

**Pure White Light of Heaven**

by Stephanie Gray

“When was your last donation,” the nurse asks, tightening the tourniquet.

“About a year,” I lie.

She smiles, and dabs my arm with disinfectant. If she notices the shaking, she mistakes anticipation for nervousness. “It will only take a second,” she assures me, “It’s just a little prick.”

I smile back. I wonder if it looks as forced as it feels. My jaws ache.

The nurse is heavy and rosy cheeked. I can see the blood vessels in her hands and face and they disgust me. I would be empty and pure as glass; I want light to pass through me. I can smell her breath.

“Do you have any plans for Christmas, Sandy?” she asks.

I almost forget to answer to the fake name I wrote on the form I filled out

“No,” I answer, sick with wanting. My blood feels thick and toxic as motor oil.

“No?” The nurse says, “Does your family live in town then?” I wish she’d shut up. I dig my fingernails into the palm of my hand. I want to kill someone. I want to scream.

The instant my blood starts to fill the clear plastic tube: release.

I am in a crystal tower. Clear water flows beneath my feet. Ice. The brilliant white light of heaven. Peace.

The nurse gently slides the needle out of my arm and applies a small round band-aid. When I’m unsteady to rise she helps me.

People ask me questions. I know I’m supposed to answer them if I expect to be allowed to leave, but it’s hard. I’m still full of white light.

Yes, I feel fine.

Yes, I have someone to drive me home.

No, I would not like juice or a cookie.

I leave as quickly as I can.

Lawrence is waiting for me in the parking lot. He doesn't ask me any questions when I open the car door and practically collapse into the passenger seat. He just drives me home in silence.

Back in our large, empty house Lawrence eats microwave popcorn for dinner, gets high, and nods off in front of the TV. I open all the windows in my bedroom and fall asleep on top of the blankets, imagining I'm sleeping beauty under glass. Loved and untouched. He never mentions the bloodletting. I don't mention the heroin. It's an understanding we have.

We have our routine, Lawrence and I, for however long we manage to keep it going.

I went home with a vampire boy once, before I met Lawrence and discovered the expediency of needles. I had seen some documentary on real life vampires, gone on-line and found the address of a local club. It was a tiny, filthy place, packed with skinny, tattooed androgynies, painted lips and porcelain fangs. The one I found was tall and built like a holocaust survivor, dressed in black clothes that left only his face and hands exposed. He seemed so pale he almost glowed under the club's black lights. I let him take me back to his shitty apartment. I let him lay me down and take off my clothes. He

slowly stroked my skin with his guitar calloused finger tips and dragged a needle sharp dagger lightly across the surface of my skin when all I wanted was the quick, subtle slice of the knife and the slow emptying of my veins.

When he finally got to it his thick, painted lips felt like parasites sucking on my neck, bloated and fat with blood. As soon as he finished I pulled on my dress and bolted, not even stopping to call a cab. It seemed better to brave the city streets at four am than spend another instant there, in that unclean apartment, with my ashen faced vampire boy gone pink and puffy with desire once the makeup had been washed off. When I got home I stood under a scalding hot shower in the pitch dark of the windowless bathroom. However good the bloodletting had felt the greasy black lipstick mark circling the wound like an infection was grotesque. After that I resolved to risk a professional, and discovery, rather than the taint of unclean things.

The first time I bled I was at my father's summer cabin overlooking a flat, crystal lake, just after my mother died. I was alone with him there, thirteen and blossoming, bleeding, hot and stained. I felt burning, like I had a fever all the time. There was a dark spot in the lake, stagnant and black and festering, under the shadow of drooping trees. My father had warned me to stay away from that spot; there were nasty things in the water. But the water there was thick and dark and gross, like I felt. And I figured there could be nothing in there that was nastier than what was happening on dry land, so I lifted my skirt and waded in up to my ankles, then my knees, then my thighs. When I emerged from the water I at first mistook the leaches for spots of mud that I couldn't wash off. When I pulled at them they clung fast and I remembered that you were

supposed to burn them off. I had no match so I had no choice but to wait until they had drawn from me all that they wanted.

Distantly I remembered that doctors had once used leaches to cure fever, to draw away the bad blood. Maybe, I hoped, they could suck away the reality of what was happening to me. When they fell off of me I remember feeling calm, empty, purer than I had felt since my mother died and bleeding started all in the same month. That night I slept better than I had in weeks, with my mind empty of dreams.

I was only woken by my father coming into my bedroom at dawn, red faced and drunk, weeping for my mother and finding only me. The next day I went down to the lake again.

When I can't go to the clinic, I am obliged to have Lawrence use his syringe on me. He always objects. Always gnaws his lower lip and tries to get out of it. But in the end I'm the one with a rich father with a guilty conscience and he's the one with an expensive monkey on his back. He'll do as I ask.

The inside of my thigh is best. Where the nurses won't see the marks. Lawrence's hands are indifferent to my body as they search for a place to put the needle. When he is finished he shows me the syringe full of blood before squirting it into a coffee mug. It feels good, but it's not enough.

"Again," I demand. He does it again. If I asked him to, I wonder if he would bleed me to death.

Two days later I visit a different clinic, across town. I wish for a private room with walls made of smoked glass, cold winter light glinting through. The nurse is a sterilized automaton made of white metal, clean and soulless. I am naked and chilled and alone. This place does not exist so I must make due with garish curtains and smudged windows, tired nurses and screaming children playing in the corner. The TV is too loud. I know it's too soon. But my veins are full to bursting with toxic sludge, pollution, filth.

I've come to love the smell of peroxide. It smells clean.

In the parking lot I slip and fall in the snow and can't get up again. Lawrence scoops me up in his arms and carries me to the car, drives me home while I doze in the backseat. I sleep best after I've bled.

Back at our house I let him carry me up the stairs and place me gently on my own, perfectly made bed, on top of the covers.

"You can't keep doing this, you know." Lawrence says with something like grief in his voice. Something like guilt.

"I'm fine," I tell him.

"No," he tells me, "You're not."

I'm touched that he cares. But this isn't the way Lawrence and I work.

"You need help," he says.

"Black kettle..." I reply. Or start to reply. The words aren't coming out the way they should.

For a second I think Lawrence is actually going to persist. But he's shivering, even though he hasn't taken his coat off, and he can't keep his hands from twining in and out of his hair. In the end he takes the wad of bills I press into his hand and goes away.

At midnight I crawl across the floor to the bathroom. I find the razor blades under the sink and get into the shower, turn the water on.

I stay there until the water turns to ice.

I just want to feel clean.