

HIDE SCHOOL

by Steve Mobia

Clouds, sand, brick-block school
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Swing up, swing down
Birds, grass, grains of sand
She rides the pendulum
of a mighty clock
Courting time.

She sees her bare legs against the brewing-storm sky,
then her light summer dress near the sand-soft earth.
No one here to call her Lily—only a serenade of
chirping chains.

The day slows down, ready to sleep
under the approaching cloud blanket.
She relaxes,
tucks in her legs.
The arc shortens
and the brick-block school, seen streaked in passing,
solidifies before her eyes.

The swing now still, Lily rests a cheek against the chain, pausing in her giddiness to take a deep breath. Before her looms the old hulk of the abandoned high school with its six stories of broken and boarded windows.

“It’s such an old school,” she whispers. Her thoughts drift again to her thirteenth birthday, two days away. Months of waiting have built to an excitement she can hardly contain. She’s been swinging upward today as if to dive into the sky.

This is Lily’s private playground. She knows the secret way over the chained gates after making sure no one is watching. Though she finds her friends good company, on certain days like this one with its humid weather, she just has to come here alone. She feels older here. There are no jungle gyms, merry-go-rounds or slides. In fact, the swingset is the only thing shared with the other playgrounds Lily frequents with friends. Here there are different shapes—chin up bars, rope climbs, hoops—and something she especially likes; a balance beam, just high enough to be scary. It’s no secret that Lily is wild about circus performers, particularly the tightrope walkers. Under her nimble feet, the balance beam becomes thinner and thinner until it’s as thin as a thread. The thread will not break if she keeps her faith.

In Lily's group of girlfriends pulled together by gossip and giggles, faith is a favorite topic. Not necessarily faith in God, but faith in the future—in ones infinite possibilities. Mara with her new braces gleaming, listens so intently to this talk about faith that it almost frightens Lily. Youngest of the group, Mara has grown especially attached to Lily, and though Lily has tried to discourage it, she also sees Mara as a kid sister, allowing Lily to feel older than their one year age gap.

Lily is restless with her youth. Of all her friends, she is the most tired of dolls and little girl games. "To be older like Stacey," she'd say to herself after hearing Stacey tell a particularly juicy story about this or that boy or of the biology teacher whom she claims to have slept with.

Lily's mom does not like Stacey.

"Don't you dare use that filthy language," says Lily's mom. "And tell Stacey that she is not welcome in our home. She's a bad influence of you."

Stacey has taught Lily some "cool talk" as she calls it.

"You mean girls in the city really talk that way?" Lily would ask.

"Bet your ass!" Stacey would reply with a grin.

This amazing ability of Stacey to say just about anything put a spell on Lily. Only movie actors really talked and acted like Stacey, certainly no one from the little farm town where Lily was raised. Much happened when Lily moved to the big city: her mother got a new job and couldn't spend the same amount of time with her, she saw so many different kinds of people, and...she met Stacey.

A high school freshman, Stacey had a certain assured way of moving that fascinated Lily. Though Stacey was always getting into trouble, she sailed through her problems with a gleam in her eye and an amazing story to tell over hysterical laughter. Stacey would show up at the most unexpected times and they'd go on for hours bubbling over the details. Then the next day, Lily would hold Mara's rapt gaze as she carefully revealed in hushed tones the episodes she had laughed at so uncontrollably the night before. Mara would sigh and look longingly off into the distance.

Lily almost told Stacey about her ritual here at the old high school: the way she would bring her dress and leotard along and change into them once over the gates; the way she'd dance on the balance beam tightrope until the audience of phantoms perched in every window of the building applauded her superhuman feats. But no, this had to be her own personal high school where her own adventures would unfold. Since she couldn't go to Stacey's school yet, she'd come here.

Even though Lily knows she pretends about the high school boys watching her, at times she is shocked at how well she pretends. After finishing a particularly graceful

move on the balance beam, she'd look over her shoulder and could swear she saw an actual face gazing through a boarded window. Then it would quickly disappear.

She looks for that face now among the bricks and boards of the imposing building. Her swing is totally still as she holds her breath and concentrates on what she sees—the dark red patterns of brick inlaid designs around the window, fire escapes, the huge inscription “Knowledge is Power” near the roof, pigeon droppings—but there is no face. “Oh well,” she says to herself, “I do have a pretty good imagination.”

Getting off the swing, she skips lightly to the balance beam which she always saves for last. Her shoulder length blonde hair flares out as she moves dizzy with excitement. But after tagging the wooden beam, she regains her composure. She thinks of Janice, the best gymnast in the school. In slow-motion detail, Janice's perfect back flip on the beam comes to mind. Lily, her mouth agape, was in the audience thinking: “How could she do that with everyone watching her?” A borrowed book gave Lily illustrations of the moves to practice in private but she just couldn't perform in public—something about her body being seen.

Lily has been uncomfortable lately, awkward feelings and thoughts. Nothing seems quite right anymore. Her dresses look different on her. She can't seem to make up her mind about anything. Stacey's high school tales enthrall Lily with more excitement than ever, though she now reacts with a tinge of nervousness she never had before. This deserted schoolyard is her refuge—she can be as wild, confused or thoughtful as she wants.

Today before coming here she put threads on a few more dolls of her diminishing doll collection. She's turning them into moving marionettes. But even this movement isn't enough. The life has gone from her tiny friends and families whose histories she had so carefully plotted. Mara has borrowed most of the dolls and Lily hasn't asked for them back.

Thinking of her puppet friends, Lily leaps to a standing position on the beam. She imagines threads connected to her own body, making her light and buoyant. A gust of wind from the approaching storm stirs her outstretched arms. The pale yellow dress flutters and her bare legs feel a tingle at the slight breeze. She has left her leotards off today, the way she does when it's warm and humid. The storm is still hours away, said the forecast. Lily looks up at scalloped clouds overhead. “Plenty of time,” she thinks.

Walking from one end of the beam to the other, Lily sees herself in a circus tent high above the center ring. Mara is staring up from the cotton candy crowds, pressing her trembling hands together. Stacey waves assuredly on the back of an African elephant, its trunk upraised. Music blares from the brass band. Lily reaches the other side and carefully bends her back. Resting her left then her right hands on the beam behind, she

moves her taut legs slowly through the air then down to complete a graceful somersault. The crowds are ecstatic—thunderous applause.

Lily's reverie is pierced by the clang of the chained schoolyard gate. She quickly jumps down from the beam—a streak of panic rushing through her lithe form. All of the playground equipment is so thin, nothing to hide behind. She makes a break for the boarded up physical education building a hundred feet away.

