

Chapter 1: Meet Dante

It was Friday, October 17th, 2:30 pm: Less than 10 hours to go. By midnight that night, Dante Willis would officially be an adult. Legal. A man. These ideas scarcely passed through Dante's mind as he sat in Mrs. Applegate's AP English class.

What was going through his mind was far less profound. They were questions mostly: Did he have enough kegs for the party tonight? Should he get more beer on top of that? Would his friends actually bring their own booze like the Facebook invite had said? Should he even bother to hold up the vain hope that his inner circle of friends would help him clean up after half the senior class trashed his house, or should he just prepare himself to pony up for the cleaning crew the next morning like he had planned?

Dante had the perfect storm as far as parents went. His mother was a successful psychiatrist with her own private practice. His dad was a restaurateur who owned three different bar & grills in the tri-city area. On the weekends, more for fun than for money, his dad DJ'd for weddings and parties. As a result, Dante had never really wanted for money or entertainment.

It's not that his parents were stupidly liberal, either. It's not like they taught him about "safe sex" and gave him condoms and porn at some bizarrely young age --or gave him condoms and porn at all...from your parents....that's just...ugh.- or continued breast feeding him past an age when he could remember anything. It's just that as a family, they were rich, they knew it, and didn't bother to pretend otherwise. When he got into his first car accident last year, his mom swiped her card, and he paid them back by bussing tables and washing dishes at one of his dad's restaurants for an entire summer. Responsibility and accountability, see?

So what if by age 13, Dante knew how to make about 30 different cocktails? So what if he knew what pills in the medicine cabinet could be combined for the best stress relief, or the best buzz? Most adults knew this stuff too. If anything, Dante's knowledge of the effects, both good and bad and the risks involved, made him less likely to overindulge in substance abuse when he was an adult. And if he really wanted to do something, he'd figure out a way to do it anyway. So best just make him aware of the benefits and risks. So his mom and dad had reasoned, anyway.

The real kicker, the lynchpin to the success of this party getting off the ground, though, was Dante's birthday. His birthday was October 18th. His parent's anniversary was October 18th. That's right, same day. Dante's parents used to joke that he was their little anniversary present. But now after nearly 18 years of Dante having to share his birthday- the greatest day in any kid's year this side of Christmas- and their anniversary- the most romantic day of the year this side of Valentine's- all involved were a little sick of it.

Dante drove home with the pedal to the metal, not bothering to worry about trivial things like pedestrians, cops, or other motorists. Really, in hindsight, it's a miracle he didn't kill someone.

He peeled into the driveway in his 2010 Nissan Altima, slammed on the breaks with expert timing and came to a screeching halt just as he was about to collide with the garage door. Dante smiled cockily to himself. He knew he should pull in slower, and not risk the damage to his car and his parents' house; but it gave him just the slightest adrenaline rush. Knowing that he was just literal inches from a grounding and another summer of bussing tables, and that he avoided it every time, gave him a sense of accomplishment. It was like he was more than lucky, like he was invincible.

The garage door was closed, which was the tell-tale sign that his parents were not home. They had likely already left for their weekend. Good; let them have fun. He was going to have his.

He walked in the front door and his eyes bugged out of his head. His dad's stereo system and turntables were already set up in the living room. Score! Dante checked the fridge, to find it packed with...2 liter soda bottles. Meh. Then something caught his eye. Taped to one of the Coke bottles was a note.

It read: I moved the kegs from the garage to the basement before your mother could see them. The liquor cabinet is stocked and unlocked. Enjoy the mixers. Don't tell your mother. Happy 18th. The freezer even had three bottles of Jägermeister chilling in it. Dante wasn't sure if he had ever loved his dad more than at that moment.

With the most important part of the setup already done for him as a final birthday present from his dad, Dante went upstairs to his bathroom. He looked at himself in the mirror. Should he change for the party? Right now, he was wearing his light blue shirt and khaki pants. Not a bad look, but he'd definitely want to put on some underwear before the party...just in case.

He was beginning to get a five-o'clock shadow, but decided not to shave. Some girls liked that look. Maybe even Melissa. Besides, he was planning on everyone getting too drunk to care. He lazily brushed his light brown hair off of his forehead. His parents would insist on him getting it cut soon, but Dante liked the shaggy look. When he went to college next year, he'd already decided, he'd grow it out, just to bug them.

Dante opened the medicine cabinet so he could get his deodorant. Bottles of Vicodin, Xanax, Oxycodone, and Adderall greeted him instead. A note in mom's handwriting said:

There are 30 pills in each of these bottles as per prescription. If there are more than 10 missing from any bottle, we will have words. Love: Mom.

Holy shit! This was unprecedented. This was permission in the disguise of a warning! This was the closest mom had ever got to "Party Out". Dad had stocked him full of beer and liquor and a stereo system. Mom had actually left pills out with the expectation that he and his friends would be using them. This was epic! His parents really did love him!

With that said, and a massive order from Pizza-Hut, Dante was ready to roll. At 5:00 his friends arrived, arms loaded with chips and snacks. By 6:00 all of the kind-of-popular kids had shown up, the ones that actually show up on time for a party. By 7:00, most of the really-popular kids had wandered in and the party had really started in earnest. By 8:30, the druggies and the stoners had bought their ticket in through obvious and unsubtle offers. Now THIS was a party.

This night was one of many firsts for Dante: His first keg stand, his first winning game of beer pong, his first losing game of beer pong,(so much better than winning) his first drunken kiss (though for the life of him, he couldn't remember with who. Hoped it was Melissa.), Less glorious firsts included his first walking in on people having sex in his parents' bedroom, his first walking in on people having sex in his bedroom, and of course, his first party pass out.

It was after what must have been his 8th or 10th Jaeger-Bomb that the world REALLY started swaying and spinning. Suddenly, thoughts of "This is awesome, don't let it stop" turned to "Oh my god...it hurts...MAKE IT STOP! MAKE IT STOP!"

"Dudedudedudedudedude!" he heard someone say, "Looks like Dante's 'bout ready to pass out already! Total lightweight!"

"Somebody get him over to the couch." he heard another voice say. Dante suddenly felt himself being carried by very strong and very friendly blurs. Probably people from the football team.

"Dude! Leave his shoes on, then we can draw on his face!", he heard the first voice suggest.

"No way man", the second voice echoed in his brain. "It's his birthday, it's his party. Least we can do is let him pass out in peace. "

Dante felt very sick at this point, and found himself unable to even sit up. He needed sleep. Right now. It sucked that he was passing out at his own party, but right now he was too tired and too drunk and too drugged to care. He managed to make his eyes focus to check the time. 11:50 the clock on the cable box said.

Too tired to smile, Dante settled for smiling inwardly. He might be passing out a teenager, but when he woke up, he'd be a man.

Chapter 2: Rude Awakening

Dante woke up. Hung over. Definitely hung over. Definitely, definitely hung over. All the signs were there: Pounding headache; queasy stomach; cold sweat that reeked of booze; and the overwhelming, almost supernatural urge to burrow 10 feet into the ground and hide from the tyrannical rays of the sun. Goddamned sun. Tyrannical sun. Goddamned tyrannical sun. The morning of your 18th birthday wasn't supposed to hurt this bad.

But then Dante thought about WHY he had woken up hung over. Worth it. Totally worth it.

It wasn't until his eyes creaked open enough so that he could get up and stumble into his bedroom (which he hoped people weren't having sex in...fuck it...he didn't care at this point) that he realized something was definitely wrong.

For starters, he wasn't on the couch anymore. He lay on his back on a floor. The floor was covered with a bluish-grey indoor/outdoor carpet; the well-worn kind you see in an office or school building. The horrible light that made him want to weld his eyes shut came from the ceiling. It was fluorescent, not solar.

Wait a minute. The floors in Dante's house were all hardwood. He had passed out in his house, and woken up, hung over, someplace else. That was the first major problem.

Dante sat up to take stock of the situation he was in. That's when he became aware of the second major problem. He had pissed and shit himself in his sleep. Badly. He knew it instantly. The damp clammy feeling around his crotch and thighs. The grimy, gritty feeling around his butt. The horrible, stale smell. Visual confirmation didn't give him any cause to feel relief. Based on how none of the bodily waste felt warm, he had been in it for a while. A couple hours at least. He would have to burn his khakis after this.

