



OUROBOROS

I've heard of others who were visited by angels. They spoke of winged beings of gleaming light, with booming voices and swords of flame. Creatures with many arms and many heads and visages so horribly beautiful the mind swam just to behold them.

My angel was a child, no more than three.

I'd known the first time I set eyes on her that something wasn't right. No children are allowed in the places where they tolerate me to earn my keep. They shield the innocent with one hand, while they use the other to pay me to dress in white stockings and short skirts and fulfill their filthy fantasies.

The paradox there has challenged me for weeks. I try to understand it,

how they want to protect something and defile it at the same time. Sometimes I feel like I'm coming closer to understanding it, but then something happens and it all goes fluid as quicksilver and slips through my grasp.

But logical or not, it is as it is, and regardless of how much they pay me to show them my "young" flesh, true children are not allowed in those hallways. So, when my eyes met hers that night, I knew something out of the ordinary was happening.

I looked again, once the stage lights had dimmed, but the audience was once again a sea of leering smiles and groping paws. Her angelic visage was nowhere to be found.

Behind the ancient velvet curtain, the bouncer refused to

look at me as I passed. The other dancers had no such problems, though, and several pairs of angry eyes glared as I retreated to the far corner of the corral that passed for a locker room to change after my last set. It wouldn't be long before this was just one more in a line of places that I used to work. I'd hoped it would be different; hoped he would be different. But I knew the signs by now.

It seemed, the longer I lived, the faster the changes came. First the moment of surprise when they saw me. I have no false modesty, I know what they see. The looks they give me, at first glance, are the ones they reserve for things of great beauty and wonder. But I know,

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as well, that what they see is not the real me. I exist, here beneath their perceptions, like a blighted fruit beneath an unblemished skin. And it does not take long for them to know it as well. I can see the change happen, there beneath their eyes. The surprise turns to resentment, for some. Bright green envy or jealousy, coveting what they think they can never have. For others, the look turns red with anger; they hate me for the beauty they see, or for the looks others give me. The worst are those who take it to heart, who measure themselves against what they perceive in me and find themselves wanting. You can see them die a bit inside, those ones, going wan and jaundiced from the inside out. I move on quickly when I see that happen. Anger you can predict, and what you can predict, you can avoid. But soul-sick folk, they're as likely to burn you down while you sleep as they are to slit your throat — or their own — and you just can't ever tell which way they'll turn.

That was what I was seeing here, that deep-down self-leathing that says the one who's wearing it has nothing left to lose.

And sure enough, I'd barely gotten dressed when Jimmy the sweeper came with the pile of dollar bills the customers had thrown for me. He wasn't smiling.

I'd already started to pack my bag by the time he spoke. "Tanner says he's got to let you go."

The boss's name rang in my ears like I'd been slapped. I nodded, taking the money numbly. Jimmy fidgeted, standing there like he had to explain. "Someone's saying your ID ain't legit, that you're underage. Folks are starting to talk, and Mr. Tanner doesn't want any excuse for the cops to show up."

I nodded again, looking past the sweeper towards the nearest girl. She was a pallid blonde with too much makeup, three kids and a cocaine habit. She had the good graces to drop her gaze, but I knew who'd started those rumors. There's only so much money in any man's pocket, and those who were tucking it in my drawers weren't leaving it for the other girls. Even if they didn't hate me for what I was, knowing it or not, they'd have done the same to anyone who came in and cleared pockets the way I did. It was just a matter of survival and that, if nothing else, was something I'd learned about humanity. They had a powerful strong drive to survive.

“Better get going before he comes on back.” Jimmy glanced toward the curtain that separated the corral from the rest of the club. “He was pretty pissed.”

This was called irony, I thought, as I slipped out the back door and into the alley. My identification was, indeed, falsified. It wasn't because I was too young that I needed a purchased identity, but that I was far, far too old.

The earliest thing I remember was my father's face pulling back from mine, and his voice in my ears. There was the smell of leather and wine, and I thought, as my eyes fell upon him, that he must be the prettiest thing in all creation. I don't reckon I was far from the truth in that matter.

