

UGLY, POOR AND STUPID

Ugly, Poor and Stupid sat on a bench in the park. It was the same bench they sat on every day, in the same park they always visited. The three sat together each day and watched the passing of spring into summer, autumn into winter. Having moved in together a little over a year ago, each felt within themselves the satisfaction of true contentment that, albeit rarely, comes from living with one's family. Their mother and father, Fat and Lazy, had both died in the winter of the previous year – Lazy, their father, from exquisite atrophy of the limbs, and Fat, their mother, rather than dying of a broken heart had died simply because she was too fat to get off the couch and across the room to the phone to call for help. She died of starvation remarkably quickly given her size. After being notified of their parents' deaths, Ugly, Poor and Stupid were reunited.

Standing in the living room of their childhood home, sans parents, the three decided that it really wasn't all that bad a place to live and that they should live there, from then on together. All three siblings were notably miserable individuals. To be part of a family again after so long a time felt wonderful, in a way both puzzling and profound. They lived a relatively peaceful life in the house left to them by their parents. Each of the siblings moved into their old rooms which were cozy if not a little cramped. They ate their meals together and watched TV together and talked; they sometimes even laughed. Being together made each of them realize how desperately lonely and isolated they had previously been.

Ugly, the middle child and sole daughter of the deceased, felt safe and protected living with her brothers. With them came the masculine company she had so grievously longed for. She deferred

to her elder brother Poor on all matters and mothered the young Stupid to the point of suffocation. For Poor came the immense relief from the envy he felt in the company of most individuals, for no one in their right mind would feel jealousy for a woman as unfortunate looking as his sister or a boy as simple minded as his brother. In their presence he felt himself to be something of a hero. A stronger man, his paltry strength was emphasized by his siblings' weakness and obvious need for protection. Stupid being the youngest of the three, a young man with the mind of a child, had spent the last seven years of his life in a government funded home. Living now with his brother and sister who treated him like a baby – their baby – was for him an inconceivable joy. He finally had what he had always wanted, simply to be taken care of. So began the ritual, every evening they would walk to the park. Sitting quietly, not speaking, just enjoying the evening air in each other's company and watching the passing people, each sibling enrolled in their own elaborately envious fantasies.

Ugly sat, peering over a fashion magazine that she wasn't reading, and looked longingly at the woman in the park. She looked at men too of course, but more often than not her eyes strayed to the woman. On warm summer days they ran, their long tanned legs in white shorts, running with their friendly looking dogs, bouncing joyfully keeping time with their owners' glossy ponytails. In the summer, more so than in the other months, the bodies of the women were a constant source of pain and fascination to Ugly, particularly their skin: the unblemished faces, the bare arms and slender waists, ankles and wrists. In the Spring, they walked with children bundled loosely against winter's last luke-warm breath. They strolled with husbands, with lovers, with friends in the autumn watching the falling leaves making deep carpets of gold at their feet.

The most beautiful of all, in her opinion, was a sad woman. Parks in the winter attract sad women the way they attract lost birds. The sadder the woman the more beautiful she appeared to the furtively watching Ugly. Once the vision of a young girl sitting alone in the snow under a bare branched tree weeping quietly, had driven her to such heartbroken agitation that she had to flee the wanton display of unaffected beauty, leaving her bewildered brothers alone on the chilly bench in the park.

Ugly was a solitary creature. She seldom, if ever, left the house, their evening excursion to the park being one of the few times she would set foot outside. And when she did, it was only in what her brothers called her disguise: large dark glasses, a hat and a massive coat with a collar that hid her face.

“Like a spy!” her younger brother, Stupid, would delightedly exclaim while clapping and hopping from foot to foot.

She spent most of her time cooking for her two brothers and watching daytime television, her mind lost in the unattainable fantasy of pseudo-love. She sat slumped on the couch all day, kept alive, seemingly intravenously by a constant stream of romantic comedies. Stupid sometimes would sit by her feet and watch with her, laughing and clapping at the most inappropriate times.

