

42. THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Chloe Donzenac had run away from home and ended up in Saint Louis, Missouri. She had been on the street for some time. She was barely surviving. She did her best to just keep her wits about her. If some terrible things had happened to her, she tried to put them all out of her mind. But her mind wasn't very good for much of anything these days. So it seemed like a miracle that she had scraped together enough money for a room for the night.

Chloe was the perfect mark for all the perverts and con artists that roamed the streets. She fought off the sly offers and surreptitious assaults. But her resistance was weakening. And she was out of resources. Who knew what really transpired in the shadows?. As she stumbled towards the light, she quickly forgot about any mistakes on her own part. A quick glance at her reflection was always enough to tell her that she had not completely succumbed to the terror around her.

All these sad stories showed on her face. She tried to rub off the dirt that had collected from days of city air. But the traces were now deep within the skin. She was holding on to the signs of youth. And she didn't want to surrender to the harsh sculpting by a hostile life.

She had left her suburban home with the hopes of escaping its rigid conformity. But the streets impressed her with a more demanding master. Although she couldn't go back to her old life, she deeply regretted the way that things had turned out. But even that regret was muffled by the din of the hurt that now assailed her.

In the safety of the room, she wanted to remind herself that she had not lost her dignity. But whatever line of demarcation that she had drawn for herself may have already been crossed many a time. She had friends who she had imagined were worse off. Now, even their dissipation seemed like a more congenial resolution.

The comfort of the room was something to which she had grown unaccustomed. She was able to take shelter when she needed it. She made the best of things. Now and then she would find a squat where she could crash a couple of times. But she also had to keep moving. She claimed that there were people after her. So she didn't like to stay in one place for more than a night or so. But her stories were more excuses than explanations of her actual situation.

If the times required it, she was willing to make up anything. That helped her to hold it all together. Fortunately, the room gave her some protection. She wanted to sleep. But she had problems settling down. There were too many things on her mind. She felt that she needed to get things done. The room seemed to promise so much more for her. It was the beginning of a new life. She could get herself together, and the next day, things would all make sense. She wouldn't have to go back to all the phoniness that had been dragging her down.

She ran her fingers through her hair. If she could manage it, she would take a shower. She needed to wash all this crud off of her. She tried keeping herself together. She wanted to look nice. She just felt that a storm cloud was shadowing her permanently.

She huddled against the backboard of the bed. She needed to motivate herself. The room should have been inspiration enough. The light was on. It shone down at her like the noonday sun. She just stared at it.

When she tried to stand up, her fatigue pulled her back down. She'd rest here for a few more minutes. After that, she could take a shower. She started to drift off. Then she shook

herself back to consciousness. If she stayed in her zombie trance, she wasn't going to get anything done.

There was a big mirror by the closet. She hadn't looked at herself in a mirror in quite a while. What would it be like if she took a peek. She'd have to walk by the mirror when she took a shower. She could always look away. Or she'd just see a phantom moving by next to her.

What would she notice if she took the time to stare at herself? When had she become someone else? Her new image made it easier to distance herself from her past. Nothing in her old life could save her now. So there was no reason to try to remember. She wanted to believe that had come to resemble someone. She wasn't living her own life. She was a body double. What did that mean? She could experience the pleasure for that person. While the actress could maintain her modesty, the body double could take all the risks of being an exhibitionist. What did it mean to show yourself to the world? Was it possible to trace the contours of your personality. The silhouette of the body spoke to the observer. He could make it mean so much. He would engage in a dialogue with the double. But when he actually met Chloe, she would have no idea what he was talking about. She wouldn't live up to the image that he had created. She wouldn't play the part of the double.

The spectator wanted to do everything in his power to replace the self with its double. The double was supple and uninhibited. The double wasn't afraid to give of herself. Chloe moved her legs along the bed. She valued her privacy. She didn't want anyone watching her. The double had no inner life. She lived for her public. She was always performing.