Tentatively, Dante gazed around the room, tried to figure out where he was. It was pretty plain, actually. White walls, with no decorations, pictures or posters. On one end of the room was a plain white door with a golden colored knob. At the other end was a large padded table. Underneath the table was a plain, gray cabinet. Beside the table was a mini-fridge.

All in all, it was pretty bland. Door, padded table, cabinet, mini-fridge. Nothing else. Not even a window. The room itself wasn't even that big. In fact, it was about the size of your stereotypical examination room at a doctor's office. Hmmm....door, padded table (examination table?), cabinet (medical supply cabinet?), mini-fridge (mini-fridge?). Maybe he was in a doctor's office, or a hospital. That made sense.

Then again, why the carpet? Most medical facilities had tile flooring for ease of cleaning. Weird. Before he had time to think about it any further, he was hit by a more immediate need. He felt his stomach lurch and instinctively rolled over onto all fours as he began to puke his guts out.

There he was: In an unfamiliar room, covered in sweat, in pee and poop filled pants, retching on all fours while trying to not get splashed by his own vomit. That was when the doorknob turned and the woman walked in. Embarrassing, right?

She was beautiful. Not hot, or sexy, but beautiful. Kind of like how you can look at a statue of a woman and think "That's a beautiful statue". You recognize how aesthetically pleasing it is, but you don't have dreams of fucking the Venus de Milo. She appeared to be in her mid-thirties to early forties. Her shoulder-length raven hair struck against her white blouse and black skirt. Her red lips popped. Her green eyes took Dante in, and an audible gasp escaped her lips.

"I'm.....bluuuurgh!" Dante gasped between waves, "sorry....bluuurgh!" Dante wanted to die of embarrassment right there. The woman rushed over to Dante and took a knee as she gently stroked his hair.

"It's ok, it's ok." she said in a rushed, but soothing tone. "Just get it aaaaaall out, and then we'll get you cleaned up. Okay, honey?" Dante could only nod meekly as he set a record for most contents being expelled from a human stomach. After a few minutes, Dante had finished his "Best of the Exorcist" routine. His eyes began to de-blur. Oddly enough, though he had coated about a quarter of the room with a mix of vomit and what was left of his dignity, not a single drop of the stuff had landed on the woman. A pool of puke had gathered around him and soaked his palms. Luckily it stopped spreading right a it spread to where the woman had knelt. Thank God for small mercies. The situation was bad enough, and he'd already have to apologize about the carpet. He didn't want to have to apologize for her outfit. A small selfish part of him hoped he wouldn't have to clean up his own vomit after he got himself cleaned up.

"All done?" the woman asked her eyebrows raised to emphasize her question. Avoiding eye contact, Dante nodded his head. "Okie dokie," she said, "Up we go!" With surprising alacrity and incredible ease she lifted Dante off the ground by the waist and carried him over to the padded table.

"The hell? Oomph!" Dante shouted as he quickly found himself being carried and then plopped onto the padded table. He turned his head and saw the woman opening the cabinet underneath the table.

"Scuse me ma'am," Dante began as he tried to push himself into a sitting position. "This isn't necessary." To his confusion, he couldn't push himself up. "Let me just take a shower, okay?" The woman ignored him. From the cabinet underneath she pulled out a clipboard. She examined it closely for a few moments.

"Let's see", she went on, her lips pursed, oblivious to Dante's continued struggling. "Dante Willis. Been here since 11:59 pm Eastern Standard Time." She looked at Dante pityingly "You poor thing, you've been here for nearly eight hours. " she clicked her tongue. Fear began to well up in Dante.

Wherever his body had touched the padded table, it stopped moving. He had landed on his back and his hands spread out to break the fall, but now they refused to move. The soles of his feet were in a similar position. It was as if he was paralyzed, or stuck to fly paper. No, forget that. Fly paper pulled back to keep you stuck, this was a case of his body refusing to listen. Right now, only his neck and knees seemed to obey his commands. The woman put the clipboard away, and pulled out a small covered trash can with a flip open top, and a small plastic box with a pop top.

"Look, lady," Dante pleaded, "I'm really sorry I woke up in your place and made a mess on your carpet. I don't even know how I got here. Clearly something...blblblbl..." Dante was cut off by woman roughly wiping his face off with a moist wipe.

"I know, I know", the woman interrupted. She stepped on the trashcan pedal and the lid popped open. She threw the vomit covered wipe in the trash and let the lid shut. She pulled another wipe out of the plastic box and continued to wipe Dante's chin and neck.

"You're all wet and dirty and sweaty and your tummy doesn't feel good." She threw another wipe in the trash and closed the lid again before taking another wipe out of the box. "But let Mama Judy clean you up and get you dressed, and then everything will be aall better." This woman was talking strangely to him, like he was some kind of child.

The stranger thing was, Dante noticed, was that the first wipe she threw away wasn't in the can anymore. Had she missed the first time? Was there a false bottom? Why would there be a false bottom? His brief reverie on the nature of garbage cans was broken when he felt the woman's fingers unfastening his pants.

"Hey hey hey hey!" he yelled as she unzipped his pants. She lifted his legs up until his butt was slightly off the table. Apparently, the nature of the table didn't affect her at all. With one hand holding his legs, she expertly used the other hand to pull his pants down his feet and off his legs, exposing his poop and urine stained briefs that he had slipped on before the party. (The better to conceal...ahem... arousal with, than his boxers)

"Well," she said in appraisal of the khakis, "looks like these are goners. Sorry Dante." She stuffed the pants down the trashcan and let the lid shut.

The woman looked at the state of Dante's underwear and shook her head while clicking her tongue. "Tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk," she said to herself as she surveyed the mess. "I will never understand why so many people use cloth, but then don't bother to put them in the plastic pants." She shrugged and then went for Dante's underwear.

"NO! DON'T!" Dante screamed as she ripped the sides of his tighty-whities open like it was nothing and unfolded them; exposing Dante's genitals to the open air. He tried to cover himself in some way. But his body wouldn't respond as the woman, Judy, had lowered his legs-back of the knees and all- back down to the table.

She crossed his ankles and lifted his legs again with one hand, as she started to wipe his butt for him with wet wipes. Baby wipes he realized. Baby wipes. She placed the used ones in the soiled rags that used to be his underwear. She slid the underwear out from underneath him before letting his butt hit the mat again. Then, gingerly, she tossed it into the once again empty trashcan.

She moved onto wiping his groin, and legs, which reeked of urine. Dante's eyes nearly leaped out of his head when he saw what was happening. Everywhere that the baby wipes touched, body hair came out. He didn't feel a stinging like a waxing, or a tingling or burning sensation like a hair removal treatment. His hair in his pubic area and legs just got wiped off and thrown into the trashcan. It was more like the hair had never been there and he had just rolled in it. Now the wipes were wiping them off. Dante didn't have a mirror, but he bet the same fate had already befallen his facial hair.

"Nonononononononono!" Dante yelled, struggling in vain to make his body heed his commands. "Look...lady...Judy...ma'am. Please stop. I'll do anything you want. Just please stop." The woman ignored him and continued to wipe the hair off his legs and nether regions and throw them away into the bottomless trashcan.

When she was done, she pulled him to the sitting position, and pulled him to the very edge of the table
"Let's take off that shirt too, so I can clean off your chest." she said. "Arms up." she said, raising her arms up into the air as if to show him what she meant. "Come on, Dante, arms up!" Dante realized something. The only part of his body that was touching the mat was his naked butt. He could now freely move his arms and legs.

He pushed Herculean woman square in the chest with all the force he could manage. She backed up only a step, but a puddle of vomit made it enough, causing her to slip. Dante pushed himself off the table and landed clumsily on his feet. He made a break for the door going at top speed.

He didn't make it two strides before he was lifted back into the air by the waist and suddenly hoisted back onto the table, this time face down.

"Nnnno!" The woman scolded, "No! Bad baby! Bad, bad baby!" He felt her hand come down once across his bottom and felt a thunderclap pass through his body. Dante went limp. It's not that it hurt, on contact it felt like and made the same noise as a quick slap on the ass. Under different circumstances, it could have been a flirt. But something was different about it on another level. It was like an EMP had just exploded inside him and all of the energy went out of his body. He couldn't even speak now.

She flipped him over and pulled him into a sitting position.

