

Spanish Fingers

His eyes stayed impossibly blue. Men lost their color after I stared at them long enough. Their skin would pale, then their eyes would fade to a dead gray. Most men were walking corpses as far as I was concerned. Please, like I'm gonna give myself to a zombie.

But he was vivid. His lips could have won an academy award. All the way across the room I was falling for his performance. My lungs, twisting unbearably tightly, sent my head the message that they'd only begin to function again once my legs got their act together and took me to him. I chose to walk the long way around the bar as I stalked toward his back corner. I hoped the smoke hanging in the air wouldn't give the impression that my hair was aflame. I gave my long red locks a shake; we're going for elegance here.

He noticed me soon enough, and I kept his attention. His bright blues followed me all the way to the seat by his side. Not only was he a star on stage, he played a very active audience. Maybe I'd yet get to be the supporting actress in whatever he chose to play. His body radiated heat, though the room was chilled. Something about how his hair fell carelessly across his eyebrows prompted me to slide closer until our chairs were touching. "I'm Amy." Even I could hear the quiver in my voice.

His mouth flickered into one of those million dollar smiles you might find on a teenage magazine cover. "Brendan. Can I get you a drink?"

Hell, no. We could get out of here, more like it. "Sure." Nothing was quite the same if you were still completely sober, anyway.

I let him call over the waitress while I looked him over. So colorful, he'd be any painter's dream. It took all of my will power to keep my fingers from brushing through the silky ebony that fell to his shoulders.

Show Them All That They're Not Alone

1 She walks alone down the road and no one sees as she goes.
2 She's apart from the world around her.
3 The "Invisible Girl" in her own little world,
4 she tries to hide so they can't surround her.
5 She puts on big jackets and hides her face behind sunglasses
6 so that no one can see what she's hiding.
7 She tries so hard not to show... she doesn't want them to know...
8 know what happens when her parents start fighting.
9 She goes home to the place where she's hurt everyday,
10 and tries to find some escape from the yelling.
11 She hides alone in her room and squeezes her eyes tight,
12 to stop the flow of her tears that aren't quelling.
13 "It's okay", she whispers as she rocks back and forth,
14 trying to shut out the sounds that she's hearing.
15 "I'm gonna be fine, he won't find me this time.
16 I'm all alone, in my own little clearing."
17 Her peace cannot last and it shatters like glass
18 as her dad pulls the door off it's hinges.
19 She yells but she knows it won't stop all the Hell
20 that happens each time that he binges.
21 He hurts and he shames her and he says that he blames her
22 for all the trouble that's been in their home.
23 Until she's finally left, bruised and bleeding to death,
24 and she draws her last breath all alone.
25 She's happier now, and no longer alone,
26 but she left her last message in stone on her grave.
27 A warning to some and a message to others.
28 One she hoped they'd remember and save.
29 "Please be kind to each person, don't ignore them or hurt them.
30 And please don't leave anyone out.
31 Because everyone in this world, every boy and each girl,
32 fights a war you know nothing about.
33 They could be in pain and have no one to love,
34 or to care or to share when they're home.
35 So please show the world that you care
36 and for them you'll be there and we'll
37 show them all that they're not alone."

The day my mom and sister and me moved into the apartment on the lower east side is one I will always remember. It was the beginning of the end of my innocence. Perhaps things would have been different had we moved into a nicer neighborhood – or any other neighborhood for that matter. But I didn't think so. I think that everything that happened was meant to be. Moving into that apartment was just the catalyst – a million other things could have set the coming events into motion.

That day might have been any other day of my life – the sun was shining warm in the sky, kids were playing hopscotch and kickball in the streets, and men in steel-toed boots kissed their wives goodbye before heading off to work. All men besides my father, that is. He could no longer kiss my mom or go to his job with the railroad company. He was dead. He had died four months before, leaving us destitute in the process. And that was why we now had to live in a beaten-down apartment complex. And why that day wasn't just like any other day.

I put the cardboard box I had been holding down on the ground and took a good look at TODD Apartments. That's what the place was called – TODD Apartments. Except the letter T had fallen off the sign and the last D was on its' last hinge. So the sign really read ODD Apartments – a bad omen if there ever was one. And once that D finally came off it would be OD Apartments – even worse.

