

# The Monster of Sunset Park

by Victor Giannini

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ART BY JUSTIN SANZ

MUSIC BY GOODMAN CARTER

READ BY THE FICTION CIRCUS



I hit the windshield hard. My skin opened up as I broke through it and slammed into the road. There was glass in my face, gravel in my arms, blood in my hair, metal in my mouth. The sickness in my stomach rose up and flooded over.

There were two cars, one twisted around the other and dripping red. My head felt huge, broken, and empty.

I floated. I heard people screaming millions of miles away, and it didn't bother me. I started to relax. The pain had been everything, and now it was gone. There was nothing. There was no me.

I was ok.

2.

Faint streaks of light spun around me.

I knew better than to think it had all been a dream or that I'd awakened from a coma or anything like that. My body was naked and pale, its blue veins slowly throbbing and new stitches arching across my flesh. My feet were frozen as if they had been walking and my hands lay limply on my chest. And there were lumps on me. They looked ready to burst--like insect eggs, growing on me, waiting to hatch.

I couldn't tell who I was, or who I had been. Who I had been was beginning to fade like a favorite dream on waking.

There were three voices in the small apartment. I recognized two of them. The soft, weak one was my mother. The sharp, raspy one was my grandmother. The one I didn't know also belonged to a woman. It crackled like electricity and it made me afraid. I tried to take a deep breath. Warm air coated the sides of my throat and I heard a dull thump in my chest, like garbage dropped out of the window.

I got up, dragging my feet. At the edge of the living room, I cupped my balls, and I put my head around the corner. My mom and Grandma were sitting on our couch, and another woman sat across from them beside an empty table. The room was dark and the walls were purple. The one plant in the corner was dried and dead.

My mom had been young when she had me. Now her face was lined with wrinkles and her blonde hair had faded to a yellowy gray, and the creases by her mouth were growing. My grandmother was thin and fragile in body, but she had a strong face. Her eyes were round and close and her sharp-pointed nose sloped over her tight lips. Clumps of white hair strayed from under the blonde wig that I thought was real until I was six.

The third woman was very tall, and that's all I could tell, because she leaped into the shadows by the corner when I came in. Her long fingers covered her face and her hair was tight and coiled above her head, like a sleeping snake. Her jewelry jingled and clanged while she moved. Something about her body made it hard for me to look at her.

"He must never see my face!" she commanded.

Her voice echoed inside my head.

My mother lifted a pillow off the couch and handed it to the woman. She took it and held it in front of her face.

"I've never seen one wake up so quickly," she said. "You! Did you see my face?"

I began to say no. Then I felt angry.

"Yes," I said. "I saw your face."

It felt as if I had coughed up dirt when I spoke. The woman recoiled.

"It is a terrible thing for the reborn to know the one who brought them back," she said. "To know this thing is to weaken the forces that tie you to this world."

My grandmother sat up and reached for the woman.

"What will happen?" she asked.

"It may drift between," she said. "It may shrivel in sunlight. It may decay within months instead of years. But worst of all, the bind between us may now be too great. It will pull me closer to his world."

"You're going to die soon because I saw your face?" I asked. I liked that, even though it was a lie.

"Perhaps, thing. However I have great power and training. I can resist," she said. She made some stupid signs with her hands and she looked at my grandmother. "Of course, this means an extra fee. This adds a terrible burden to me, you understand."

"God damn it," my grandmother said. She turned to me. "Do you have any idea how expensive it was to find and hire this woman? We don't have much left, and now you're making it worse."

"Thank you for whatever you did, Grandma," I said.

"Thank your mother," she said. "Of course I'm happy you're back. But it was her that went crazy, when you died."

When you died. She'd said it.

Of course I had known, somehow, since I had woken up. but it was jarring to hear it confirmed.

My mom was now standing in the center of the dim living room. Her face was trembling in the yellow kitchen light. She reached her hand out to me. I took a step forward, still unsteady.

"Hi, mom," I said.

"Hi, baby," she whispered. "Are you okay? Do you feel okay?"

"Not really," I said.

Her face reddened.

"I mean, I'm a little tired," I said quickly. "I just woke up."