On the bench, next to his sister sat Poor, the eldest of the three, glaring from beneath his heavily cultivated frown at anyone and everyone, hoping desperately for eye contact. It gave him a peculiar thrill to glare at people until they noticed him. The shock in their eyes when they finally realized that his animosity was directed solely at them was as close as he ever came to an actual confrontation. He might once have been a handsome man, but the years of crippling envy showed

in every line of his countenance. His face was contorted into an expression of grotesque malice that comes only from wishing evil on every living being on the planet. In Poor's case the weakness never to act on his hatred had worsened his nature. Beneath his thin smile, as though boiling just below the surface, popped poisonous bubbles of scorn. One could almost have felt sorry for him, but his groveling, self-aborrent demeanor repulsed even the most charitable of souls. Poor, in his opinion had the worst luck imaginable. Everyone else got all the breaks, he often told his brother and sister. No endeavor he undertook ever seemed to work in his favor. What Poor did not realize was that his failures were more often attributed to the extreme loathsomeness of his character. Turning to his brother, opening his mouth to comment on the fatness and vulgarity of the breasts belonging to a particular jogging woman, he stopped short, the harsh words dying on his lips. Seeing his brother's face, he chose rather to smile, a rare occurrence, the act transforming his manner, rearranging his features until a glow of uncharacteristic warmth shone forth from his face.

Stupid sat, neck craned backward at a somewhat masochistic angle, staring at the sky. Faint tears leaked from his eyes and trickled down his cheeks past his gaping mouth. His lips contorted into a smile of unabashed wonder. He was staring at a flock of birds migrating in the shape of a V with the same expression with which one would look upon the ceiling of the Sistine chapel. Snapping forward abruptly, he turned to his brother and asked in a clear ringing voice,

“Where are the ducks going? Why are they flying in a pattern? If I had wings could I also fly?”

“I don't know the answers to those questions, Stu,” his brother replied kindly, if not a little flatly.

Stupid slouched down on the bench; he rested his head gently on his brother's shoulder and heaved a grave sigh.

Stupid was a beautiful boy, young and strong and fair, his skin as pale as porcelain, his hair golden – features fine as an angel, with cheeks stained the colour of autumn apples. He seemed to have something of a celestial air about him. If you saw him on the street you might think he was just like any other attractive youth. But if you looked into his face you would know with absolute certainty that something of vital importance was absent in his expression. It was his eyes that betrayed him; they were of an extremely pale blue hue and distinctly vacant. They stared out of his head like they were seeing some other infinitely strange and confusing world. And of course, there was the fact that he never could quite remember to close his mouth, it hung always, slightly ajar.

This particular winter day would prove to be different in more ways than one; this day being the type of day on which decisions are made that change the course of one's life irrevocably. Ugly, Poor and Stupid however did not know this. They passed the day like they would any other, sitting idly and daydreaming, their heads filled with the glorious *what ifs*, a never-ending, if not slightly demoralizing hobby. The only thing notably different about this day seemed to be the sudden drop in temperature. Poor had astutely noted that this day seemed to be decidedly colder than the last. Stupid, the more restless of the three wanted to break their tradition of merely sitting and observing people; he was chilled and fidgety and wanted desperately to go for a walk. Finally giving in to him, as they always did; Ugly and Poor agreed to indulge him. They set off down the path towards the more secluded area of the park. They strolled in the early evening air upon which rode the faintest promise of snowfall. Their feet crunched the brittle grass as they approached the lake, the fading sun played in pinks and oranges on its surface. In the middle of the lake was a small island accessible only by a rickety wooden bridge. That of course was where the ever-adventurous Stupid

wanted to go. He broke away from his brother and sister, running and yelling delightedly, as though he had just discovered the meaning of freedom. Ignoring the indignant yells of his siblings he charged towards the bridge and, crossing it with astounding speed, disappeared into the trees of the island. They could hear his delighted laughter fading as he ran deeper into the dense foliage. Looking at each other and sighing, smiling wearily, they followed, knowing that if they didn't Stupid would more than happily spend the night on the island.