"I'm sorry I had to do that, Dante," the woman said sincerely, "but you shouldn't have run away like that. You could have gotten hurt, honey. Now, let's finish getting you cleaned up and then get you dressed." She took his blue shirt off and threw it away. Then she proceeded to wipe down his upper body. Chest, stomach, back, shoulders, neck, armpits, and all. He couldn't offer up any resistance. Dante was beginning to feel very cold, and couldn't help but shiver.

A bit of drool started to form on Dante's chin as he was laid back down. Judy didn't seem to mind. Even as he screamed inside his head, Dante knew what was coming next, and knew he didn't have a way to stop it. The woman reached into the cabinet underneath and took out a diaper. It was the size of an adult diaper, but completely decorated and designed like a baby's disposable diaper. Cloth-like cover, clouds stenciled in the crotch and butt area, pictures of rainbows and smiling babies with halos on the waste. She unfolded the diaper and lifted his legs a third time to slide it underneath him. His butt touched the padding as she lowered him down onto the diaper. Even with the air still reeking of vomit, he could detect a hint of perfume in the diaper's padded layers as the scent wafted into his nostrils.

She spread his legs, and pulled the front of the diaper up over his now hairless crotch. With two large Velcro tabs, one on either side, she taped the diaper in place. The baby angels seemed to be smiling up at him from his waist. Even though he couldn't move his body, Dante could still feel the difference as the bulk forced his legs apart slightly.

The woman, Judy, put the box of baby wipes and the trashcan back in the cabinet. Before she closed it, she took out a long blue shirt. Not unlike the one Dante had been wearing until very recently. Without resistance, she pulled Dante back up into the sitting position, and guided his arms and head through the proper holes. She wasn't done, though.

Dante found himself being laid back down, once again, as Judy pulled each end of the shirt down towards the diaper. It was a onesie: Something even most two year olds didn't wear. Each fastening of a snap around his crotch sounded like the gate of a prison cell being closed in Dante's mind.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dante could still see the edge and leak guards of the diaper poking out. Plus, there was a noticeable bulge in his mid-section, now. Even covered, this could hardly be considered an "out of sight out of mind" situation.

"There we go," Judy chirped, "now let's get you a milky ba-ba before we take you where you need to go!" She opened up the mini-fridge and took out a rather large baby bottle, about the size of one of those "Big Chug's" of milk sold at convenience stores. It was filled to the top with milk. She offered it up to Dante's lips.

Against his will, Dante began to suckle on the bottle. His mouth was suddenly on auto-pilot. Automatically, his hands raised up and grasped the bottle, his lips continuing to pull on the rubber nipple. Judy began to gently rub his stomach as the milk slid down his throat.

"There we go," she cooed, "make it all gone. Good baby!" The milk was sweet. Very sweet actually. Creamy too. And despite it coming from a refrigerator, it was very warm. Soothingly warm even. Dante's eyes drooped a little bit, and he felt drowsy. No, drowsy wasn't the word for it. Docile. That's what it was, docile. As he drank the milk, Dante slowly regained control of his body, despite the mat on the table. Furthermore, his hangover started to go away too. His headache dulled into nothingness, and the lights didn't seem unbearably bright anymore.

He wiggled his toes in experimentation, and found they obeyed. He idly kicked the air, and found that his now hairless legs responded just as well. He rocked his body ever so slightly to see if his back and torso would obey. They would.

The thing is: Dante considered escape, but something in him didn't want to, just yet. Sure, he was 18 and dressed like a baby while nursing a bottle. But this felt kind of nice. And Judy didn't seem so bad right now either. A happy gurgle escaped his lips and some milk dribbled down his chin. Judy smiled and wiped it away with her hand. Heh...funny. None of the vomit she had slipped in earlier had gotten on Judy's outfit. Weird.

As he finished the bottle, the pressure in his stomach told him that his hang-over wasn't completely cured. Despite himself, Dante began to whimper and looked up at Judy with puppy-dog eyes. "Fix it! Fix it" his eyes said.

"All done?" Judy began as she looked down at Dante's uncomfortable expression. "Ooooh! I know what you need." She picked him up, and draped him over her shoulder. She began to bounce him lightly as she patted his back firmly. A few seconds later, a mighty belch thundered out of him.

"Good baby!" Judy praised Dante, "now one more". Dante complied. Hangover officially gone. "Ok, aaaall done. Let's go to the nursery," Judy announced as she effortlessly shifted Dante so that she could carry him on her hip. Frankly, if it weren't for the ease in which she was doing it, the whole thing would have looked awkward. It definitely looked a little ludicrous. Dante was pretty sure that if he had been standing up, he'd be taller than woman who was carrying him.

Now with Dante in tow, Judy opened the door. The door led to a long hallway, endless it seemed. The floor had the same indoor/outdoor carpeting as the examination room. On either side of the hallway were rows of Dutch doors: The kind that was split into top and bottom sections. Each door had a series of numbers and letters on it.

From 0101A, 0102A, etc., all the way down until at some point, the numbers started over at 0101B and so forth. Eventually, the alphabet ran out, and started over at 0101AA, 0102AA. Dante was carried for what seemed like a long time, but he didn't care, though he wasn't certain why. Finally, they came to a door labeled 1017AB. Judy knocked with her free hand, almost comically holding Dante up while he was resting on her hip.

The top half of the door opened up, and Dante was instantly knocked out of his haze. Staring back at him from the other side was a woman who was almost identical to Judy. Sure, her hair was dirty blonde instead of black, her eyes were brown, and she was wearing jeans and a T-shirt instead of a blouse skirt combo; but otherwise she could have been Judy's twin. Make that Judy's clone.

"Hey Judy," Judy said to the other woman. "I've got another new arrival."

"Sorry, Judy," the other woman said, "It's the 18th, no new arrivals till next year." Even their voices were the same.

"I know, Judy," Judy replied, "but he literally got here last night just before midnight. Poor little guy, was sleeping on the floor when I found him this morning." That elicited an "awwww" from both of them. "He's technically yours."

It was official. Dante must be tripping balls. He must have mixed the wrong pills with the wrong amount of booze last night, and this was his fever dream. He hoped he didn't talk in his sleep about this, or else someone might be able to blackmail him for life. Hell, if his mom found out he was having this dream, he'd start seeing her for therapy.

"Can't you just make an exception, Judy?" the other woman (other Judy?) asked, though her tone of voice suggested she already knew the answer. Judy (Judy 1.0?) pivoted so that she was between Dante and what must have been her clone.

In a tense whisper she hissed "Judy, he was here at one minute before midnight. He was only ONE minute away from being declared lost. If I fudge any of the paper work, even by a minute, he doesn't go into another nursery." The second woman in the jeans and t-shirt sucked in her breath and her eyes widened.

The hell were these hallucinations talking about? That therapy when he woke up didn't sound so bad.

"Never mind," the second woman said, reaching over the threshold. One stranger handed over a babified 18-year-old to another. Dante found himself resting on the hip of the other Judy (Judy 2.0?)

"Alrighty then," the first Judy said. "Let's see," she began to list off on her fingers, "I've already cleaned him up, changed him, dressed him, fed him a bottle, burped him, and walked him all the way down here." Dante "eeped" as he felt two fingers poke through the leg hole of his diaper. (His diaper? No, no, no. THE diaper. THE diaper. Damn this was a messed up dream. He must be tripping.)

"He's still dry, too." the second Judy confirmed. Dante felt a hand pat his rump. "Not poopy, either."

"See," the Judy in the blouse and skirt smiled, "this is working out already. Good first impression, Dante! Now, if you excuse me", she addressed the second Judy, "I've got to get back to my office. This little guy had an accident in my office and spit up all over the place. I need to get back to see if I can clean it all up before it stains."

The second Judy gave a dry chuckle and shook her head. "Good luck with that, girlfriend." With that, the top half of the door shut, leaving Dante alone with this new stranger that looked so much like the old one.

Dante wanted to run. Wanted to scream. Wanted to kick and punch and bite his way to freedom and make a break for it. Maybe he could make it down to the other end of this hallway and find a way out. But if this Judy was anything like the other one, it would be no use. She would pop him on the bum, and he'd go limp like a vegetable. Besides, this was just a dream, (though the frequency that he had to remind himself made that statement feel less and less true), he'd wake up soon enough.

"Well, little Dante," this new Judy said, turning her head to the man-child on her hip. "Let's get you into the nursery. They did a 180 degree turn, and faced another bland office door with a golden doorknob. Within a few easy steps they were at the threshold, and the new woman opened the door. Blinding light filled Dante's eyes, as he squeezed them shut. He felt himself being carried over the threshold, and heard the door shut behind him.