She smiled and she touched my shoulder. Her skin was so hot and sticky. It made my flesh crawl, but I did my best to hide it.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"It won't hunger for food again. It doesn't need to eat. It shouldn't eat," said the woman. She turned to my grandmother. "Once we finalize the transaction, I will give you a copy of the rules. Make sure it knows them fully. I give no refunds if it falls into the dead world again."

My grandmother nodded.

"How much?" she asked.

"I didn't really see your face," I said. "Seriously. I can barely see anything right now. My eyes aren't focusing right."

The woman was silent and still behind the pillow.

"I believe it," she said to my grandmother. "Better to trust the returned. It will be better for me when I am one day in its world."

I wanted her to leave. Her presence made the room feel smaller and hotter.

"You'd be better off dead," I said.

"How dare you!" my grandmother said. "You owe everything to this woman!"

"Honey, please," my mom said.

"I will take my leave now," the woman said. "Thing, return to your room until I am gone. I do not wish to risk being seen again."

I shrugged, but I turned around. She was really pissing me off, but it would be good to have her gone. Being rude to her woke something up inside of me. I felt a little less cold, a little less dead.

3.

My room was blue and smelled like burnt wood covered in mold.

Books and comics lined the shelves. My desk sat in the corner. The posters on the wall showed strong men slaying great lizards. The Invisible Man in bandages stared at me from the poster in the corner.

Everything was very neat. All my clothes were in the dresser drawers and there were no books piled on the desk. That was wrong. I didn't keep things this organized.

There were other things wrong. There was no telephone next to the desk. There was no mirror across from my bed. And the window above my bed had bars in it.

I had never had much of a view. When I was younger I stared out from every angle, trying to see life outside, but all I could see was red stone and trash in the gated alley two stories down. I had sat on my bed and wondered when they had built the windowless factory next to my home and what the view had been like before that. But there had never been bars on the window before now.

At least my expensive action figure collection was untouched. They lined the shelves and book cases, a small army of intricate and collectible monsters, heroes, and aliens. My fingers were still cold and slow but I was getting used to moving around again. I thought of arranging them in a delicate battle.

The door creaked open behind me.

"She left," my mother said.

She came in and she shut the door behind her. Then she clasped her hands in front of her waist.

"Grandma didn't mean what she said," she said. "You know how she gets. She worries about us."

"It's no big deal," I said. "It's not her. I'm the one that's changed."

"Don't say that," mom said. "You're still my baby boy. I'm so happy to have you back. You have no idea how empty this house was without you."

I nodded.

"The woman left a pamphlet with Grandma," she said. "You should go over it with her when you're ready."

"I'll come look at it in a minute," I said.

"Take your time, honey," she said.

"Mom," I said. "What's with these bars in my window? Nobody's going to be able and climb in and rob us from here."

Her head lowered. She turned and opened the door.

"I'm glad to have you home," she said. "I love you."

"I love you too, mom," I said.

She left without answering the question.

Something important was missing. I stared at my desk where the phone used to be. I stared at the blank gap on the wall where my mirror used to be. I stared at the bars in my window and at my toy shelf. How had I died? All that came to mind was a shattered windshield and other people screaming.

4.

Grandma was sitting in the kitchen at the small, round table in the corner. My mom was next to her, cooking a chicken. The room felt smaller than usual, the walls more yellow. The tiled floor felt cool under my bare feet.

I sat down at the table. On the table was a piece of what looked like leather with dark red writing across it.

"You need to read this," Grandma said. "Pick it up. I don't want to touch it."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because it's made of human flesh," she said. "With words written in blood."

"You have to be kidding," I said as I picked it up. It felt good. I liked it.

"There are conditions to your staying here," Grandma said.

"I don't care," I said. I folded the skin up and tucked it in my pants pocket.

My mom turned around with wide eyes.

"After all we've done for you, you sit there and say 'I don't care'?" Grandma asked very slowly.

"I promise I'll read it later," I said. "But I've been through a lot. I'm pretty worn out. I don't want to sit here and read rules on my first night back. I want to go for a walk around the block. Or maybe I'll go sit in the park."

"I'm afraid that's not going to happen," Grandma said.

I bit my lip. It felt like a ripe maggot under my dry teeth.

"Honey, if anyone who saw you wasn't under the enchantment," mom said, "well--it wouldn't work out. It would be anwhat did she call it, mom?"

