

I don't understand.... I don't understand!! ...But what is there really left anyway? Joe is gone, and there can't be a God then, and there's no heaven, and there's no souls. Everything is hell, even here... or there's not even a hell, it's just something that maybe is real but why is it if it's like this? All miserable. Stupid. But wh—... no. No. There's nothing.

She lightly pressed her fingertip against the edge. She gnawed at her bottom lip, and turned her opened palm upwards. She bit down on her lip and closed her eyes, and flashed the edge across, feeling her fresh warm blood heating the metal.

She looked down to her palm, and saw grass beyond it beneath her feet. She looked around, and found herself back at the crossroads. The dusky sky grew black and the earth rumbled. She fell down to her knees.

“No! No! Save me! Please!”

Nothing.

“I'm sorry!”

Nobody. She took a slow, broken breath and stretched her arms out in front of her, the unity of palms and blade turned inward.

“I'm...sorry....”

She thrust her hands to her chest and shuddered violently. Everything went black. Her eyes rolled up to the back as she fell forward onto her face. On the beige carpet in her room, two black pools expanded from where her hand rested and from her chest.