For a time we were happy, or as like unto it as any could be. He'd made me for company and to love him, and I didn't know anything but that to begin. But then a prospector found silver near our cabin, and before we knew it a town had sprung up nearby. My father took to visiting regularly, leaving me alone for longer and longer. We fought, then, when he came home smelling of liquor and toilet water. Then one morning, he came home smelling of blood.

They said they didn't dare leave me there, after they burned down the house and hanged him with it. Looking back, I wonder if they

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didn't hate me then, as much as him, and did it for spite. I was still reeling from his death and did what they said, at least at the beginning. They couldn't very well marry me off right away to a stranger, and I looked young, as young as some of the other girls at the orphanage, for all that I'd lived more than a decade with Father after he woke me.

That was long ago, long enough that 16 was a full adult back then, whereas now it was enough to get me kicked out of yet another job, despite my papers saying I was three years older. As I headed down the alley toward the street, I was lost deep enough in my thoughts that I almost didn't see her standing there.

Her hair was curled in ringlets and as dark as her boots. In contrast, the starched apron around her waist was as white as paper and looked just as crisp. She stared at me for a long moment, but before I could think to speak the side door creaked open behind me. I glanced over

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my shoulder to see who was coming out, and when I looked back, the child was gone.

Jake Tanner filled the end of the alley. He was broad at the shoulder and narrow at the hip, built like a man should be built. My heart caught in my throat at the sight of him. He paused to light a cigarette, and that beautiful face was illuminated for one brief moment before the lighter went out. I just stared. I couldn't do anything else. The curls of smoke crept out past his lips as he exhaled, and I wanted nothing more at that moment than to be just as close.

I must have made a noise then, because he looked down the alley at me and frowned. "Hey. I told you to get out."

I shouldn't have said anything. It wasn't his fault he hated me. I'd overstayed my welcome, and his reaction was inevitable. I should have just turned and walked away. But the hatred in his voice was such a stark contrast to what I wanted to hear there, I couldn't help myself.

"Actually, you didn't tell me anything. Jimmy did." I turned to face him, my voice carrying louder in the alley than I'd expected it to. "Kind of you to make him do your dirty work."

"You back talking me, girl?" He took a drag of the cigarette then snuffed it out beneath his shoe. The fluid power of the gesture made my breath catch in my throat, and I couldn't answer.

"I told you to get out. I don't need your kind of trouble around here." He crossed his arms across his chest as if he expected me to try to break back in through the door behind him.

I didn't move. I just closed my eyes, breathing in the tang of his cologne, the sweaty mixture of alcohol and tobacco that reminded me of the way my father smelled when he came back from town. He reminded me a lot of my father.

I heard him step closer. His hands tangled in my hair, and for a second I imagined that he was going to pull me close for the passionate kiss I'd dreamt about.

A second later, I hit the brick wall, so hard it rattled my teeth. I hadn't been prepared, so I took the force of it full on my shoulder. He twisted my arm back behind me until it could go no further and pressed me against the wall in a grip of steel. His voice hissed in my ear like a lover's whisper as he ground the side of my face against the brick.

“I said, get out, girl. If I have to tell you again, you’re going to regret it.” Tobacco flavored his breath as it brushed my skin. I wanted to lean back into him, to feel his lips pressed fully against my cold flesh, even for just a moment, but he held me too firmly.

“I . . . I thought we —” I struggled for words that would let him know how I felt.

“We? There’s no ‘we.’” He pushed harder, and I grunted in pain. “I wouldn’t fuck you with Jimmy’s dick.”

He threw me down and walked back toward the door without turning to look back.

The door slammed shut behind him, and I waited until the echoes died away before I pulled myself to my feet. Blood was trickling down my face. I could have healed

it, but instead I clapped my hand tightly over the wound, cradling it. It was the only thing he’d ever given me.

