

Subject: 225H.001 [REDACTED] Monday Submission
Date: Thursday, November 17, 2011 2:25:32 PM MT
From: [REDACTED]
To: stephen.gibson@uvu.edu

(Is there any way to get confirmation that you received my e-mail and that it's in the PDF for Monday?)

"Now serving: Cancer twenty-five-three-oh-eight."

Kicking a heel against the linoleum tile in boredom, Carl thought of the final scene in Beetlejuice. He could almost sympathize with Beetlejuice right about now for stealing the shaman's paper, even if it cost him his head. At least they had had chairs there.

"This blows," Carl griped to the guy in front of him, who was missing half the skin on his face and bore a long, diagonal bloodstain across his chest.

"Would you stop *whining* already?" the guy groaned, wiping something from the corner of his remaining eye with the tip of his finger. "You'll get up there soon enough."

"If 'soon enough' means before Judgment Day, I'll be glad." Carl wished again for seats. Who in heaven would be sadistic enough to make a waiting room without chairs?

Well, technically, it wasn't an official room. He could see the stars and planets in all directions through the semi-transparent ivory tile that stretched on forever. It had no walls, what with the forever-rising number of dead souls being higher than the number of people who went on to their final rest or torment.

"It's not like you're getting any older," the lady behind Carl commented. The first time he had looked at her had been a mistake. Now he could not get this sick image out of his mind of the lady in a line at Macy's with a box of shoes under one arm and her half-charred head, wearing a patiently bored expression, under the other.

Carl watched the red boxy numbers on the digital screen high above his head change again. Somehow, Motor Accidents never seemed to move up. It always went to Cancer or to shorter lines – like Murder or Overdose. Impatient, he scuffed the floor again, making one of the Celestial Workers who wove in and out of the lines glare at him in a most un-heavenly way. Carl rolled his eyes and bent down before the man could chastise him, buffing the dark line off with his thumb. Shouldn't the floor of a waiting room in Heaven be made out of marble or gold? Who would pick linoleum? It made Heaven look cheap.

He must have complained aloud. "It's not Heaven," the guy in front sighed, now picking at a loose piece of flesh that dangled from the right side of his jaw like a piece of sloppily-eaten food. "This is *waiting* to go to Heaven."

Carl glanced down at the paper in his hand again and winced at the seven-digit number printed on its now wrinkled and sweaty surface. "Um," he said, reaching out and snagging the sleeve of one of the Celestial Workers. "Can you tell me how long this is going to take?"

Dressed like a janitor and pushing a bucket full of water that never got dirty, the man's buggy eyes widened until Carl thought they would pop out of his skull. "It takes as long as it does," he said.

"They obviously didn't train you in being helpful," Carl muttered, turning away.

"I can go get someone for you to speak to if you are dissatisfied?" the Worker suggested.

"I'm pretty dissatisfied," grumbled Carl, sarcasm leaking like battery acid from every syllable.

To this, the Worker merely nodded and, pushing his plastic yellow bucket forward, scuttled off towards the head of the line. It would probably be at least a hundred years by the time he got to the front, Carl thought.

"Excuse me."

Oh, well, that was fast. On his other side stood a trim, athletic man in an immaculate Italian suit over a dark maroon shirt and a black tie in a shell knot. He looked Italian too, his slicked-back hair dark over the thin mustache on his upper lip. Carl wondered for about half a second if this guy was Mafia-related before he found his hand grasped in a firm and painful handshake that ground the bones of his knuckles together. "I am Giorgio. I hear you have complaints?"

Hugo kneeled before the altar of Brandol. *Lord of Balance*, he prayed, *give me the strength to do thy will*. He heard faint footsteps from behind him.

"Father, it pleases me that you are here."

"I shall never understand the gift that Brandol has bestowed upon you my son," said the Baron. "I pray that you will be present this evening at the wedding feast."

"I too Father hope to be there. It shall be a night not soon forgotten."

"Yes, son. Finally peace can be between myself and the Marquis of Linton. Rise my son, let us off to prepare."

"Aye lord father, let us off." He rose from the ground lifting the traditional black and white priest garb of Brandol. They strode out of the empty chapel into the spring evening. Hugo kept his arms folded within the sleeves of his priest's robe. The Baron walked tall with his chest out in pride.