What did he want from the double? He wanted her to smile. If she smiled at the right moment, he would think that he could please her. He knew what he had to do to make her smile.

She felt that her watcher had no idea who she really was. He simply broke her body into digestible bits. He was all about consuming her soul. Even if he could touch her, she would hold part of herself back. She wouldn't let him know.

He lived by touch. He thought that his hands could reveal things about the world. He could redefine her character. He was an artist bringing her to life.

She resented the touch of these strangers. She didn't want to be touched. She knew what guys expected of her. And she did what she could to avoid these types. Anytime that someone brushed against her, she did her best to forget the contact. They left some kind of trace on her. And she wanted to wash it off.

She wanted to take a shower. But she didn't want someone looking at her. The curtains weren't shut. She could close the curtains, and then she could take a shower. But she hardly had the energy to do both. So she settled on the shower. And she slid across the room naked. It gave her a long-lost confidence. If someone was watching, let him. He wasn't seeing the real Chloe.

She gave him the smile that he craved. He thought that she had rewarded him with what he deserved most. He had been observing her. He had taken his time to look at her. He created a story to go along with his watch. She was lonely. She needed someone to take care of her. He was there for her.

As she passed the mirror, she looked back at the bed. She could still see a shadow in the corner of her eye. She was having a little trouble standing up. She made it to the shower and turned on the water. Things were happening.

What kind of guy would watch her in the shower? He didn't seem like a very healthy

guy. Not the sort that she would invite in. If he broke in, what would happen. Had she made sure that the room was locked. She didn't want someone coming in while she was in the shower. She pushed the shower curtain against the wall of the shower stall. She had to protect herself as much as she could

The shower made her feel like a new person. She wanted to see how good she looked. She was still afraid. She made it back to the bed and lay there. Her clothes were in tatters. But they were all that she had. She did what she could to make them presentable. If she could manage a little more money, she could make herself look a little better. A new dress would make her look fine.

Why did she care? She didn't want to appear as if she had money. That would only leave her more vulnerable. She was thinking too much. She was getting way ahead of herself. The shower had interrupted her routine.

Her fatigue came back and knocked her over. She was back to lying on the bed. She wasn't ready for sleep, but there was little that she could do to hold back. She remained in the nether zone between.

Chloe had been troubled by her relationship with her father. She could not figure out the source of her feeling. She couldn't imagine any specific event that had left her so upset. Nevertheless, there was something there. She tried to analyze her experience. Why were there these incredible gaps that she couldn't account for.

She didn't want to believe that she could repress portions of her life. She had never had blackouts. But there were moments when things seemed to go blank. She didn't want to associate all this with her father. That would only make her seem more vulnerable. When she thought about her life, she only saw this blank spot. And that was that. She did what she could to peel back the layers. But it wasn't as if she encountered a deep realization about herself. She couldn't remember a thing that would make her so upset.

There was a frail quality of her psyche that made her feel broken. If she felt so badly, what had precipitated this feeling. It seemed too simple to blame all of this on one person. She had already faced something troubling about her relationship with her mother. But this was even more. All these other wretches that she had met along the way only brought back some recollection of her father.

If she tried to put these thoughts out of her mind, they only came back more intensely than before. She felt that she was caught up in some kind of weird story. And she didn't want to go any further than that. Perhaps her self-disgust needed an explanation. If she could bring it all to the surface, then she could dismiss the negativity once and for all. But she didn't think that it would be that easy. There was something hiding inside. And she saw the image of her father again and again.

Maybe, she was feeling sorry for him. He may have had it rough in his own life. And his despair had rubbed off on her. But she still couldn't remember any time when he had shared these desperate stories with her. Where would her feelings of sympathy originate?

She also considered that her concern was simply part of her own defenses. If her father really was some kind of threat, humanizing him made it easier to deal with his viciousness. She reviewed the events in her life. Each time that he seemed to intervene, she hit a blank spot. Her memories were not being cooperative. Why were there so many gaps?

