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*Morta Infinita*

On the last Halloween Kristen spent with her father they dressed as vampires, and when he hefted the rock that would shatter the Eisensteins' bay window and send their dog yelping into the woods, he smiled a sad vicious smile, and his face became the face of a vampire too.

"There are two kinds of people in this world," he said. Then he side-armed the rock, and the street exploded in noise, and she was running and he was not. He just stood there in his cloak and black shirt and white Converse All-Stars, as if he were not afraid at all, as if he were not even visible to anyone but her. As the rock left his hand and arced over the neat lawn she suddenly remembered what he had told her a few days before when picking her up from detention. "We all have to suffer the consequences of our actions," he had said as he opened the passenger door for her. "And sometimes we have to suffer the consequences of other people's actions too."

That was Saturday, five days before Halloween and two days after her mother had left for Florida. There was a horror movie festival playing downtown, so that's where they headed, and as they pulled away from the school, Kristen gave the gray building a single-finger salute. The principal was deep inside, his head bowed over paperwork, and her dad was saying something about the forces of social control. She wondered if he even knew the specifics of her crime. "I spit at him," she explained after a while. "I didn't hit him though. He sidestepped it like a matador."

"Who?"

"Mr. MacEllan," she said. "The principal."

"Your principal is your pal," he said with a laugh, pulling into a space near the theater. Even lately with her dad's eyes grown bloodshot they loved to watch horror movies together. In the dark of the movie theater Kristen could feel him next to her vibrating with emotions some people would never, ever feel in their entire white-bread lives, and she felt herself vibrate too, because she carried 50 percent of his biology in her blood.

She knew what would happen. The screen would go dark, and her father would lean over and whisper something funny about the titles or the music or the fatheaded guy in front of them, and then they would be quiet except when they gasped with joy as the villain made his first appearance. Whether it was Vincent Price staring into the eyes of a skittish dinner guest or some skin-masked, ax wielding psychopath chasing down a girl in cutoff shorts, Kristen was on the side of the devils. In horror movies freaks and ghouls were the clever ones, the fascinating ones. "The heroes are boring," she told him once as the screen glimmered with violence. "The monsters are the only ones who do anything interesting with their lives."

She liked to change his words around a little and speak them back to him so that she could watch him smile and nod at their wisdom.

"I can't go in," he said, looking into the rearview mirror at the theater marquee. He smiled tightly without taking his hands off the wheel, as if they were still driving down the road. "I can't go in there with those people. I just can't." He was crying. He leaned back his head, let out a deep breath, and said, "Oh boy."

She pictured the inside of his head as a labyrinth where he would sometimes get lost. The houses he designed were smooth and made with lots of glass, beautiful and transparent and cold and not at all the kind of place most people would want to live. She wondered if his brain was too full of these beautiful buildings, variations of shape and form and function and

strange angles like a whole other neighborhood that existed and did not exist. That was where he spent most of his time lately.

Her mother--she resided in sunnier climes.

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When little Edward Eisenstein introduced Kristen to Morte Infinita that Halloween--the Halloween her father lifted the rock and smiled as if he were the daddy of all vampires--well, it was a revelation, what her father would have called the opening of the mind to new frontiers. On the 29th of October her mother had called from Florida, and for two days Kristen had searched for meaning in each one of her father's pinched expressions. But then on Halloween afternoon in the Eisensteins' furnished basement the haze lifted, and it was like, oh yeah, man. It was like before and after pictures in the back of comic books.

"This is the kind of movie even your dad wouldn't let you watch," Eisenstein explained before hitting the play button. He didn't know that her dad wasn't up to watching movies these days, not since the aborted horror festival. Her father just sort of stumbled around at night, wandering like he was a ghost in his own house, while her mother sexed it up in Key West with her new boyfriend. "He's got this dark tan," her father had told her on Saturday as they sat outside the theater. "It's the kind of tan a certain kind of person likes."

Kristen had never met Stephanos, but she could imagine him through her father's eyes as a man blessed with looks and decisiveness and not enough goodness or evil to get him into much trouble. "I bet he does sit-ups in the morning," her father had told her. "He seems like that kind of person. I bet your mother wakes up to the sound of him grunting from the floor." This alone was reason enough to dislike him and his stupid ponytail and rubber flip-

flops and the numberless cigarettes he smoked on the bow of the boat and then dropped into the sea. He did not own a boat himself but worked sailing the boats of the rich and lazy. Did these lawyers and doctors know what kind of man they were trusting with their most prized possessions?

