The Eyes
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me?” She spoke to a ghoul, a memory with no conscious or conscience, praying for an answer she could never find. The key was in her hand; her spirit snapped. She twisted the key and opened Bluebeard’s closet—she was too late.

The blood…the body…the blade…my brother…my boyfriend…my heart…his lies…his fucking whore…my mother’s tears, my father’s note…my tears—mom’s tears—the lies…the lies…It all became a blur. All the memories she had suppressed confused themselves and fused together in her hyperventilating mind. The blood-soaked visage of her dead brother arched his back over the naked body of her lover’s flame. His last words—the bastard’s last words. She fought herself. She lost. The memories were hyenas and she their prey, nothing but carrion to her own demons. “I don’t love you anymore baby,” he had said—stuck in my head—the words growing louder with every inch the hyenas moved. There was nothing left to do, so she screamed. Years of pain sounded in her ravished wail. It was gone. Her father’s note, her brother’s body, her paramour’s goodbye—he was gone. Her heart beeped like a hammer as she struggled to control her breathing.

The front door creaked. Her mother was home. Quietly, limply, she made her way to the door, squeezed her head against her mother’s shoulder, laughing as snot leaked onto her mother’s blouse. They rocked together gently. “I love you mommy.” “I love you too sweetheart.” The door opened again, and closed just as soon; her stepfather hated walking in on awkward moments.

She sat in her room that night. She knew the demons would return. She knew the traumas would never go away. She knew she could beat them. I’ve conquered the oven; I can conquer anything. She smiled gleefully as she looked down at her bare feet and pink toenails. She overheard the words being sung in the background: “Sunshine been keeping me up for days.” She turned off her computer, turned off her lamp, said her prayers. And as she drifted off to sleep, she smiled.

The Eyes

Kateyln Barnhart

“What is that smell?” I asked the mortician beside me. He paused for a moment before saying, “It is the formaldehyde, Mrs. Williams.”

“Oh,” I said. It wasn’t an intolerable smell, just different. My eyes took in the surroundings. There were no windows and the walls were made of cement blocks. The body bag rested on a table. I took a deep breath and inch towards it.

The mortician stared at me and asked, “Are you ready?”

Is any mother truly ready to see the body of her child? My sweet, sweet, innocent Anna. I nodded. It was too hard to voice the words. With slight hesitation, he pulled the zipper. I gasped and took a step backwards, not prepared for what I saw. The muscles in Anna’s face were relaxed and her skin was pale. Freckles dotted her petite nose. The bullet wound marked her heart. My gaze paused on her eyes: shiny, black, pupils dilated. They held many secrets—secrets that she would not and could not tell.

Anna: April 9, 2010

I quivered in that dark room, my back against the wall, trying to make myself as small as possible. The room was stuffy; there wasn’t a fan or even a cracked window to let in a slight breeze. The only thing that shed a little light was the street lamp outside that cast shadows of the furniture onto the floor. My knees were bent to my chin and I cowered behind them. The only two sounds in the room were the suffocated whimpers that sought to escape from my mouth and the scratching sound of Hayden’s shoes against the worn Berber carpet as he paced back and forth. Every five steps or so he would pause and hit the wall that was quickly being covered with holes—like a piece of Swiss cheese. With every punch, I jumped a little and my whimpering would jump an octave.
I struggled to distract my mind from the inevitable. I decided to dwell on the last four months.

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Two months earlier ~

I slowly stroked the raised indents on the upholstery of the maroon sofa.

My mother said my name softly. “Anna?”

There was a huge weight around my neck, weighing me down. It took all my strength to raise my head and look at her. Her eyebrows were knitted together and her eyes were wet. She was ready to cry at a moment’s notice. I sighed and rolled my eyes.

Mother, I knew that I needed to say something and my first instinct was to be upfront and tell her the truth. “Mom, I...I love him. There is nothing you can say to change my mind...” I was tripping over my words. I was hoping that by talking fast enough she would believe me and get off my back about it.