They crossed the incredibly unstable bridge while cursing the disobedience of their brother, the way one would curse the naughtiness of a family dog, and finally made it to the little island. Once standing on the island they realized that it did not seem very little at all. The opposite bank on which they had stood now looked to be very far away and the willow trees occupying the island seemed to tower above them. Poor, hell-bent on rejecting all of life's mysteries, dismissed the sudden change as a trick of the light.

And so, grumbling and cursing while they walked, the two set out in search of their wayward brother. Accompanied by the fading light, the two marched furiously into the forest. The island seemed to be expanding all around them. They could no longer see the sky; their only indication as to how long they had been walking was the growing darkness. Through the gloom, they heard a gentle singing; it was a song they knew well – the song they fell asleep to. It rang clearly throughout the house at midnight each night without fail.

I, to whom air and waves are sealed,

I yet possess the human part.

Oh, better beasts you must now yield.

I name the cool stars of the field.

I have the flowers of heaven by heart.

The clarity and pitch of Stupid's voice was unmistakable and they hurried towards it, their anger forgotten in their relief at finding him. They ran for longer than they realized, the song seeming to echo all around them. Finally crashing through a glade, the two sank exhausted to their knees, only to find a broadly grinning Stupid sitting cross-legged on the ground. Leaping to their feet thinking to scold him for his reckless behavior, they saw their brother raise an urgent finger to his lips; his eyes were wide and pleading. Struck silent in their confusion, they looked more closely at Stupid. In his arms, he rocked to sleep a baby that looked for all the world to be carved out of ivory.

"Stupid!" Poor hissed urgently, "Where did you get that baby?"

"I... I found him – he spoke to me," stuttered the suddenly nervous Stupid.

Ugly was silently gazing at the clearing into which they had stumbled. The trees hung heavily draped with hanging flowers; a sweet exotic fragrance filled the air. Lichen clinging to the overhead branches glowed with a ghostly luminescence. In the centre of the glade lay a shallow pool, the water clear as crystal. Within the pool a multitude of coloured starfish lay on smooth white rocks. Ugly sat down heavily on the ground. Never before had she felt the humbling magnitude of true appreciation of beauty.

She shut her eyes inhaling deeply. Poor approached his brother cautiously and gently extracted the baby from Stupid's embrace. Stupid stuck out his lower lip and sniffed petulantly but allowed his brother to take the child. The first thing that Poor realized was how immensely heavy the little

body was. It was truly carved out of ivory, its pale skin icy cold to the touch, laying his hand on its tiny breast he could feel beneath his fingers the rhythmically beating heart of the child. He laid the sleeping baby in a soft mossy depression at the foot of a huge tree. Turning, he looked at his brother who was now lying on his stomach gazing avidly into the shimmering pool. Every now and then, Stupid would dip his hand into the cool water and with a single finger lightly caress a submerged starfish.

The three were seated on the ground bathed in the gentle glow of the glade; it must have been somewhere around midnight for Stupid once again began to sing. His voice rang like crystal, a sound like the first traces of dawn. Like a flood of molten gold, the noise rushed out of him. Head flung back, eyes wide and glazed, he sung. Towards the end of the song the sleeping baby stirred. They got reverently to their feet and walked towards the waking infant and peered curiously down at it. Pursing its lips, it made sleepy wet noises within its mouth and rubbed at its eyes with its little fists. In their entire lives, absolutely nothing remarkable had ever happened to any of them. They felt for the first time like only they existed. It felt as though the entire world had dropped away around them, leaving only them, the island and the ivory child suspended in an eternal void of nothingness. They stood in the presence of this mystery, immersed in the glory of the truly inexplicable. Opening its eyes, the child acknowledged them and in that very instant each of them knew without a shadow of a doubt, that their lives were about to change forever.

Blinking its ivory lids the miracle yawned, stretching its plump body sleepily. Through narrowed eyes it regarded the intruders with eyes of pitch black crystal,

fathomless voids, the lights caught swirling within them like minuscule reflected galaxies – eyes that would almost have been cruel were they not staring from such an angelic face. Smiling up at them the child said,

“Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,

I am He whom thou seekest!