"Magnus! How great to see you!" shouted the Baron as his most trusted advisor approached. Magnus wore a silver breastplate with the crest of the Barony, a lion reared on its hind legs, with his battle proven sword sheathed at his side.

"My lords Gregory and Hugo, what a marvelous day!" exclaimed Magnus. "The birds sing of joy and not a cloud in sight. How glorious!"

"Yes my friend, a wonderful day indeed," said the baron. "We are on our way to finish the preparations for the feast, is everything taken care of on your end?"

"Nearly my liege. I need only see to the wine."

"Good good. See to it then."

"My lords." He bowed and left.

or do more with it
show leather scene: summary instead?
better images of what
people are wearing
needs setting/place

Starlit Funeral Tears

The comets flew down with white tails behind. The endless stretch of blue rock horizon swallowed them, the atmosphere so thin that the man standing on the balcony could see the stars and the nearby ring planet as if from the surface of a barren moon. Purple, the planet shown like a polished fruit, gold rings streaked with green like astral zebra patterns.

Vin turned away from the spectral sight and took out his watch from the breast pocket of his tux, the pocket that held a black dyed flower. *Six o' clock*, he thought. Ven watched the second hand leave the hour, ticking, ticking around. His wife had been dead for three days, three hours, and twenty seven minutes. He had loved her for...

... *how long?*

Vin bunched his brows, thinking, reaching for the time he'd spent with her. But the word wouldn't come up from the ocean of his mind, now foggy, the death a storm that had churned his thoughts.

His hands shook.

"Dear."

Vin looked up at the voice, soft and determined like red rose petals in fall. A walrus of a woman stood in the doorway, the light shining over her shoulder shadowing her front features to a black outline. "Aunt Lucy," Vin nodded to her.

"Jessica would want you to go on, Vincent," Lucy said.

"Thank you, Lucy," Vin turned back and let his eyes grow wide, absorbing the bright toxic colors of the coming night.

A hand, ~~or a bag of meat with five bratwursts sticking out~~^{cut}, grabbed his shoulder. Vin's suit tightened as the material bunched under Lucy's grasp. "You have to be strong. For me, Vin."

The widower came to attention. He could hear the tide of his thoughts pulling out, leaving a clear picture of Lucy's grief on his mind's beach. "Aunt Lucy," Vin turned to her and held the large fat flaps of her arms.

"Vin, I don't know..." Lucy began. Tears stopped up her delicate facial features, an angel's face. Heart shaped lips and high cheekbones, a nose with the right upward curve to make a little bud that could nuzzle in a lover's neck.

This woman quivered. Just last year she had turned out a drug gang from the apartment complex she owned; she had slapped a rogue construction worker unconscious; she had worked with children dying of aids on a third class world.

Now she was so much shaking jelly in Vin's arms.

"Vincent," Lucy said. "I didn't think she'd go. I didn't."

Vin stroked her shoulders and rubbed her back, closing to her.

pretty good

Subject: English 225H.001 [REDACTED] short story fragment

Date: Thursday, November 17, 2011 2:08:45 PM MT

From: [REDACTED]

To: stephen.gibson@uvu.edu

It was on a crisp Wednesday afternoon that the man from the bank knocked on my workshop door. My apron was covered in sawdust. A thick pine trunk was on my workshop bench, waiting to be grooved into a concave box.

would they start with the trunk

The man held up a property foreclosure slip for me to read. My own land wasn't in jeopardy, but the field surrounding my workshop had been sold to a developer. Soon the field would be a suburban neighborhood, the trees and brush wrapped into a bundle under a steamroller, then burned. My workshop would be the only part of Gregor's Hollow left. Everything else had been sold to the developer, even the cemetery.

*local banker
buried
locally?*

Two days later, on Friday, the man was brought back to my workshop, still in his black suit, mangled from a three car pileup. I measured him for his coffin, then set to work. I chose a nice cedar for him, because he seemed like the kind of man who appreciated the difference between high-quality furniture and high-gloss furniture stain.

I never let these acquaintance-turned-clients situations bother me. It's simply a hazard of my job.

I can remember every coffin I've ever carved. I've made them out of cedar, oak, cherry tree, pine, and mahogany. Once someone requested bamboo. I've carved fleur-de-lis, ocean waves, constellations, Bible quotes, sports symbols, even an Arabian Nights theme. Everyone wants their coffins personalized, and I encourage it. I use words like "peaceful," "gentle curves," "comfortable." I want my clients to think of my coffins as cozy, like warm little cradles, not death-boxes for rattling bones.