She hated giving in to a trite psychological explanation. She hardly had suffered at someone else's hand. However, it seemed that the only thought that she could follow along so consistently was this vague recollection that she had of her father. Her attention span could hardly sustain any other ideas. Her very inability to explore further meant that there was something blocking her way. She preferred to believe that it was something physical. Even then, it wasn't all that important. What it really meant to her was that she was getting bogged down with trivial stuff. She could let it bother her.

Chloe wasn't waiting for some kind of deep revelation about her past. It wasn't as if her father was ready to sign some confession so that everything could be put back in order. She couldn't pinpoint any actual scenes to make it possible to form a real accusation. That seemed to be that. But even her analysis was not complete enough to allow her to come to any kind of resolution.

Indeed, if Chloe Donzenac had been influenced by some traumatic event in her past, then she was hardly the person that she had assumed herself to be all along. This very sense of disassociation was so troubling in itself to send her over the edge. All along, she had been plagued by these doubts. They had only become more severe with her time on the streets. There would be no escape from this uncertainty.

Once the solid mask of personality started to unravel, the self found it impossible to put everything back in place. Chloe had been experiencing just this kind of disarray in her life. Incidents that seemed so fresh in their immediacy faded deep into her unconscious mind. She couldn't have it any other way. She wasn't following a trail back to sanity. It was no longer worth trying.

Every time that she tried to review these supposed events, they just seemed like phantasms. Only a wrinkle in time. When she attempted to smooth out time's flow, the interruptions would disappear. It was like none of it every happened. She wondered what caused her to dispel these occurrences. What had ever drawn her to these experiences in the first place? Her life was driven by a frightful necessity. She recognized that only these risky experiences could give her what she needed. So she was willing to undergo any hurt that went along. She expected these negative consequences. That just made it easier to deny the whole thing.

Lying on the bed, she had trouble even localizing any of these events. If they were simply dreams on her part, where did her experience start. She didn't want to qualify these events for anything more than that—illusions. What was real were those things that she enjoyed. Everything else was fake. It really wasn't happening to her. But there was so much experience in the middle. This was where everything became really confusing.

She tried to make it through the muddle. She knew what she had to give. She could be charming. But that wasn't her at all. She had seen other girls go through the act. She wasn't going to do any of that. If the final result was going to be the same, so be it. She couldn't help it if other people expected something of her. She could play along if she believed that they were going to help her out. She couldn't survive out here by herself. She didn't have anything to show for herself.

She hated the story that she was running for herself. She wasn't that messed up. She had it together. She had needs, but she wasn't about to screw herself up, just so that she keep herself whole. That seemed like a contradiction. She was strong. She was a survivor. Of course, she

was!

She kept telling herself that she was doing all right. But that wasn't how it really was. She only felt right for these few moment that she was lying on this bed. After tonight, she would be back in the craziness. And she hated it!

She wished that she could look herself in the mirror and transform herself into something a little more normal. She had no idea what that could be. She wanted to be more vivacious. She wanted people to like her better. It wasn't good to spend so much time alone. She needed to give more of herself to the world.

Where did the world end, and where did she begin? All these dreams were running together. She wanted to stand up and dance around the room. An audience could bring her back to sanity. Her fans were all deluded. And the illusions proliferated around this room. Where was the store where she could buy all the part that she needed to put herself back together?

She tried to smile. One smile would be enough to put everything back into place. She could organize her whole life around this one moment. But other people wanted her to smile. If she wasn't smiling, they would tell her to smile.

"Smile, and let the world know that you are happy."

If she smiled, would they know that she was happy. She wanted to smile with all her might. Then everyone would be able to see.

Who was she kidding? There was a time when her cynicism would have crept in. It would have been bitter. But it would have guided her back to a deeper understanding about herself. Things no longer worked like that.

There were times that she believed that there were mysterious forces influencing her life. That was why she felt so down. If she could shake these feelings, then everything would be all right. She needed a spell to put it all in place. Some people had lucky numbers. They used them to play the lottery. Or go to the track. Chloe needed that kind of magic.