Safely concealed behind the dividing wall between the boys and girls locker room, Lily peers into the school courtyard. From the entrance tunnel near the administration office, a woman emerges wearing a brown jumpsuit and fumbles in her pockets for something.

"I've had it with him," moans Cornea as she unfolds the letter pulled from her pocket. On it, a maze appears superimposed on a drawing of the high school building. A side view is drawn below, pointing out the gate she had just climbed over along with a list of oblique instructions.

The wrinkled paper reminds her of other cryptic notes and letters Malick has sent her over the year she has known him. At first, they brought much pleasure to her. Though she felt he indulged in preposterous irrational ideas, she found his earnest attempts to express them refreshing. She would reply and try to match his convoluted trains of thought, playfully pretending to be serious. Didn't he ever realize that to her it was just a game?

Cornea looks around the high school courtyard, her eyes drawn by the slight movement of a swing in the playground. She thinks about her thesis on regression and how crucial Malick had been to its completion. But now it's finished and she had not been able to pull Malick out of depression. Weeks have gone by without any word and now this letter, this maze on a map.

"Condemned: Unsafe for human habitation," read the tattered cardboard sign on the gate she had climbed over. Cornea recalls Malick's mention of the controversy surrounding the closing of his former high school: Though built in the 1920's, the city had concluded that the building was sitting on shifting foundations. Cracks began appearing in classroom walls. Students walking the halls claimed they heard rumbles from time to time. Though some in the school's administration protested with a vengeance, local politicians made children's safety an election issue and the school was eventually closed. It's been some ten years now since the place was abandoned. No one has wanted to build on the precarious site yet the school has remained seemingly intact.

Even while debating with herself the night before, she knew she would come here. She thought of every reason to ignore him—his frightening emotional swings, his possessive demands, his sudden sexual urges. Still, she just has to confront him one last time. The meeting has been rehearsed many times now; she will say he has gone too far, that this maze in the high school is the last one she will endure for him and that she's leaving. So easy to simulate, too easy. It might have been as easy for her mother to quit collecting tropical fish. Cornea would tell her, "those goddamn fish are driving you to drink!" And yet she'd still be there at night in the living room lit only by the blue glow of surrounding aquariums, finishing her bottle of anisette. "The angel fish are coming to free me," her mother would mutter to herself while gazing at the scale patterns of her swimming pets.

Shaking her head, Cornea examines the map in her hands. The next step is to find a fire escape on the main building. There are quite a few fire escapes on the old school—all have their lower ladders retracted. Something must be different about the one Malick intends for her.

Walking alongside the rust-red brick walls, her mother's fish scale paintings come to mind, then Malick's butterfly scale photographs. A wave of feeling washes over her, that sense of being dwarfed by the magnitude of nature. Malick would often mention this. "Humans are so obsessed with their own importance it's laughable," he'd say. Yet he obviously was taken with his own importance—why would he expect her to climb this building for him? Kicking the ground in frustration, she contacts a pile of chain at her feet and, looking straight up, sees a partially lowered ladder. At one end of the chain is an antique Kodak camera. Cornea opens the back of the camera. Where the film should be there is a scribbled note:

*Photography is a plague, a pile up of details
parasitically sapping our energy,
distracting us from the great questions.
Yet with skill
we can use this chain of impressions
to rise above our surroundings*

"Yeah, I see where this chain of impressions has led you," Cornea whispers under her breath as she whirls the chain in a circle, using the camera as a pendulum weight. Releasing a length of chain, the old camera as projectile vaults the extended lower rung of the escape ladder. Cornea catches the camera and pulls both lengths of chain. The ladder reaches the ground.

“So this is your great ladder of success. Are you listening up there?” Cornea shouts bitterly up at the cold steel structure. She wonders what Malick really thought of her regression thesis. She had labored over it for months. Was this whole retreat from the world Malick’s reply? She begins to climb, reflecting upon the steps needed to secure her subject. Had she used Malick dishonestly, encouraging his flights of fancy so that his behavior might shed light on questions she herself was pondering? No, she was honest from the beginning, from the time she first saw him in the library slowly leafing through a large book of symbolist painting. She had been writing across the table from him and had a difficult time concentrating. Her eyes kept drifting over to the paintings in his book—the overripe imagination, the muted yet intense coloring. Then for a moment he raised his frazzle-haired head and met her eyes directly. “It’s all here,” he said. “What more can we do?”

“I’m writing a paper for my psychology class,” Cornea began to blurt out. “What are you studying?”

A quixotic smile crossed his face. “Butterflies and bow-ties.”

At that time Malick lived in a dusty storefront downtown. He tried to start a photography business but with meager equipment and an anonymous sandwich-sign outside, he failed to attract customers. Cornea remembers her first visit to the place. There was a screened off chamber with two sets of doors that one had to go through to get in. Inside, live butterflies fluttered everywhere.

“Cornea, I don’t believe you’re here!” Malick said while folding up a lighting stand.

“The addresses are very hard to see on this street,” she said, glancing around the room. Apparently he had just finished a photography session as lights and cables were scattered everywhere. On the walls were several close up photos of butterfly wing scale patterns.

“Actually, maybe I should take your picture,” mused Malick. “Just a few minutes ago a mother brought her nine-year-old daughter over for a portrait. The girl was wonderful. I usually keep all my butterflies in the back room but she really wanted to see them. So we made it part of the portrait. The butterflies cast shadows on the backdrop and one yellow swallowtail actually landed on her shoulder just as the shutter snapped.”

“How do you keep these all alive?” asked Cornea as she tried to count them.

“Honey and sugar water,” Malick clicked on the lamp he had reset. “Come sit on this stool. I think we can use the same background and make a very lovely portrait.”

“Hell no, that would be too cute.” Cornea moved away from the stool. “You’ve got to be kidding. Me with butterflies on my shoulder? Forget it.”

“What’s wrong with butterflies?” asked Malick, not sure whether to take her seriously. “They’re the epitome of beauty!”

“We have a lot to talk about I guess.” Cornea looked down at her notebook.

“Okay, if you say so.” Malick switched off the light. “Let’s talk then.”

In the days that followed, they talked. She told of her aloof father who worked as an airport baggage claim superintendent; that his conversations revolved around positions of carrying handles and the merits of detachable wheels versus permanently affixed ones. “And those cloth cases, now they’re really something,” her father would say while eating an automat sandwich. “They make much more sense, so lightweight!”

All the while her mother, an interior designer, squandered her money on ever more expensive tropical fish to gaze at and paint.

“Ah, I remind you of your mother, so that’s it,” laughed Malick. “I suppose we’re both interested in patterns.”