Thou dravest love from thee,

who dravest Me.”

Its voice was soft and lilting as a lullaby. They stared down at the thing in silence.

A bubble of saliva appeared on the child’s pouting mouth. It grew to the size of a small marble and solidified. Catching the light, a faint glow began burning in its center.

Poor, unable to control himself, lunged forwards and snatched the tiny golden ball from the ivory child’s now smiling lips.

“You want it? It’s yours!” said the child melodically.

“What... what is it?” Poor stammered immediately regretful of his ever-present greed.

“It is whatever you want it to be, a gift you might call it, one for each of you.”

The baby lisped sweetly while producing two more hard shining spheres.

Waiting their turns Ugly and Stupid retrieved their prizes from the pursed lips of the child. Each sibling stood looking at the gleaming orbs in their palms.

“What do we do with them?” asked Ugly, finally finding her voice.

“Put it in your ear before going to sleep and when you wake your life will be whatever you wish it to be.”

“A wish,” breathed Stupid.

“Precisely, but I must warn you however that there is one condition, and you must decide for yourselves whether or not the price is too high.”

“No price could be too high,” blurted Poor, almost yelling.

“Very well then, the condition is...”

The baby paused seeming to enjoy the tense suspended silence.

“All wishes made must end in tears.”

Ugly frowned, not quite understanding, but Poor’s quick mind raced ahead of the others and a cunning grin slowly spread like a poisonous gas over his face. Motioning to his brother and sister he walked a few steps away from the child. Huddling together he said to them in the patronizing tone of someone who is too busy congratulating themselves to truly consider the wisdom of their words.

“Brother and sister,” he said, his mouth curling deviously, “not all tears need be tears of sorrow.”

His concept slowly dawned on Ugly’s face and she returned the sly smile.

Poor’s eyes shone with a bright imperious light, a sinister ember danced wildly in the darkness of each pupil.

Turning back toward the patiently waiting child he crouched down on the springy moss-covered ground and whispered.

“The tears we give to you will be tears of joy.”

“They will be tears nonetheless,” replied the stone-cold infant.

“Now come and kneel before me and let me see your heart’s desires made visible.”

Ugly was the first, holding her golden pellet tightly between her thumb and forefinger, she looked deep into the unfathomable eyes of the child. She lost herself for what seemed like hours in their bottomless-ness. The child grinned broadly to reveal its bone coloured gums.

“A life without love is no life at all.” It murmured to her.

“You shall be agonizingly beautiful. Men shall fall before you. You my dear will have more love than you know what to do with.”

A single fat tear rolled seductively down Ugly’s pockmarked cheek. The child parted its cold lips, opening its quivering mouth to reveal a rigid looking tongue. Ugly, balancing the teardrop on a fingertip brought it slowly to the diminutive salivating mouth. The baby suckled greedily closing its eyes, its face glowing with a dark immoral light.

“A tear of gratitude, how sweet but also how bitter,” remarked the child, its eyes like slits.

Ugly staggered away, she felt towards the tiny creature a confusing mixture of abhorrent revulsion and a monumental, all consuming sense of indebtedness.

Stupid flung his arm jubilantly around his sister and whispered into her ear,

“I’m going to have wings, I’m going to fly.”

“No Stu,” she scolded angrily holding him at arm’s length, giving his shoulders a hard shake.

“That’s a silly thing to wish for. Think about it. You are always asking your brother and I a million questions. Wish for something that will change your life.”

Stupid thought long and hard about this; he thought longer and harder than he had ever thought about anything in his entire life. Finally, he approached the child. Kneeling he looked imploringly into the arcane eyes and said,

“I wish... I wish to know it all, to know the answer to every question I’ve ever thought to ask, every question that anyone anywhere has ever asked. I want to know everything.”

“A wise choice,” remarked the smirking child.

