

First Love

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The house was perfect! Michael and Amy had been looking for a few months, ever since they found out they were pregnant, but it was hard to find a nice place with a bit of yard at a reasonable price. This place, though, was everything they were looking for. It was almost too good to be true.

The paperwork to close on the house seemed endless. Michael fretted over the stock transfers to pay for it and the insurance and titles and other endless details, running anxious fingers through his short blond hair, but eventually it was all done. Then came the packing, the moving, the unpacking. Change of address forms, mail forwarding, new bank accounts, new checks, and the endless updating of everyone's records. And eventually even all of that was done.

It was on a late August evening that Michael and Amy were sitting on their back patio, grilling some turkey burgers and listening to distant music from some neighbor's party. They were finally settled in and happy, content. This was theirs. A warm pride filled Michael. His home. His wife. Soon to be his baby, too. His life.

“Hey spaceman, don’t burn the burgers!” Amy taunted him, her bouncy brown hair dancing around her brown eyes.

Michael laughed. “I was just thinking how beautiful this is, and you especially.” He grinned, set the spatula on the side of the grill, and wrapped his arms around his beautiful wife. He kissed her on the forehead, chastely, and on her mouth passionately. Then he kneeled and lifted Amy’s shirt to kiss the gentle bulge of her tummy, his green eyes full of mischief.

“That tickles!” Amy laughed. “And the burgers are done... do your manly duty and feed me meat!” She stomped her foot in mock demand, her lips on the verge of laughter.

“Yes ma’am!” Michael saluted with a grin; giving her tummy another quick kiss, he went to serve dinner.

* * *

Fall was blowing into town the September night that his grandmother died. While her death was no surprise, it was still a blow to Michael. He had spent many vacations in her sunny California house, engulfed by the softness of its guest bedroom, playing with new toys and new friends, exploring the old family neighborhood. Michael was overcome by memories as he hung up the phone; the laughing sound of his grandmother’s voice, the spicy smell of her kitchen, the cool dry air of her living room. He felt a door to his childhood close as he replaced the handset on its cradle.

Amy walked in the back door, pulling off her gardening gloves, and noticed Michael standing by the phone, his eyes bright. "Honey, are you okay? Who was that on the phone?"

"Mmmm? That was my father. Mimi's finally passed."

"Oh." Amy stood behind Michael, clasped her arms around him. She rested her head on his back and felt his tension.

The weeks following her death began with funeral preparations and ceremonies, and ended with paperwork and cleaning and sorting, the many tasks and decisions needed to close a long life. With the many children, grandchildren, cousins, friends, and hangers-on, the division of property looked like it could get ugly. Grandma Fryer was not poor, and she had lived a long and interesting life, collecting over the years a number of equally old and interesting objects.

Michael knew what he wanted, the one thing out of all her possessions. He had to have the bed.

He had spent so many hot California nights in its cool sheets. Its carved wood, dark with memory and time, comforted him. He loved the silky texture of its frame, the weight of it. Everything.

“You have got to be kidding.” Amy wasn’t sure if she was aghast or amused when she first learned of his attachment to the vaguely terrible thing.

“We need a bed; our old futon is lost in the new bedroom. We could move the futon to the guest room, and this bed would be perfect for us.”

Amy looked dubious.

Michael thought for a moment and added to his defense. “This bed has a lot of memories for me. Most of my childhood life was a struggle, but when I was with my grandmother all that misery faded away. I slept and read and played in this bed every summer for years. Most of my childhood.”

“Well, we do need a bigger bed,” Amy hedged.

Michael turned his puppy-dog eyes to her. Amy gave him a warning look in return. “None of that. We can take the bed.” Maybe with the right bedspread, some new pillows, a change of curtains. Yeah, she could make this bed work. In fact, this could be an opportunity to create an exciting new bedroom.

The first few nights after the funeral Michael tossed and turned miserably in the new bed, disturbing Amy’s sleep so she woke up each day more tired than before. The occasional after-work nap on the couch saved her sanity. After a week or so Michael started sleeping soundly again. Not long after that, the melancholy that had gripped him after the death

seemed to drain away and his usual good cheer returned. Amy hadn't realized how much she had missed his smile until it had re-appeared.