He opened his eyes, as he was being carried around. Curiosity had got the better of him. He was currently on a staircase, with the new woman slowly descending it. They must have been a few stories up! As he looked around, he saw the room, the "nursery". It was humongous!

The room was about the size of a giant warehouse, all covered with the same bluish-grey carpeting that dominated the rest of this place. This so called "nursery" was big enough for at least ten simultaneous games of football.

One entire wall looked to have a giant mural of smiling children playing in the grass, with blue skies. Another wall was covered with life size pictures of animals from all over the world. Every fifty feet or so, a new ecosystem was depicted with the animals that lived there. There were little fold away cubicle walls throughout that divided the huge area into smaller sections. This was closer to a small city, than a nursery. It gave the whole thing a bit of a rat's maze feel, at least from above.

Two things dominated the landscape: "Judy's" and "babies". Well, neither statement was quite accurate.

Wandering the floor, watching playgroups, changing diapers, feeding bottles, playing games, etc. etc., were women who looked uncannily like every other woman in this place. Yes, their hair colors, hair styles, and wardrobes were all a little bit different, maybe one or two had a mole, or wore glasses, but it all seemed like a variation of a theme. All of them were relatively attractive women, who appeared to be in their mid thirties. Same facial structure and everything.

Every little pocket in this warehouse had people dressed like babies in it, though most were certainly not babies. From the air, as he was slowly carried down the staircase, he could point out a few little cubicle rooms that seemed to have genuine toddlers and infants in them. But more easily, he could see older children; ten, eleven, and twelve year olds playing with to-scale baby toys, and wearing to-scale baby clothes and diapers.

There were even high-schoolers, kids his age, playing. Based on facial expressions, and the choice words he was able to pick out, not all the kids were happy about being in this "nursery". Some babbled incoherently, gurgling and clapping like he had been moments ago. Others, cursed, and spat, only to get spanked by a "Judy" and go limp. Still more, cried and bawled. Dante managed to piece together multiple wailings of "I'm a big boy," or "I'm a big girl".

Finally, Dante was down at the ground level and could no longer see the layout of the place. Being carried around on the second Judy's hip, he made several twists and turns before being taken into a cubicle area. Another woman with the same face, only now with bleach blond hair and a nursery worker's scrubs, sat quietly in a rocking chair.

Sitting in a large, mesh playpen were two girls, about high school age. The first one, an Asian girl with her short hair in a bow sat in nothing else but a pink t-shirt, and a diaper. She sucked on a matching pacifier. The other one, a blonde with her hair up in pigtails, was on her knees sucking on a big bottle of apple-juice while wearing a loose dress that just covered the top her diaper. It was already swollen and beginning to sag a bit. The second woman opened up a door to the oversized playpen and put Dante inside before closing it. He was left in a sitting position with the diaper forcing his legs open a little bit.

"Dante," Judy in the jeans started, "this is Midori", she said pointing to the Asian chick, "and this is Lysa" indicating the bottle sucking blonde in the wet diaper. "Midori and Lysa, this is Dante. He's new here, so you all play nice. Be my good little helpers and teach him what it means to be a good baby. Okay?" Her question was met with a wide eyed nod from Midori- still sucking on her pacifier- and silence from Lysa- who had about finished the bottle. The woman that brought him here went to talk to her double in the nursery scrubs.

Dante turned his head towards Midori, still sucking. Actually, if it wasn't for the whole baby thing, she'd be kind of cute, in a Melissa sort of way.

"So, Midori, what is this place? What's the deal? What's with the baby treatment?" Dante asked. Midori stared at him blankly for a moment before spitting out her pacifier.

"Blablahbooblebooble!" was her reply, as a stream of drool ran down her chin. She turned over to all fours, with her butt in the air as she started to crawl towards Dante, babbling all the way.

"I think she likes you," came an unfamiliar voice from behind. Dante turned around to see, Lysa squatting on all fours. Her face reddened a little bit, and she grunted. The back of her diaper puffed out a little bit and Dante's face contorted as he realized what she was doing.

"Um...do you mind?" the blonde girl said with an annoyed look. "A little privacy please?" Dante continued to gawk. "I'm pooping." Dante felt a lump in his throat form from that last piece, but couldn't take his eyes away. "Look the other way, you jackass!" Lysa practically screamed.

Dante snapped his head around the other direction, only to have it collide with a very sloppy and wet kiss on his cheek, courtesy of Midori. Eugh! The Asian girl clapped her hands with delight at the look on Dante's face.

"Ok, you can turn around, now. I'm done," Dante heard. Dante spun around on his rump to keep his back to and his face away from the less coherent of his two new cellmates. Lysa was now, sitting on her bottom, likely spreading the mess around in her diaper, as she smoothed her dress out to cover more of it.

"Sorry about that, new fish", the blonde said. "Old habits die hard. I'm just not used to pooping around boys, you know. I think it might be a girl thing. Boys never seem to care where they go or who they go in front of. Aaah whatever." A new wave of revulsion spread through Dante, and it must have shown.

"Oh yeah, where are my manners?" Lysa corrected herself. She took a deep breath. "Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhahahahaaaaaaa" Within seconds the girl was bawling, tears flowing down her cheeks. The playpen door opened and in came the woman wearing the nursery scrubs.

"Lysa, what's the matter sweetie?" she cooed, before sniffing the air. "Ooooh. Someone needs a change. Okay, come on." The woman in the scrubs scooped the blonde chick up and carried her out of the pen, shutting the door behind her and took her over to a nearby giant changing table.

Dante watched on with a mix of disgust, horror, and fascination as Lysa calmly placed her hands behind her head and laid back as if she were getting a tan at the beach while her diaper was changed. Legs held up, ass in the air, wiped powdered and re-diapered in a matter of minutes, and the girl didn't seem phased one bit. Dante caught her rolling her eyes as she gurgled and cooed for the woman while being carried back to the playpen.

"There, that's better," Lysa said to a dumbstruck Dante as she brushed her hands together. "So first thing's first. If you haven't figured it out by now, you're dead."

WHAT?!

Chapter 3: Definitely Not Dead

Have you ever experienced something that caught you so off guard, you literally didn't know what to think? You didn't feel happy, or sad, or angry, or even confused? "Numb" or "nothing" wouldn't even be apt descriptors. Those are still words with concepts attached to them that show some level of comprehension or cognition. The best words to describe this sensation would be "complete and utter, time-stopping, shut down."

Sometimes that moment comes after an unexpected life-altering shock. Like your parents announcing their divorce at Thanksgiving dinner because one or both of them are gay and they're tired of living the lie...oh, and Mom is pregnant again. Or finding out your best friend shot themselves in the face immediately after texting you "c u 2morrow".

It usually doesn't last too long. Emotions hate being left out of the party, and soon rush in to fill the gap; and time MUST be accounted for- so even as it stops, it's still jogging in place, ready to sprint forward to catch up to the present. Still, that moment, that brief shut down of synapses, that mini-stroke, happened.

For Dante, this was that moment: Sitting in a giant playpen, dressed as a baby, being told that he was dead, by a girl who had just shit herself in front of him only minutes earlier. This did not compute. Dante was a processor who had just witnessed his first "2" after a lifetime of binary. Not only was it illogical, it was from completely out of left field. This did not work. This was peanut butter and mayonnaise on banana bread.

He sat there, his brain trying to make sense of the sentence. Lysa, the aforementioned deliverer of what-the-fuck-news, sat, waiting. She had repositioned herself so that she sat in with her legs criss-crossed. She pulled her short dress over knees, hiding the fresh diaper she was wearing. She yanked the bows out of her golden locks and her pig tails came undone, her hair falling to the side of her face. She wore the type of passive, uncomfortable smile of the hospital nurse having to deliver bad news to the family.

Her eyes remained immobile, patiently waiting for Dante to say something. Anything. To ask questions, to yell things at her, to break down and cry. Anything.

Midori, meanwhile, had crawled over to the other side of the playpen. She had had the brilliant idea to scoot her backside up against the mesh siding of the playpen and prop her legs up, so her legs and torso formed a rough 90 degree angle. Currently she seemed fascinated on how many different permutations of her own fingers she could fit into her mouth. The teenager was enthralled by the strings of saliva formed between her lips and fingers.