Hunched over, shoulders shaking, eyes wide with fear, Stupid’s tears fell gently like a warm rain on the chubby ivory cheeks. Wiping its face with its hands the baby licked insatiably at its smooth palms, giggling happily to itself, muttering the words “fearful tears, delicious,” like they were a line from a well-loved song.

Stupid staggered backwards in terror and ran blindly to the ever-protective arms of his sister.

Last stood Poor, looking down at the still chuckling child. Sinking to his knees he gazed silently into the void-like eyes of the infant. And the void-like eyes stared back into him, into the very core of his being. His deepest desires, his darkest aspirations laid grudgingly bare before this omnipresent infant.

After a lengthy silence the child whispered.

“I know what you want. What you hunger for is so extraordinary that you cannot even imagine how to ask for it.”

“Yes,” choked out the word and it seemed to hang suspended in the air.

He was having trouble controlling his face; he could feel his left eye twitching madly; his mouth was contorted painfully into an insane rictus of a smile. This was the most important moment of his life. He wanted desperately to wish for riches but any and all riches could be robbed from him.

He wanted to wish for a talent that would bring him great wealth but his hereditary laziness made him want everything for nothing. He had spent his whole life fantasizing of a moment such as this. Now the endlessness and constant presentation of possibilities was driving him wild with greed and lust for power. He must, he thought wish for something that can never, under any circumstances be taken from him. In this moment of frantic illogical distress, he made his wish.

“I wish to be able to create diamonds with the power of my mind.” He blurted.

“Done!” said the ivory child, a malicious grin warping its delicate feature into a shockingly demonic mask.

“NO, wait! I...” screamed Poor.

Darkness descended on the three with the heaviness of a drenched cloak, and very suddenly they were standing on the bank of the lake in the moonlight staring at the little island at its centre. The rickety wooden bridge was gone. Poor made to rush into the water, but his sister held him back.

“It’s too dark. Maybe it wasn’t such a terrible wish. I think the child was just trying to make you doubt yourself. We can come back in the morning if things don’t work out.” Poor looked at his sister, suddenly unsure of himself.

“Yes. Maybe you’re right, and the water does look very cold, doesn’t it?”

Ugly looked immensely relieved. The truth was that at that moment she couldn’t have cared less whether both her brothers drowned or froze to death trying to get back to the island. She had lost all regard for them. Her entire being was solely focused on getting home and going to sleep and starting her new life the very next day.

The three walked home in the first falling snow of the season. They did not speak a word to one other. For each of them the other two had simply ceased to exist. The world from which they had so long been excluded was finally opening its doors and welcoming them with the open arms they had always dreamed of. Their ill-equipped minds completely overwhelmed with the dazzling gifts of tomorrow. With no more than a second thought, they had quickly forgotten the love and tenderness for one another that they had only so recently discovered. Of the three only Poor felt cheated and unsure of his impetuous wish. He damned himself for his hastiness and damned the ivory-child for planting the blossoming bud of doubt that now bloomed in his mind.

The first feeble rays of dawn woke the lightly sleeping Stupid. Eyes still closed he reached instantly to his ear, only to find it empty. The little golden sphere he had placed there the night before was gone. Before going to bed he had tucked it snugly inside his ear pushing it in as deeply as he could. He then lay in bed and worried to himself as he drifted off about tossing in the night and dislodging his little wish. He had clamped his hand hard over his ear until it hurt and stared out sleepily at the heavily falling snow. Now in the reality of the dawn he shook his head at his own foolishness. Stupid, being no stranger to vivid dreams dismissed the previous night's adventures with a shrug and sad smile. Rising from his bed with a yawn, he stretched his body and blinked his eyes. Taking one step forward he collapsed onto the floor hitting his cheek hard on the bare wood. He lay there completely still; in his ears, there was a loud rumbling like the crashing of massive waves. Rolling over on his back he lay spread-eagled staring at the ceiling. A tide of inconceivable sorrow welled within him and cascaded down his cheeks pooling around his head like a halo. His unblinking eyes pried open as the wisdom of the world, like a flash flood, flowed through him. His mouth gaping

in a silent scream, his eyes rolled back and he was gone. Only his bare, empty body on the wooden floor in a pool of early morning light remained.