And then the nightmares came.

The first time, she dreamed of suffocation, of darkness creeping over her like a velvet blanket of night, pinning her to the bed, filling her, oozing coldness and numbness into her ears, her nose, mouth, vagina, suffocating her, driving the heat from her. She awoke in a desperate struggle to breathe, to pull life and air back into her lungs, her body covered in sweat, her heart racing. Michael moaned softly in his sleep and shifted gently. Amy wrapped her arms around her stomach, holding her pillow there, and rocked gently until the black shadows in the corners of the room softened to grey.

Michael waved the dream off as a side effect of pregnancy. "It could be worse, too. You haven't had any morning sickness, so maybe this is just your response instead."

Amy would have rather had the sickness, at least this morning, but her concern faded when the dream didn't return the next night, or the night after. Standing at the large bathroom mirror that Thursday morning, combing her hair and listening to Michael in the shower, she had forgotten about it entirely. Steam fogged the corners of the glass as hot water splashed and danced.

She reached up with a hand towel to clear the mist from her reflection and froze; the room tensed and exhaled around her, the shadows in the corners crouched black and staring, so many shadows. The vanity lights around the mirror became thin, anemic things, barely able to penetrate the gathering fog. Darkness crept close like an army of spiders, a phalanx there along the edge of the mirror, a point guard lurking in the sink's drain under the plug, another in the overflow. Rings of black hung under the faucet's knobs, individual points of nothing stared from the shadows in the texture of the wall itself. The shadows surrounded her, slowly reached into her, creeping, striving to suffocate her again, to fill her with emptiness.

She gasped and fell forwards, caught herself on the edge of the sink. Her right hand pressed on the mirror glass as it shifted and warped, rippling like a living creature straining against its bonds. Amy couldn't catch her breath to scream, couldn't breathe at all, and then it was gone.

The knuckles on her left hand were bruised from hitting the faux marble and white from squeezing the brush. Her fingers ached as she opened them, letting the brush clatter into the sink.

She collected herself for a moment and then continued with her ablutions. At the front door as they headed out to work, Amy kissed Michael goodbye as usual, adding "Dear, let's get away somewhere this weekend. We could use a rest, I think."

"Mmm, okay sweetie. What would you like to do?"

"I don't know yet. Think about it though, okay?"

"Okay. Love you, have a good day."

"Love you too."

The next two days dissolved in a rush of activity and work and chores.

Saturday morning came and they had still not decided what to do that weekend. Amy woke first, as she often did these days. She showered and brushed and deodorized and dressed. She emerged from the bathroom victorious, a glorious butterfly from its cocoon, and was surprised to see that Michael was still asleep. He had tossed and turned, wrapping himself in the blankets. She put a hand on his shoulder and prodded him gently. "Michael, wake up. It's tomorrow."

He mumbled softly, just sounds, and rolled onto his back.

She poked him less gently. “Uppies, sleepyhead! There’s fun to be had today.”

His eyes opened, black pits sinking into the void, his pupils dilating until they engulfed all color and life, their cold darkness reaching up from the depths at her, hungry, unseeing, blind. She jerked back, ripped the blankets from him and screamed, “Wake up!” The wild t-shirt that Michael wore as pajamas was revealed wet, clinging to his belly. There were pearls of fluid floating like dew in the pubic hair around his limp penis.

Amy took a pillow and smacked him with it, her earlier fear replaced by annoyance. “Wake up, you dope.”

Michael blinked and saw her now, then felt a breeze. He had the good sense to blush and stammer incoherently for a second and then escaped to the bathroom before the onslaught of Amy’s giggles, and before she had gathered her wits enough to taunt him properly.

After a light breakfast they spent the day at the zoo. It wasn’t much of a zoo, really, but it had some elephants and some monkeys, a few big cats. Amy petted the goats while Michael explored the collections of creepy-crawlies, the bugs, lizards, and snakes. Then Michael went off to tease the monkeys while Amy spent time with the parrots. She made friends with a lovely umbrella cockatoo, tickling its chin and scratching the soft itchy spots under its wings.

The day was perfect. Enough sun, enough breeze, and that pleasant earthiness that comes from being near real animals in something like actual nature. A decent facsimile at least. The sun quietly faded in a swirl of reds and oranges, a spill of fluorescent ink across a pale sky.