Her eyes pierced mine as if trying to change my mind. Quickly sadness vanished and was replaced by frustration as she noticed the bruises peeking from their hiding spot under my short sleeve shirt. She pointed a finger at them, for they were fast turning from plum to a musty yellow on my arms.

“Did he do that to you?!” she demanded. I knew she had the desire to call him a filthy word, but she was against using such language even if she was upset.

I said nothing, but tried to cover them up with my sleeve. It was pointless to lie to her. I went back to stroking the abrasions on the couch; then switched to picking imaginary lint off my pants. I had to keep my hands busy. I could not show her how much her words affected me.

Her voice softened a bit, “Anna? Why?” I knew she was desperate to get through to me, but I didn’t want to listen. I knew what I wanted—him. Nothing could change my mind. She did not understand how deeply I loved him. I refused to let him go, I couldn’t. My mind drifted to how we met.

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My senior year began in a flurry of college applications to different universities. I was so busy with all of my extra-curricular activities and homework and the 4.0 I worked so hard to maintain that I didn’t have time to involve myself with the typical party scene that many of my peers were into.

I normally did not hang out with my friend Joanne, because she was very different from me. However, she invited me to go to a New Year Eve’s party with her. I was under the impression that it would be a harmless little get-together with pizza and board games until the clock struck midnight. Instead, the party was the complete opposite in every way. The cup of “punch” that someone handed to me had a distinctive taste, but I liked it. Soon I was loosening up and shamelessly flirting with anyone who had two legs and a penis. I couldn’t remember what happened that night, if my life depended on it. When the morning came around, I woke up next to a very cute guy. Shocked, I hopped out of bed and pulled my clothes on. Wow... I cannot believe I did this. But he is so hot. And it was so thrilling. And I kinda liked it? Wow. Before leaving, I grabbed a Sharpie out of my purse and scrawled my number on his chest; he didn’t even flinch. I smiled a little then rushed out of the room.

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He didn’t call me for two weeks; I thought for sure he had forgotten about the moments that we had shared together. I was wrong. Even though we only talked for five minutes, I knew he was the one for me. He was my first real boyfriend and was like no one else I had ever met in my life. Some people called Hayden odd, obsessive, and intense. I considered him to be eccentric, attentive, and exciting. Hayden was over six feet tall, with shaggy brunette hair that always fell in his face and covered his eyes—those eyes that were so full of intensity. Looking into them, I was both captured and scared. Hayden did not go to school, but worked at the local mechanic shop. I did know that he wasn’t on speaking terms with his mom, and that he always made comments about how much of an asshole his dad was. I remember when we met up sometimes he had bruises on his arms; whenever I asked how he received them, he always looked away and changed the subject. I felt at a loss about what to do.
Our blossoming relationship started in a whirlwind. We spent every possible minute of our day together soaking up each other’s presence. My friends got a little annoyed that he was my main priority, but they were just jealous. They didn’t understand. Well, that’s what Hayden told me, although that didn’t explain their reaction and the genuinely concerned expressions on their faces. But he was everything I wanted, and I could not imagine my life without him.

The first couple of months were incredible, but then things started to go downhill. What was once fun and exciting started to become frightening. I came home emotionally shaken, like a leaf with bruises on my skin. My mother noticed a change in my demeanor and the bruises that I tried to hide underneath my clothes. One afternoon, after coming home from school, she sat me down to talk. I’ll never forget that haunted look she gave me when she questioned me about what was happening. It was the first time I felt trapped in a dream that I could not wake up from.

My mother said my name softly. “Anna?”

“Mom, I...I love him. There is nothing you can say to change my mind…”

“Did he do that to you?” she demanded when she saw my bruises. “Anna? Why?”

One evening Hayden calls me. He always does if we aren’t with each other at night; this is the first night in a long time that I’ve been alone. His tone is different; but I can’t put my finger on it.

“Hey babe... What’s up?” he asks. He wants my location and a play-by-play of what I’m doing.