Ugly woke with a start; she leaped out of bed so abruptly that a dizzying veil of blood rose to her head, momentarily blinding her. Legs buckling, she sank down in a heap on the floor. On her knees, on the faded red carpet of her room with her fists pressed tightly against her eyes she whispered the words as she thought them, “Oh fondest, blindest weakest.”

Head clearing, she slowly rose with still shut eyes and walked across the room. She opened the closet door, the one she had purposefully not opened for as long as she could remember. Behind was attached a large full-length mirror. With her eyes still closed she ran her quivering fingers over the cool glass. Bracing herself, both hands pressed against the mirror, she slowly opened her eyes. She froze. The creature that stared back at her was unlike anything she had ever seen. Pulchritude. The word echoed over and over in the darkness of her mind, the syllables blending themselves together in the mindless repetition of prayer. She ran her trembling hands down the body’s slender waist, over the large perfectly formed breasts and with her fingertips she gently caressed the flatness of the stomach. The skin was glowing golden; the hair cascaded in thick sheets of honey and lay heavily on her shoulders. She opened her crystal blue eyes wide, afraid to blink, afraid to lose sight of this perfection for even a split second. She was glorious. Her face gleamed with a radiant light, such as the world had never seen. She then threw back her head and from within her wrenched a cry unlike any the world had ever heard.

Poor lay in his bed not moving at all, staring out of his curtain-less window at the deathly white afternoon landscape. He was too hot but could not summon the strength to kick off his blankets.

He thought bitterly to himself that his brother and sister would have to change their names to Smart and Lovely. They were probably now sitting eating lunch and congratulating themselves on the cleverness of their choice of wishes. He waited, sulking under the covers for them to barge into his room demanding excitedly to see the diamonds he could miraculously produce. He brooded regretfully on his ridiculous wish. He had never felt more wretched in his entire life. He thought angrily of the selfishness of his brother and sister; they did not even care enough to come check on him. Hot tears of abandonment welling painfully, cursing his foolishness he wrapped himself in a suffocating cloak of self-hatred. He shut his eyes tightly trying desperately to escape the obsessively wayward wonderings of his mind. He did not dare to even think of diamonds. "Idiot!" he whispered to himself, pulling the blanket over his head, trying senselessly to shut out the lurid waxen world. Rolling over he went back to sleep.

Ugly pulled one of her old dresses over her head, it hung baggily on her now faultless frame. Beaming at her reflection, she pulled a belt tightly around her slight waist. None of her underwear would fit, but she rather enjoyed the feeling of her naked silken skin under the soft woolen fabric. Flicking her long hair, she wrapped a threadbare cardigan around her slender shoulders. And with a step lighter in more ways than one she skipped joyfully down the stairs. Pulling on a pair of large boots belonging to her brother Stupid she ran out of the house. The snow had fallen in thick drifts on the pavement and the whole world glittered in a reflection of her sparking eyes. The few people standing on the street stopped to stare at the rare beauty of the girl that walked briskly by in the white world, head flung back. The wind catching her flaxen hair blew it like a veil of gleaming

gold behind her. The few men that were watching stopped what they were doing and followed, their feet crunching stealthily in the fresh snow.

She walked on and on through the streets of the city, oblivious to any and all. Her beauty trailed in a wake behind her. In that wake followed the men. Helplessly, mindlessly they staggered after. The wealthy men, the adolescent boys, the homeless, the feeble, the husbands, the fathers, the brothers, the sons, they trailed after her like dogs snuffing after a scent. This, she thought while smiling secretly to herself, was the very first day of her brand-new life. Catching a glimpse of her reflection in a store window she stopped. She gazed enraptured by her own beauty. She twisted around flinging out her arms and spinning in the lightly falling snow, laughing with abandon, she admired herself from all angles. It was then that she became aware of a dark mass in her periphery. Turning slowly, she saw the mob of men; their faces were warped into masks of animalistic lust. They stood, sweat running, panting in the cold air, their hot breath steaming demonically. With gaping mouths, they stared lasciviously at the wonder before them. And in their hearts, they felt a desire stronger than anything any one of them had ever experienced, the all-consuming white-hot fire of deliverance.