Her mother had never sailed in her life, but when Kristen thought of her, she imagined her on a boat, white sail taut in the wind. She had been gone for five days when she called on Tuesday, and she wore new clothes in the three pictures she had e-mailed. None of them featured Stephanos, who must have been the person holding the camera. There was a conservative hint of a smile on her face--a hesitant, shameful smile--but her skin was darkening in the sunshine, and she looked healthy. She was changing, blending into her new environment like a chameleon. Kristen was changing too. Everything was.

Well, not everything. Her father wasn't getting worse, not really, and that's what Kristen told her mom when she asked her about him. She said, "He's doing great. We're having an amazing time. We saw a movie festival." She laughed nonchalantly like they were in Paris. And by saying that, it was like they were in Paris or at least someplace as exotic as Florida. Neither of them brought up Stephanos. Her father had said Kristen wasn't supposed to know, that he had figured it out himself only a few weeks ago. So Kristen said, "What are you doing?" and her mom said, "Just hanging out with Aunt Clair. We're heading on a little road trip tomorrow. I'll be home on Thursday next week. Can the laundry wait until then?" They talked about Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck and Goofy--losers, every last one of them--and Kristen said yes and no and maybe and then handed the phone over to her dad like it was something smelly. He lifted the receiver to his ear, put on his best, most calm voice, and said, "Hello, dear." He nodded and then turned to Kristen and said, "Would you mind going upstairs for a little while? Your mother seems to think that we need to keep secrets from you."

Upstairs Kristen lay flat on her bed and listened. Her dad was meek as he pleaded with her mother--for what exactly Kristen didn't know--and then loud again in a rushed jumble of sentences, and Kristen stopped her own breathing to listen harder. "I just told you what I want," he said, and for a second Kristen imagined him gripping her mother by the shoulders and shaking her, although she was hundreds of miles away. Then something metallic hit the wall and clattered to the floor.

"Sometimes people feel guilty because they should feel guilty," he yelled into the phone. "We're only a little club because you left. That's why we're a little club." His voice became mock childish and keening, and he said, "She loves me more than she loves you." Kristen pushed her face into the pillow and tried to brain-nap because tomorrow she had tests in two subjects. But she couldn't close her eyes for more than a minute, and when she came downstairs her father grinned at her from the sink. "Hey, kid," he said. "Just tidying up a little."

"Looks good," she said. Sometimes she wanted to kiss his forehead softly. She had seen her mother do that once when her father was in bed, still wearing his coat and tie.

He said, "Let's do something fun. I'll make it up to you for the festival thing. I still feel bad about that." She looked at him. He knew what she was thinking, boom, like telepathy. "I promise to forget about work if you promise to forget about school," he said.

They drove through town slowly, past the large sprinkler-soaked lawns, and he talked more about Stephanos, although he did not mention his name, just that there was someone else and that this person did something exotic and manly like sail boats or run a hot dog stand. Had her dad forgotten that she knew the man's name, his profession, the way his hair curled around his ears? Kristen felt like she could pick him out of a lineup.

She said, "Don't worry. It's okay. It'll be all right."

As he headed over to the south side of town, where Kristen was not allowed to ride her bike, he talked about the pressures of his job and the responsibilities of marriage. "In sickness and in health," he said. "That's a very important part of those vows." She wondered what they would be learning or not learning in her second-period history class. It seemed like her mother would never come back, although everybody was still using the word vacation.

"Watch out for that cat," Kristen said.

"I'm difficult to live with," he said. "I know that. Times have been rough lately. The last few years. But I thought we could work it out."

"What did she say?" she asked. "Tell me."

They passed people raking leaves and putting up Halloween decorations in the fading afternoon. Occasionally he waved or beeped the horn in greeting, but he was close to tears and his voice was breaking. Kristen wondered if she should be driving. She said, "Let's go home, Dad. We don't have to do this," but they continued their tour, heading east now toward the abandoned factories along the river, where bar bands rehearsed heavy metal songs and kids shattered beer bottles on the sidewalk. They drove by buildings the opposite of the kind her father designed, squat and old and tired.