“What were you dreaming last night, Mike?” Amy asked, as they drove home.

Michael shrugged and looked vaguely embarrassed.

Amy nudged him with her shoulder and grinned. "C'mon, it must have been good. You can tell me, I won't be mad... who was she?"

"That's the thing, I don't remember at all. The first thing I remember is waking up and feeling unnaturally... cold... down there." He chuckled, eyes glued to the road.

He looked just uncomfortable enough that she believed him. "Well, okay then. But if you see her again, tell her you're married, right? Unless it's me in the night..." Smiling slyly, she ran her hand across his leg. "I might just invade your dreams instead. Or give you something to dream about."

Michael grinned. "Promises, promises!"

"Indeed."

They held hands the rest of the way home.

Later that night they both slept deeply and peacefully, exhausted and happy.

Sunday's dawn leaked through the venetian blinds, cold and thin, grudgingly giving color to the room but mostly cutting it into knife-edged shadows. Amy's eyes drifted around the room sleepily and settled on a blurry grey spot in the corner of the ceiling, over on Michael's side. She poked Mike with her elbow.

"Mmmm..." he mumbled and turned a protective back to her.

She flipped the freshly changed sheets and comforter off of him, keeping a corner over herself for warmth.

"Ugh! Cruel woman!"

"Good morning."

"Hah!"

She flipped the covers over him again, secure in her victory. "Look up in that corner. That's not mold, is it?"

Michael blinked at the smudge for a moment, squinting a bit without his glasses. "No, probably cobwebs. Or maybe just a shadow. I'll check it out later."

"Okay. This house is new; it shouldn't be moldy, should it? I've heard that mold can be a problem in some houses. We don't have a leak or anything, do we?"

Michael grunted noncommittally. "Probably not. I'll poke around some though, okay?"

"Okay."

The day passed with a sense of busy unease. Michael never did check out the grey spot and Amy didn't feel like pestering him about it all day. Night fell and comforting shadows filled the corners of the bedroom like pillows. They mumbled their goodnights and slipped beneath warm sheets into the land of dreams.

Amy drifted through her dreams like a floating leaf, touching on one shore and then another, swirling in reflective pools and dashing across bubbling straits. Warmth seeped out of her and snow fell in her dream. Naked trees, their angular branches twisting and writhing in the storm, spun across her vision as terror rose from the pounding fury of the river behind her. Cold spray dashed across her, whipped into her skin by the frenzied wind. Blinded by streaks of snow she ran into the woods. Her feet were cold, tangled in vines and sunk in dead leaves, broken twigs wove together across her legs, and snapping limbs fell into her path. Struggling, trapped, freezing, the blackness rose up behind her, reached down to her, into her, and Amy shuddered awake, shivering, sweating, and cold. The blankets were tangled at her feet, leaving her mostly uncovered.

Shadows writhed across the room, dancing as if to candlelight. Amy imagined the room was breathing rapidly, almost panting, pulsing. Shadows slid out of their corners and back, advancing a little more with each breath, pressing. Reflections of moonlight cast a silver rime on the room and its furniture, on the cast-off clothing and shelves of books. A row of pretty ceramic dolls watched the drama blindly.

She waited for the panic to leave her, for her heart to settle again, but it would not. She turned to Michael, to wrap herself around him for comfort. But Michael wasn't there.

No. He was there. Buried in shadow. Blackness lay over him. Shadow towered above him, arching up in ecstasy and leaning down intimately, surrounding his side of the bed, a living thing that pulsed over where he lay. He was pale; his face gleamed with sweat; his body writhed and pressed against the dark.

Amy's stomach turned on her, panic filled her and curdled into nausea as she rolled and fell out of bed, staggered to the door and out to the living room and into the half bath there. The cold tiles were soothing as she kneeled and heaved her dinner into the toilet, hands on the seat, tangled hair drifting across her face.

In time the convulsions stopped and calm settled across her mind. The clean shadows of this room were soothing and the cool night air tingled against her skin. A terrible dream! She hadn't been that lost in nightmares since she was a child.