I remember all the coffins. I don't remember all the people. I reflect on my thirty years of coffin-building in Gregor's Hollow, and there are only a handful of bodies that stick out. The man from the bank is one. Another I remember was a little girl who pre-designed her coffin while dying in the hospital. And of course I remember the first coffin I ever built. I remember the man who was placed in the coffin. I remember him, because he was my father, and I carved a blue jay above his head in his white pine box. It was the first thing I had ever made with my hands and my tools.

All these coffins are now buried, under nine feet of frozen, snowy ground. Even while Gregor's Hollow is pieced off and sold, my coffins won't be moved.

*What's next and
ideas of plot
Desire? Danger?*

17th of November 1867

What was I thinking? I got what I came for, how did I even end up in that room? The journal explicitly warned it was cursed but I was in a state of euphoria, the Scryer beckoned me. In that moment I never wanted something more in my entire life. Now I'm unable to relinquish the object no matter how I try for it clings to my arm with the strength of cold death itself.

19th of November 1867

My dreams are haunted by towering specters that whisper with voices that crackle like fire. Their eyes are sealed with indifference as they mutter unintelligibly. I tried to speak to them but they did not respond, they keep drifting as shadows and speaking in riddles. I cannot remember much of what they said but one phrase is remains branded in my mind; "Scryer in the wound of time, sees all but none see he, blessed and cursed to tread alone and see not what he creates."

24th of November 1867

My dreams feel longer and longer, I fear to sleep again. My nightmare last night felt as a full year. The Scryer's grip grows tighter and it is now to the point that it is impossible to distinguish the where my skin ends and it begins. My son tugged at my sleeve today and in doing so nudged the Scryer, the instant he made contact with it I smote him to the ground. My action was not my own, I helped him up immediately and embraced him in sorrow. He said all is forgiven but I'll never forget the way he looked at me.

Divines save me...

More details.

What does it look like?

How did it get there?

Subject: English 225H.001 [REDACTED]
Date: Thursday, November 17, 2011 2:56:51 PM MT
From: [REDACTED]
To: Stephen.Gibson@uvu.edu

Both looked at and closed the cloaked figure into a corner. RedScarf immediately drew her pistol and aimed its sights at the target. NightBoarder quickly rushed over to Red's right side and blocked the end of the barrel with his hand.

"The hell are you doing, Red?!"

"Move your hand, or I'll do it for you" she said

A purple aura illuminated around NightBoarder's hand which he used to crush the pistol into pieces. Red stared at him mask-to-mask with a pissed off expression he could feel penetrate through her mask to his. They then turned their attention towards the cloaked figure and started to interrogate.

"Where are they, and why are they doing it?" NightBoarder said, "This city has enough problems with Crypt back, why add more to the drama?"

The cloaked person looked down, turned around, and examined the city. Skyscrapers were everywhere and neon lights attached to them advertised of gadgets, products, and rave dances. Spotlights shot up into the always dark starry night which was colored the same as the city with neon lights of various colors.

"This city is nothing more but a techno nightlife," The cloaked figure said "It lost its true integrity four years ago when you almost destroyed the city."

A light red fist appeared in the air and struck the figure on the face. Looking to his left he saw RedScarf in the stance of an after punch with a red aura around her right fist. She then walked over and picked up the figure by the neck, with her right arm, and dangled the now choking figure over the ledge.

"Listen here, Witch, unlike my friend I've killed before and I never hesitate to pull the trigger. She said, taking off the figures hood.

"Don't do it, Red, look at her, she's scared now." He said, "Come on, this isn't you, you don't threaten to kill people, bring her back."

Scared and gasping for air the woman looked at Red's mask and felt a killers intent disappear into a state of calmness. She then was thrown back onto the roof top filling the gap between Red and NightBoarder. The duo looked at each other, he then threw her a smile which she couldn't see but feel as they both looked down and saw the cloaked woman laughing. The laughter grew louder and louder as both saw her eyes change from brown to empty white. The starry sky began to fill with large dark-grey clouds which shot out thunder that stuck the tallest buildings, and heavy rain accompanied with fierce winds. Red aimed her right arm at the witch and transformed it to the arm canon. Firing five red shots Red discovered the hysterical laughing woman was protected by an electrical shield. NightBoarder knelt on one knee and began to charge.