Dante wasn't dead. How could he be dead? If he had died, he would have remembered it. He definitely didn't feel dead. He was still breathing, seeing, hearing, talking, thinking. He was positive that he had felt his heart pounding when the first Judy in the white blouse and black skirt had put him on the padded table and he found himself paralyzed. Time for a rebuttal.

"Uh....no?", was all that Dante could manage.

Lysa "humphed " a laugh. "What do you mean 'uh...no?'" she said "Oh yeah, kid, you're dead, and not figure of speech dead. You're 'dead', dead. D-E-A-D. Dead. Sooner you come to accept it, the sooner we can move on and go about our forever."

"I'm not dead.", Dante said firmly.

"Uh...yeah...ya are." Lysa retorted with the certainty of someone arguing that the grass was green and the sky was blue.

"No, I'm not." Dante replied.

"Yes, you are.," Lysa said back.

"No I'm not," he said.

"Yes you are," she pressed

"No I'm not!" he spat.

"Yes you are!" she spat back.

"NO I'M NOT!" he shouted. Lysa held up her hand as if to say "stop" and she pointed sideways. The Judy with the bleach blonde hair and the nursery worker's scrubs had come up to the side of the playpen and was peering in through the mesh . Her hands were on her hips and her left eyebrow was cocked in question.

"Dante, Lysa, are you two playing nice?" she asked in that way that parents give more as a hint than a question. Lysa silently nodded her head and stuck her thumb in her mouth. Dante copied.

"Are either of you cranky babies?" Both shook their heads. "Do you need a spanking? A time out? A nap? A milky ba-ba?" To all of these they silently answered "no". Lysa was particularly enthusiastic on saying no to the bottle.

"Okay, you two, but play nice, or Mama Judy will have to spank.", then she turned around and walked over to her rocking chair and sat down. Lysa let out an audible sigh of relief.

"Alright," Lysa sighed taking her thumb out of her mouth. "Let's try this again. But let's be civil and try to talk like adults. I get enough of the arguing this when I talk to the real babies, especially the 2 and 3 year-olds." She took a deep breath. "Now, exactly WHY is it so hard to believe that you're dead?"

"Because, I didn't wake up dead." Dante answered matter-of-factly.. "I woke up here."

"And here," Lysa said gesturing all around them, "is where we go when we die." Dante said nothing. He just sat there, not believing, absent mindedly sucking on his thumb.

"Okay," Lysa said, chewing on her lip. "Let's try this another way. Let me guess: You lost consciousness, and when you woke up, you were in the clothes you last remembered wearing, and you had peed and pooped yourself?" Dante nodded.

"Then", Lysa went on, "one of those," she jerked her head sideways indicating the worker in the rocking chair, "cleaned you up, took off all of your body hair and then dressed you up like...that." Dante nodded again.

"Then," she continued, "you got force fed a bottle of delicious milk, got burped, and everything seemed really good for a little while. Am I warm?" Dante continued to nod. "Then, they brought you here. That's what happens to about everyone who comes here." she finished.

Dante nodded, still not really believing. Whatever this place was, dream or not, it was organized, so it didn't exactly baffle him that they had a standard operating procedure. Of course, this was still just a bizarre pill and booze induced dream, so it didn't matter. Time to set this nightmare chick straight.

"Look, Lysa...was it?" Dante started, putting on his most patronizing smile after taking his thumb out of his mouth. "Just because I'm in an unusual situation, doesn't mean I'm dead. There's a perfectly..." he paused, (reasonable wasn't a good word for it, and logical was right out) "plausible explanation for all of this."

"Oh really?" Lysa retorted, "how did you get here and wake up in a strange place?"

"Kidnapped," Dante stated a little cockily. "I was pretty drunk last night; would have been easy to take me."

"Okay, what about the wonder-women here that all look alike?" Lysa asked.

Dante shrugged, "plastic surgery and steroids."

"The milk?" she pressed.

"Drugged.", he smirked. Come on, that last part should have been obvious.

"These and all of this?" she gestured to their clothes and surroundings.

"There's a market and a manufacturer for everything, these days."

"Then what does anyone gain from all of this? Treating us like babies?" she asked. That was a tougher one. Dante didn't have an immediate answer for that. Then it came to him.

"Porn." he said. Lysa's jaw dropped. "Yeah, porn," he went on. "There are probably hidden cameras throughout this entire building that are secretly filming us so that sickos and pervs can whack off at home on their computers."

"That's messed up!" Lysa exclaimed. Dante shrugged, his cocky little smile grew just a bit bigger.

"Like I said," he shrugged, "there's a market and a manufacturer for everything these days. Besides, I'm pretty sure this all just a really weird dream. Like I said, I was really drunk last night."

"Oh." Lysa said, an evil smile spreading across her face. "So we're dreaming now, are we?" She leaned forward and crawled over to him, slowly, methodically, seductively, her hips swaying with every stride. She licked her lips as she drew nearer. She gently caressed his forearm, and leaned in, her eyes closed as if to kiss him.

Dante closed his eyes, and puckered his lips. Awww yeah! This dream was just starting to get hot! He could feel her breath on his face.

"Dori!" she said, in the same high pitched voice people use to call their pets. "Num-nums!" Pain shot through Dante's hand as Midori- apparently having broken free from her contemplation of mouths and fingers- bit into it., his arm being held in place by Lysa's iron grip.

Dante screamed in agony as Midori drew blood from his hand and tore at it the way a dog tears at a piece of meat. Tears ran down his cheeks unbidden as skin ripped off. Midori stopped biting and blew a raspberry at Dante as he continued to wail. Lysa released her grip and sat back, mimicking his prior smug expression.

"Yeah," Lysa said, "I taught her to do that."

"Midori!" The Judy in the nursery scrubs yelled as she threw open the gate to the playpen. "Not again! Bad baby! Bad baby! Mama Judy spank!" Midori was quickly picked up, spanked on her diapered bottom, and then laid back down on the playpen floor while she went limp. The nursery worker walked over and took Dante's hand.

"Aw, poor Dante's got a nasty boo-boo," she murmured as she looked at his mutilated hand. "Let me kiss and make it better." The woman took Dante's hand, and pressed her lips against his bloody wound. "Mwuh," she said, making an exaggerated kissing noise. Then she took her hand and lightly wiped the blood off Dante's hand. None of it seemed to stick to her, simply vanishing as she wiped it off.

His hand was healed! No pain, no bite marks, no blood, no missing skin. Nothing. It was as if the last 30 seconds hadn't happened. The woman picked Midori's lifeless form up and carried her out of the playpen, shutting gate behind her. "Naughty Midori!" she said, as she propped the overgrown baby in a stool in the corner.

"So," Lysa said, the smirk still not leaving her face. "Still dreaming? Still shooting porn?"

Chapter 4: Of Heaven, Hell, and Here

Okay.... So maybe there was more to this situation than it being a dream, or some convoluted fetish porn filming site. (Dante felt a little sick of himself for that- who would even conceive of such a thing?) It certainly hurt too much to be a dream. The hand kissing thing was DEFINITELY not normal. This was definitely out of the realm of any kind of normal. Physics and modern medicine had just taken a back alley beating at the hands of a kiss.

"So," Lysa spoke up while Dante continued to stare at his renewed hand, "the real question is, how did you die?" The obvious answer would have been "murder". He hadn't been doing anything terribly dangerous, just throwing the biggest birthday bash ever with him and about 100 of his closest friends. Maybe someone had had a grudge against him and poisoned him, or killed him in his sleep.

"I can see that look in your eyes, Dante," Lysa interrupted Dante's train of thought. "You're over thinking this. You're making up a story to fill in the blanks. What REALLY happened?" Bitch had a point. If he was dead, it probably wasn't murder. Probably some kind of accident. A lot of people were drinking last night, maybe somebody got drunk and accidentally crushed his head in by knocking over a stereo or something. Then again, Dante couldn't remember how drunk everyone else had gotten, since he had gotten so hammered himself. Wait a minute....

"Wait for iiiit..." Lysa said, staring intently into Dante's face. Dante had gotten REALLY drunk last night. So drunk that some people had carried him over to the couch. There had been some stupid argument about whether or not to take his shoes off and let him sleep, or keep them on and draw on his face. Some kind of dumb party rule or whatever.

Wait a minute. Wait. A. Minute. When Dante had woken up today, he hadn't remembered wearing any shoes. What if the party guests had left him alone? He had fallen asleep on his back. What if everyone left him alone, and he had gotten alcohol poisoning? What if he had threw up and choked on his own vomit and nobody noticed till it was too late? SHIT!