Then her father glanced over at her and grinned like someone was going to snap his picture. "You know, I can take the rest of the week off. You don't want to live in Florida, do you?" And then, "No. No. Of course you don't. It's the land of make-believe. I went there once, with your mother when we first married, to visit your aunt. It's full of crocodiles and the elderly. Did you know that crocodiles were around in the Jurassic age? They're pretty much dinosaurs."

Kristen looked out the window at the restaurants sliding by and said, "I'm so hungry I could eat a dinosaur. I could eat a rock. I could eat a minivan." She laughed and put both sneakers on the dash. If her mother had

been here no way would she have been able to get away with that.

Her father pulled into the parking lot of the Great American Pancake House, and she smiled because she loved this place most of all. They often came here together after going to a movie, and in the vinyl-seated booth he tried to explain that the films were like society's subconscious and that the seamless narrative arc of body-body-body-body-end was beautiful in its own naturalistic way and that she should brush her teeth twice a day and none of this waving the toothbrush around in her mouth like it was a magic wand. By just putting on his turn signal her father had made today like those other days. By the time he stopped the car and opened the door, Kristen decided that her mother was at home reading the New York Times on the couch.

Kristen told the waitress she wanted pancakes and waffles both, two each, and a big glass of milk, and sausage on a separate plate, and a side of mashed potatoes with gravy. The waitress smiled at her like she was the source of all cute in the world, like her existence made having a suck-ass job a wonderful experience. "You have a darling daughter," she said as she filled his coffee mug. It was like they were driving cross-country or something. The car was packed with camping equipment and a cooler full of 7-Up. That was the kind of thing fathers did with their daughters, right?

"Thanks," her dad said. "We're very close."

"I can tell," the waitress said.

He gave Kristen's hand a conspiratorial squeeze. "We're practically family," he said, and the waitress laughed. So did her father. If there were people at the next table they would have joined in. It was a comedy routine.

"You're happy, right? You're content?" he asked her when the waitress had gone. He smiled and sniffed at something bad in the air and his expression hardened. "That's the chief aim of everybody around here, isn't it? To be content? The Thorstons are content. The Eisensteins are content. Your mother is doing everything she can to be content."

They sat in silence for a while, looking out the dirty window at an elderly man shuffling across the parking lot. It looked like the poor guy couldn't find his car. He stopped and turned around in the twilight, turned around again, and then his hand moved slowly to his unshaven cheek.

"So you think Mom is happy?" she asked.

The food arrived with a nervous clatter. When the waitress headed back to the kitchen, Kristen asked the question again and felt like she was jabbing him with something small and sharp--her fork, her sticky knife. "Do you think Mom is happy?" He didn't answer. He was still watching the man in the parking lot, where the streetlights were finally coming on. "What about you?" Kristen asked. "Are you happy?"

He was smoothing his mashed potatoes down with the curved back of his fork like he was petting a kitten. "It's all very primal, what's happening right now. Very, very primal. But the people around here wouldn't understand that. I mean, look around. Just have a conversation with somebody. Try to get past oh, what a nice day and nice weather we're having." His voice trailed off. She swore she could hear the people at the other tables chewing, but maybe it was just him. Her mother said he was always in a hurry, that he chewed his food like a shark.

The guy in the parking lot still hadn't found his car. He looked feeble and helpless, the kind of person who would get it between the fifth and sixth ribs in the first ten minutes of one of the movies they loved so much. She looked over at the next table where little kids were fidgeting in their seats and sucking on straws and giggling, and she realized it hadn't been long ago when she had been that ignorant. Her dad was talking about death and divorce and the depressing sound canned tomato soup makes as you plop it into the pan. "It's the little things that will bring you down," he said. "Happiness requires a certain--I don't know--indistinctness of vision. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't be careful. That's not what I'm saying. Remember what

Kierkegaard said. 'The torment of despair is not to be able to die. To be sick unto death is not to be able to die.'

That was the way he spoke to her, as if she were forty years old and four years old, making references to philosophers with names like curses and explaining that ice cream was really bad for her. It was like he couldn't get a bead on the place in the universe she was right now. He shot too long or too short--at various future and past selves--and he could never find his true target: a thirteen-year-old girl with braces who just a few days before had slapped a freckle-faced boy on the side of the head and then spit at the school principal when he tried to break it up. What had her mother asked her the night before she left? "Kristen, are you angry?"