“I’m at home. I’m finishing up the last of these Calc. problems. I have five more left and then I’m going to eat and watch a little TV,” I hesitate. “Is that okay?”

There is a long pause as he calculates whether I’m lying or not. He finally says, “Yeah.”

His voice roller coasters between roars and tears. I don’t get it.

“I need you. Can you come over to my house?” I look at the clock.

It is fast approaching eleven, but I agree to come over. I quietly sneak out of my house. It takes me barely ten minutes to walk the eight blocks to his house. I text him quickly to tell him I’m outside. Three minutes later, he opens the front door to let me in. I look into his eyes and instantly know that something is wrong. There is an intensity I am now familiar with. His eyes are bloodshot, and he jumps with every little movement I make. He grabs me roughly and pushes me down the stairs to his basement. I say nothing, hoping he won’t hit me. I whisper, “Where is your dad?”

With a slight edge in his voice he replies, “He’s at the bat.”

I notice a bottle of Jack Daniels on his end-table. It all starts to click into place.

Timidly I ask, “Hayden... what’s wrong?”

He snarls, “I got fired from my job because I fucked up a fuckin’ car engine.” He glares at me, “Goddamn you, Anna. I fuckin’ hate you. You’ve ruined my life.” He throws me up against the corner of the wall.

“Hayden... what? Why?”

“You’re worthless, girl. You are a fuckin’ bitch and a god-awful girlfriend.” The profanity that leaps from his lips doesn’t seem to end. I freeze in place and cover my face, hoping for it all to stop. He continues to pace back and forth as my whimper persists.

As I cower in the corner, he stops pacing and looks directly at me. At this moment, I don’t see the man I dearly love, but a lion—and I am the lamb. The next few moments feel like a scene from a horror movie, with me as the victim. He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a small handgun. A scream rises from some place within me. I try to make eye contact. He avoids my gaze. I plead for him to stop. He raises it. He cocked the gun. The bullet hits me. He raises the gun to his own head and pulls the trigger.

I could not move my legs or make my hands twitch. Any sort of feeling or emotion had dissipated. I did, however, feel a presence of someone leaning over my body; their hot
breath upon my face, looking at me and into my eyes. My eyes could not focus though—much less process what was going on around me. I felt like I was in a bad dream and in this dream, I knew that I had died. Except it was not just a dream. As I peered back into the concerned eyes of my mother leaning over me, I realized I was the one in the body bag.

My father never had many material things. In fact, when I was a child he never had a permanent residence. Sometimes when we stayed with him he didn't even have food. However, he was rich in love for my brother and me. He would do anything for his boys; we were his pride and lifetime achievement. In return we loved him just the way he was: with his unkempt beard, ragged jeans, stained shirt, and torn shoes. He was a kid at heart and never felt a need to be responsible.

People gravitated to my father because with him it was always time for a good time. He lived life like a rock-star and the people that knew him loved him for it. The party didn't exist before he got in; it wasn't even planned. This inner eternal fun that exuded from him was a bright light in peoples' lives.

At my father's funeral it was standing room only. As I arrived, “Danny Boy” playing on a Sony CD clock radio sitting on a plastic chair, a photo of my dad about 35 on the Feather River holding a salmon, and a potpourri of people, the only seats available were for immediate family. A long procession of friends, family, and ex-girlfriends or wives took the podium. Some sobbing and some trying do like he would have, making it a party. I took the podium like the former. Then my cousin stood at the podium, differently than everyone else and the room calmed as he spoke with a story teller’s enthusiasm. He recounted a night we had spent camping with my dad. The outdoors were one of the few places my father was truly comfortable. He tried to share his love for it with us as often as he could. The night is one that I also have never forgotten and still often think about.

It began one sticky, hot summer evening when my cousin had come with my brother and me to stay with my dad over the weekend. Upon our arrival at his house the woman my dad was shaking up with threw us out because she didn't want three kids staying all night in her house. So to make the