"An aberration," Grandma said.

"We're breaking the rules," mom said. "But it's worth it, isn't it? Anything is worth it."

"So--what would happen if there was an aberration?" I asked.

"We could only afford to have ourselves enchanted," mom said. "If anyone else saw you, you would have to--to stop existing. Proper order has to be maintained."

"The woman said that you would explode into bone and dust and drift from our memories," smiled Grandma.

"Jesus Christ," I said. "So I can't ever leave this apartment? I can only see you two for the rest of my life?"

"It's all there on the skin," Grandma said. "It would be a good idea to read it."

I looked at my mom. Her mouth was twisted in a smile but her eyes were tight and watering. I put my head down on the table and felt my skeleton stretch and curl.

"The chicken's done," my mom said. "Would you like some?"

I looked up at her.

"I don't eat anymore," I said.

"I know, but I'd still like to cook for you," mom said.

I felt my face twisting up on my skull. Something horrible was crawling in my guts. The fact that my room, my personal world I had built, had been changed before they brought me back, was really pissing me off.

"Sure, mom," I said. "Sure I would love some."

We ate together at the table. I looked around the room as we ate. I didn't want to show them that eating the food hurt. It was so hot. I chewed it with slow awkward crunches. It just fell down my throat when I tried to swallow. It sat in my stomach like a nest of worms.

As we ate, something on the mantle above the stove caught my eye. It was a picture of my mom, my Grandma, and myself at my high school graduation. I tried to remember who I had graduated with. Who were my friends? What had the rest of my life been like? I thought about these things and my fork shook as the chicken fell down my throat.

But it wasn't the picture itself that really got me. It was the picture frame. An engraved vine with roses that snaked around the graduation picture.

That frame had been on my shelf, in my room.

But there had been a different picture in it. Not my graduation photo.

5.

They went to sleep and I didn't. No matter how heavy I felt, every time I lay down on my bed the sleep wouldn't come. I pulled the skin of rules from my pocket and turned on my desk lamp. The heat from the bulb bothered me.

Aside from being a total pain in the ass, the rules were straightforward:

- I could never know the face of the woman who had resurrected me, or the methods of the particular ritual.
- It wasn't forbidden, but I shouldn't see my own face. It didn't say why.
- It was forbidden to pray to any gods or to eat living creatures. I didn't know what to make of that. The best memories I had of my life were the moments of my death. When you died, they used to say you'd see God, and I hadn't. So not praying to any gods was fine. And eating living things? The witch had said that I'd never be hungry again.
- The most important rule was the one they'd told me: if I was ever witnessed by a living being who wasn't under the enchantment, I would cease to exist.

That part bothered me. It wasn't specific. Would I just die again, or would I literally be obliterated from existence? And would that mean my past as well?

Did my past even matter? No. What mattered was the picture frame stolen from my room and whatever picture had been in it.

What the fuck? They had edited me before bringing me back. That made me very angry. I couldn't just ask them; obviously they didn't want me to know. But as long as they didn't know that I suspected anything, I had a better chance of figuring out why they had taken that picture from my room.

I got up off my bed and I walked to my bedroom door. I turned the knob and it stuck fast.

I tried again, and again the door stayed shut. They had reversed the knob. I was stuck in my room until they decided to unlock it.

6.

The sun came and the door lock clicked. They were already slurping down eggs by the time I stumbled into the kitchen.

"Are you going to work today?" I asked my mom.

"Yes," she said. "But I'm getting off early. I'll be home by three. We can watch a movie together."

"Grandma?" I said.

"I'm staying here," Grandma said.

I watched them eat their eggs and drink their coffee.

"It would be nice if you left my room unlocked at night," I said.

"Baby, I don't know," mom said. "What if you wander out and someone sees you? Then I'll be all alone again."

"I'm not a baby, mom," I said. "I'm not going to wander outside and banish myself from the earth just because you're asleep."

Her eyes darted to Grandma.

Grandma shifted in her seat. She kept her eyes fixed on her coffee.

"You're his mother," she answered. "Do what you think is best. But the extra locks on the front door stay. We've invested too much at this point."