Kristen had a new idea, and she tried the thought on for size the way she sometimes tried on ugly clothing at the mall--just to see how bad it looked. Her mother had died from a horrible illness. It was one of those devastating dark age kind of diseases, a dawn-of-time pestilence sort of thing. Her father sat across from her, simmering in his grief, which was natural, even kind of noble, and Kristen had to be strong, because his love had made him weak.

But halfway through the second waffle she felt the first waffle hardening in her tummy, and she pictured her mother embraced by brawny sailor's arms--the arms of the hero--as if this were the end of a Hollywood movie and the credits were about to roll. But it was not the end. It was the beginning, right?

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"The name of the movie is Morte Infinita," Eisenstein said two days later on Halloween afternoon as they moved around the side of his house to the cellar. They let themselves in--the backdoor was unlocked--and he popped the tape in

and clicked on the tv. Kristen pushed a square of cardboard against the nearest window to block the sunshine. Children and parents would be roaming the darkened streets in a couple of hours, and then they would return to their houses and take off their costumes and be in bed by ten o'clock. The next morning it would be sunshine and morning newspapers and kisses on the cheek, but right then the ground was beginning to break open like something ripe. Zombies. Foreign zombies. The tv was full of them. "Is that Spanish?" Kristen asked.

"It's Italian," Eisenstein said, and then he pronounced the words with relish, Morte Infinita, as if he were pronouncing the name of a complicated Italian dish. She reached into the bag on the cushion between them. The cheese snacks left orange dust on her fingers. She sucked them clean, one at a time, as she leaned forward. The zombies scrambled over shattered bricks and along the banks of dried-up rivers. Without people to kill they were sad and lost and innocent as babies. She was reminded of her mother's voice on the phone a couple of days before. At the time it had seemed normal. But after the fact, in her memory, it sounded desperately hopeful, like the voice of a person on a game show trying to figure out the right answer. "I needed to get away for a little while," she had said. "I hope you understand. Your father will take care of you. He will. Is he taking good care of you? He's not good at much, I guess, but he's good at taking care of you. Sometimes, I think, better than me. But I'm sure you don't think that. Is he there?"

When the prettiest woman in the cast was killed twenty minutes in, Kristen knew she was in for something special. When the sliver of wood penetrated the eye of the local doctor and the camera zoomed in and held the shot and the music swelled as if something romantic had just happened, Kristen felt her heart beating strong and fast. When a zombie in a tattered priest's robe took a chunk from the hero's neck and he was lost in a sea of rotting corpses, well, God bless Anthony Fentana, the director of the movie

and writer of the screenplay, a man who was probably dead himself in an Italian cemetery. The disjointed plot, the graininess of the film, the detail of the gore, all of it confirmed something. "That was amazing," she said as the screen turned black and then sky blue.

Eisenstein said, "What did I tell you? There's nothing like the Europeans when it comes to zombie movies." He took off his black-framed glasses--he wore them only when watching television--and Kristen could see from his tentative toad-lipped expression that she had been called here for other purposes. The week before, he had tried to put his arm around her while they were watching The Angry Red Planet, and she had bent forward and laughed. It wasn't like he was a jerk or anything, or that repulsive even, although he had a weak chin and greasy, feathered hair. But there was something about him that would probably make girls laugh until he was middle-aged, and Kristen guessed he knew this too. "Kristen?" he said.

"Yes?"

"Do you love me?"

"Of course not," she said. It was enough to make her smack him. Jesus Christ.

"I know," he said, and they listened to the video rewind.

"Kristen?" he said after a while.

"What?"

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't worry about it." She reached out and touched him on the shoulder and thought about how young he seemed in his spindly puberty. She saw him as a different species altogether, something slow moving and amphibious and sensitive to light. His father was a big man with a truck driver's body, but he worked as a consultant for insurance companies, making spreadsheets and graphs and giving presentations about the statistical likelihood of people dying from this or that or the other thing. Little Eisenstein would probably

end up doing something similar.

"I wish there was something I could do to help," Eisenstein said.

"Help with what?"

"Everything," he said, and the crack in his voice made her want to wrap her arms around him and squeeze. He said, "My dad was talking about having you stay at our place until your mother comes back."

The window shades were down day and night, but their lives were still on display as if they lived in one of her dad's glass buildings. She said, "Your father also said that the Red Sox were going to win a pennant last year. I remember him telling us that. Do you remember that?"

"Yeah," he said.

She said, "Did your dad mention anything about Stephanos? Is he coming back with her?"