"Aaaand we're there." , Lysa commented sarcastically. "Congratulations. I thought you were going to try and beat Midori's record for denial. Thanks for the pleasant surprise and proving me wrong."

Dante shifted his weight to all fours. It felt oddly comfortable on the padded playpen floor. No wait. Something about that was wrong. The fact that it felt right was wrong. Maybe he wasn't dead, just going crazy. Maybe this was all his hallucination? Like the padded playpen was really a padded cell, and his deranged mind was substituting in babyish images.

He felt a pair of hands shove him onto his side. Dante landed with a bit of a grunt, but was unhurt. He looked up and saw Lysa's disapproving glare, her arms crossed with her standing on her knees. She had a very stern look on her face, despite being dressed like a one-year-old at the oldest.

"Stop it," Lysa warned, "you're already over the hardest part, now. Don't regress."

Dante's mother had once told him that when people had multiple traumatic experiences occur in rapid succession to them, they often coped with it by putting one dilemma off to the side while coping with the other. Dante's two traumas were that he might be dead, and that he was in a place full of crazies that insisted on treating him like a baby. If Dante was dead, then there might be nothing he could do to help that. There might be a way out of this infantilized situation if he knew more about it. Dante decided that he could accept being dead- at least temporarily. Time to find out more about here, wherever that was.

He laid back and avoided eye contact. Looking at Lysa wouldn't help much. The contrast between her tone and her garments was too much right now. For someone dressed like a baby, this girl had no shortage of attitude.

"Are we in Hell?" he asked. This felt a little like Hell.

"Don't be silly," she told him. "Hell is much worse than this. Hell is the worst torture your mind can imagine. I'd hardly call playpens and pacifiers for all eternity the worst torture imaginable."

"Then is this-?" Dante started

"Heaven?" Lysa interrupted. "You're joking, right?" she laughed. "Welcome to Heaven! Your reward for a lifetime of piety and Godly devotion is an endless supply of milk and mush!" She sighed. "Besides, I don't know about you, but I probably didn't deserve to go to Heaven, the way my life was going."

"Then where else is there?" Dante was starting to get worried.

"Limbo," Lysa said with resignation, "where Catholics say un-baptized babies go when they die."

"But... I'm not Catholic." Dante said indignantly.

"Neither am I." Lysa retorted, her hands on her hips. "Guess that doesn't matter to the Big Guy, huh?" Dante was pretty sure he'd never been baptized. His family never went to Church. Not that they were militant atheists, or anything; religion was just something that wasn't discussed. Something still didn't add up, though.

"I'm not a baby, either...obviously," Dante replied.

"A lot of the people here aren't either...obviously." Lysa answered. In a moment, the fire went out of her voice. "But we're treated like babies all the same. I think the Judys figure that if they treat us like babies, then it doesn't matter." She motioned over to the Judy in the nursery scrubs, and Dante followed her gaze. Midori had apparently served her time on the naughty stool and was now cradled in the Judy's arms being tickled and nuzzled while the Asian girl giggled and squirmed in pure delight.

"Sad part is, they're not wrong," she continued. "Eventually, everyone in here snaps and starts playing the part for real. I think it might be something about Limbo itself; something in the air that makes you want to act like a baby. Some only take a few months. Most make it a year or two before the constant treatment breaks them. A few make it longer than that, ten...maybe twenty years; but I don't know of anyone who's made it more than a hundred years. Eventually, you get broken down, and you become a true innocent again." She kept staring at Midori- completely wrapped up in the strange woman's attentions. "Midori made it about a year and half before the change became permanent. Poor thing."

Dante looked at Midori and started to wonder. Had she been just a regular teenager at one point? Someone who died young and was sentenced here because a dude in a robe hadn't poured water over her head? Forced to be a baby for all eternity?

Part of him envied her stupidity. This place might not be so bad if you didn't know any better. No responsibilities, pretty women taking care of you and being nice to you. He wouldn't have to feed himself. Heck, if even half of this was true, he wouldn't even have to dress himself. Hell, he wouldn't even have to wipe- NO! DON'T THINK LIKE THAT! FIGHT IT! Dante sat up, his eyes hardened.

"How do I fight it?" he asked, staring at Lysa, his eyes burning with hatred- not for her- but for what he had almost thought. There was a spark there for a moment, between the two of them. A connection made, however brief.

Lysa nodded her approval; she had felt it too, then. "For starters, you have to be honest with yourself. Denial and hope are poisons in this place. Know in your heart that there are forces bigger than you keeping you here, and that means you're not leaving. If you try and escape, you'll be more likely to crack when they catch you. That hope will turn into despair and that's when you'll give in."

Dante nodded. He wasn't going to try to escape. Yet. He needed more information first, and some time to formulate a plan. Lysa gave him an odd look. Goddamn it, he needed to get a poker face.

"Also," she went on, building up steam, "you're going to be forced into doing things that you won't be proud of. Get over it. Dignity has no place here." Dante could almost imagine a general's helmet on her head, and riding crop in her hand. He imagined the American flag in the background of the playpen. "You will pee and poop yourself. You will drink from bottles and eat in a highchair. We will probably see each other naked by the end of the day. Just let whatever humiliating thing happen, accept that it happened, that it'll definitely happen again, and move on with your day."

"If there's a way a small way to keep your dignity-like expecting jackasses who are still smart enough to understand you face the other way when you're pooping," Dante felt his face grow a little red from embarrassment. "Do it, but otherwise give up on embarrassment, dignity, shame, yada yada yada."

"Those whiners who scream to the ceiling 'I'm a big girl! I'm a big boy! Waaaaah!'" Lysa threw her hands up in mock distress. "Are the ones closest to cracking. And the angry kids who curse, and hit, and play rebel, get spanked every five minutes?....they're next in line. Cynicism is your friend".

Dante had to admit, this made some sense. It would be harder to break someone who didn't feel hope. Harder to change an aspect of someone who didn't emotionally invest a lot in that aspect. Don't give your tormentors much to torment. Speaking of which:

"What's the deal with the- um- Judy's?" Dante inquired.

"They're angels...sort of.", Lysa answered. "Created to be the perfect mommies, nannies, babysitters, caretakers...whatever." Lysa started listing off on her fingers, "They don't eat, drink, sleep, use the potty, (heh...weird vocabulary choice there), or do anything that doesn't immediately relate to treating us like we're rugrats. I mean, they don't even get dirty."

The image of the first Judy and her immaculate outfit despite being pushed into a puddle of vomit came to mind, as did the blood refusing to stain the Judy's hand after she kissed Dante's boo-boo....injury....injury...his mutilated hand.

Lysa shrugged, "I don't know if they literally think we're babies, or just treat us that way, but the result's the same. All but the most basic stuff that we say, they treat like baby talk anyways. Watch..."

Lysa turned and called out, "Hey Judy! Judy! I bet I could really improve your face by running my dad's lawn mower over it!" The Judy in the nursery scrubs walked over, Midori resting on her hip.

"Well someone sure sounds excited!" she cooed to them. "What is it, Lysa? What is it?"

Lysa turned her head back to Dante, "Now watch this." She started waving frantically and calling out in an excited and high pitched voice. "Dori! Dori! It's me! Lysa! Look at you, whoah! You're so high up there on that nice lady's hip! Hi Dori! Hi!" Midori waved back enthusiastically, enjoying all the attention from her playmate.

"Well it sure looks like someone missed their little friend.", mused the Judy. The angel turned her head to the baby-teen on her hip. "Are you ready to go back and play? Are you? Are you?" she didn't bother to wait for an answer. "Well, okaaaay. But no more biting." Midori gave a solemn wide-eyed nod.

The playpen gate opened again, and Midori was plopped down among them. She immediately crawled over and gave Lysa a sloppy hug, the two girls almost falling over themselves. Lysa, gently nudged Midori away, "Thank you, Dori," she said, "now Dante and I need to keep talking, otay?" Midori nodded and babbled something before crawling off.

Lysa turned back to Dante, "See? They only hear what they want to hear." Interesting. So in theory, Dante could talk to some of the others, maybe make a few allies, and form an

escape plan or rebellion right under his captors noses. He got that look from Lysa again. Was she psychic or something? Damn!

"What happens if they're not needed?" Dante asked, trying to take the feeling of suspicion off of him. "Like what do they do when we're sleeping or just playing....(don't say playing nice don't say playing nice)..nice?" FUCK!