I ran the rest of the way home, my car abandoned in the club parking lot. Twenty minutes of darting through traffic and avoiding panhandlers, and my shame was still roaring in my ears. I’d practically begged him to hit me, to kiss me, anything. I eschewed the lift for nine flights of stairs taken at a full sprint that did nothing to slake my humiliation. By the time I left the stairs for the dingy hallway of my floor, I knew Tanner was right. I wasn’t worthy of his attention. I wasn’t worthy of anyone’s attention. How could I have ever thought it would be different? How could I have ever thought that —

My apartment door was ajar. I started to approach cautiously, but a crash of glass spurred me on, and I was through the door before drawing another breath.

The room was destroyed. Not that it had been much to look at before, secondhand furniture and third-hand belongings all crammed together in a studio the size of a large closet. Now, however, it was knee-deep in debris. I stopped short, stunned by the rampant destruction. I didn’t have much to begin with. I’d gotten used to living with only what I could carry, after having been forced to leave everything behind time after time. But there was nothing whole here, nothing unscathed. The overhead light hung down from the ceiling like a gallows’ noose, the bulb shattered. Even the ancient gray



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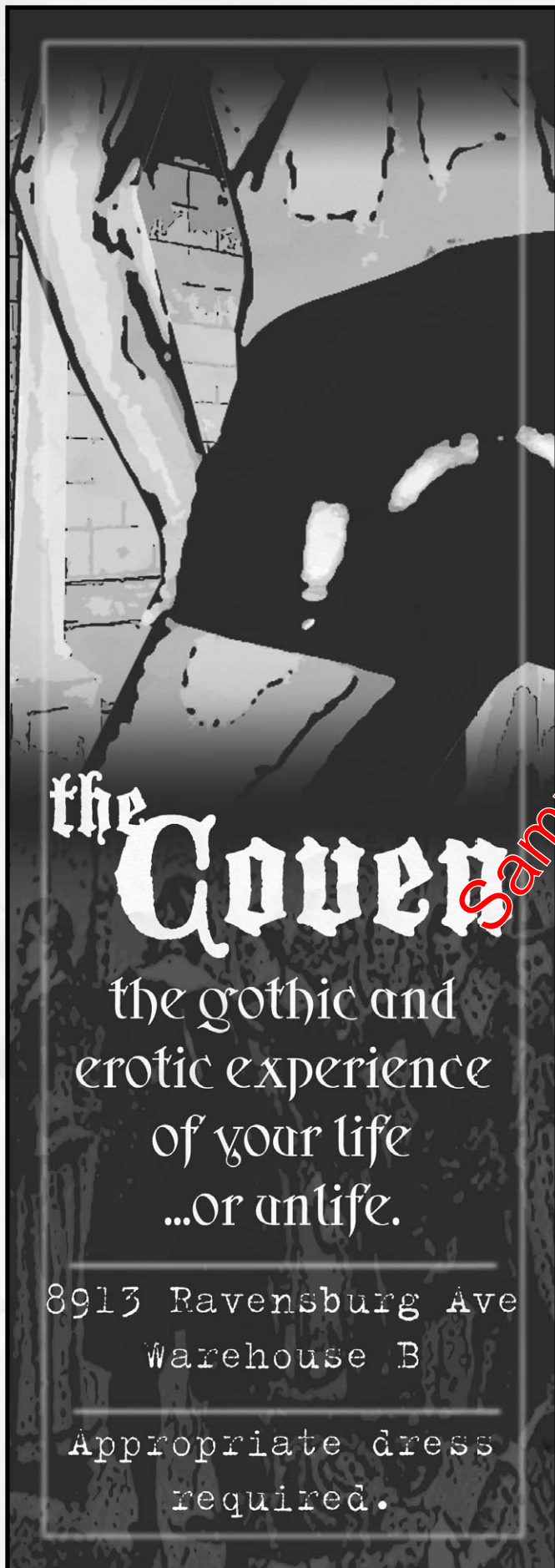
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mattress had been shredded, polyester stuffing streaming from slash-marks like entrails from a slaughtered thundercloud.