I felt like slamming Grandma's head into the table. Instead, I sat in my seat, trying to look patient and complacent.

They were eating smashed white eggs with yellow running through them. They didn't look good to me. But I felt my stomach twitching and churning deep inside me anyway.

7.

Mom left for work. I sat in the dark living room with Grandma. She sat on the plastic covered couch and watched the fifteen-year-old television sputter images at her. I stared at the grain patterns in the wall panels and the maze of wrinkles on Grandma's skin. They were like worms crawling over each other, all over her flesh. She smelled bad to me.

"She wasn't alone," Grandma said.

"What?"

"Your mother. She wasn't alone like she said," Grandma said. "After your accident. I was still here for her, like I've always been."

"I don't think that's what she meant," I said.

Grandma's neck creaked as she turned her head to me.

"I know what she meant," Grandma said. "I've known her longer than you have."

"What? Of course you have. What the hell are you getting at?" I said.

"I devoted my life to her," Grandma said. "And she devoted hers to you. And you threw yours away. That's what I'm getting at."

I felt the anger returning, heating up the thick blood that sloshed through my rotten veins.

"I didn't ask to be turned into a fucking zombie," I said.

"You watch your tone with me, young man," Grandma said. "You have way too much of your father in you."

I pointed my gnarled finger at the television. "Your show looks interesting. Why don't you pay attention to it?"

"Don't think you're prince of this house again," Grandma said. "You follow those rules and you follow them well. We can't afford to rescue you from the grave twice."

"I didn't ask you to rescue me from the grave once!" I said.

"Yes, you did," Grandma said.

I looked at her.

"Don't put words in my mouth," I said.

"You pleaded," Grandma said. "The medium channeled your spirit before we decided to go through with everything. You begged us to come back. You told us you were all alone in the dark, but you could hear something heavy coming at you from far away. You were screaming."

I stared at her.

"It was pathetic," she said.

I pushed myself off the couch and began to walk toward my room. They'd never talked to me while I was in the void. The medium must have lied.

As soon as I got inside my room, I heard the door lock shut behind me. I felt a pit open inside my heart.

8.

Mom came home and brought a movie with her. It was something about a family being separated and reunited called "Forgetting Lilacs." I pretended to enjoy it. After dinner, mom gave me the screwdriver and let me switch my doorknob back to the way it was.

They went to sleep again, and I sat down on my bed and stared at the action figures. Soon I heard snoring drift out of their room and into the hall.

I went into the kitchen and stood there in the dark, letting the moonlight filter in through the small window over the sink and onto my chest. There was the photograph frame. I picked it up and carried it into the living room with me.

I sat on the floor in front of the TV and tried to remember.

It didn't work. I saw phantoms in my brain, vague memories of faces swirling together in a mass of eyes, lips, and teeth. The stench of clean flesh, heavy perfume, body sweat, and alcohol. All of them mixed together and clouded my head.

I got up to turn on the lamp. Abusive orange light assaulted the living room. I lay down on the shag carpet and stared up at the cracked ceiling. What kind of picture could have been in there before? It must have been a person. You don't keep pictures of houses in frames like this one. So was there a person they wanted to erase? Who could have been so threatening?

This had to be a vital key to my past. I couldn't afford to let it go. It wouldn't hurt me to know who I was beyond the comic books and action figures.

I could see my face reflected in the blank television screen.

Two shriveled eyes, no pupils, rolling about in swollen sockets. A shrunken wrinkled nose pulled so tight by the rest of my mottled skin that it looked like it was sinking into my skull. The skin around my mouth had rotted away. My cracked teeth were surrounded by dry, gray muscle. My hair hung in loose, dead strings.

I dropped the picture frame.

I am ugly. How did my mother even look at me and pretend to love me anymore? She really must have gone crazy.

So ugly.

Did she leave me because I am ugly?

Alien thoughts invaded my head. Lightning seared across my skull and struck the back of my eyes.

It was a girl, sitting on her bed, not facing me. The room was completely new to me, but as it came through the fog of memory I knew I had spent countless nights in it.

She was crying. She said that wasn't the reason at all, but I knew it was. I was ugly, and that was why she was leaving me.

I felt the lightning again. My head split inside and I fell to the floor.

9.

My mom found me on the floor the next morning. She started screaming.