She had seen signs for fortune tellers. They also had answers. But they made you pay. Chloe wasn't looking for that kind of exchange. She needed a cheaper version of her life.

Sometimes she heard voices. These were usually days when she hadn't slept for a while. She would hear trails of conversations. People would call her name. She would turn and would see no one there. Perhaps, she wasn't listening hard enough. She needed to get some sleep. That was why she had rented the room in the first place.

She wondered if the ghosts had followed her to this place. In her restlessness, she was hearing things. This time, it seemed like more than idle chitchat. She imagined someone talking to her.

To what degree did the supernatural require assent from the participant. Did the ghosts have to ask her permission to appear? Did Chloe have to be in a weakened state already to hear their voices? Was she chosen for visitation due to something special in her nature?

She was open to new experiences. If anything could pull her out of the doldrums, that itself would be a blessing. Could simply wishing for a miracle makes its presence more likely? Chloe was vulnerable enough to allow anything to affect her. Her dreams had begun to blend with her waking life. At first, she had tried to resist this change. That intent had passed. Things came and went.

If there was a supernatural, then its form would be so potent that it would be impossible

to resist its message. Chloe was willing to submit. She wanted to get down on her knees to welcome the spirits in her midst.

She was still in a daze. Whatever was going on here was taking her for a loop. The room started spinning. She felt dizzy. This had nothing to do with the occult. She hadn't eaten very much today. She was feeling a little ill.

She didn't want to give up so easily. Sure, her discomfort was related to her frail condition. That simply meant that her conscious mind couldn't interfere with the spirits affecting her. She was in the perfect state for an eventual visitation.

Did Chloe have a calling? This explained why she had to put up with so much suffering. She was being prepared for something greater. She had known all along that she had a calling. That was why her family had rejected her. That was why she had so much trouble making friends. People knew that she was different. They resented her for it. They wanted to take away her gift. And she was doing everything that she could to hold on to her legacy.

She was near collapse. Nevertheless, she told herself that she was on the verge of a profound revelation. She could feel the power tingling throughout her body. She was ready to be lifted up.

When nothing happened immediately, it fed her doubts. Ghosts came and went on their own volition. It didn't take an individual to bring them to life. Chloe's desire to be haunted was not sufficient. The spirits needed to feel that she was worthy of a visit. She was letting her pride get in the way. Even in her desperation, she was trying to inject her ego into the equation. No spirit could bless her until she put aside her pride.

What if her new identity was a suit of clothes on the bed. She could put it on and all the bad memories would go away. Even if such an option was hers, she couldn't manage the strength to change.

As she tried to make her way through the night, she could almost feel her flesh crawl. Her experience was so much worse than simple pangs of hunger or isolation. Her stomach seemed contorted. And she could barely move on the bed. She hadn't felt this badly at any time before.

What started out as feelings on the surface of the skin soon spread deeper. She couldn't rub it away. She started to shake and then shiver in response. Although it was quite warm in the room, she pulled the covers over her. It granted her temporary relief. This wasn't so much an irritation as it was some kind of electrical sensation. Her body was misfiring again and again. She felt little pin pricks.

She interpreted the random touches as some kind of code. She tried to figure out a regularity amidst the chaos. She wanted to believe that her body was telling her something. The more that she concentrated on what was happening, the more that the feeling became localized. It was almost a response to her moving her hand along her skin. She was discovering areas of tenderness. She could trace the contours of these feelings.

She told herself that these were messages. It was almost like memories that she could activate individually. As much as the experience pained her, she found a delight in its progress. She was sketching a picture. And she filled in the shading. And she brought intent to the lines. None of her realization diminished the overall sense of disorientation. She remained zoned out on the bed. She was doing her best to come to, but all this was too overwhelming.