“But you’re more passionate than either of my folks. I mean my mom would sit there, tuned-out on booze, looking at those supposedly cute serene fish. I couldn’t stand it.” Cornea looked Malick in the eyes. “No, you’re not like them. You can do something important with your life.”

“I don’t know,” responded Malick. “Everything I’ve tried has failed. I’m just barely squeaking out a living. But, I do have an idea that will make it for me.”

“Make it for you. What do you mean?”

Malick held up a drawn diagram. “Presenting: the butterfly bow-tie.” A large tiger striped butterfly was affixed to the collar of a faceless man in a formal suit. Malick was beaming. “It’s got to go over, look; the eternal beauty of butterfly wings combined with the classic bow-tie. You see, most bow-ties are black and colorless but not these. They’ll be in all the different natural butterfly wing designs and colors—one for every occasion. Wear a different one everyday!”

Cornea stifled her laughter. “That’s the most bizarre thing I’ve ever heard. Wow—and you’re convinced of this.”

“I’m more than convinced, I’m certain!” declared Malick.

And so began the arduous enterprise of the butterfly bow-ties. Fortunately Cornea had a college friend, Celine, who worked with fabric. All three would spend nights at Celine’s house. Malick would help Celine sew the complicated tufts in the patterned material they had silk-screened while Cornea wrote her regression thesis. She would also write notes to Malick—descriptions of possible sexual escapades that they could enact later in the evening.

It had always puzzled Cornea that even though Malick was ten years older, he had never had sex with anyone else. “Where did he put his passions all those years?” she would say to herself.

On the night she first offered herself to him, a gusting breeze forewarned an approaching storm. She remembers closing the window of her dormitory room to keep her desks papers from stirring. “Come on now, you must’ve had a woman before.”

Malick was sitting, arms crossed, on her bed. “Never, never before.”

“But why? You’re so impulsive. What stopped you?”

“My parents stopped me for many years. They were so stern and protective.” Malick suddenly blushed. “All my friends were screened. Nobody was good enough. I guess I became a voyeur. I could look at the world outside but not touch it.”

“Because touching it was sinful?” asked Cornea, unbuttoning her red taffeta dress bought just for this occasion.

“Of course it was a shame to be interested in others that way.”

Cornea stood in front of Malick and stroked his hair. “In which way?”

Malick looked up at Cornea’s inviting lips as she spoke the question again softly, “Interested in which way?”

Malick swallowed, then spoke. “Late one afternoon when I was around seven and chasing some swallowtail butterflies with my net, I entered a middle school yard. The sun was still up—it was a bright hot day. There was the yellow swallowtail butterfly I was after, perfect, perched on a ‘bird of paradise’ plant. I couldn’t have imagined anything more beautiful. But I had to be very careful sneaking up on it or it would escape me, so I slowly came closer with my net up. Now this plant was a few feet away from a storage building for P.E. equipment and as I walked slowly around it, I could hear soft moaning from the side of the building. There, two girls who looked twelve years old were completely naked with their clothes on the ground around them. They were caressing and kissing each other and had their hands between each others legs. I suddenly lost interest in the butterfly and hid behind the plant, gazing.”

“They didn’t see you?” Cornea asked as she knelt and unbuttoned Malick’s shirt.

“No, they just were so involved with each other. Years later I would think back on that scene—the hot summer day, the butterfly opening and closing its wings and the lovely girls. There was something so inaccessible about it all.”

“So you became a voyeur?” Cornea spoke quietly as she pulled Malick’s shirt over his shoulders.

“Yes, I guess I have. In high school, when I became interested in photography, I took pictures of two things: butterflies and girls. I kept butterflies alive in my room as I do now. And, I would hide at the schoolyard of the middle school, hoping to capture with a picture that scene that stayed with me, to somehow make it more intense.”

“More intense so you could masturbate?” Cornea stroked Malick’s hard penis through his pants.

“Yes,” Malick spoke breathlessly, his body trembling. “But...but I never saw anything so explicit as the first sight of sex. I was very patient and waited for hours behind bushes, got great pictures of girls playing but never the one I wanted. Once I was caught by a teacher at the school and taken to the principal’s office. My parents were told and I felt so ashamed. They said I’d better concentrate on schoolwork. The next day I came home and...” Malick broke off, tears welling up and spilling down his face.

“What happened?” whispered Cornea imploringly while unzipping Malick’s pants.

“My father had sprayed insecticide in my room. All my butterflies were dead, scattered on the floor. A note from my father was tacked on my door. It said that I’d better...better learn to kill butterflies and pin them up like normal collectors.”

Cornea touched his bare hard penis. “No, that was wrong of him. You’re so alive, I can feel you. We’re both alive and your butterflies are alive.”

Running his hands up under her soft silken dress, Malick sighed, “Cornea; it’s like I’m a little boy again, seeing something I shouldn’t.”

Cornea’s body undulated. “I want you to see me and touch me. You don’t have to hide.”

Malick stood to embrace her. Cornea, overtaken with the move, fell against her desk, spilling papers. Malick toppled with her to the floor and they moved together in feverish rhythms while Cornea’s thesis pages dropped helter-skelter around them.

Cornea has climbed to the sixth floor platform now. To her right, a short ladder leads over onto the roof of the high school. She glances again at the map—something about the roof skylight. As her feet touch the roof, she looks back over her shoulder down into the courtyard. A flash of movement draws her attention to a young girl who runs behind a wall

“Hey, down there!” Cornea shouts into the empty space. No reply. “Who are you? Are you watching me? Don’t be afraid. Come out!”

No movement, no sound. Cornea, puzzled, turns toward the massive broken skylight.

She thinks of greenhouses, fiery flowers, a dream she recently had of an enormous long greenhouse spanning a valley, reflecting the sun. But this skylight was shattered long ago by vandals.

She peers through a broken pane into the dark void below. The skylight is over a hallway and she can make out ransacked lockers on both sides. Obviously Malick intends for her to go down there, but how? She moves to the other end of the skylight and looks in, nearly scratching her face on a shard of glass. A banner, proclaiming a homecoming

prom, is nailed up under the window ledge and anchored beneath, providing a cloth chute leading to the floor. “That’s very weird,” she says to herself, for Malick told her he never went to any high school dances in his teens. A large section of rusted metal skylight frames have been purposely removed to enable Cornea access to the chute.

“I don’t like this Malick!” she exclaims. “I don’t like playing these games anymore!”