"Depends," Lysa said. "They seem to keep a certain ratio of Judy to baby. If we're with more babies, and there's nothing for them to do, they usually talk to each other. Sometimes, they tell stories about us- like the things we did that they thought were cute or funny. Other times it's water-cooler talk and gossip." she shrugged. "Y'know, the kind of stuff that grown-ups talk about when they're sure the kids are distracted or are too young to understand. They don't even care if you listen in. It's how I found out about a lot of this stuff." Her eyes darted to the side...an afterthought. "That and I was lucky enough to find someone to show me the ropes of this place."

"Oh yeah? Who was it?", Dante asked, genuinely interested. If Lysa knew more people who were like them around here, maybe he could make friends with them and use it to his advantage later.

"Next question." Lysa said.

"I already asked it," Dante pressed, "I said who showed you the ropes when you first got here?"

"And I said...NEXT. QUESTION." Yikes! Backpedal backpedal backpedal!

"Ok," Dante said, wisely changing the subject, "what's the deal with the milk?" Safe choice. Definitely a safe choice. Besides, something was up with that milk.

"That," Lysa sighed, "is Angel milk, if you know what I mean." She rolled over onto her back, her diaper on plain display and her legs idly kicking the air. Oddly familiar. "They call it the milk of human kindness." her voice mellowed out as if she were daydreaming. "It takes away all ambition, and all inhibitions. Without those things, you're innocent, free from any aggressive or shameful thoughts. It basically makes you a baby for a little while. The Judies love to force it down our throats. The buzz makes the idea of going full baby seem more appealing to a lot of people."

"You can't get away from it, entirely.", she went on. "They serve it at least twice a day. Don't expect to do any heavy thinking right after breakfast or dinner, or if you can't sleep through the night. Still, if you can avoid coming off as too cranky, or fussy most of the time, they won't give you any extra.

"Don't worry," she said, sitting back up and crossing her legs, "it's delicious AND habit forming, but it's not permanent- I think the stuff they give to us in the bottles is cut with something." Her tone went back to normal. "But even after it wears off, it has lingering side effects."

"What kind of side effects?" Dante asked.

"If a baby can't do it, we probably can't do it either. For starters," Lysa pointed to the ground, "Have either you or I stood up on our own two feet since this conversation started?" Nope, that they hadn't. Dante had barely noticed, it felt so natural to be crawling around. The last time he had stood up was when he was running away...before the milk.

"What else?" he asked.

"Look down at your crotch. Any idea how to get that onesie off?" Dante stared down at the crotch-snaps. Did he know how to get undressed? Nope. Getting the blue onesie off seemed about as out there as quantum physics right then.

"What else?" Dante repeated.

"We're not potty-trained anymore." she responded flatly.

"Seriously?" he questioned in disbelief. To be trapped in diapers was one thing. To not possess the alternative skill-set, thus needing diapers sounded far fetched, even here. Dante suddenly felt uncomfortable.

"Can you even tell me how to use a potty?" Lysa questioned. "Bet you can't." It was true. Dante could remember what a potty looked like- a funny chair with a hole in it. It made a funny sound when you pulled the handle down. He could even remember having used a potty before. But for the life (after-life?) of him, he couldn't list the steps in how to use one, anymore. His discomfort grew.

"Can you even think of another word for potty?" Lysa pressed. God help him, he couldn't. He felt a horrible need growing inside of him. Dante was about to explode, a dam about to burst.

"I'm about to pee!" he shrieked. He didn't even finish the sentence before his bladder let loose. Lysa quickly turned around. Relief, sweet relief flooded his every synapse as he flooded the diaper. His diaper. He shuddered at both of those thoughts.

"Okay, done." Dante hung his head in shame, quickly before correcting himself. Mustn't let himself fall too deeply into pity. "So," he admitted to himself, as Lysa shimmied back around, "I just pissed my pants."

"No you didn't." Lysa told him. "You wet your diaper. It didn't even leak through to your other clothes. Besides, you're not wearing pants " she smiled. Was she actually making a joke?

"Seriously," she chuckled dryly, "none of the babies get dressed in pants here. Closest things they have are shortalls. It's like they really want to hammer the baby thing home; I guess pants are too grown-up or something" She shrugged and gestured to herself. "Same

thing goes for dresses and skirts that actually cover your underwear. I think it's another form of control."

"So let me get this straight," Dante summarized, "These Stepford Wives dope us up on soma and control every part of our lives like Big Brother till we lose it?"

"Uh...yeah..." Lysa said, for the first time sounding uncertain. "I guess so." Heh. Blondes.

"Not much of a reader?" Dante asked, feeling like he had the upper hand for once in this conversation. Thank you Mrs. Applegate.

"No," Lysa said, her eyebrow cocked, in curiosity. "I read a lot back when I was alive. I was actually planning on being the first girl in my family to go to college. I caught the Brave New World and 1984 references. I just don't get what you were talking about with the Stepford Wives. Must be after my time." Seriously? She hadn't seen the movie? Either the good one or the remake?

"How old are you?" Dante asked. Lysa got that smug look on her face.

"You know those old fashioned cloth diapers, with the safety pins and everything?" she asked. Dante nodded. Like the kind worn in the old cartoons. "When I first got here," Lysa said, "they were just called diapers. Disposables hadn't really become popular yet."

Seriously?! This chick was THAT old? She must've been old enough that if she were still alive, she'd be back in diapers again anyways.

"Yeah," she went on by way of explanation, "this place sort of changes to keep up with the times and the latest baby fads. I've been able to keep up on the slang and lingo by talking with other new fish, like you. So don't be so surprised that I don't talk like some old biddie!" Ironically enough, being prideful that she didn't sound old had the opposite effect. She was starting to reek of "I'm old, but I'm hip...so not really that hip."

"Thing is though," Lysa said, changing the subject back, "I've worn cloth, and I've worn disposables. I say if you're gonna be stuck in diapers forever, go with the disposables."

She was right, now that Dante thought about it. Compared to his wet cloth underwear, (though hardly a fair comparison), his wet disposable felt far better. The damp warmth felt good, and the diaper swelled slightly, creating a mushy feeling around his genitals, almost as if a warm sponge was massaging him down there.

Whoah! All of a sudden, Dante's diaper felt a little bit tighter. Something else, besides the diaper had started swelling. He looked down at his padded crotch. He could feel the erection, but couldn't see it. (Take that khakis!)

"Um...Lysa," Dante blushed, "I thought you said if a baby couldn't do it, we couldn't do it." He gestured to his crotch and gyrated slightly to get the point across. "I think I might be at risk of having a very un-childlike accident here." Lysa just smiled and rolled her eyes.

"Dumb ass," she said. "You got a stiffie from your first wet diaper, didn't you? Baby boys get erections all the time. Heck, it's probably why they're harder to potty train." Hmmm, maybe. That made some sense.

"Baby girls can get wet in more ways than one if you know what I mean. " she winked. "But as far as our plumbing goes, your seed shooter just got demoted to a squirt gun, and I'll never lactate, have a bun in my oven, or get a visit from my aunt flow again." Did that mean he could potentially have sex here? Apparently death was no cure for a male teenage libido.

Lysa started giving him that "don't even think about it look" again. Time to change the subject and distract himself again.

"So," Dante looked around nervously, "is there any cut off age for entrance into Limbo?" It was the best he could do. He couldn't think of any better questions.

Lysa shrugged. "There'd have to be. Even with a lucky break like Limbo, there'd have to be a point where God says 'You're old enough to go to Hell.' "

Memories from earlier crashed into Dante's brain.

"JUDY, HE WAS HERE AT ONE MINUTE BEFORE MIDNIGHT. HE WAS ONLY ONE MINUTE AWAY FROM BEING DECLARED LOST. IF I FUDGE ANY OF THE PAPER WORK, EVEN BY A MINUTE, HE DOESN'T GO INTO ANOTHER NURSERY!"

Eighteen. Eighteen-years-old was the cut off. If Dante Willis had died one minute later, he would have died a man. He would have been condemned to Hell for all eternity.

Chapter 5: Baby Blues

Dead. Limbo. One-minute short of eternal hellfire and brimstone. Instead he was sentenced to an eternal existence as an overgrown infant. All because he had died just one minute short of his 18th birthday. Sixty more seconds, and he would have gone to the Lake of Fire. That one realization made everything hit home for Dante. He was dead. He was in Limbo. He was stuck in a giant daycare center filled with other people who had died without a baptism. And the only options presented him were to either go insane and become a drooling idiot, or go with the flow and accept the treatment.