The building was a crumbling, brown blob that smelled of several decades worth of cigarette smoke and had bits of garbage littered all over the dead lawn. I took my little sister by the hand and walked with her up to apartment #245 – our new home. We came to a stop at the peeling, green door. "Are you ready to see our new mansion?" I asked Gracie while giving her a reassuring wink.

Gracie was the tender age of 14, with dark, curly hair and sweet, plump cheeks complete with dimples. She was my baby sister – a baby in every sense of the word. I was three years older and, for all my attempts at sophistication, not much more experienced. I was her opposite in the looks department

Defending the Union (Part III)

Captain Morgan sat in her office, her feet unconsciously tapping an agitated beat on the titanium floor, trying to decide the fate of an entire race. Who made her God, anyway? Was it up to her, or could she tell herself she was following the order from her superiors to end this war at all costs? But *genocide*?

She got up to absent-mindedly get coffee from the dispenser. She had been told of the atrocities of war and the hard decisions, but no one prepared her for the guilt that brought on such nausea as to make her instantly regret the sip of strong coffee. She dumped it out and went out the door to Ops.

"Captain, we are crossing into Brekali territory and will soon be visible to their detecting sentries," Ensign Henderson explained.

"Is the virus fully prepared and ready?" she asked Frasier.

"It is fully integrated and ready for dispersal, Captain."

Morgan's eyes looked inwardly in concentration for a moment. "Increase to full inter-system speed, Henderson. I want to get to Brekal with the shortest amount of warning possible. I'd prefer not to spend that full minute our virus takes to start working fighting off an armada of enemy ships. How about you?"

"Full speed ahead, aye, Captain."

Suddenly, time seemed to stand still. Every millisecond seemed to matter and stand for her attention to be recorded for posterity. The helmsman told her they were one minute from their target. Target? Had she really thought of the entire planet as a target before? Every living thing down to an amoeba would perish at her hand, and likely the planet would be too unstable to even stay in one piece. Orbits of the nearby planets would then be affected, and possible countless societies would perish at her hand.

"The sentries are hailing us, Captain. Should we respond?" Lt. Wendall asked.

"In just a moment. Frasier, deploy the virus as soon as we are within range. Henderson, send your countdown to them. Everyone, act like this is a normal emergency. Communications, on viewer."

"Greetings, Brekali. We bring you an urgent message from your people. It would have been sent by them, but our ship was much closer and a serious nebula storm is blocking long-range communications. Our message is that the war is over. Peace has been declared!" Morgan looked back at her officers and got the nod that they were deploying the virus. "We have just sent you their encrypted communication as to the declaration of peace."

She tried to look as happy as possible about the "good news" and stood there in front of the view screen waiting for the shoe to drop.

"Sir, I don't know what they sent us, but it does not appear to be what they have stated it to be." And there it was, that shoe.

"What?! Open fire with the orbital sentries and launch fighters! What, Captain, did you send us?!"

"I assure you this is what the commanding Brekali handed me to send to you. Perhaps there was some mix-up and he gave me the wrong data crystal."

"Sir, our systems are no longer responding. Whatever that was, it got through our computer firewall and is corrupting...*everything*! Outdoor air scrubbers have ceased. And sir! Tectonic stabilizers are no longer working and the planet is trying to tear itself

Landing Next to Hell

1 Flying over I can see the smokey destruction:
2 actual flames under me that would kill if we
3 should crash

4 so far below.

5 We land, next to hell.
6 I'm hungry, have snacks in my pockets... and a paperback.
7 Jump from the helicopter; boots, ankles, and knees impact
8 the hard uneven ridge top.
9 I love the thrill of going into it but at the same time, I'm like:
10 can't we keep flying over and not work for a bit longer?

11 Gear up. Heavy, full of water
12 and survival equipment like a fire shelter,
13 which looks like
14 a tin foil twinkie
15 once deployed.

16 Ever have a tin foil dinner around a camp fire?
17 Who would eat us when we were
18 done roasting?

19 Get out, get to work, hurry up!
20 What are we doing?
21 Just go! Go! Go!

22 OK, here?
23 Yes there! Go! The fire's coming up this hill and it can't get past here. Go!
24 OK.

25 Adrenaline is hardly a substitute
26 for not being in amazing physical shape.
27 But it will have to do.

28 The urgency of the situation won't change the fact
29 that this is our first fire this year and we're a bit
30 rusty.

31 Whatever, just work, and work HARD.
32 OK, we're actually supposed to be over there, GO!

33 We go.
34 We work.
35 The fire does what it wants.