Cornea has played many games with Malick. All those notes she would write him while he worked with Celine making butterfly bow-ties: “Yes, tonight I’ll be deep in the hull of the great ship, polishing the floor of the captain’s quarters. And you, his first mate, enter sweating from hauling in the sails. The captain is away. We have the room to ourselves.”

Cornea had a closet full of special outfits picked from thrift shops to match the roles they’d play for each other: she a teacher, he a student late for class; he a gynecologist, she a young girl being examined professionally for the first time. Their appetite for ever-changing situations seemed limitless. Malick was searching for something—something solidified in that young boy’s eyes when he saw the inaccessible vision of those two young girls. What those girls shared he could not possibly feel, only imagine. And from the chrysalis of his imagination, an innumerable medley of butterflies would emerge.

Cornea lets go of the skylight and slides down the homecoming banner to the cold tiled floor. On either side, lockers, their doors torn off, expose graffitied cocks and cunts while the rancid smell of fermented piss shoots through her sinuses. There are cheap tinsel decorations and a mirror ball with most of the tiles missing.

Crepe paper bunting is strewn like a chaotic spider web throughout the hall. As Cornea moves she feels the paper stick to her jumpsuit. Grabbing a strand to pull it out of the way, she discovers that it’s covered with wet paste. Despite Cornea’s attempts to tear them off, as she moves down the hall, the streamers trail behind like a lost car from a wedding procession.

Lily walks to where the woman in the brown jumpsuit went up the fire escape. The ladder has retracted. She wonders what that woman wanted inside the building. Walking backward and looking up, she sees nothing unusual. Above those big solid words “Knowledge is Power,” she scans the roofline.

“What was she after?” Lily ponders as she walks to the other end of the building. There, a decorative wall extension provides numerous footholds. If Stacey was with her, she knows she’d climb it. On the top plateau, she could reach over and just barely grasp the sill of an unboarded third story window to pull herself in. But what is inside? She

pinches herself for not responding to the woman's call. If she had it to do over again she would have shown herself and waved up. It seemed the woman really wanted to talk to her. But no, being here was Lily's secret. Perhaps the woman was a building inspector, since she was wearing a jumpsuit. Perhaps she would have told Lily's mom that she had trespassed. Her mom would have a fit. Lily would certainly be locked in her room for at least a week. Then she would be forbidden to come here, never again would she feel the magic of the balance beam. No, she couldn't risk her freedom. "But what's inside the building?" The question gnaws at her mind.

Lily can hear Stacey now: "That's all high school stuff. You'll find out when you're old enough." But Lily wants to know now—why wait? She walks back to the swingset and sits on the leather strap of a swing. The old building seems alive under the shifting light patterns of approaching clouds that break up the afternoon sun into radiant beams. The changing lights make her think of nightclubs, boys, sexy dresses, whispers and pledges.

"What is going on in there?" Lily asks aloud and kicks the sand under her swing. She imagines Mara's plaintive voice: "Don't you know Lily? I know you know. Tell me pleeeeeease!"

Lily must find out. After all, this is Lily's high school. She has to know what is going on in her own high school. She's studied gymnastics and mastered her school jungle gym. This wall will be a cinch.

Distant thunder accompanies Lily's running feet to the base of the wall that looked so easy to ascend from a distance. Still, she can't give up. She must discover what is going on behind her back. Otherwise, this school will never be hers again.

Now a musty dust cloud envelopes Cornea who descends into the fifth floor hall. A vague light creeping around boarded windows from nearby classrooms outlines something ahead, some people. Cornea stops breathing, her spine prickling as she flattens herself against the closest wall. "Are these friends of Malick?" she asks herself. The figures are ahead in the hall but are motionless and in odd positions.

Cornea reaches into her jumpsuit pocket for the pin-flashlight. She knew it would be dark in the old school. "Alright guys," Cornea tentatively calls out, "so this is my surprise party, I get it."

There is no reply. The tiny beam from Cornea's light appears solid in the thick dust. These aren't people or at least living people, she assures herself, walking slowly forward.

An assortment of old dress forms and chipped manikins are clumsily dressed as football players and cheerleaders using tattered cloth. Some of the manikins are quite old and their halfhearted smiles persist through peeling paint. Badly made paper mache football helmets adorn some. There are many missing limbs or arms and legs torturously bent into inhuman positions. It all appears to be some kind of frozen orgy, the players and cheerleaders enmeshed in an awkward charade of sex.

In the rooms along both sides of the hall, there are more manikins in mocking erotic poses. Some suggest the roles Cornea and Malick had played during the heat of their first month of passion: the trapeze artist draping her dangling thighs over the ringmasters shoulders, burying his head beneath her short spangled dress; astronauts crashing into the sun, having one last claustrophobic climax in their capsule before vaporizing. Even though the outfits are crudely fitted, Cornea recognizes the references. From her groin a hollow sickness rises.

Hidden in an alcove, Lily pulls blue jeans up under her yellow dress before removing it. A long white T-shirt conceals her budding breasts. She folds the dress into her backpack as when she usually leaves the playground. However, today is going to be different. Today she is going to climb.

Lily shoulders her pack and walks to the wall. A decorative star pattern in the bricks leaves plenty of room for her small hands to grasp. The wall extends out away from the main building to a single-story cafeteria while decreasing stepwise in height.

Deliberately and with a measure of pride, Lily begins her climb from the low end near the cafeteria. Her purple sneakers fit into brick cavities as she moves higher foot by foot. Reaching out her left arm, she touches the upper ledge of the wall. By balancing her weight with hands along the ledge, she can move sideways to her right, fitting her feet into the brick patterns along the way. But then, the wall steps a few bricks up and she must climb higher to reach the top ledge. Over her shoulder, the balance beam and the playground seem far away.

"I guess I must be crazy," Lily whispers as she looks to the distant open window. Nothing else matters now but getting to that window. Her nimble body finds a new burst of energy.

Cornea is descending another staircase while trying to read Malick's map with her penlight, "Forth floor; latent knowledge." Suddenly her feet slip and she loses her balance. There are piles of open books covering the steps. The bindings twist and tear under her weight. Torn pages stick to her paste-daubed jumpsuit as she tumbles, the sliding volumes offering no firm ground.

Finally she comes to rest in what can only be described as a small valley formed by heaps of books rising around her like hills. She pulls her legs up together, checking for sprains. Above, pigeons fly in and out of high broken windows. "So, this must've been the school library," Cornea says to herself as she stands hesitantly, noticing the empty wooden shelves bordering the vast room.

Climbing to the crest of one of the book mounds, she surveys the disorder. It's clear that the pigeons have favored this room, their excrement covering the piles of volumes like fallen snow. In a neighboring valley, the tiled floor has been torn up, revealing a large hole containing some dark red cloth-covered object sunken within.

