

NICOLE E. HASLING

MY NAME IS HOPE

It was that dusty, unclean place of chipped white porcelain, the broken pipes dripping gray puddles of sordid water into miserable pools of loneliness that you saw in those dark, disheartening movies. Those forgotten bathroom walls that hadn't been used in years where the graffiti was covered up with still-bright blood, distorted red with the killer's gut-twisting proclamation of doom scrawled across it for the detective who followed shortly after.

I almost wished that there was a murderer lurking in the sewage and grime of this desolate place where I sat on a broken toilet ring, legs tucked up awkwardly around my bulging stomach, door shut against the world I fought so hard to distance myself from. I almost wished—then I wouldn't have to do it myself.

My dirty old blue jeans had holes in the pockets and rips along the seams; the button was undone and the frayed belt that held them around my rotund waist was at the largest hole. The shirt that covered my starved torso should have been white, but like the bathroom around me, I just didn't care enough to keep it clean. In fact, I hardly cared enough to keep myself fed, let alone the life within me.

She was how I fell apart. That yet unborn daughter that was the only reason my sides didn't touch on the inside was the reason for my loathing; my abhorrence to my life, to her life, and to the world. She was the reason I let my soul die. She took my life for her own; left me to struggle through my own existence, alone.

It was her, and it was him. He had crushed the fires of my independence, she had destroyed my hopes and dreams. I could not escape him: he held me by him, by twisted loyalty and force; he used me for his own. I was his pleasure, nothing more—though perhaps I was less. He used my body, but it never brought him satisfaction. These sinister marks that cry upon my arms and face are proof of his displeasure. So many nights I had stalled my tears until the shuddering slam of that poorly-kept door gave them release, that they were free to wash that red stain from my newest wounds. The torn garments that clothe my slight frame do little to hide these scars and bruises that mar my abused frame—but it has been so long that even these seem familiar as to give my slight comfort.

But even that norm had been thrust from me, that night two months past when the fruits of his devil-imposed labors came to bear. One time too many had he used my body for his will, and now that phenomena that many women hold so dear had come to pass. But the joy those others feel at the creation of life simply burned into my soul and tore out my own. His curses, his torments had lasted longer that night, the crimson became a river that swallowed the normal stings he usually inflicted. And that night, as the door slammed, it was me in the cold, dark night. Me and the unborn child of his making, and she already six months alive.

I was lost. I had nowhere to turn. I passed two days in a dark alleyway, not knowing where to go, not having anyone to ask—I had been confined to my house for as long as I could remember; ever since my mother had run away. I stayed in that dark alley for two days until hunger drove me back to his door, the only place I knew. But he had no use for me, and my stomach was forgotten in the face of new, deeper pain. I lasted another two days before I finally broke—so weak by then that I could barely stand, but knowing only that I had to find nourishment. Fortune brought me to a dumpster behind a family restaurant, and that night I feasted on moldy bread

and old fries. It sustained what little life was still left within me, but I knew it would not last. Even if the garbage trucks didn't come for another week, the leftover wastes would not hold me.

Sickness wracked my body each morning, violently waking me from sleepless rest; yet if it were from child or disease, I did not know. Again, I forced my steadily deteriorating body to move, thrust myself onto the street; but only at night did I bare my dirt-streaked face, when darkness sheathed my bloody scars and past of abuse. I fed off trash—living the sewers and dumpsters as a rat, no more than the mice that were my only company. Time became null, the sun had no meaning, the stars brought no light to the nights. How long I lived thus, I can only guess by the size of my growing belly, a constant reminder of my rejection.

I found a kitchen, people who cooked for those who had nothing, like me—but I do not know when I stumbled upon it. My bruises had lessened, my wounds becoming scars. Nothing was said about them—I think the grime had disguised me well enough, and I had not the courage to speak. I only accepted the meal and ate—the first real food I had eaten in—how long, now? I stayed in the dark alleyways nearby, dependent on this new source of nourishment, as I began to have trouble walking, each day my unborn child growing larger in both my body and mind. I could not escape her, as she could not escape my womb. Each of us imprisoned—but as her time drew nearer, her freedom more real, mine fled steadily further. It was she who had thrust me onto the streets, she who had forced me away from my home and my life. It was she who had cursed me; who had killed me and left an empty corpse to roam this world of nightmares.