From the kitchen, another explosion of glass announced the vandals hadn't yet fled the scene. Everything went red for a minute as the cauldron of emotion inside of me boiled over. My fists knotted up and ached with a longing to be used, and fire flew through my muscles as my Pyros flared.

I ran for the open doorway to the kitchen. The icebox door was hanging half open, its light apparently the only one still working in the apartment. The contents had been vomited out onto the linoleum. The cupboards had been cleared, turning the floor into a chaotic mosaic of pottery shards and ruined food. In the middle stood a nightmare.

From taloned feet to half-bald head, she was horrific to behold. Her dugs hung half to her waist, a mockery of womanhood. Bony spines stuck out at jarring angles from her flesh, as if there were something even worse under her skin trying to erupt. She looked up from the destruction she'd created, and as my eyes met hers, I knew that whatever monstrosity her body held, her spirit was much worse. Her eyes were flat and dead, set in a face that was raked deep with claw marks.

Her maw opened in a silent scream, and she launched herself at me. I reached out to block her attack, and her claws fastened around my wrists like pinchers. Her wings shed oily feathers that half-blinded me as we struggled. The stench of rotten eggs and sulfur filled the air, repulsing me more than her attack did. She raked for my belly with her claws, but I spun her around, letting the force of the turn flip her talons away and then shaking loose her claws so she flew across the room. She crashed against the rickety chair and sprawled for a moment, stunned. She wasn't any shorter than I, but I was stronger, and besides, I was mighty angry.

When she flew at me again, I was ready. I turned that fire in my belly into a hunger and let it loose on her, sucking out her spark like a man on a marrow bone. I didn't like to do that. Pandoran energy was nasty stuff, harsh as Hell and bitter as dregs. But it worked. She froze up in mid-air, like she was too shocked to move, and I caught her easily. With one fist around her throat, I held her away from me while willing her stinking gubby flesh into stone. She stopped struggling.

I grabbed and yanked hard. Her wing made a wet sucking sound as it pulled loose from her shoulder blade, but it trailed granite dust rather than blood. It had worked.

I turned and threw her at the hardest thing in the room, the gaping icebox. The light exploded, and the harpy shattered, shaking the room. Chunks of stone poured out to mix with the rest of the debris scattered across the floor. I snatched up the largest piece and threw it out the tiny window above the sink. It shattered the glass and sailed out into the darkness. It felt good to watch the glass fall.

“Daughter of the Hangman, you have to go. They will be coming soon.”

I turned to find the angel child standing in the doorway. She fairly glowed, a single point of light in the otherwise dark room. I could only stare.

“Hangman’s Beautiful Daughter, you must get your bag and your car and leave town. You must go now.”

I nodded numbly. I had no idea who this cherub was, but she was right. Even in a building as shabby as mine, a fight like this wouldn’t go unnoticed. I had to get out of here.

I looked around for my bag and then stopped. I remembered the cool leather slipping through my fingers as my face was pressed against the wall. I’d left it in the alley.

My car keys. My identification. My money. Everything was in that bag. “It’s still at the club.”

The angel nodded solemnly. “I have to go get it.”



She nodded again, and then disappeared.

If shame had sped my footsteps on the way home, panic gave me wings returning to the club. It was still hours until dawn. Maybe no one had noticed my bag in the alley. I could just slip in, grab it and be gone before any one noticed.

My luck has never been that good.

Tanner was smoking again when I arrived in the alley. He wasn’t alone. I heard the blonde’s vapid giggle and his answering murmur as I crept toward my abandoned bag. Damn him for using that tone with her. It flowed like bitter honey on the air.

Their conversation stopped,

then began again. “. . . that her?”

“I thought I told you not to come back.”

I crouched to pick up my bag as his footsteps drew near. I didn’t trust myself to look up. “I just came to get my bag. I dropped it before when you —”

“When I what? I didn’t touch you, bitch.”

One hand on the bag, one on my wounded cheek, I paused.

“I said I didn’t touch you.”

“Okay, you didn’t touch me. I just ran into the wall all on my own.”

The blonde giggled.