Cornea takes a step before a sudden panic and she rifles through her pockets. Has she managed to save the map? "If I dropped it, how would I find it in here?" Her pockets are empty. She looks back down to where she was sitting. Among some thick texts with black covers, she sees the wrinkled paper next the fading beam from the penlight.

Scurrying down the pile, she thinks of turning back, of not playing Malick's game. After all, he deliberately tried to trip her with those loose books. With some effort, she can retrace her steps, leaving Malick without a tourist for his hidden museum.

In an angry fist she snatches up the map. Dare she read on? She looks around the cavernous library. An odd calmness settles in, the mounds of texts no longer suggesting calamity but sweet decay. Exhausted, Cornea slides to a sitting position and shuts her eyes. She imagines page after page floating down like feathers. She pictures Malick lying beside her, asleep on her dormitory bed. Oh how she used to love studying his face while he slept.

Cornea slowly opens her eyes. In her hands the map remains. She reads on: "Save the Teacher's Chair."

On closer inspection, the object in the hole is indeed a chair; a fat plush upholstered one with red curlicued designs. The floor tiles are scattered haphazardly among the books around the hole, giving the impression of a recently unearthed grave. "Save this, huh," ponders Cornea as she pulls the sloped back. It's obvious the chair's heavy wooden frame isn't going to budge easily. Cornea works her way down inside the hole, insulation

and broken concrete surrounding her. She imagines an avalanche of the book mounds, burying her.

The padded fabric on the chair is moldy, giving off a dank smell. Bending down with her penlight, she looks beneath the seat. Among the rusted springs she catches a glint off something shiny. Pulling it out, she discovers it's a key, oversized and theatrical. Attached is a tag: "Key to the Worship Room."

Trickles of rain strike Lily's cheek. She is now two-stories high and, slowly making her way along, she nears the point where the wall meets the main building.

The new arrival of drizzle from thickening clouds stirs an urgency inside her. For the first time she thinks of being trapped in the high school with a raging storm outside. The thought arrests her movement. She looks up into the darkening sky. "Please don't rain!"

In her mind, the open window extends a thread of faith, pulling her toward it. "Everything'll be all right. I'll be in and out in no time. It'll be a light sprinkle like this for at least another hour before the big storm hits. Don't worry."

The third-floor hall opens out cavernous and empty. All the doors along the hall are shut. Cornea begins to try each door in search of the "Worship Room."

The butterfly wing photographs—Malick used to worship those. She remembers him saying that the patterns on the wings of butterflies were on the carpets of the gods. And for sure the gods were also wearing his butterfly bow-ties. Cornea once suggested he also make pupa and cocoon earrings for women. "Wonderful," he said. "The caterpillars would chew their way out of the brain, exit the ears and..."

"Stop it!" Cornea snapped mockingly. "Are you saying women's brains are full of holes?"

"Some, not all." Malick, chuckling, ran to Cornea who was sitting at her dormitory desk and knelt down beside her. "You, for example. No nasty caterpillar could pillage your brain. Here's proof." He picked a page off the desk. "Look at this document. No holes here."

"Come on Mal." Cornea forced a smile as she tried to grab back the paper.

"So what's the current topic of your masterpiece?" asked Malick as he stood to tease Cornea with the paper held high as bait.

“Fetishes, if you really want to know. Now give me the fuckin' paper!”

“This means so much to you. Is this paper a fetish? Are you obsessed?”

“Don't be a stupid shit.” Cornea bolted from her seat and tore the sheet from Malick's hands. She pressed the wrinkled page to the desk on top of the others. As she sat back down, her expression soured. “Malick, I don't want to play any games right now. Can't I make a suggestion to you without you acting like a fuckin' maniac? What's wrong with pupa earrings?”

Malick leaned over her to whisper, “What's wrong with fetishes?”

Cornea lowered her voice. “Well, they can be very exciting. But,” she looked up into Malick's eyes, “in a regressive personality, they can become...a trap.”

Cornea runs her fingers along the key in her hands as she stands before a locked classroom. On the door is painted a golden pupa of the type formed by the Monarch butterfly. She inserts the key slowly and turns.

Candles are everywhere. They are positioned around large photographs and drawings of a young girl. In the center of the room an altar-like platform supports a crudely made clay rendering of a girl walking a tight rope, a candle in each hand. Thick incense pervades the atmosphere. Hanging by an unboarded classroom window are binoculars and a camera with a telephoto lens affixed to a tripod. A bulletin board on another wall has pages arranged on it. Cornea goes to the board and reads.

“July 16: Today Musetha tried what appeared to be her first cigarette. She did this after finishing the balance beam. While changing her clothes, she pulled from her backpack a wrapped box—Marlboros, it looked like. After putting her shirt on and pacing nervously, she went out and sat on a swing while unwrapping the box. She looked up at me quickly just as I took a picture. I dived to the floor, afraid she had seen me. With apprehension, I peered slowly over the window ledge. Now she was standing, an arm coolly draped on the balance beam, head back, gazing at the sky with a lit cigarette in her mouth. I struggled awkwardly to get the camera in position. After fumbling with the focus, I took a picture—but, by this time, Musetha had her head lowered, coughing.”

Cornea walks from one candle lit picture to another: the girl on the balance beam doing a handstand; the girl swinging on a rope. And then there are hand drawn fantasy portraits of the girl—nude in a forest, sleeping in the grass, floating ecstatically over a fountain.

Was this the girl Cornea saw from the roof? While making a move toward the unboarded window, Cornea hears the sound of a music box wafting down the hall outside. It is a tune she can almost recognize. She leaves the room to follow the sound.

It comes from down yet another staircase—but at least this one is clear of obstacles. In fact, these stairs have been meticulously cleaned.

From the bottom of the stairs, Cornea moves through another dark hall to a room with wide doors. Inside, a large table has been set for eating. Two polished candelabras surround a plate of cooked shellfish, muscles, scallops and crab. There is only one plate. In the center of the table is a shining sliver music box. As the tune plays, a figurine of a young ballerina slowly twirls.

“You expect me to eat alone?”

No reply.

Cornea picks at the crab while visualizing a newspaper headline: “WOMEN DIES EATING POISONED SEAFOOD DINNER IN ABANDONED SCHOOL.” She takes a bite. Quite tender and spicy. “When did Malick learn to cook so well?” she asks herself.

The music box is running down and Cornea again puzzles over the melody. Was the tune “Home Sweet Home....No”. It seemed that Malick has tinkered with it, putting in false notes or taking away others. Finally on an unresolved tone, all is silent.