Feeling better, Amy stood up and found the light switch. The harsh glare was not kind to her, but she squinted at the mirror and tidied herself, rinsed her mouth and face, and soon felt much better. Clicking the light off again, utter blackness descended and then faded as her eyes adjusted.

A dream. A nightmare. Unreality made vivid by the changes of pregnancy, the fears of her own mind amplified by the shadows of night. Feeling almost foolish she lay down on the

couch, her back turned against the unnatural darkness of the bedroom, and there she waited across endless minutes and hours of night for sleep to return.

Amy awoke to the sounds of the shower. She pulled herself up from the couch, stiff and only vaguely rested, and drifted into the bathroom. Michael was lost in clouds of steam and the glass walls of the shower wept with condensation. There was no hint of nightmare in the cheerful morning light.

Michael dressed quickly while Amy showered and, saying something about meetings, he dashed off before she was out. Amy found her clothes in the big closet and changed in the bathroom, since she felt strangely reluctant to spend time in the bedroom. She passed through that room quickly, not noticing the dark veins of grey curling around its corners.

After work neither of them was in the mood to cook, especially when faced with the scattering of old dishes that were cast across the kitchen, which meant dinner out. Food was found at the Shining Wok, a favorite of theirs. Michael seemed unusually quiet, though, as he grazed through his meal, carefully selecting bits and pieces with his chopsticks.

"I had a terrible dream last night, Michael."

He looked at her for a moment, nodded.

Amy looked at her food. "I think the mold is getting worse in the bedroom."

He looked at her as if he didn't understand what she had said, then his face ordered itself into a look of sympathy. "I'll check it out. I didn't see anything today, though. It's probably nothing."

"You were going to check it out last weekend."

"Was I?"

"Yes"

Michael chewed thoughtfully a bit. "It would be mildew, not mold."

"Whatever." Amy felt tense and didn't understand why. Usually they talked easily during meals, especially dinners out. Tonight felt like an ordeal. She returned to her food, no longer very hungry, but picking at it from a sense of duty.

They both ate silently. Michael ordered a beer, unusual for him on a weeknight. And then another. Amy watched as he drank them and finished his own food, and then picked at hers.

"I want to go home now, Michael."

Startled, he stopped fussing with the food, paid the check, and led the way back to the car.

Michael looked over at her as he drove home. "Do you feel okay, sweetie? "

Amy looked at her hands nestled in her lap, their fingers intertwined. "No. I think it may be morning sickness catching up with me." The words felt dry and lifeless to her, untrue, but they satisfied him.

"Yeah, probably. Let me know if I can help, okay? I'm here for you."

She glanced up, saw his eyes intent on the road, and wondered.

That night Amy found reasons to delay going to bed. She had to clean the kitchen. The living room needed tidying. There was mail to answer. Bills needed organizing.

"Honey, leave those bills. I'll get them in a few days, you know."

Amy placed the envelopes back into their basket without any comment.

"I'm going to bed now, I have a big day tomorrow. You get some rest. Read or something, it'll relax you. Come to bed." Michael kissed her on the forehead and wandered into the depths of the bedroom to change, to clean, to read a page or two in some book, and to sleep.

Sleep did not call to Amy. She picked up a book, made a nest on the couch from pillows and blankets, and settled in for an hour or two of reading. It was a good book and it drew her attention quickly as she lost herself in the troubles of its characters.

Amy awoke with a start, half remembering something that slipped out as consciousness flooded in. The single light by the couch surrounded her with its warm light. The glowing numbers on the video player indicated that it was two in the morning. The living room was filled with grey silence, the house slumbered around her, a protective shell and her a wee hermit crab hiding in its depths.

And again a sound, a muffled yell from the bedroom, a thumping and scuffling.

Blackness curdled out of the bedroom like tarry smoke.

Amy cocooned herself in the warmth of her blanket and shuffled cautiously to the door, braving the malignant shadows, afraid to look and more afraid to not know.

The tableau in the bedroom was crystalline in its starkness, cut from shadows and moonlight with a scalpel and assembled from fragments of night like a puzzle. Pieces clicked together as her eyes found purchase in the silvery scene.