"You idiots are powerless against me, it won't be long before we bring back the God of Evil to cleanse this horrific city." The woman said standing up.

NightBoarder, who was now encased in a purple shield, tackled the woman from behind and carried her towards the other end of the building until both fell off the edge. Red followed and dived off to catch up and saw bolts of lighting and beams of dark matter bounce off each other as both shields collided. All three gradually descended as people from below looked up in awe as others ran. NightBoarder felt prickles and stings of lighting slowly starting to penetrate through his shield as he continued to punch the woman in the face. Red charged up a shot from her arm canon to where it was becoming unstable and yelled, "NightBoarder, move!"

Rightly so when you take into account the fact that you are being launched using a machine that is based on primitive technology,” Solrum said as he walked to Pherian. and patted him on the back. “But my dear boy, your worries are misplaced. We have been using the Zehtus Rail since the 475th rotation. We have only ever had one system failure. And even then the capsule was recovered and the family was able to go on the next rotation. No danger exists, only the danger of the force of gravity on your stomach.” With that Solrum let out a hearty laugh. Pherian glanced and smiled.

“I know it’s supposed to be like Paradise. But it is difficult to leave my home. As a matter of fact, I was born and raised here,” Pherian said jokingly.

“I wouldn’t have guessed that,” Solrum said while laughing again and slapping Pherian on the back. “ You are a quiet contemplator in a room full of hungry beasts. The constant roaring means nothing when you open your mouth, dear boy.” He was referring to Pherian’s recent rise to head seat on the Zehtus Corp, a ring of nobles, and holy men, who were awaiting the opportunity to be sent to Zehtus. Pherian had been fighting hard to gain a place on the head seat since his mother and father had become ill with the Neardeath which deteriorates the body and causes age to come quickly.

Subject: 225H001 [REDACTED] Short Story fragment
Date: Thursday, November 17, 2011 3:03:07 PM MT
From: [REDACTED]
To: Stephen Gibson

"The launch will be the early light of the next Star rise. I hope your family is prepared, Pherian." The man named Solrum spoke in his usual slow, proper, speech pattern. Pherian simply looked up at the thick man and nodded. He did not like to be bothered while reading. The holoform of the Zehtus Rail drifted in front of him on his holopad. He lightly touched his finger to the screen and made a small circle. As he did so the holoform rotated on its 3D plane. He watched the play back on the holoform as the capsule was loaded onto a long rail, and was magnetized. Before launch a strong negative electric charge is sent through the rail one section at a time, which causes the rails polarity to shift to match the polarity of the magnet attached to the capsule. The capsule is then pushed forward at a swift speed. As the polarity of all the sections of rail are shifted the capsule very quickly picks up speed, until it finally reaches terminal velocity and launches from the rail.

"Have you ever seen the Zehtus Rail before, Pherian?"

"No, I can't say I have. I spend my time in the lower reaches of the city sprawl."

"It's a magnificent machine. modeled after our precursors first projectile weapons, no doubt, except for purposes other than hunting or warfare." Pherian nodded. He was not one much for words. His father had always told him that those who must constantly speak are merely compensating for their lack of intelligence. "If a dim person says 500 things in a matter of an hour, chances are good that at least one of the things they say will sound intelligent." Pherian had since proven this theory wrong. He had met people who seemed to speak constantly, and yet nothing even the slightest bit worthy of recognition is uttered. Pherian allowed a slight smile, and a quick laugh.

"Pherian? Are you listening?" Pherian shook from his small flashback at the sound of his name.

"Ah, yes, apologies Solrum. Merely thinking how life will be once we reach Zehtus."

"Ah yes, yes, yes, Pherian. No doubt you are nervous for the safety of your family.

Subject: 225H.001 [REDACTED]
Date: Thursday, November 17, 2011 3:32:37 PM MT
From: [REDACTED]
To: stephen.gibson@uvu.edu

Fragment-

Blake burst through the large wood grain door. The hinges creaked and moaned.

His mother sat across from him at the kitchen table, where old magazines and recent tabloids spilled randomly across its surface. What a mess. He could tell she was focused on something...