"Who?" he asked, and she told him never mind, and then she made her hands into fists and played drums on her knees, and they were quiet except for the music she made on her body.

"I'm just trying to help," he said finally.

"If you want to help then just sit quietly." She sounded like his mother or teacher or some stupid thing. The idea of her needing Eisenstein's help made her feel small, like he could lift her up in his hands. Her father was not a big man, but he was bigger on the inside than the outside, as if he followed some extradimensional logic. She was the same way. They could handle this together. They always had, right down the line.

"But Kristen," Eisenstein said. His voice was whiny with love and goodwill. She cut him off with a shush, and then they were quiet. It was a perfect moment.

Then she said, "Let's watch the movie again." He found the remote and the opening music began to play, plodding piano chords like something shambling and aimless. She watched Eisenstein's face, poor lonely Eisenstein

with the 125 IQ and nervous stutter. She turned back to the tv and said, "The blood looks real."

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The night her father threw a cloak around his shoulders and told her that they were going trick-or-treating, Kristen had raced against time to be with him. She had taken the short cut from Eisenstein's house. Her bike crashed through the woods, and as she peddled faster she gave out a yelping howl of delight and rage that she hoped people might confuse for something other than a girl of thirteen. It had been a week since her mother left for the airport, and yes, maybe her dad wasn't doing so great, maybe he was in pain, but who gave a shit if he mowed the lawn? And it was wolf pain anyway, the kind of wound that made you smarter and sharper and keener and hungrier and just plain better when everything was done and you were on the other side of it. Leaves and branches snapped against Kristen's face as she sped downhill, and she imagined herself as something dark and mysterious, a one-of-a-kind animal that occupied a solitary ecological niche and was only now deciding to enter the foolish world of mankind.

Her father was in the hall sitting at the desk, writing with the long black feather pen he kept there. "I'm trying to cultivate as many affectations as possible," he sometimes said when using it. She remembered her mother laughing at that joke, the way she threw her head back. Her head was back now too, in bed, Stephanos grunting between her spread legs, his mouth against her shoulder like it was an apple. Kristen had seen her father and mother locked in that pose a couple of years ago through the crack in the door.

"Hey," he said, straightening up and looking through her as if she were invisible. "Who goes there? Is that my faithful servant?" That joke again.

She knew what was required.

"No," she said.

"It's not my faithful servant?" Mock panic rose in his voice. "Oh, dear. Who then can it be?" He was an effeminate character in a story by Edgar Allan Poe, and she was some deceased relative returning for revenge, dripping water from the pond where she had drowned. She smiled in the dark, and her love became a kind of light by which she could see him clearly.

"No, it's me," she half yelled, and she was suddenly outrageously happy. She wanted to tell him about the movie and the sick, wonderful mind behind it and the blood that looked real and the burning church and the endless body count. She wanted to relive it through his senses. He could show it to her in new ways, open it for her like a book.

He said, "And who are you?"

She said, "You know who I am." She looked at the desk and said, "What are you doing?"

"Writing out a check to the credit card company. It's amazing how expensive your mother's tastes are." With a flourish of his pen he was finished. He cleared his throat and said, "Well, you ready?" She did not know what he meant until he stood up, and she realized he was dressed in the black cloak. "Trick-or-treat," he said. Then they walked downstairs together.

Ghouls and freaks and superheroes smiled at them as they emerged from the house and made their way through the neighborhood. Two Batmans walked side by side toward them. "Neither of them wanted to compromise," their mother explained, and Kristen's father nodded as if he understood. The kids frowned back at Kristen, clutching tightly at their bags of candy. This was serious business. They knew that. Monsters moved in solemn processions of three or four. There was something mournful in the way they walked, as if they were all lost and searching for their homes.

"Here, take these," her father said. He handed her something. Plastic

fangs. She was dressed in a black T-shirt and shit kickers. She put the teeth in her mouth, and abracadabra, she was a vampire. "Your mother never enjoyed this kind of thing," Kristen's father said as they walked across the street holding hands. "She was always so afraid that someone was going to get hit by a car."

He was talking as if her mother was dead. For a ridiculous split second Kristen wondered if he had read her mind in the diner when she had considered the same thing. "Dad?" she asked.

"Yes?"

"How did Mom meet what's-his-face?"

His lips pursed slightly. He was thinking.

"Dad?" she asked.

"Yes?" he said.

"You're in a lot of trouble, aren't you?"