A woman was on her bed, on her husband, her black hair flowing down her back and twining into the shadows of the bed, merging with the darkness that flowed and surged around Michael. Her naked skin was almost silver white, almost glittering. Her breasts swayed as she shifted, soft shadows rippled across her stomach; her upturned face

suddenly bent down to Michael, kissing him, breathing him in, merging with him. Her body swayed and surged above his, as his body pressed up into hers.

Dark tendrils curled in the corners of the room, heavy ropes of cobweb weaving significant patterns.

The bed creaked and Michael moaned heavily.

Amy sobbed in shock and dismay, disbelief.

The shadowy woman stopped her writhing and turned to face the sound, the intrusion, Amy. Eyes of ebony bored into her. The shadows in the hall squeezed and grasped and the night spun as Amy fell to the carpet, senseless even as she struck the wall, bouncing the picture from its hook. It fell by her head with a heavy sound, the glass cracking.

Michael stood over her, worried. He was the first thing she saw when she opened her eyes, outlined by morning sunshine, a halo around his head, a bleary angel with dark bags under his eyes. "Are you okay?" he asked with concern.

"No." Amy hurt. She sat up and her back spasmed and twitched. Her right arm was cold and numb, the nerves pinched. Her legs were stiff and unresponsive. Her shoulder ached where it had hit the wall. "Yes. Maybe. I'm okay. I must have fainted."

Michael helped her to her feet. "I'll call the doctor today and make you an appointment."

Amy nodded, not really paying attention. She was trying to remember the previous night, what had happened, fighting against a numbness in her mind.

She walked into the bedroom and gasped at the extent of the darkness in the corners of the room. Michael followed her gaze but didn't seem disturbed by what he saw. Amy brushed the bed as she passed it, heading to the bathroom, and recoiled from its icy touch. Wide eyed, she looked at the familiar comforter rumped at the foot of the bed, the

pillows askew at the head. She touched the bed and it felt almost wet in its coldness. Michael sat down on it, in front of her, and seemed fine.

Amy turned away and lost herself in a hot shower. When she got out, Michael had left. She could sense the bed in the other room, malignant, crouching in its shadows even while it was cheerfully illuminated by the morning sun.

Skirting it, Amy went to work.

Amy got home early that night and, after making dinner, fretted until Michael finally came home late. He looked half dead with purple-black circles under his eyes, his cheeks coarse and heavy... even his hair seemed tired. He flipped through the mail briefly and set it aside, found his seat at the table.

Amy poured him some juice, set the hot food in front of him, and took her place at the table. "We have to get rid of that bed, Michael."

He stared at her a moment, uncomprehending.

"The bed. Your grandmother's bed. We have to get rid of it."

"I don't understand. It's a great bed! I love that bed."

Amy stared at him, at his obvious lack of sleep. "I don't understand it either, but I can't sleep in it. It makes me... uncomfortable."

Anger crept into Michael's face and he pulled back, hands in his lap. "I sleep well in the bed, there's nothing wrong with it. I can't get rid of it. It's the only real link with my past. All of this," he indicated the house with his hands, "is ours, or yours! Only that bed is really mine."

They sat uncomfortably for a minute. Amy searched for words and was unable to find any. Michael grunted and pushed his chair back and disappeared into the bedroom.

Amy sat a while longer, listening to the tick of the kitchen clock, staring at her food with a growing knot in her stomach. She went to Michael and found him sitting on the bed.

"Michael, please. I know it sounds bizarre, but this bed is scaring me."

He didn't respond. She stepped closer, saw his eyes were dark and unfocused, his breath slow and shallow.

"Michael?"

"Michael!" She grabbed his shoulder, and the coldness of it shocked her like a slap. She started and then shook him roughly. Michael almost fell off the bed but he stood up at the last moment, staggered a bit and found his balance.

"Amy, are you all right?"

She stared at him as he stood there, pale, framed in the creeping darkness of the room. She couldn't find her voice but, in a whisper, said, "This bed is haunted."

"What? I don't understand."

"Michael, this bed is haunted. Something is wrong." She knew then that her words were true. How could such a thing be true? It was insane. She was sick. She was going to see a doctor soon. She needed rest. But the bed was haunted.

"Don't be ridiculous. I've slept in this bed off and on for my entire life. This bed saw me grow up! How could it be haunted?"