Without turning her face to him, he trudged across the gray carpet. His boots echoed along the cream colored tile floor. At that moment, an animal clawed its way out of his chest. Boiling over and out of his dry red mouth, he couldn't hold it in anymore.

"Mom!" he said, slamming Sarah's note down on the kitchen table causing it to rattle and shake. She still turned her fragile tan face towards the paper she was reading, "She's gone! I need to know where she is. She needs to hear that I'm sorry..." A single tear narrowly escaped his left eye. He quickly smudged it to hide the evidence.

"Blake, she doesn't want to see you after all that... told me so herself." she whispered, while flipping through the crinkled newspaper. Thinking about how the paper boy could never deliver a clean cut copy that was void of unseemly rips and creases, she skimmed over the main article.

"But I can't stop, I have to tell her. It was my mistake..." He plopped down into the nearest chair, adjacent to his mother's. "I didn't mean to embarrass her, again." He stared out the window. Mauve and brown maple leaves were swaying to the autumn wind in his old backyard. Each one having no control as to where they might land. Only the wind knew.

She finally turned to look at him. The smell of booze that tainted his breath pierced her nose, as it curled out from his words. The faint aroma of peppermints tried to cover it up, unsuccessfully.

"Is that it?" she asked, eyeing the shriveled paper.

He looked at his hand. Unclenching his fingers that wrapped around the note, it just laid there still and quiet. It was Sarah's note. The last note she had written him. He struggled to pull it out of the confining envelop. Once opened, he read it aloud to her.

Blake,

I can't be with you. The house is yours; do with it as you please. I have taken the dog.

Don't look for me.

I'm done.

Sincerely, I will never be yours,

There was an 'X' casually scribbled where her name should have been.

Blake turned to his mother, waiting for a reply, a question, anything. He needed something. But what he really needed was to know where she was. His mother had once again turned towards the morning paper.

After the passing sounds of several trains had come and gone, shaking the foundation of the little white house. He finally said, "Please tell me where I can find her." Stifling back sniffles and approaching tears, he waited. The landscape paintings along the wall became more blurry in his eyes.

"Blake, I promised her I wouldn't tell you."

"Please." He laid his head on the table, cooling his heavy forehead.

There was a long pause.

"She's staying at a motel outside of Trenton," she hardly mouthed out as she stood up from her seat. "Now don't go and do anything stupid! You know her brother will be there, and after your last meeting with him. I don't think this time will go as smoothly..." She walked out of the room, leaving her mess on the table.

Subject: Fragment for Monday

Date: Thursday, November 17, 2011 4:48:14 PM MT

From: [REDACTED]

To: stephen.gibson@uvu.edu

All the lights are up around the neighborhood and the faint scent of pine is floating around me, keeping up with my stride. The night is young, but all I want tonight is to be at home with her by my side. Just her scent and the lights around the tree turned on. Some might say distance keeps us apart, but death is a much harsher reality. I've got time on my side tonight, but somehow that doesn't matter when I'm all alone. I've let this grief take on the shape of a new companion and I can't help but wonder if that's all I need to get through this Christmas. So many families together, Christmas trees in windows, dogs barking as I pass by. This world is moving on without her and without me and all I can think about is how I should've stayed inside my apartment tonight.

Subject: ENG 2250.001 - [REDACTED] - No-flinchy
Date: Thursday, November 17, 2011 4:57:53 PM MT
From: [REDACTED]
To: DrStephen GibsonUVU

And They Ate Happily Every After: a Coffee-Break Fairy Tale for Busy Post-Modern Readers.

Fired from his job when the sun set an hour ago, Caleb has been driving around and around the belt highway with no purpose or plan. Blasts of rock music from the radio heighten his agitated internal emotions but block his senses from the external world.. He doesn't notice the screaming siren or the red flashing lights of the highway patrol car until several miles after being followed. Caleb's sullen attitude towards the highway patrolman, who pulls him over and asks for his license and registration, guarantees him the maximum fine on several moving violations. "Please drive safely, sir," says officer Bill, a chunky man with ketchup in his bushy mustache. "Damn pig!" yells Caleb after Bill drives away.