Suddenly a door flies open, slamming itself against the wall. A man in a soaking wet tattered business suit stomps into the room, leaving splashed footprints on the floor. His receding hair is unkempt and his face haggard and red. With a steady stride, he walks up to Cornea. “Malick,” she whispers, stunned.

From under his arm he brings out a soggy thick paper notebook and throws it on the table beside Cornea's plate. It is a copy of the ‘regression’ thesis on which Malick has scribbled a large A+.

“Very good,” he says. “Excellent. You'll go far in this world.” Malick walks to the head of the table. Cornea puts down her fork. “Your analysis shows great insight. There's not a regressive tendency that has escaped your eye. Of all my students, you are the one I prize. Be proud of the accomplishment. Oh...” Malick pats his hand near his neck. “Something's missing! Oh shit, would you excuse me? I must get a bow-tie to complete my suit.”

Cornea, recovering from seeing Malick in such a condition, catches her breath. Malick re-enters sporting a black swallowtail bow-tie which he straightens. “There we are—pretty classy huh?” His face takes on an aloof expression. “Today's lecture is on the making of a failure—something we should all heed so as not to become one. Take, for instance, butterfly bow-ties. What more sterling example of failure can be found than the butterfly bow-tie?” He points to his own. “Sure it has beauty, grace, pizzazz—but, the

lowly inventor did not study the market. If he had, he would have realized that men, his primary customers, were not inclined to the decorative. They prefer simple straightforward bow-ties with a minimum of color. Butterflies are too irrational, superfluous, flighty. Thus the grandiose schemes of the inventor fell flat. Last I heard, he ran deep into debt and disappeared from sight—some say, never to return.”

With a heave of disgust, Cornea pushes away her unfinished dinner. The plate slides off the table and shatters. “Why Mal? Why make me go through this shit? Why didn't you call before it got this far?”

Malick, feigning sadness, wrings out his wet sleeves. Water splatters on the old floor. “You are a feisty student aren't you?”

“Stop it! Why let me even know you were here? What good does this do?”

No answer. While looking down at the broken plate, Malick slowly takes off his bow-tie. “At first I thought I'd just get away, but then I kept thinking of you.”

Cornea stands, panting heavily.

Malick continues. “I moved into this high school after the last box of bow-ties was returned and I was broke. I got some money from selling my studio equipment. Then I let my butterflies go and came here to build this home for us.”

“Home?” Cornea walks to Malick and grabs his wet shoulder. “Listen, I've thought about us a long time—all the time that you didn't write. I can't deal with you anymore.”

Malick looks up. “But you could help me. I mean, you have graduated. You're now a psychologist.”

Cornea shakes her head. “This isn't a professional relationship—you were my lover.”

“Do it out of love then!”

Cornea exhales, nearly breaking into a derisive laugh. “You know I can't stay with you in here, don't be an idiot. Look around—see what you've become. And who is that girl in the room upstairs?”

Malick walks to Cornea's place at the table and sits, staring at the wound down music box. “That's Musetha. She rescued me from complete depression.”

“You're pathetic.” Cornea leans over him. “If you've done anything with her, I'm not going to protect you from the cops.”

Malick looks up into Cornea's harsh gaze. “I thought you'd see the beauty in her that I do.”

“What I saw was your lust, and I know it well.” Cornea breaks off her gaze and moves quickly to the door while speaking in a high curt voice. “Okay, I'm ready to go. I may be a psychologist now but I don't do house calls.”

Malick pounds his fist on the table. “Have you forgotten our letters?”

Cornea nervously fingers the door knob without looking back. “Of course not. Things were different then.”

“Right. I wasn't a washed up business man.” Malick stands and moves toward Cornea. “I still had a future.”

Cornea leans her head against the door, exhausted. “That whole business venture always meant more to you than me. You were so excited about it. That's why I went along with you.”

“You wanted me to succeed so you could feel good about stealing my private life for your thesis. You thought that if you helped me get somewhere in life, it would prove you were a good psychologist.”

Turning to meet Malick's advance, a tear breaks free which she promptly wipes from her cheek. “That's not fair. I was writing that fuckin' paper before we even met.”

Malick clutches Cornea's shoulder. “Why were you with me then? Was it love?”

A draft whistles through the boarded windows along with the slight tapping of rain outside. Cornea's eyes wonder from object to object in the room then finally return to Malick's face.

“Of course I loved you.” Exhaling and closing her eyes, she embraces him.

“And there's no love left?” he whispers.

“Why do you think I came here?” I love you...but I can't stay with you.”

Malick returns Cornea's embrace but with a desperate hold. For a few moments the school with its dark burden eases into oblivion and she is alone with him in some infinite expanse, her mind a blank. Then she feels the warm press of his body against hers.

“One last time,” Malick faintly whispers.

“What?”

“One last time, between us.” Malick pulls away to corner Cornea's eyes.

Cornea shakes her head. “Don't ask any more of me. Please.”

His hand climbs to her breast through the coarse fabric of the jumpsuit. Cornea pictures a slow falling of sand into a stirring sea; a sharply defined wall of sand standing boldly against the wind and water, then breaking off and sliding over itself into the awaiting waves.

“Come down one last stairway with me. I want you to see where I've been sleeping.”

Lily's waterlogged shoes squish when she slides her toes between the decorative bricks. Her backpack seems heavier.

“Why don't I give up?” she asks herself.

Above and to her right looms the beckoning window, opening into a room emitting a faint flickering light.

Far below in the darkening playground, Lily sees a vision of Mara looking back, pulling away in fear. She opens an umbrella covered with pictures of teddy bears and hides, kneeling behind it. The swings are occupied with her other girlfriends being given pushes by Stacy who grins, her teeth resembling fangs.

“Just a few inches more,” thinks Lily as she reaches across from the brick wall to the lower ledge of the open window.

The rain, having just now become a downpour, partially blinds Lily’s eyes as she strains to touch the sill. She looks down and blinks to clear her sight. The playground is now empty in the murky dusk. She is all alone now. A chill shakes her to the bone. She looks back up at the glowing warm light from the window. She plans to change into her dry dress after getting inside.

A clap of thunder. One small hand on the sill. Lily is breathing heavily, blood pounding behind her ears. She leaps. Another thunder clap. She hangs now from her fingers, both hands on the sill.

With all strength summoned, she pulls up inch by inch. Her eyes rise above the sill and she strains to see inside.

What? It’s herself on a tightrope—her private fantasy. Excited and bewildered she heaves her body up, consumed by an eagerness that makes her clumsy. Trying to raise her right knee upon the window ledge, she slips on the slick surface. The entire building rumbles and shakes.