“You shouldn’t have come back here.”

I started to stand. “I just needed my —”



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His cigarette burned across my cheek as he backhanded me. I reeled back against the wall. I dropped to all fours, barely holding onto my bag with one hand.

“Get out of here before I fuck you up, you worthless little whore. Somebody oughta teach you a lesson —” I could hear his boot pull back to kick me, knew before it landed where it would strike, how the ribs would crack beneath his blow.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as I reached deep for the fire bubbling inside me. I felt it flash, like lightning through my muscles, catching my blood on fire as he kicked forward.

What happened next was a blur of red. He kicked forward, hard and fast, but I was faster now. I spun out of the way, vaulting to my feet. The blonde screamed as my leap took me near her. I reached out with my empty hand without thinking, and silenced her. Her neck snapped, and she slumped to the ground as I turned to face Tanner.

“What the hell?” He looked from her fallen form to me and back, the flush of exertion and outrage sending a blush to his bronzed cheeks. I wanted to touch it, to see if it burned as hot as the fire I felt inside right now. I reached for him as his next blow fell toward me.

My fingers looked tiny and white clasped around the meaty hammer of his hand, but only for a moment. Then they were both covered in flame.

He screamed like a little girl, and I spun around behind him. The leather straps of my purse wound round his neck, just below his jaw line. As I tightened the makeshift garrote, his voice died off to a choked whisper.

Fifteen seconds of pressure on the right artery, and the human body crumples. Four minutes, and the brain begins to die; more and they're not likely to come back.

I let go as soon as he hit the pavement. Part of me didn't want to.

As the club shrank in my rearview mirror, I pondered the evening. Perhaps this was what they felt then, when they sodomized the things they claimed to love. This burning mixture of love and hate, of fear and loathing all wrapped in a passionate flame. The quickening inside me told me that I'd learned something here, something important.

And as I drove away from the city with Tanner's bound body in my trunk and his bruises still on my skin, I hoped my next lesson wouldn't be as painful.



Sample file

strange alchemies

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Sample file

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INTRODUCTION

Life's full of tough choices, at least that's what they say. Some days I don't know whether to count myself as part of that "life" or not, being what I am, but regardless, the choices are there. To stay a day longer in the safety you built, or to move on before they come for you. To take the blow and risk them not stopping, or to fight back, knowing there's always more of them than you. To end it all, or to keep on struggling toward a goal you sometimes doubt you'll ever reach. No right answers, no black-and-white, just tough choices all the way down the line.

I opened the trunk, and he stirred. Not awake yet, but it wouldn't be long. I'd been debating myself the whole way out here, and now I had to decide.

My father hadn't made any more after me. Maybe he would have, but the woman who betrayed him and the mob that cut him down made sure he didn't have the chance. But he'd told me, when he was teaching me, that eventually I'd have to. When I was still freshly made, he would stroke my hair and tell me how beautiful I was, how perfect, and how he knew, when he got put on to hang me high, that if he did it right I'd be the perfect child for him. He'd worried about it for days, he said, of whether the knot would break me too badly, whether I'd be marred and useless. He warned me of the dangers. I'd listened.

Looking down at Tanner, I couldn't see any damage. But when he woke up, he'd struggle, and he'd hurt himself . . . or make me hurt him . . .

I checked around us, but the dead-end road was so far from anywhere, I could probably have camped there for a week without being disturbed.

He breathed in deep, and I watched him sleeping quiet as a babe. I reached down and brushed away a strand of hair that had strayed across his forehead. He was so very pretty, peaceful, perfect, really.