She backed anxiously away from her would-be admirers as they advanced surreptitiously, stalking her, savoring the hunt. She whirled and ran, stumbling blindly in the deep snow. Through the empty streets, the horde scrambled black-eyed and wordlessly after her. She came suddenly to an old stone church and wrenched open the heavy wooden door, seeking sanctuary. She stood in the aisle, a pool of melting snow at her feet. The silence within was complete. It descended on her like two strong hands clamped viciously over her ears. Looking around, she gaped at the splendor of

the ancient structure, the high vaulted ceilings, the long red-carpeted aisle. She ran to the altar and stood before an immense marble figure of Christ on the cross and with bewildered eyes she cried bewildered tears. With the Lord God looming over her she felt insignificant, dwarfed by the grandeur of this holy temple of worship.

The deafening silence of the barren church was politely broken by the sound of an old priest clearing his throat. He was seated in the front pew. Running to him she fell desperately to her knees and like a child pressed her face into his lap and sobbed uncontrollably. The old priest smiled down at her and patted her snow-soaked hair reassuringly. With her face buried in his robe she did not see the transformation that was taking place upon the face of the man of God. The priest smiled secretly, a smile that he would have permitted himself only in the darkness of his chambers in the dead of night.

Massaging her neck gently, rhythmically, he said,

“Have you come for confession my dear?”

“Yes, Father please,” whimpered the prostrated Ugly.

Taking both her hands he pulled her to her feet and helped her to a confessional pushing her firmly inside. He then followed her into the enclosed stall. The small space was cramped and the old priest stood uncomfortably close to her, his round belly pressed threateningly against hers.

“What are you doing Father?” whispered the trembling Ugly, trying uselessly in the small space to retreat.

“Hearing your confession my child.” He whispered back, pushing a strand of damp hair behind her ear, his breath smelled sourly of cheap red wine. He then brutally clamped his lips over hers

forcing his thick tongue into her mouth. Ugly tried to scream, her head banging sharply against the back of the booth. The priest's strong boney hands were already ripping at the thin wool of her dress. He pinned her against the wall while struggling to lift his own long robe. Finally freeing himself from his habit, he looked at her. She stood naked, wearing only her brothers' boots. She pressed herself against the back wall of the tiny confessional. Shivering before him, she pleaded with him to stop, begging him to spare her. Her sobbing did nothing but arouse him further; he fell upon her like a wild animal falls on a piece of raw meat. Biting and ripping, with teeth and fingers into her immaculately tender body, the man of God's eyes rolled back into his skull. He screamed in tongues, thrusting himself brutally, mercilessly inside her again and again. Her cries were echoed only by the cries of the men outside the church wailing, demanding to be let in. When finally, having satisfied himself, the priest dragged her semi-conscious body by the hair out to the altar. There he laid her on the steps and arranged her limbs in a prurient pose. Legs splayed wide in welcome, arms and head thrown back. Straightening his robes, he strode down the aisle towards the entrance of the church. Flinging the doors wide in welcome, he admitted the howling multitude of men.

They surged in fighting and screaming down the aisle, they fell before her and crawling on their bellies, the pack descended on her. They took her in ones, twos and threes while the rest chanted and yelled. They tore at their own flesh and the flesh of their neighbors. Leaping and crying, they circled her like crazed beasts, not until after the very last man had sated himself did they leave her bloody corpse. They filed out of the church and into the night. The winter air cooled the fires within them. In their hearts, they each felt an immense sense of self-justification. They had done what needed to be done. They had come face to face with the most primal of urges and they had

triumphed. They went home that night to their mothers, their wives, their children, their lovers, and slept the sweet sleep of the truly exonerated.