I rolled over to show her that I wasn't dead again. The light was still on. The picture frame lay next to me.

That fragmented memory from last night still played before my eyes. Excitement and panic kicked at each other and I concentrated. I couldn't lose that memory.

Not a photograph, a person. A girl with short red hair. She was beautiful and I was so ugly.

"What happened?" my mother cried.

"I'm fine," I said. "I think I just got weak and fell down. I'm okay. You can go to work."

"What the hell is this?" Grandma said. She clicked the lamp off. "Was that on all night? Electricity isn't free."

She pursed her lips and stared at the picture frame. She stomped over and snatched it from the rug.

"What is this about?" she demanded.

"Mom, calm down," mom said.

"I was trying to remember my graduation day," I said. "I was trying to remember what my life was like and I got sick and fell down. Calm down. I haven't slept for days. I just need to rest."

Mom helped me up onto the couch. Her skin was sweaty and wet. "I'm going to take the day off from work," she said.

"That's crazy mom," I said. "I'll be fine. Just go. We'll watch another movie when you get back."

"It's right," Grandma said. "We still have to pay the rent."

"He's right," mom said. "He."

10.

After mom left for work I locked myself in my room, pressing against the window and staring out between the bars. I slid the window open and smelled the city. Garbage and rust and trees. It was great. I looked down into the alley and saw the shadow of the gates and the tree at the end.

Little kids were playing a game out on the sidewalk. I used to be a little kid playing games on the sidewalk. Now my eyes were closed and the smells of the city were in my sunken nose and I was swimming through the memory.

Stephanie was the name of the girl that used to be in that picture frame. I had a girlfriend. More than that: I had a lover.

I had a lover when I was alive. I felt hope crawl up my throat; I felt happiness push against my bones. But the apartment felt smaller. The walls crept closer.

11.

Grandma went shopping with her friends the next day. My mom was at work. While they were gone the air lost some of its dust. I had time to think.

I knew I wasn't hungry but I could feel something gnawing in my stomach. I went through the fridge by reflex. Fruits and vegetables and the dead, useless flesh of animals. And a bottle of champagne. It was pink and it had a Saturday morning smell.

I took it back to my room and I locked the door.

Sitting there on my bed, sunlight breaking in between the window bars, I stared at my reflection on the bottle. The bottle couldn't show me any of the horrible details. The children were laughing in the alley.

The bottle clinked against my teeth as the last of the champagne shot down my throat. A coffin apartment and puppet women controlling my memories. But now I could remember what being drunk felt like.

Being drunk felt like being undead: never conscious, always watching. I laid back on my bed with the empty bottle in hand.

12.

I watched them eat dinner. Grandma couldn't stop bragging about how nice it was to get out of the apartment. Mom asked me about the empty champagne bottle and I said I was sorry. She hid the alcohol in the little pantry over the fridge.

Mom went to sleep while Grandma watched television in the living room with the lights off. Her old body rustled the plastic couch cover and the beam of the TV cast her twisted shadow against the wood paneling. I stood and watched her, champagne burning in my stomach.

"Why'd you try to hide my girlfriend from me?" I asked.

Her nostrils flared. Her face didn't peel away from the glow of the screen. "I have no idea what you're talking about," she said.

"I know that picture frame used to be in my room," I said. "What'd you do with Stephanie's picture? While I was dead?"

"You should calm down," Grandma said through her gritted teeth. "You're confused. Go back to your room and play with your toys."

"I'm going to talk to Mom about it tomorrow," I threatened. "Mom will come clean."

Grandma got up. She stopped a foot from my face. The stench of her hot breath shot out from between her yellow teeth.

"Thank you for ruining my evening," she said. "I'm going to bed. You'd be a lot happier if you just minded your own business and stopped poking around. Not everyone gets a second chance, you know."

"I am minding my own business," I said. My stomach twitched again and I kept my white eyes on her.

Grandma stepped around me. I listened to her frail feet pad down the hall and into her bedroom.

13.

As they slept I stole mom's spare bottle of champagne. I killed the bottle and then I went into their bedroom.

The two lumps lay on the large purple bed that they still shared. I could smell the difference between them. Mom: champagne, cheap perfume, some kind of sad flower. Grandma: old coffee, bitter pretzels..