“Oh God no!” she screams, the backpack weight pulling her out and away. She thrusts both arms forward and just manages to catch the metal vertical strip of the glass frame. Her feet swing out below, dangling awkwardly. Again she heaves her wet body against the wall. The cold rain courses over the sill and into her eyes. She swings her right leg up and catches the far side of the sill. She has never been so afraid. Finding a tiny foothold and pushing with her left leg, she wiggles up and through the window.

For a long time she lies coughing and crying on the floor inside with a slow puddle growing around her trembling collapsed body. Though triumphant in reaching her goal, the ordeal offers her no pride. She is simply grateful to be alive. The storm outside throws a powerful gust into the room and Lily shivers. She rises to close the window. All the candles are extinguished.

A rap at the door. Another. Malick rises from his bare mattress and moves through the large echoing classroom, his feet kicking aside pieces of chalk and erasers, old textbooks, empty three-ring binders. Among these items are sealed cardboard boxes stacked against one wall. On them are marked with bold letters; “Bow-ties—Swallowtail, Bow-ties—Nymphalids, Bow-ties—Painted Ladies.”

“Who is it?” Malick hesitantly asks, as if fearing an inquisition or an arrest.

After a long stony silence, a small trembling voice, very faint, is heard. “It’s...I’m just someone who wants to know...”

Malick presses his ruddy cheek against the closed door and whispers through the crack. “What do you want to know?”

“What’s going on here. I thought the school was empty.”

“Maybe you’d like to come in and I can tell you.”

“Sure, I guess.”

Malick swallows to wet his parched throat. With shaking finger he clutches the doorknob. He knows who’s come to find him. He must compose himself, wipe the sweat from his forehead. He doesn’t want to frighten her away.

Slowly the door opens. Malick, in sudden embarrassment, hides behind it, waiting for his visitor to enter.

Soft movements are heard—bare feet, a flutter of pale yellow.

Malick scans her back as she moves cautiously across the floor, avoiding the scattered debris with the deftness of a phantom. Still, her bare ankles and supple legs betray a very physical being. She stops. Her combed blond hair parts to one side with a move of her hand. “Where are you?”

“Behind you,” Malick declares apologetically.

Amid the splintered, scattered relics of his old high school stands Musetha in all her glory, her face puzzled yet brimming with curiosity. Her eyes do not flinch from the sight of Malick in his torn red silk robe.

The girl walks toward him, her gaze fixed on his. She nearly trips on the exposed mechanical workings of a pencil sharpener. She looks down with an annoyed frown, breaking the spell. Malick runs forward, grabbing Musetha’s shoulders to steady her.

“Fuck,” she blurts out, her voice suddenly deeper. “How could you stand all this junk around here?”

“Sorry. Did you get hurt?”

She lifts her left foot. The spiral sharpener blades left two small slices on the ball of her foot.

“You shouldn’t walk on this dirty floor with those cuts. Let me carry you across the room.”

Without giving her a chance to reply, Malick hoists her small body onto his chest and makes his way, awkwardly through the cluttered room. His right hand is cupped under her thighs now revealed by a sliding of the yellow dress. A flush of faintness causes Malick to nearly drop her. With his left arm, he pulls her shoulder close and regains his balance. He tries desperately to smile, to ease her anxiety. They reach the mattress. With devotional solemnity, Malick lies her trembling body down. As she settles onto its surface, a whiff of mildew is pushed out from the mattress into the air around them.

The girl wiggles free of Malick’s arms. “I’ve seen you before I think.”

Malick swallows hard. “Where?”

She sits up, bracing her cheek with her right hand on top of bent knees. “Outside, when I was playing. Was it you watching me?” She turns her eyes up to Malick with a sly squint.

He exhales. “Yeah...I couldn’t keep my eyes off you.”

“Why?”

Taking a deep breath, Malick reaches out gently to the girl’s shoulder. “You excite me.”

“I excite you?” She stifles the flicker of a smile with a mock grimace.

“You sure do.”

“Like those pictures in that room. You made those pictures?”

“Yes,” Malick’s hand massages her shoulder. “Do you like them?”

“Mmmmm, some. Except the ones where I have no clothes on. The model of me on the tightrope I really liked.”

“It’s my favorite too.” His hand runs down from her shoulder and over her breasts. “That’s why I put it in the middle of the room.”

She quietly gasps and lets him rub her nipples. “You must like me a lot...to do all those drawings and take all those pictures.”

“I love you. You are my goddess,” Malick whispers, his mouth only an inch from her ear.

“I’m your what?”

“Sssh!” Malick presses a finger to his lips, then brings it over to hers. She kisses it. He drops this hand nervously to the hem of her dress. “Please trust me. I’m not going to hurt you.”

Slowly sliding his hand up under her dress, he reaches her soft panties, which, to his surprise, are wet.

“Ah maybe...maybe we shouldn’t do this,” she gasps.

“But, we’ll never forget this anyway. So we might as well make it worth remembering.”

Malick’s blood is pulsing hard behind his ears. His hand slips under Muestha’s panties and over pliant public hair into the delicate folds of her vagina. The girl shakes and parts her mouth, breathing erratically and shutting her eyes. Malick slides two fingers into her. A small round object alights on his fingers. Slowly Malick withdraws his hand and holds the object up. It is a glistening white pearl with an overwhelming sweet fragrance.

“You *are* a goddess!” exclaims Malick, holding the pearl near Musetha’s closed eyes.

Malick places the pearl on his wet tongue and swallows. Musetha slowly opens her eyes. She looks to Malick and smiles; a different smile this time—the smile of carefree precocity.

“I know what you want to do with me,” she says, “and it’s okay. I want it too.”

Malick feels as if the pearl is changing inside him. Hot flashes radiate from it, sending heat surging through his body. He is possessed with desire for Musetha.

As he pulls her floral-print panties from under her dress, the girl reaches around Malick’s neck. “Are you a teacher here in this school?” she croons.

“Do you want me to be one?” Malick replies, slipping the dress off over her head.

“Yes.”

After removing his robe, he carefully lowers himself over her. “Then, I am your teacher.”

Clouds of dust and mildew are puffed from the mattress while Malick and Musetha wrestle rhythmically upon it. Musetha takes on a new aggression, hungrily licking Malick’s neck while running her hands rapidly along his penis. “I’m ready for you.”

Malick is suddenly afraid. He hears a faint sound from the hall, distracting him. “Calm down Musetha. What’s got into you?”

“Your dick!” She yells. “Put it in me!”