As Caleb surveys the darkness, on the side of the road near a freeway exit, he is reminded of his wife when he sees the huge golden arches of a nearby McDonald's restaurant sign. "Damn broad!" he yells as he checks his watch and realizes his marriage therapy session will be starting without him in five minutes on the other side of town. Tempted by the neon sign for the satisfaction of his hunger, he drives to the restaurant and pulls up to the drive-through intercom. A pre-recorded voice asks him if he'd like to try a triple mocha coffee shake. "Just shut up and I'll tell you what I want!" he yells into the intercom. "I'll have a triple by-pass patty melt with extra lard and carcinogen sprinkles." After receiving no vocal response from the intercom he repeats his order, without sarcasm, but receives no response. "Some punk kid is probably sexting his girlfriend instead of taking orders!" he says to himself. "I'll teach the sumbitch some manners," he mumbles as he parks his car and leaves it in the middle of the drive-through lane. He pulls out a concealed handgun from his jacket and enters the restaurant from the back door.

After closing the door behind him he is surprised to see a gun pointed at his face. A man wearing a yellow ski-mask angrily demands that Caleb drop his pistol. He complies and says, "your voice sounds very familiar - aren't you in my anger management class?" Caleb is shoved by a second masked man towards a small group of frightened people who are being held against their will, half of whom appear to be employees of the restaurant. In the middle of the group is a man writhing on the floor while clutching his chest and apparently having a heart attack. "I know CPR, let me help him," pleads Caleb. The two masked gunmen nod affirmatively. After administering CPR Caleb tells the gunmen, "I need a cup of ice." Sighing with annoyance, one of them gets a cup and hands it towards Caleb who suddenly springs to his feet and shoves him against a deep fryer. The restaurant manager, previously passive during the robbery, rushes the second gunman.

Caleb repeatedly smashes his opponent's arm against the side of the deep frying machine in an effort to knock the gun out of his hand. Frustrated with the resilience of his opponent, Caleb shoves the man's arm into the hot oil of the deep fryer. He screams in agony and falls to the floor. Meanwhile, the manager is shot in the leg while wrestling the second gunman. Caleb picks up a heavy stainless steel cylindrical tank of pressurized soda-pop and smacks it on the head of the gunman, who falls unconscious. Caleb binds the manager's leg wound and calls the police on the phone.

Three days later Caleb is offered a job by the manager and is also given a large monetary

rewards by the man whose life he saved with CPR. After learning the ropes of the restaurant business, Caleb buys the store with his reward money. He makes his wife the manager and they eat happily ever after. Bill, the highway patrol man, stops by every morning for coffee, a double sausage Egg McMuffin, and a dirty joke.

Subject: Engl225H.001 No Flinchy Fragment

Date: Thursday, November 17, 2011 4:58:41 PM MT

From: [REDACTED]

To: Stephen Gibson

Aileen felt her mother's hand tighten around her fingers as she, too realized they would be late. The man operating elevator five glanced at the clock then stared out at Mais and Aileen. A sick smile peered out through his black, tangled beard. Aileen shuddered as she watched his black eyes hungrily traveling across her mother's body. Horror crept through Aileen as she frantically looked to the women around them, desperate for help. The women stood with their faces turned to the elevators, their lips perfectly still to keep them out of trouble. Tears started to burn Aileen's eyes when she noticed a flash of yellow to her left. She peered past her mother's leg to get a better look. It was the yellow dress of her half sister, Bera, dancing around the legs of her mother, Leli. They were five women from their elevator, they would make it with time to spare. Aileen tugged at her mother's long sleeve and gestured towards Leli. Before Mais could react Aileen darted towards them, fueled by her panic. Aileen's soft leather shoes padded against the hot slick circular platform that extended out from the elevators. She dodged the women in line for elevator five and angled herself towards Bera and Leli. As Aileen skid to a stop Bera's face lit up with happy surprise while Leli's delicate lips turned into a frown. Aileen was so relieved she didn't care what Leli thought. She turned around expecting to see her mother right behind her, but she was nowhere to be seen.

Subject: English 2250.001 [REDACTED] (Fiction snippet)
Date: Thursday, November 17, 2011 6:23:44 PM MT
From: [REDACTED]
To: stephen.gibson@uvu.edu

Blake Marie crossed her legs and propped them up on her desk. She leaned back in her chair, folded her arms, and scowled.