Amy shook her head and backed out of the room, pausing in the doorway. "I know, it's crazy. But can we get rid of it? Today? Now? We can set it in the back yard."

Michael stared at her. The lines of his face grew hard. "No. I'm going to get ready for bed now." He turned and disappeared into the bathroom.

The room seemed alive, each shadow watching her. She could feel the texture of the room scraping against the back of her mind. The walls seemed to breathe. The bed crouched in the middle like a living thing.

Amy backed into the hall, into the living room, and sat, stunned, on the couch.

Water ran in the bathroom. Drawers clinked, clothes rustled, cupboards opened and closed. Lights flicked off, one, then the other. Blackness filled the bedroom. Sheets rustled.

Michael had gone to bed. Without her. In that bed. Panic crept around the edges of Amy's mind. How could he do that? What was wrong with her? Her heart beat hard against her chest, blood whistling in her ears.

He loved that bed. And the bed loved him. Grew up with him. She was an intruder here. She could feel the animosity from it even out here. It wasn't the room. It wasn't mold. It was the bed. She could feel the darkness of it in the walls, even out here. Shadows cut across the room. Holes opened up in the wall sockets, leading to midnight; the cracks under the closet doors were gateways to infinite spaces. The reflections of the living room in the mirrors rippled and faded. The shadows around her were living things, breathing, watching, waiting.

Amy ran to the front door, grabbing the keys from their shelf, and fumbled her way outside and into the car, still dressed in her work clothes. The shadows around the house closed in on themselves, sealing it. She sat in the car and shook. Her hands found the

ignition slot, threaded the key into it, and started the car. She backed out of the driveway and drove halfway up the block before she remembered to turn on the lights. The neighborhood was quiet but not empty; signs of life filled the houses around her. Trees stood quiet guard over their yards as the blue glow of televisions filled windows all along the street.

Amy drove randomly for a while and, eventually, found her way to a friend's house. She wished she could go home, to her mother, but that was a thousand miles away. Karen took her in, though, with only a few simple questions, and made her comfortable on her couch.

In the morning Amy called in sick to the office and saw Karen off to her work, promising her that she would be okay. She waited until the sun was high in the sky before she made her way back to her own home and the shadows that waited for her there.

She wasn't mad, she was sure of that. The world had gone mad around her. That was a hard truth to accept, but she had to. Always before, when things had been hard, Michael had been there for her. He was always a comforting presence in the back of her mind when they were apart, and she had the direct comfort of his arms and his voice when they were together. Now she felt lost, alone, empty. Michael seemed gone to her. She had to get him back. Amy rested her hand on her belly as she drove against rush hour traffic.

Michael was gone when Amy pulled into the driveway. The house looked perfectly ordinary in the morning light. Inside, everything was the way she had left it; blankets and pillows were scattered near the couch, little piles of mail tipped here and there, books sat on the tables. A cup by the lamp. She could barely remember the panic of last night, it all seemed unreal now. She was tired and everything had that up-all-night haze to it. Maybe she had dreamed it all.

The door to the bedroom was closed.

It was just a door. To a room. It was just a bed. The only fear was in her own imagination. Once the bed was gone, this stupid irrational fear would also go. This was probably some manifestation of morning sickness, something perfectly reasonable. Michael would be mad when he found the bed gone this evening, but he would get over it. They could buy a nice new one. Together.

Opening the door with cold hands, Amy didn't know what to expect beyond it, but she found... just their bedroom. Clothes on the floor, Michael's bedtime shirt on the bed, the blankets mussed at the foot of it, the pillows tumbled at the head. The room seemed cheerful in the morning light, ordinary. Amy sighed and felt foolish for what she was about to do, indulging herself in this mad fantasy. But the echo of memory from last night kept her resolve firm.

Amy stripped off the blanket and sheets and tossed them in a corner; pulled off the pillows and removed the skirting around the box spring. Standing at its foot, she dragged the bed a few inches away from the wall. Getting on her hands and knees she looked at the hardware that held its frame together. A few simple bolts with slotted heads and, on the other side, she felt square nuts on the threaded shafts. She would need a crescent wrench and their stubby fat screwdriver, both of which were in the toolbox in the hall closet.

Easily done. She returned to the bed, tools in hand.