She imagined that every bruise and every cut had reappeared. More than that, these were the psychic wounds that she had endured over the years. These weren't simply events that had affected her. They almost predated any actual experiences. Each mark seemed to be a foretelling of things to come. More than that, this was some kind of deep fating. It was all leading towards an understanding of herself. In her present state, she could hardly count on her knowledge to be of much benefit. It only dragged her down deeper. She did all that she could to resist what was occurring. But even that opposition was all part of what was happening to her. She could not get outside of herself.

She was coming face to face with a version of herself that she had carried with her all along. Try as she might, she couldn't shake what was hitting her. And it was all so abrupt. She couldn't move fast enough to avoid the pain. It fed off of her reaction.

She wished that she could have taken a shower to relieve the stress. She knew what would happen. Even cold water would feel like a thousand degrees. It would remind her of every minute detail that she had tried to forget. She was now even more helpless than she had been before.

As she became more involved with her experience, she understood how totally a part of herself it had become. Every attempt to numb the pain was only another remembrance of its reality. She was only making things worse. She told herself that she just needed to get to the bottom of things. In the soul of her darkness, there was a reverberating sound that could liberate her from this oppression. She tried to disentangle herself. It only added to her discomfort.

She couldn't dream away how she was feeling. She had to hold with herself. She was almost seeing the hurt as its own remedy. She hadn't want to see herself as a martyr. She wasn't looking for sympathy. This was her condition. There was no magic wand that was going to shoo it away. Try as she might, she had been unable to discover a pattern to her suffering. She wondered if that very fact meant that all this was going to continue on. This was only a preview of her days to come. She zoned out on that thought.

Chloe wanted just one day of total clarity. While she had been overcome with her own feelings of discomfort, her only thought had become how she could remedy her situation. And once this distress passed, she believed that she could get on top of the feeling. She was riding the wave of her own triumph. Maybe that was her chance to jump off the roller coaster. But she believed her high more than anything. This was the vision that had got her through her difficulty. It wasn't so much that it meant something. It just was. This was Chloe Donzenac facing her being in all its stark nature. That alone was too much to allow her to abandon the experience. It told her to remain with the permanence of this sensation.

The reality was so abstract. She wasn't recalling some ideal from her childhood. She wasn't savoring a delicate chocolate. She wasn't reminded of the harmony of the universe. She was simply becoming accustomed to her own existence. She was suspended in this bubble. The wonder put every other feeling on hold.

She didn't want to get carried away with what was happening to her. She still skirted that precipice which had previously mesmerized her. And she was attracted by a similar feeling. This was not so much excitement as it was awe. She gazed with her mouth open at a most extraordinary phenomenon. This was her Grand Canyon. And the spacious wind blew through her. It spoke of the majesty in an eternal way. She was flying. But she knew that if she looked

down, that she would crash on the ground. So she just floated with the reality that her mind had created.

She had only just tasted the extraordinary nature of her being. She was ready to soar. But she knew that such a graceful gesture only tempted a more severe let down. She couldn't let that stop her. There was no net. They were no guide rails. Nothing was meant to hold her back. She spread out her arms and took off.

Chloe had seen the warning signs. That only encouraged her. In a way, this joy was similar to something that she had felt a thousand times before. And the feeling would never last. It promised her the world. And she fell for that false character every time. That was all part of the zealotry that propelled her through the ether. She reveled in the strange balance. If this was somewhat unlike her, she had still couldn't let go of the dream. She wanted to be a circus performer. She wanted people to gasp as she attempted the impossible. And she wanted everyone to look away as she made her final dive.

She embraced the temporary nature of her enjoyment. This made it pure. It marked her moment in time. It spoke of her relentlessness. No one else would have gone this distance. So Chloe scraped the stratosphere. She made trails in the sky. It only made her want to push on further.

She was reaching the point of no return. Here she was able to trace the very kind of markings that had haunted her during her suffering. She wanted to shake off this frail body. But her contentment just came in such a fragile wrapping. As she embraced its fundament, she again sounded her pain. This was the best part of the experience. The ugliness was so exquisite. She wanted again to face herself in the mirror. She could not. She had to let the image flash inside her brain.