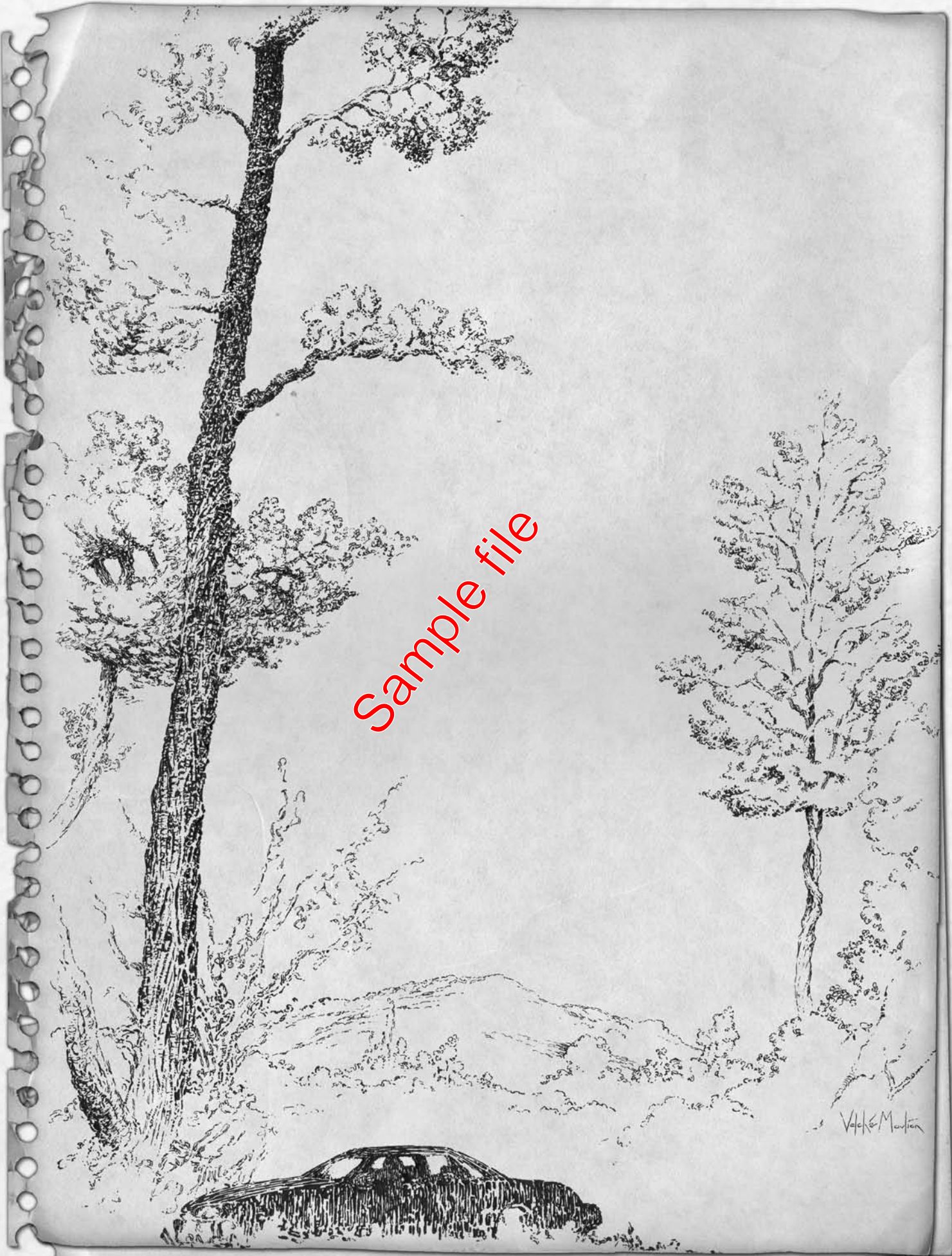
Quietly, so as not to disturb his slumber, I shut the trunk, but only most of the way. I didn't want to kink up the venting that I'd sat in there beside his sleeping body. I taped the big green garbage sack down over the gap, and then fastened the other end of the venting around the exhaust pipe of the car before slipping back in the driver's seat.

The radio started crooning Natalie Cole on the classic station as I started the car.

When it comes to love, no pain no gain, I think I'll take a chance on you . . .

I sang along, not knowing how long this would take.

You've captured my heart, and I won't take no for an answer . . .
But then again, I had all the time in the world.
Gonna make you mine . . .



Sample file

Vicki Martin