"That's a hard question to answer," he said. "I'm not sure." He squeezed her hand a little more tightly. They walked past a brightly colored spaceman holding a plastic K-Mart bag. Her dad made a sound like he was eating candy, a soft sucking noise, but he didn't say anything else until they reached the sidewalk on the other side of the street. Then he stopped and bent down and looked in her eyes the way a softball coach might before a batter goes to the plate. He said in the most steady and reasonable-sounding voice she had heard from him all week, "Your mother and I met sixteen years ago. I was thirty-three, and she was twenty-two. That's a big difference. That's almost your whole life, kiddo. You don't just throw that away because someone's hit a rough patch." He put his fist to his mouth, as if he was about to clear his throat. "Let's just say there was no other guy involved in this mess. Just me and you and your mother. That still wouldn't be an excuse. Especially in this day and age. There are medications. There's all sorts of crap. Analysis and stuff. Aromatherapy, for Christ's sake." He began to

laugh, and he rubbed the top of her head with two knuckles. "We live in an enlightened age, after all."

She did not want this. She wanted an answer. She would keep looking into his eyes until he gave her one. She said, "Dad, are you getting better?"

He looked at her as if she had just said something super cute and amusing. He said, "You wouldn't remember, but she did this a couple of times when you were this big." He held his thumb and finger apart an inch, as if he was holding a bug or a screw or some small thing that could be lost if you let it go. "I wouldn't be surprised if things were back to normal by next week," he said.

She remembered again her mother's craned neck through the crack in the door, head tilted back as if posing for a painting, her eyes shut tight. She thought of their conversation a few days before, her father's pleading voice. How many things like this had Kristen missed--moments when the door was closed or the words were exchanged late at night when she was sleeping? For each she had seen there must have been a hundred that had slipped past her. "What about Stephanos?" she asked, and there was a sharp edge to her words. Her own voice startled her.

Her father scowled as if he had forgotten this important part of the equation, and then he said, "Don't worry about him. He's just a fling. That's all he is." Then he straightened up, smoothed out his cloak, and headed up the steps to the front door of their destination. He knocked three times and stepped back, raising both arms in the air ready to strike.

Mrs. Van Dyke seemed surprised to see them, but she opened the screen door and smiled. "We're supposed to be vampires," Kristen said quietly, and she opened her mouth to show off the teeth. She was too old for this.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Van Dyke said, and she handed her an apple and a Snickers bar. They thanked her and walked away, back down the steps, Kristen feeling the woman's farsighted eyes on her back.

A few houses were dark, and Kristen wondered what was inside them, behind the window shades, down their cellars. Most, though, were lit up with orange light, or decorated with paper witches and ghosts. A few played eerie music from open doors or recordings of people screaming and evil laughter. Two big beefy kids passed by wearing hockey masks as costumes, and although Kristen vaguely recognized them, their real faces were hard to remember. The same with the skinny Darth Vader who ran up Mrs. Van Dyke's stairs as they were heading down. Was he from her homeroom?

"Don't eat the apple," her dad said as they walked away from the house. "I don't trust that Mrs. Van Dyke. She could snap any minute." He took the apple and bit into it with a little growl. "How is school going these days?" he asked between chews. "That hillbilly kid, is he still picking on you?"

"A little," she said.

"He only does that because he likes you."

"No, he hates me," Kristen said. "He wants to stomp me into mulch. I can see it in his eyes." She didn't mention that he had also insulted her dad, calling him a mental patient. That's what had made her rain punches on his gross freckled face and then spit at the principal when he had interfered with what was really a question of honor.

"That's just his way of showing you that he has a crush on you," her dad explained.

She stopped and spit her teeth into her hand so she could speak more easily. "The costumes suck this year," she said. "Maybe it's just that I'm getting older."

Nobody came to the door of the next house, although the porch light was on and she had seen other eager people receiving candy there. Her dad tapped on the window with his knuckles, threw his coat around his shoulder in a gesture of exaggerated indignation, and walked down the steps. She followed him to the Eisensteins' house, where she knew sad little Eisenstein was

watching Morte Infinita for the third time. She popped the teeth back in her mouth and nudged them into position with her tongue.

"We're vampires, Charlie," Kristen's father said to Eisenstein's dad when he opened the door. "Don't invite us in, for God's sake. Put garlic in your windows and get a cross. We've come for you and your wife and son, but especially for your wife."