All else but this hatred was lost to me. How I got to this bathroom, how I survived those months on the street I do not know. Nor do I care—it is but another day, another hour, another moment of torture I must endure.

Spasms of pain rock my fragile form, so nearly torn apart already. I am but an old, gray dishcloth, past repair, past hope—the shredded pieces so numerous it is a wonder I am still somewhat whole. That child—that creation of the Devil—tears apart my body from the inside, pain now to both body and mind.

My crimson-stained hands clutched the dusty walls on either side, my scream was caught in my throat and I couldn't let it beyond my constricted throat. But the physical torment was merciful, for it faded again, unlike the wickedness in my mind. My eyes fell to the scratches that were torn into the walls, bloody now from where my nails had been torn out. Under that smear of copper-smelling, sickly-sweet red was a different shade—the scrawlings of someone who sat here once before. Three dash four. Digits... a phone number, written in black pen. I stared at it, my savior, for it took my mind from the pain. I held on to those numbers... I needed them. Those seven digits became my life—I burned them into my mind like a fiery brand that had touched my eyes.

I struggled upward, lifting my heavy body from the seat, my sides heaving from the effort. But I was past pain—I only knew those seven, gleaming guardians that danced before my eyes. I could hardly stand, I don't know how I was able to walk, how I made it up those treacherous stairs to the payphone I somehow knew was there. So wrapped up in myself I didn't even know how I was able to make a call once I reached it—perhaps some careless person had left that quarter—more money than I had seen in months. But that call... it was all that mattered. What did I say, when the other line picked up? So lost in the delusions of pain that I had suffered, I heard only the voice of a holy angel on the other side. Perhaps I laid my story bare; perhaps I sold my soul. But at that point, very little seemed to matter.

Like most of my life before, I remember so little of what transpired, but I recall the spasms that shook me, I remember my back against the time-stained wall; sweat beading upon my thin, sickly brow; pain screaming through my veins and tears that bled from my eyes. Through that, I remember nothing so vividly as the image of the phone, dangling from its twisted cord

beside me, the dial tone droning it's dead, forlorn tone that finalized my despair. My only chance now devoid, that single tone calling me into oblivion.

It was to a lady's kind face I awoke, her clear hazel eyes staring placidly into my own tormented blue pools when they opened—I wondered if I had finally found heaven. But the pain that my body could not forget lingered, and my sickness still prowled through my burning veins. At first I wondered who she was, why she had stopped; but I came to realize that it did not matter. She held out her hand to me, and I knew that the number I had called was heaven's, and God had answered and sent me an angel.

She helped me stand, patient as I hobbled with her, my awkward gait lopsided both from scars and from child. She helped me to her car, which was parked not so far away, though the distance seemed miles to my legs that had nearly forgotten how to walk. I recall faintly her assurances that everything would be fine, that she was taking me to the hospital. I believe I tried to thank her, my manners still alive though I was not completely aware; but I fear I was too far lost to have any words that made sense.

She stood beside me—in her kindness, and I, a stranger!—as the doctor looked me over, his perceptions hidden behind thin-rimmed glasses, his whisperings drowned by the hard beating of my heart that echoed loudly in my head. Beyond the clean white of the sanitary hospital bed and medical flashes I saw him shake his head sorrowfully at the nurse beside him. I heard myself cry out something, wondering what was wrong.

I caught the murmured words of shock when he announced his observation that I was no older than sixteen. The words were jumbled after that, but when the nurse finally came to my side, it was with fear that I heard her words. She felt my stomach, kindly telling me the baby had to come.

I held my screams until I could contain them no more—birth, the gift of life, was painful indeed; a torment no woman of my age should have to bear. But I remember—oh, so clearly—how much pain was overridden by something stronger when that doctor's same, sad face came into view.

Stillborn; the child was dead. The child that had taken mine now left that life behind. At first, I was infuriated—I hated the world for what she had done. She had stolen my gift only to shun it. She, just like her father, had so little praise for life that she could give it away so readily. My father's child... my child... she was dead. And so were my last ties to him. I felt relief sweep through my broken body—my life returned to me, somehow. I no longer felt the bruises and cuts, the sting of birth or loss. I was reborn. That child I had carried was not still-born, she lay here, now—I was that child. I had life again.

I could hear the doctor plainly now, could answer him with a cognate response. And so I did, tears streaming bright down my cheeks:

“Hope... my name is Hope.”