Grandma would always be a problem.

In time, she would die. But how long would it take? Would mom try to bring her back too?

My jaw slid open. The dry skin around my lips stretched and flaked off as my tongue rose. I could just bite the skin from her old skull. I could end the waiting game.

The cloud burst around me and I felt sick. I stumbled out of the room and back into mine, forgetting to close their door.

As I collapsed across the bed, I dropped the bottle.

It made a pathetic crash. Something in me crashed. One of the action figures from the shelf was in my hand. I threw it through the bars against the red bricks next door.

The others stood in their designated poses, staring at me in horror. The glass from the broken bottle reflected the moonlight in a pool of pink champagne.

I tore posters off the wall, flinging the comics across the room. The action figures smacked onto the bed in a tangle of plastic weapons and limbs. The Invisible Man stared at me and I put my fist through him. It sunk into the wall.

I pulled my fist out slowly, marveling at the perfect hole in the wall. The poster had been covering a hole that I had put there long before. There was an open bottle of whiskey tucked inside.

14.

The kids in the alley could see the action figure. Broken, yes, but not so bad that their daddy's glue couldn't fix him. It lay there waiting for them, just beyond the alley gate. The alley gate, just outside at the end of the hallway, down the flights of stairs lined with beer cans and the bodies of strange insects. I could remember what it had been like and that was all.

Day and night, night and day. What if the women died? How could I get out? Would I sit and rot in this apartment, breathing them in and shitting them out as I picked at their bones?

15.

"Were you in our room last night?" Grandma asked, pounding on the door. "Leave me alone," I said, lying on the bed among the action figures and the half-empty whiskey bottle..

"I know you were in there," she said. "You were looking for the keys, weren't you? You want to get out of here and end your miserable half-existence? Did you even think of what that would do to your mother?"

"So lock your door tonight," I said.

I could hear her walk away, but the door opened anyway and Mom walked in.

I sat up. Her eyes danced around my trashed room, stopping at the whiskey bottle.

"Oh, baby," she whispered. "Were you--were you drinking?"

"No," I lied. I looked down at the half-empty bottle. "I just found this."

She looked at the hole in the wall. "We--we have to fix that."

"What?"

"The hole," she said. "Rats might get in. I'll--I'll buy a book on how to fix it for you. And I'll get the supplies. We can do it together this weekend."

"I need to clean up in here," I said. "I need to be alone."

"Okay," she said. "Okay."

She bent down to pick up the whiskey bottle.

"Leave that," I said.

She stood up quickly and went to the door.

"I'm going to cook some nice veal now," she announced. "For dinner. You should try some."

"Sure," I said.

She shut the door.

I didn't clean. I twisted open the bottle and put it to my lips. My twisted face glared up at me from the curved glass, a hollow boy with vacant eyes. The children outside were still trying to get the action figure.

16.

Stephanie could bring me something better than this shit, somewhere out there in a world that I could only taste through greedy children's laughter creeping through the alley.

So I smashed the bottle and I brought it into the kitchen with me where they were eating the veal and I swung it at the picture frame on the shelf. The frame smashed into the wall and shattered. Their chewing stopped. Their eyes burned into my skin.

"What the fuck is going on?" I screamed. "What is so goddamn dangerous about my girlfriend? What was so wrong in my life?"

They stared at each other with baby cow melting in their mouths. Useless, powerless masters. The house was the true master.

"Please, baby," my mother whimpered.

"Sit down," Grandma said. She placed her fork neatly next to her plate. "You really want to know the answers, you spoiled brat? Then sit down and shut your mouth. You'll get your answers."

"I picked up a book on spackling on my way home," mom said.

"Please," Grandma said. She draped her bony hand over mom's forearm, and for a second, her withered face showed patience and love.

I glared at them.

"Why did you hide her from me?" I asked.

"Who do you think this 'she' is?" Grandma said carefully.

"Stephanie. My girlfriend," I said.

"There was a Stephanie," Grandma said. "You two grew up together. There was nothing more than that."

"No," I said. "It was deeper than that. I can feel it."

"I'm sure you felt it was deeper, honey," mom said. She reached out to me. "But we could all see it. She never felt the same way."