A yellow envelope sealed with the golden TC of the Taxing Committee rested against her wooden piggy bank. That seal could only mean one thing: inside were a collection of Blake's receipts and a semi-personal letter from her assigned accountant informing her of her financial status.

"As if I don't already know what it says," Blake muttered, snatching it off the desk.

She tore it open.

As she suspected, the bundle of hand-written yellow receipts along with her claimed tax deductions were crammed inside, followed by a printed notice. Holding the notice in hand, Blake dropped the other paperwork on her desk and rolled her legs on top of it. Dirt from her shoes showered the papers.

The accountant's notice informed her that, due to her dropping income, the generous committee would reduce her tax percentage for next year. On the back was a note warning her to sell her scrying crystals while she had the chance, and to go into something more reliable—like serving at a mealhouse.

A mealhouse. Her parents would love that. "After all the money we spent on you at school, you trade in your fortunetelling career to wash dishes?"

There were other options, of course, but most of them involved employers. In fact, all of them did. Gruesome business men in tuxes who were prepared to take credit for one good discovery Blake made after another. "Oh, you found the Trevors' missing child? Well, just wait while I go to the media and collect the reward! Maybe I'll give you a bonus if you fetch me some coffee."

Her parents argued that she was paranoid when she told them this. When her father was younger he had worked as a reporter, using his fortunetelling abilities to predict the weather. Her mother was a celebrated palm-reading psychologist. Neither of them complained about their bosses. Both of them would smile knowingly when they learned of her failure.

UMI

UMI is what they call it. It stands for something else, but all the students say it stands for University of Mental Issues. Lots of wackos just like me go here.

I personally struggle with obsessive compulsive disorder—OCD for short. Things have to be germ-free. I can't control myself with hand sanitizer or washing my hands and such, and that's why I'm here.

My best friend, Al—short for Alice—also has OCD, but she has different symptoms. She only uses one-syllable words when at all possible, for example.

But not all the kids who go to school here have OCD. Some have extreme fears of the dark, spiders, or heights—naturally, we call them Scaredies. A few have SAD, or Seasonal Affective Disorder. We lovingly call them Greenhouse Kids. No matter what the issue, no two people here are just alike.

But Nick, he is really something special. Like, *really*.

"Sam!"

I turned in Al's direction. "Yeah?"

"Why do I feel like I missed some...thing?" She finally got the second syllable out.

I changed the subject. "You did it! That new therapist is a miracle worker!"

She glared at me. "I can say what I want. So, what did that look on your face mean? Can I guess?"

Stepping off the dirt road on which he had already walked 19 miles, the man sat down against a nearby tree trunk and unlaced his shoes. His fears were confirmed: his white socks were stained red, blotched with the blood of a dozen burst blisters.

He cleaned his wounds with a fresh shirt from his backpack, then carefully laced up his shoes again and returned to the road. He peered down either side, longing for the sight of an approaching truck—a big, soft-seated semi with a voluble driver, who would do all the talking as they drove back to town. He saw nothing, however, so he closed his eyes and instead listened for the truck (it might be just around the bend). But all he heard was the wind and the leaves and a single, far-off bird. He cursed, thinking specifically of the birds, whose melodies he found bothersome; he then punched a nearby boulder (but not too forcefully: he didn't need to add a broken fist to his troubles).

Eventually he accepted that he must continue walking (a night amidst all these identical trees was unimaginable). As both his toes and his heels were heavily blistered, he tried at first to walk on the arches of his feet; of course, this is impossible and he soon reverted to a normal gait, but still trying somehow to lessen the friction between his socks and the sores beneath them. Lift foot, place lightly, shift weight slowly. Lift foot...

It was slow going, but not only because of his lacerated feet; he now stopped, turned around, and tilted his head at every sound he heard, real or imagined. Every squirrel dashing across the road, the fall of every pinecone or acorn was, to his ears, a potential rescuer come to carry him home. He once even halted at the sound of his own footsteps, snapping a twig underfoot without realizing that he was responsible for the echoing *crack*.

His hypersensitive hearing, however, in the end, was a boon. For without it he never would have turned around (another squirrel) and seen the overgrown path that he had missed in his vexation; never would have read the dilapidated sign beside the path that, half-observed by some robust ivy, proclaimed "Ebbertson Ranch"; and certainly he never would have followed the sign's arrow—pointing north—that directed him towards these Ebbertsons.