Malick complies. Musetha’s tight vagina grabs his penis squeezing it with muscular contractions.

A streak of panic shoots through Malick. The timid girl beneath him now appears ferocious, her tongue darting around like a snake or hungry toad, his penis trapped by her gnawing vagina. She is clearly not a virgin.

A hollow brushing and knocking is heard. Malick looks toward the sound. The cardboard boxes against the wall appear to be bulging outward, as if something were alive inside them, pounding to escape. Alarmed, he looks back down to Musetha.

Writhing on the mattress has loosened her hair. The blond strands now form a crude halo around a burst of black hair beneath.

Malick is seized with anxiety. “Cornea, we’ve got to stop. It isn’t working...it isn’t working!”

“You can’t stop,” Cornea declares. “I’m almost ready to come.”

The lids of the boxes are pushed open from the erupting force inside.

“Cornea, I can’t go on. Something’s wrong!”

Cornea moans. “Mal, You can’t bring me this far and leave. Keep moving!”

Repulsed, Malick attempts to get off her, but Cornea throws her body over his, pinning his arms down with uncanny strength. She plunges her pelvis against his groin.

Bursting alive from the boxes swarm butterfly bow-ties, flying straight for Malick. They land on his body, biting and sucking his blood like brightly colored vampire bats. Some have steely clips that become probing ravenous mouths, digging into his naked flesh. Others wrap around his limbs, choking them like a tourniquet. Cornea, eyes shut, doesn’t see them and they ignore her as she screams her climax. The building shakes with a deep rumble.

A blonde wig and yellow dress are hurled into a dusty corner of the classroom. Cornea scrambles into her brown jumpsuit.

Malick lies sweating, exhausted on the floor. “What’s going on? Just a moment ago you couldn’t get enough of me.”

“Yeah, well I wanted to finish the ride, but that shaking and your screams...You’re in a nightmare and I want out.”

“The school shakes from time to time, I’ve been through many.” Malick stands and pulls his robe on. “But you don’t have to rush like this. I’m sorry you’re scared but I had the most horrible hallucination.”

“I’ve lived with your hallucinations too goddamn long! We can never be together, just us, without your phantoms joining in. A moment ago I just realized that I’ve never really touched you. And you never touched me—just some image in your head.”

Malick approaches. “You mean to tell me you’re blameless?”

“I mean to tell you I’m leaving!” Cornea turns and walks briskly from the classroom.

Malick runs into the hall after her. “You’ve got to follow my map to get out. The front door is all boarded up. You can’t leave this way!”

Ignoring Malick, Cornea walks in a steady pace down the long hall to the main entryway with its high ceiling and wood-paneled walls.

“Calm down Cornea. Please, listen to me. I know this school. You cannot leave by the front door. Let me show you the way out.”

Cornea stops before two tall double-doors and turns to Malick. “You *have* shown me the way.”

She faces the doors and pushes.

Outside, nailed boards fall off with no resistance. The doors swing wide into the rain-washed evening.

“Goodbye,” she remarks abruptly.

Without looking back, she descends the front steps and onto the street. Sounds of the outside world—cars, laughter, music—are carried along with a cool fresh-scented breeze through the open doors into the musty recesses of the interior. Malick stands at the threshold, immobile, gazing up into the darkening sky over the old neighborhood homes.

Cornea opens the door to her car at the end of the block. Suddenly Malick breaks into a run, the trickles of rain greeting his face. He nearly trips on the steps but catches the side railing before slamming into the pavement. The engine of Cornea’s car cranks once then stops. Malick regains his run in desperate heedless bounds, the water splashing up from occasional puddles.

The engine cranks a second time—this time a successful start. Malick rushes up to Cornea’s door and raps on the glass. “Can’t I go with you?”

Cornea looks back in disbelief. She rolls the window down a crack. “See, you’re not as trapped as you make yourself out to be. Now it’s time for me to get free.” She gives Malick a last look. “Oh, and they arrest people for flashing around here.”

Malick suddenly closes his robe. The engine reeves and the car pulls away—Malick breathing in its exhaust and holding it in his lungs a moment before coughing on exhale. Cornea’s car takes a turn at a blinking red light and is seen no more. Malick pivots back toward the hulk of the school and slowly retreats, his robe cold and heavy from a new downpour.

At the foot of the steps, he looks up to the now wide-open doors. Musetha stands at the entrance.

The man in the bathrobe comes toward her. Lily prepares to run but feels rooted to the spot, trapped. Should she run back inside or down the steps? Maybe she can use one of these boards with nails as a weapon. But the man seems scared too, his face is flushed red as he stops halfway to the top. Is it the rain or can Lily see him crying.

“How did you get in?”

Lily shuffles her feet. “Climbed.”

The man looks up to her in disbelief. “How long have you been inside?”

There is an awkward silence between them. Lily doesn't want to talk about what she saw through the classroom door. She thinks again about running, the steps are wide enough to allow her to get past.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you were living here," apologized Lily.

"That's alright. I really shouldn't be living here." The man shivers.

"Aren't you going to get out of the rain?"

"Oh," the man seems confused. "Guess so." He hesitantly climbs the final steps.

Lily backs away. "I'm going home now."

"Do you have to?" the man asks. "I have some extra fish I cooked."

Lily squirms, backing a little into the rain as the man reaches the entrance. "My mom would worry, cause of the storm." She slides over to the top step, avoiding the upturned nails on a loose board. "But why do you live here?"

The man takes a deep breath then leans his head against the door jam. "I was looking for something."

"A treasure?" Lily asks, thinking of adventure stories.

The man nods. "I guess you could say that, but..."

"Did you find it?" Lily breaks in excitedly.

The man smiles at her with sad eyes. "I saw it. But that's not enough. It was a mistake to come back here. This isn't my home." He looks back into the dark wooden lobby. "Now I've got to do some packing."

Lily watches as the man fumbles in his pockets for something.

"Here, you can have this." In his hand is a cloth butterfly with black and blue wings.

"Cool. A butterfly."

"It's also a bow-tie." The man winks

"Wow, that's so cool. Who would ever think of that? Thanks." She takes the gift, her fear of the man dissipating. "It's my first birthday present. I'm going to be thirteen soon."

The man smiles, "happy birthday."

"Thanks," Lily impulsively turns and runs down the steps shouting "bye" over her shoulder as an afterthought. The rain makes her yellow dress sticky. She wonders if the man will follow her. Once crossing the street, she takes a sideward glance back. The man is standing at the entrance. He waves to her slowly, then turns back inside.

Lily looks again at the butterfly. Somehow she knows she'll never go back to the school. But now she has a real story for Stacey!