She found liberation in her own helplessness. This only made her seem weak. It made her seem dependent on something other than herself. She could escape the sense of contingency in her life. She was in this room at this time. She couldn't make it any different. It made her ache all over. She still wouldn't let go. And the extreme sharpness of her realization penetrated her again and again.

If Chloe could find redemption, that would be her answer. It wasn't enough to get a clean conscience. That would only be the beginning. For the time being, it was all about trying to cast off the demons from her past. She could hold her parents at a distance. She could force her acquaintances and friends and memories behind her. That still was not enough.

She no longer feared repeating the terrible experiences from her life. She could dull the sting of those memories. But that still wasn't enough. She sought an all-encompassing deliverance. She wanted to float above life with a perfect accord. Nothing in her imagination would be sufficient to replace such a vision. It wasn't simply an idea. It was a way of existing. It needed to fill every part of the body with its complete realization.

Once she attained such an elevated state of being, there would be no possibility of returning to her melancholy. She would cherish that achievement for an eternity. She tried to make herself small enough to pass through the eye of the needle. And in this zone, she could finally apprehend her resurrection.

Happiness had always been so brittle for her. It was there to sabotage its own delight. She wasn't looking for another ride up on the elevator. This was more about a constancy.

Something that radiated from an enduring source. She accustomed herself to the shapelessness of this experience.

Simply thinking about it was not going to be enough. This was not simply the negation of her bad feelings. This was her forever.

She had grown up with fairy story about her eventual future. The tale had been quickly put asunder. But the dream was not diminished. She continued to see its reflection in lustrous things. Even as experience seemed to crush her, she would not let go of her dream.

Since the promise had been so wondrous, that became all the more reason to seek something that refreshing. She did not want to wade in the babbling brook. She wanted to follow the stream down to the ocean. She wanted to baptize herself in these cleansing waters. She wanted to immerse herself in the healing source.

Compared to her vision, everything seemed incomplete. And that lack of wholeness only made her crave the serenity more. She sought pleasure not for its own sake, but because it was a suggestion of something else. And her sense of dissatisfaction only drove her more towards that inevitable goal. She was meant to be saved.

She had watched her mother try to sequester all the happiness for herself. June basked in a glow that she would not share with her daughter. This only convinced Chloe that there was another world where she would shine. Even if she had found herself slipping down into the dingy underworld, she sought the revelation that would raise her up to paradise.

In its immediate form, she wanted her salvation now. This was something that was eminently possible even if it meant that she could only hold it for a short while. In this, she recognized the danger. That did not stop her from wanting satisfaction.

She had seen others succumb to the temptations of the world. And if she reviewed her own experiences, she would see dark moments when she had also faltered. That only made her want this thing even more. It would give her the chance to start anew. It would take all those terrible days and erase them. They wouldn't just be gone from her memory. They would be expunged from the record. Chloe would get a complete pardon.

She might question whether she was truly worthy of such a reward. But she had longed for this resolution since the beginning of time. She couldn't have it any other way. So she remained steadfast in her desire.

She was on a roll. She hadn't been victorious just once. The winners kept coming. Lady Luck was on her side. And she continued hitting sevens. There was no reason to stop. Self-indulgence was all part of the experience. This wasn't just an idea. You had to feel it in your bones. Your muscles had to quake with the realization. You had to dance your excitement across the room, down the street, over the rainbow, and outside of this world.

Chloe was stuffing herself with every aspect of this feeling. She could not deny her gluttony. She had gone beyond anything that she ever had experienced before. She wasn't going to crash this time. There were no more goblins to make her dwell in her misery.

Chloe was immune to any moral lesson. Life was meant to be enjoyed. Enjoyment couldn't just occur in the mind. It had to engage the body. And she was ready to give every part of her being to this realization. She had to involve herself physically just so that she could know that this feeling was totally immaterial. And for that reason, she was resistant from any let down.