With great effort Amy wrestled the mattress off of the bed and slumped it halfheartedly against the wall, struggling almost as much with her own unbalanced body as with the cushion. The box spring was lighter and easier to move as she set it against the mattress. Kneeling at the foot of the bed, she started unbolting the frame.

Motion caught the corner of her eye and her heart skipped, irrationally, as she startled and cut her hand on a metal corner. The room seemed to waver around her and the darkness in

the corners shifted. Her heart rate slowly returned to normal as she sat, frozen motionless, until the room returned to its morning blandness.

Amy returned to the bolts. Her hand stung and she left small smears of blood on the frame as she worked on it. The first corner at the foot of the bed was undone now, held together by unfastened bolts and gravity. It slumped slightly. Crawling to the other corner, Amy put her hand on the frame to steady herself and then quickly withdrew it again. The room shifted as shadows deepened, the light fading. A cloud must have passed over the sun.

The nuts reluctantly came off the bolts and Amy bruised her hand several times as she manipulated the screwdriver and wrench with cold, unsteady hands. The bed shifted as the last nut crawled off its bolt. Amy stood up on stiff knees and flexed her fingers, rubbing her hands together to bring some life back to them.

Maybe she should do the headboard later.

No. It had to be now.

She stepped into the middle of the frame as if she were stepping into a cage with a rabid dog. Her hands shook as she knelt and approached the bolt on the right hand side. Sliding the wrench into place, she snugged the jaws closed on the nut and slid the screwdriver into the slot on the other side. Twisting, nothing happened. Forcing it harder, the driver jumped out of the slot and gouged the wrist of her other hand. Swearing, she shook it off, ignoring the red line as it resolved into a glistening check-mark. Holding the screwdriver steady she leaned against the wrench and the nut shifted. It came off quickly now and she pulled the bolt from its hole, leaving it on the ground where it fell.

Shifting to the left side, she felt dizzy. The room spun around her. Nausea climbed into her from where she touched the floor, touched the frame, migrating into the center of her stomach. Her heart pounding, she forced her breath into a steady rhythm and removed the

other bolt. Pulling it from its hole, a piece of frame shifted and fell to the ground. She stood up and her world constricted to a narrow tunnel and she staggered, tripping over the side of the frame. The footboard slumped and shifted, the bolts rasping in their slots.

Amy fell heavily on the floor, the impact on her elbow sending webs of pain down into her hand before it went numb. Laying on her side next to the frame, she saw thick tendrils of shadow vining down from the corners of the room. They resolved themselves into a vague semblance of a gown, of hair. A trick of light indicated a face and a smile. And then darkness washed over her.

A sound in the night. A click. Footsteps. Papers. A deeper shadow fell over Amy's closed eyelids and she opened them and was suddenly dizzy, disoriented. Her arm hurt and she couldn't feel her hand, unless it was that lifeless lump under her side. Her stomach hurt. Her legs were icy. The headboard loomed into focus, tipping crazily over her, its carvings leering down at her.

The room was sketched in shades of shadow, grey and black. A silvery frost of moonlight traced it in delicate outlines. She saw Michael's shadow framed in the doorway, his pale face barely visible. His eyes were deep wells of black, holes burned into a wax mask. He turned toward her, his eyes drifting across her, across the broken bed, silently.

She tried to speak, to call out, but ice filled her mouth when she opened it and her voice was frozen, lost. Her eyes were frantic, pleading, as she tried to move, to make him see her.

Michael slowly removed his clothes. He dropped the shirt on the ground then stepped out of his pants and boxers in one simple motion. He stepped over the canted frame and sat down at its center. Shifting down a bit, he lay back in the rectangular space with his arms straight by his sides, like someone dead settling into a king-sized coffin.

Amy struggled against the cold, pulled against it to breathe, to cry out, to run away, but could only strain helplessly, unable to even escape the bed's frame where she touched it.

A shadow slid across her view, drifted over her. It left an icy trail across Amy's chest like the frozen slime of some graveside creature. The shadow woman sat over Michael, settled over him, her hair drifting out in front of her as she leaned down to kiss him. Michael sighed gently at the touch of his first love, as the room spun around Amy and grew darker until there was nothing but the dizziness and then, for her, nothing at all.