I recoiled from her hand.

"If she was your girlfriend, don't you think you would have something showing that?" Grandma asked. "Notes written to each other in puppy love? Gifts from her? Anything?"

"You stole them," I said. "You stole them like you stole the picture."

"It's not true," mom said. "Baby, we're just trying to protect you."

Grandma shot a venomous glare at mom.

"Protect me from what?" I shouted. I stood up and flung a plate across the kitchen. It shattered and the pieces flew out in every direction. The veal left a brown streak on the wall.

"You never had a girlfriend," Grandma said calmly. "Always Stephanie this, Stephanie that. You wasted your time. That's what we were trying to protect you from."

"You always spent so much time with her," mom said. She was looking down at her empty plate. "Always so much time with her. Not with us."

"She put you up to this, right?" I said. "This was Grandma's idea, right? You didn't want to lie to me."

"It was my idea," mom said.

I stared at mom. She didn't look back at me.

"I don't want you to be so attached to everything out there," she said. "Just stay here with me. Don't walk out the door and disappear like your father."

They sat there, waiting.

I turned away and stormed down the hall to my room. The empty bottle lay in the midst of my cherished trash. I picked it up and threw it at the hole in the wall. It shattered just like the plate had.

The comics and toys and posters lay across the room like wounded soldiers.

Mom and Grandma weren't telling the truth. They couldn't be.

They knocked, even though the door was still open.

"Get out," I said.

"Baby," mom pleaded.

"Get out," I said.

She shut the door, quietly.

Something in my chest ignited and sent an army of electric insects charging through my bones. I shook and coughed and felt the room throbbing around me. The memory was unraveling, stripping away like the skin of rotten fruit and falling into the depths of me.

17.

I could hear the memory, smell it, watch it. She was sitting on my bed. We were crying and I was drunk. The whiskey bottle was between us on the bed. Her hair was red and soft and smelled so nice, I wanted to touch it. When I reached she backed away.

Her face, I could remember her face. It was soft and delicate, like a garden of small flowers showing their petals to the sun. I wanted to touch her.

The girl I had grown up with, the girl I was closer to than anyone else, the girl who had lived and breathed beside me and held me while my father walked away and my mother broke down and my grandmother mutated into a bitter animal. I was asking to her to get closer, to love me like I loved her.

The answer was no.

Is it because I'm ugly?

Of course not. It's just that you're like a brother to me. A best friend. I wouldn't change that for anything in the world.

And now it was time for her to go home, and I would walk her the fifteen blocks back to her apartment, as usual.

I wouldn't change what we have for anything.

But I would, Stephanie.

I got up and put the whiskey back into the hole behind the Invisible Man. She slowly got off the bed.

It's so far to walk and its getting cold, I said. I know where Grandma's keys are. I'll drive you home.

But you've been drinking.

I'm fine. I've built up a tolerance.

Are you sure? You don't look so hot. I'll just walk, don't worry about me.

I'm fine, I said. Jesus, I can handle myself. I know my limits. We'll be back before they are.

I thought they just went down to the

Stephanie, it's cold and it's a long walk, and there are a lot of sickos out there on the streets. Real monsters. Stop being such a crybaby. Let's just go.

She came with me. We stepped out into the orange faded hall and I locked the apartment behind me. Down the hallway, down the flights of stairs with beer cans and strange insects, out onto the cold sidewalk and the purple night. How it used to feel to walk out like that. Grandma's town car was parked under a broken streetlamp.

Come on.

The inside of the car was soft and cold, darker and tighter than usual. I tried to ease the key into the ignition and missed. The second time it worked and the headlights flared up on the car in front of us. I pulled out into the street. My eyes were on Stephanie.

What about that time we kissed?

What? I was curious. If you know someone for that long you just want to know what it's like to kiss them.

That's all?

Jesus! You were drunk, and I was too. I didn't think it was such a big deal.

I guess that's the problem then, I said. I hit the gas.

Slow down, will you? You're starting to scare me.

We rolled through the intersection. I saw the glare of lights melting into each other as we passed: red, green, orange, yellow.

You just blew right through that intersection.

I spun the car around the corner, barely missing the cars parked on either side. Stephanie slammed into the car door. Good.

You should wear your fucking seat belt then, I said.