"Very funny," Mr. Eisenstein said. "Do you want to come in, or do you just want some candy?" He was holding a bag of mini 3 Musketeers in his hand. Kristen could hear the television playing in the living room, some voice talking about a helicopter disaster. She didn't know where or who or how, just that it had happened. She looked at her father, who was smiling tightly, the way he had that day outside the movie festival.

Mr. Eisenstein said, "Do you want a beer?" and moved back from the door.

"No, thanks," her dad said, "but I bet Kristen wants some of those delicious 3 Musketeers." They stepped into the house.

"I bet I don't," she said. She was looking around for Eisenstein himself peeking around a corner or something, but he was probably in the cellar. She saw evidence of him, though, in the little black sneakers in the entranceway. She hadn't realized his feet were so small.

"I'm surprised to see you here," Eisenstein's dad said to her father.

Kristen's dad smiled and looked around the room, at the photographs of their dog and brothers and grandparents and great aunts--their entire history on display. "Yeah, well, that's the way it is with vampires. We rely heavily on the element of surprise."

Eisenstein's dad made a sound like he had something stuck in his throat, and for a second Kristen thought candy was lodged down there somewhere, but then he said, "Are you treating her well?" He didn't look in her direction, but Kristen knew he was talking about her, and she had the

momentary feeling that her body was back home and only her spirit was here as an observer. She wondered what part of the movie Eisenstein was watching and what he meant when he said he loved her. Her mother had used that word many times and so had her father. Kristen loved her father and loved Morte Infinita, and she wanted to be alone with one or the other, not standing here listening to Mr. Eisenstein. "She looks skinny," he said. "She looks like she's getting thinner."

"Vampires are thin," her dad said and then, "Have you talked to my wife lately, Charlie? Does she deign to call you from paradise?"

"Paradise?" Mr. Eisenstein said.

"Just a little joke."

"I don't get it."

"Does she call you?"

"She called me once, a few days ago. She was concerned about you. She said you sounded funny." There was something apologetic in his voice. "I'm sorry. You're putting me in a difficult position here."

"My wife knows a lot about difficult positions," her dad said. "And she's still my wife, you know. And Kristen is still my daughter." Then he laughed as if something funny had been said on the television, but the announcers were still going on about the helicopter accident. She wondered if someone famous had been killed.

"Come on," Mr. Eisenstein said. "Let's not start."

Kristen's father was looking at a magazine on the coffee table. The cover of the magazine showed a smiling young woman dressed in a bright sweatshirt and little yellow shorts. She was touching her toes and smiling. From the expression on his face, Kristen's dad looked as if he had suddenly recognized this woman and was now remembering something awful she had done to him once. He went to the table and picked up the magazine. Leafing through it he said, "Don't pretend you know what's good for her. That's all I'm saying."

Closing the door Mr. Eisenstein came and looked at the magazine as if he wanted to read it next.

"I thought you were doing okay," he said. "I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt. I really did."

"I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt too," her dad said, his voice high and mocking, "but I'm pretty curious why you're protecting her. I've seen the way you two flirt. Don't pretend you don't."

Eisenstein's dad laughed then, arms folded across his chest. He looked down at the floor, at his shoelaces, at the zigzag pattern in the carpet. "This is ridiculous," he said.

"Are you fucking her?" Kristin's dad said. "Or do you just want to fuck her?"

Kristen thought of her mother walking hand in hand with her new boyfriend on some stoneless beach and wanted to believe it because it was what her father had told her. She looked at him turning the pages of the magazine, his body draped in black, and loved him so fiercely that she wanted to tear at his clothes and dig down into those hidden places and find the darkness there and grab it like a tumor. Mr. Eisenstein said, "You're going through some tough times. I understand that. But turning it into a performance piece is only going to make it worse."

"I don't think you understand," her dad said. "I didn't make it into theater. You made it into theater. Cheryl made it into theater. You're the ones who put me on stage. Do you think I wanted that?"

Kristen knew she had left his mind, his imagination. She was invisible, but there was no power in that.

"She was worried," Mr. Eisenstein said. "So she made a goddamned phone call."

Her dad dropped the magazine to the table and looked at Mr. Eisenstein in the same way he had been looking at the girl on the cover. "She's worried

about herself. That's who she's worried about."

"About you too. And Kristen."

"Which is why she left."