He sat on a bench in the park; it was the same bench he sat on every day in the same park he always visited. Poor sat and remembered his brother and sister, they lived now only in his memories. That night on the island, the night that had proved to be their last, still seemed hideously vivid in the mind of the unfortunate Poor. How many times had he stood on the bank of the river that winter and looked at the little frozen island that occupied its center. He had had to wait for the lake to freeze over completely before he could get back to the island. Then one particularly icy day when the wind was at its most bitter he ventured out onto the frozen water. Slipping and sliding on the treacherous ice he finally gained the small barren stretch of land. He had searched and searched. It was not just the change of season that had transformed the island, it was a completely different place from the one he and his siblings had visited. This island was neither large nor overgrown. He had been able to walk the length of it in five minutes. After the brief excursion, he had returned sulkily to the bank and stood there, his ever-present glare aimed smolderingly at the island. Poor could not for the life of him figure out what had happened on that night. There was, first and foremost, the disappearance of the old wooden bridge leading to the island. The bridge had simply vanished, and then there were the mysterious deaths of both his brother and sister. But the thing that concerned Poor most of all was the obvious fact that his siblings' wishes had come true but his had not. He remembered finding Stupid's body, his all-and-nothing seeing eyes wrenched wide, his arms and legs flung out, his young face twisted in an expression of sorrow beyond human comprehension. Yes, Stupid must have gotten all he had asked; he truly looked like a man that had glimpsed the truth of the world. And Ugly his sister had obviously gotten more than she had

bargained for. He would never have known that the body of the girl found outside the church was his sister had she not been wearing Stupid's boots. Stupid wrote his name and address on everything he owned. Her body had been found savagely mauled, lying frozen in the deep snow outside the church not far from their home.

Poor wept, he wept more frequently these days. He had not been back to his home in longer than he cared to remember. He spent his days standing on the bank of the lake staring out at the island in its center as though willing time to run backwards, back to that evening nine years ago, back to the moment he had made that stupid wish. He lived in the park now, unable to tear himself away from the island. He hardly slept, hardly ate, eyes riveted, watching, waiting for the return of the rickety bridge that had once led his siblings to their doom. He could not remember the day that the feeling had crept up on him; it was a day like any other, spent sitting as usual on the grassy bank in view of the island. In an instant, a glorious feeling of warmth and wellbeing had flowed through him from his center and immersed his body in a feeling of total and utter happiness. Then the crying started. He sat all day oblivious to rain, snow, sun or wind, crying on the bank of the lake, the island floating like a wet blur in his vision. He cried and cried. He cried longer and harder than humanly possible. Eventually he began to attract an audience, The Crying Man, the crowd had rather obviously named him. People flocked from all over the city to stand in the falling snow and watch the man wail. His tears froze on his cheeks only to be melted by a fresh deluge of moisture.

Eventually some merciful individual dragged him kicking and screaming away from the park and had him admitted to a hospital. Poor could not stop crying long enough to tell anyone what was

the matter. Even if he could have, he had been alone for so long that he had lost all conception of reality. In the brief moments when he was not crying, he was laughing, hysterically, wildly, joyfully. The sound was terrible to hear. One doctor, who grew interested in his case ordered a brain scan, convinced that The Crying Man's problems were not merely psychological. What he found would make Poor somewhat of a celebrity in the medical profession. The doctor discovered what appeared to be a diamond the size of a tennis ball lodged in Poor's brain. If that wasn't curious enough, the inoperable diamond was pressing directly on the part of his brain that induced euphoric tears of happiness.

Poor would spend the rest of his days in a padded cell, brought out only to be presented at medical conferences. The diamond would soon be the largest diamond to be found anywhere in the world. And of course there was the argument as to who would get the ever-growing diamond after it had killed him.

It was a warm spring day and the air was light and fragrant. The sky was a deep cloudless blue. Frank and Ernest sat on a bench in the park.

"Frank, let's go for a walk down by the lake," said Ernest to his brother.