Stop! Stop the car and let me out!

Why the fuck do you hate me so much? I screamed.

I don't hate you! Let me out of the car!

You just can't stand to be around me, huh? I love you!

Please, calm down--

The headlights from the truck blinded us. Stephanie screamed and the muscles in my leg twitched. I put my foot on the brake. I didn't push down.

Everything was a fucking lie. She kissed me! Now she wanted to leave. Okay. Then I'm going to drop her off and go back to my fucking room and get more drunk and read my stupid comic books and rearrange my goddamn action figures so that they're killing each other and I'm going to waste away in my fucking room forever while my mother waits in the kitchen for Grandma to die and

I hit the gas. I slammed it into the floor. The car jumped forward. The truck's horn almost drowned out Stephanie's scream.

I hit the windshield hard. My skin opened up as I broke through it and slammed into the road. There was glass in my face, gravel in my arms, blood in my hair, metal in my mouth. The sickness in my stomach rose up and flooded over.

There were two cars, one twisted around the other and dripping red. My head felt huge, broken, and empty.

I floated. I heard people screaming millions of miles away, and it didn't bother me. I started to relax. The pain had been everything, and now it was gone. There was nothing. There was no me.

I was ok.

18.

Mom said I was screaming. She found me on the floor of my room with glass stuck in me and my mouth stretched wide open. Grandma stood in the doorway, arms folded. My mom grabbed me tight and pinned me to the floor.

"Is she dead?" I asked.

Mom was crying without making any sounds.

"Is she?"

"Yes," Mom said.

I sat up suddenly and threw her sad little hands off of me. I struggled to my feet and lurched toward the door. Grandma got out of my way.

I lunged at the front door. I yanked at the metal chains and tore at the knob and pounded the door with my fists while mom and Grandma watched silently in the kitchen.

When I had nothing left--when I was lying on the rug as still as a corpse, panting and choking on slimy tears--they put me in my room. Mom swept the glass from the whiskey bottle away and cleared the toys and comics off my bed.

She sat with me till the sun started to creep up.

"You have to go to work," I said.

"I'll call in sick," mom said. She put her hand on my forehead.

Grandma came in drinking a cup of coffee.

"Get some sleep," she said to Mom. "I'll watch it for a little while."

"Him," mom said. She looked down at her lap. Then she stood up slowly, and walked to the door.

"I'll cook something nice for you when I wake up," she said.

"I'm not hungry," I said. "Thanks."

She went into their room and shut the door.

"You shouldn't have brought me back," I said to Grandma.

"I know," she said, her voice soft.

"I'm sorry about your car," I said.

She stared at me. The first gray rays of sunlight spread from behind the building across her wrinkled body.

"You don't have to watch me," I said. "I'm not going anywhere."

She left me alone.

19.

And still the kids were in the alleyway, trying to take what was mine. I could hear them laughing. Something warm swirled around in my skull.

I slid the window open. It wasn't hard to force my pillow between the bars and out the window. It took a little longer for the blanket. I watched them tumble down to the concrete and cover the action figure.

The laughing stopped.

I threw the best of the action figures through the bars. They fell gracefully to the alley below and landed on my dirty blanket. Treasure was falling from the sky.

I grabbed more toys and let them fall. They couldn't ignore it. One of them was getting over the fence. My mouth was dripping as I listened to him and watched the bait sitting in the alley.

The boy was so small. He had shaggy blonde hair and a grey sweatshirt on. He was about the same age I had been when I started collecting. He buried his hands in the pile of my things.

"Hey!" I called out. "Hey, kid! Up here!"

His little blonde head tilted up at me.

His scream was brilliant. It burst into the early morning air and tore through me. I fell backward from the bed. The floor started to suck me in.

I felt like I had run for miles and miles, and now I was lying down in the cool sand, closing my eyes.

#### *ABOUT VICTOR GIANNINI*

*Victor Giannini is a cannibal, a skater, and an idiot. He splits his time between self publishing a comic, "Skeightfast Dyephun", designing skateboards, and trying to get his shitty novel, "Counselor", published. If you ever run into him, make sure you punch him in the dick. His words of advice:*

*"You must read to survive! Climb buildings and punch open windows to find books!"*

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