"You were wearing her down. You know that. She needed a break. Jesus, you're wearing me down, and we've only been talking for five minutes."

"It's my problem," he said. "Not yours. Not hers."

"That's just stupid," Mr. Eisenstein said. "You think you could keep it private? It's like you're living in a fantasy world."

"Well, I'm sorry about that," her dad said, "but I like it here," and he laughed again. Kristen moved over to the window and looked out at the street, where a few more mermaids and Tinkerbells and cardboard robots were coming up the sidewalk. Why did they all look mad?

Mr. Eisenstein said, "You may be unwell, and that's fine, but you're also a prick. Get out of my house."

Her father smiled and took a step toward Mr. Eisenstein, and Mr. Eisenstein flinched the way his son sometimes did in the schoolyard. Even though he was bigger than her dad, even though it was his house they were standing in, he was the one who was afraid.

Kristen wanted to tell him to cut it out, that it was just her dad, her dad who dreamed about buildings and never hurt anybody.

The doorbell was ringing. One time. Twice. Three and then four times. Her father laughed and pulled his cloak in front of himself in the manner of Bela Lugosi and took another step forward, but his movements were exaggerated. They were funny. It was Dracula as played by Groucho Marx. It was definitely not Morte Infinita or even Nosferatu. "You see, you see, you see," Kristen wanted to say. There was no danger in him.

The two men looked at each other and then turned away.

"Mom doesn't have a boyfriend, does she?" she asked as they were walking down the steps back to the street.

He turned his back to her, hunching his shoulders, and she thought of the first horror film she had ever seen, years before on late-night cable. At the end of the movie the villain had spun away from the crowd and staggered off into the shadows, trying to hide his acid-scarred face from the stares of his loved ones. But her father didn't move.

She listened to him make muffled baby sounds, and after a few moments she took him by the hand, and they walked across the lawn. Mr. Eisenstein was watching them from the window. Then the curtains closed, and the porch light blinked off, and she thought of Eisenstein down in the basement and then of Stephanos, the imaginary man who had been so vivid to her. Her father had hexed him into existence with some sleight of hand--a bunch of words was all it took.

And if he did not exist, then in a strange way her father did not exist--at least not the person she thought she had known. She looked at him, one hand rubbing his reddened eyes, the other gripping her hand, and was surprised that she loved him even more. She gripped him back, but he stepped away from her and picked up the rock. "There are two kinds of people in this world," he said, and he grinned his Dracula grin. And he was right. She wanted him to be right.

Two kinds of people in the world. You were either a vampire or a zombie, and just like in the movies, the zombies were many, many, and the vampires were few and far between. And although the zombies had the numbers, the vampires had class and skill. They lived on the margins, peeking in from time to time when it suited them or pretending they were not vampires at all. She wanted so much to believe.

Kristen was a vampire--she knew that now more surely than ever before--and as she ran down the street, the faces of ghouls and Raggedy Annes and blue-skinned Smurfs and superheroes all turned in her direction. Faces of parents too, holding hands with transformed daughters and sons and suddenly

shocked alert by the breaking of glass and the yapping of the Eisensteins' Labrador retriever. They were all zombies really, and she despised each and every one of them almost as much as she hated her mother and her imaginary boyfriend. She hated them for not being what her father called on them to be. She hated them the way she hated the victims in horror movies, and herself, for running so quickly without thinking about whom she had left behind.

Remembering the movie. That's what brought her around the house to the bulkhead, where she rattled the double doors. She could hear yelling from the front of the house. Eisenstein said, "Who is it?"

"It's me," she said, but the doors did not open. She tried to picture herself as a vampire and Eisenstein as the innocent victim struggling to resist her. She wanted to hold him and bury her face in his pale neck and swallow and swallow until she felt better--until his innocent blood mixed with her own. "Open up," she said in her most confident singsong voice, but it came out wrong. It sounded afraid and frail and as human as human can be, and for a second she did not recognize it.

People were running up the street toward the window her father had just shattered, and Kristen tried to think of her mother on her sailboat, but all she could see in her mind's eye was the rock on the Eisensteins' shag rug. She banged on the door until her hand hurt. She tried to make her clatter a match for the noise on the other side of the house, where her father must have been doing something else to make people yell. She spit her teeth into the grass. She gave the door a kick. "It's me!" she hollered.

"Who?" Eisenstein said.

"It's Kristen," she said. "Just Kristen," and the door opened and she stepped inside.