She was on the top of the world looking down. There was no fear of heights on her part.

She was blessed.

As she gorged herself with the spoils of her triumph, she let the bubbly flow. She washed down her happiness with total abandon. Nothing could get in her way. Everything must be thrown in the mix. There was no tomorrow. After all, that was what she had been promised. And what she had prayed for had finally been delivered to her. It was time for this lover to take the leap.

She had told them to take down the nets. Total freedom only made her want to reach higher. And her daring became all the more intense. The world had done everything to slow her down. No Icarus was allowed to challenge the precepts of the gods. But she had ignored this fundamental advice. It was offered by fools who had never even approached the stars. And she was hurtling way beyond. She was watching one galaxy recede as another came into view.

The only way to know that you were having fun was to have even more fun. There was nothing that could stop her in this pursuit. Why should she give it up if she was already in heaven?

She concentrated her will on her recognition. She was beyond mysticism. This was the sheer excitement of the body. More than any hedonism, her realization was all about the abject nature of the self. And once the psyche could void all the contrary sensations, the individual could give herself to the ultimate pleasure. She had gotten beyond the ticking of the clock.

She would not look back in regret. There would be no such vantage point. Every future moment had folded into an eternal present. She had moved along from her point of salvation to something more focused. Where she had previously experienced pain, her body now gave off pleasure. Every touch seemed to bring her alive even more. She was resplendent. She was moving towards transcendence.

She wanted to believe that the body could totally overcome the here and now. Then ecstasy could not be measured by comparison to something else. It could not return to its weakened state. It would vibrate for all time.

What she was attempting seemed unbelievable. Not only was her final resolution difficult to explain, it hardly seemed possible. But she knew what she was feeling. And she would not be denied.

As she was spinning out, she was also heading within. She knew the fear as if it was a lost sister. It had been her constant companion. She had twisted time in such a fashion that it would not let her go back to her former self. But what else could she do? She hated her lot. And she was ready to toss the dice one more time.

When she woke the next day, she felt a little better. But the reality of the day started to hit her, and she again felt crushed. She knew that this other world was hers for only a short time. And the harsh light would again expose all her flaws. Her skin was sallow and her eyes wouldn't open completely. Maybe it was grogginess.

She had washed off all the nastiness. Could she find a way to hide among the other interlopers? Her life had reached a crisis. But she shied away from changing anything. What was she going to do now?

Once outside, she wanted to go back to the room. She didn't relish being back on the street again. She did her best to stand erect. She needed more money. She didn't want to go back to her old ways. She hated it out here.

She saw an empty table in a diner. They hadn't cleared the dishes away. There was still

food on the plates. She needed to be fast.

“Girl, if you don’t get out of here, I’m going to call the cops.”

“I’ve got money.”

Did she have anything left from the night before? She had managed to down a waffle before the waitress got to her. The coffee was still warm.

She had a night’s sleep. And she had eaten some breakfast. She was way ahead of herself as compared with other days. That still wasn’t enough.

As the day took over, she could feel herself slip back into rut. And that same haze washed over her. She did what she could to find some kind of balance. She was too far gone.

Chloe stumbled along the street. At each storefront, she imagined an opening. But it all seemed the same. Store owners stared at her as they waited for her to pass. They didn’t want her coming in. They didn’t want to hear another sob story.

“If you’re not going to buy something, I don’t want you coming in my store.”

“It’s a free country. I can look.”

“Not in my store.”

She walked out with an air of bitterness. But she didn’t have the will to sustain her resentment. She just needed a break.

Any offer for money would just bring her lower. She didn’t want to go back into the shadows. She tried to take some comfort from the night in the hotel. She was a cherished guest. Now things had become out of hand.

When people passed her on the street, they looked away as soon as possible. Occasionally, people would just bump into her. Then they would brush themselves off as if they had fallen and had gotten all dirty. Then they would move on without apologizing.