Fear welled up inside of Dante. He fell over onto his side and curled up in the fetal position. He stared straight ahead at the mesh walls of his new prison.

"Dante?", Lysa said. "Dante? You there, kid? Helloooo?" Dante just ignored her. His soggy diaper was starting to cool, too; his hairless crotch starting to chafe and itch. He ignored that too. "Criminey, kid, don't do this now! You just got here! Snap out of it, already!" Fuck her. Stupid blonde-headed -dead- bitch. He had problems of his own.

Apparently, finding out that he had had a near Hell experience was a more traumatizing experience than an actual death experience. A big baby experience didn't even compare. Mrs. Applegate had remarked once that "No one dies an atheist." Even atheists feared Hell on some level. It was better to rot in the ground than to be tortured till the end of time.

He would have gone to Hell if he had died one minute later. It just wouldn't get out of his head. It wasn't fair. He had been a pretty good kid all his life. Not great, but pretty good. He got mostly A's in school. He had never hit anyone, save in self defense, and generally listened to his parents. But all because his parents decided not to have some old child-molester drip water on his forehead when he was a baby, he was now stuck as a baby forever? That wasn't right! That wasn't fair! His vision got blurry as tears trickled down from his eyes.

No. What REALLY wasn't fair, was the fact that he was dead to begin with. He was supposed to be planning for college, not dead! He had had his whole life ahead of him. He wasn't supposed to worry about what happened when he died, that was what people did when they got old. Who knows, given enough time, maybe he would have gotten religious and been baptized and all that other stuff after he grew up. But now he was never going to grow up, in any sense of the word.

Dante murmured something under his breath.

"What was that, kid?" Lysa asked, leaning in closer to him.

"I said WHY DIDN'T THEY LEAVE MY SHOES ON?!" Dante roared. Lysa fell back and started shimmying away as Dante screamed at the top of his lungs. He could feel his face turning red and snot start pouring out his nose, but he didn't care. Fear had given way to anger. The feeling of the hot tears streaming down his face only increased his anger. He was transmuting his embarrassment into rage.

"WHY DIDN'T THEY LEAVE MY SHOES ON?! WHY THE FUCK DIDN'T THEY DRAW ON MY FACE! IF THEY HAD BEEN PLAYING A JOKE ON ME WHEN IT HAPPENED I WOULDN'T HAVE DIED! WHY...gasp....DIDN'T....gasp....THEY...gasp...DRAW...gasp...ON...gasp...MY FAAAAACE?!" Dante was lost to words at this point. He didn't have any left.

He started punching the floor of the playpen as hard as he could, right in the middle of it. He kept striking and striking. He wouldn't stop until he had either punched a hole in the floor or until his knuckles broke. Midori and Lysa looked on from opposite sides of the pen. Both had a look of shock and fear on their face.

On his sixth or seventh swing, Dante lost his balance and ended up sprawled on his stomach. Even his coordination was going because of that stupid milk. Too angry to bother to get up, Dante started pounding his palms on the floor and kicking his legs in a good old fashioned temper tantrum. Real mature. Not that it mattered, anymore.

He quickly found himself being picked up and held by the Judy. She used one arm to support his bum, and stroked his back with the other arm in an attempt to soothe the bawling baby teen. She bobbed up and down a little to try and cheer him up. He buried his face in her shoulder, sobbing, but was too tired right then to make any audible sound. He rubbed his nose on her scrubs. Didn't matter anyways, it's not like his mucus would stick to her.

"Awww, Dante, wussamatta, baby?" the angel cooed. Get real. She was his problem. Her and everything about this day was his problem. Her free hand left his back and he felt two fingers sticking into the leggings of his diaper. "Uh-ooooooh!" the Judy proclaimed with sing-song concern. "I know what's wroooong. SOMEONE had an accident. Off-we-go-for-a-change." She exited the playpen with Dante in tow.

There were so many things wrong with those last few remarks. "Uh oh?" As if she hadn't expected to find him wet? She wouldn't have checked him if she hadn't expected it. "Someone" had an accident? As if Dante didn't know that the Judy had been referring to him? Like she was going to stick her fingers in his diaper and then tell him that some other baby was wet? No, some other...aww skip it. Oh, and finally, why was it called an "accident"? THIS was no accident. They had intended for THIS to happen. From the very moment that they had strapped this wretched thing on his waist, THIS was the end-goal that they had had in mind. There was nothing "accidental" about the current situation at all.

Dante shut his eyes as he was being carried over to the changing table. He was so pissed he didn't want to even look at himself. He felt himself being lowered onto the soft padding of the changing table. He immediately became aware that he couldn't really move. He kept his eyes shut all the same.

"Here you go, sweetie" the Judy said. Dante felt a rubber teat brush his lips. He opened his mouth and accepted it. He needed some time without ambition or inhibition for a while. Screw Lysa and her pretentious know-it-all attitude and rules about enduring this crazy existence. Dante needed some kind of relief.

Dante sucked as hard as he could, waiting to accept the creamy milk. Except none came. Great, they had given him a pacifier! Now he had to go through this whole thing sober. These angels or whatever they were had to realize that their wards weren't really babies. They were too sadistic to be that dumb. Oh well, at least he had something to bite on.

Dante refused to open his eyes even as he felt nimble hands unbuttoning his snaps. He would not watch this. He would not look for Lysa, who was no doubt silently judging him for his breakdown. Even though he could squeeze his eyes shut, Dante's other senses were still at the mercy of his caregiver.

He felt the buttons being unsnapped, and his onesie becoming more like a shirt as it was shimmied up his hips past his stomach to his chest. He heard the scritch-scratch of Velcro as the tapes of his diaper were ripped loose. He felt the breeze as his moistened privates were exposed to open air, and smelled stale urine mixed in with the perfume of the soiled garment. He winced slightly as baby wipes were dragged across his cock and balls. He felt his legs lifted into the air and his rump got a similar treatment. He felt warmth and comfort as he was lowered down onto fresh padding.

He let out a brief sigh. Almost over. He grit his teeth- biting onto the pacifier- trying his best not to enjoy the feeling (and doing a pretty good job at it) as the new diaper became taped on and snug. Still filled to the brim with righteous fury, Dante was determined to not let the Judy have the satisfaction of thinking she had solved his problem.

What Dante had failed to account for, was the Judy deciding to blow a raspberry on his tummy.

PBBFFLLIITT! PBBFFLLIITT! PBBFFLLIITT!

A most rude noise interrupted Dante's loathing, and a jolt shot through his spine as the angel's lips and hot air flapped and vibrated on his stomach. If the spankings were like EMP's to his nervous system, then the tummy blowing was electro shock therapy targeting his pleasure centers. He squealed and squirmed as Mama Judy tickled him and said the nicest things to him, even if he couldn't understand them all. This was the most wonderful feeling in the world!

"Who's all nice and dry?!" the Judy cooed in motherese. "Who's all nice and dry?! Yyyou are! Yyyou are! Theeeeeere's a happy boy. Theeeeeere's a happy boy!" Everything seemed brighter and better; even the decorative cherubs on his waste seemed to be smiling more. The tickling subsided and Judy started buttoning Dante's blue onesie back up.

"Can't have too much tickling, or Mama Judy's gonna have to change you all over again. Isn't that right, Dante? Isn't that right?"

Dante's laughter died down, and the rational part of his mind hopped back in the driver's seat. In the back of his brain, Dante realized that the Judy's wouldn't even let him be miserable on his own terms. That's how much sway they had over him, now. That's how little control he really had. He wasn't even allowed to be angry unless they allowed it.

The Judy toted him back to the playpen and set him down. Then she picked up Midori and announced Midori's forthcoming change to all as she stepped out with the simple-minded girl. Why was it supposed to be private and discreet when a grown person relieved themselves, but was breaking news when a baby did it?

Dante didn't bother to look at Lysa. He braced himself for a cacophony of "What did I just tell you NOT to do's?" from Lysa. She would be unsympathetic. She'd survived this treatment for decades. It hadn't yet been half a day, and Dante was sure he was already half way to breaking completely.

"You okay, Dante?" she asked? You okay, Dante?! Was this a setup?

"Yeah, sorry I freaked out." he replied. Here it came.

"It's alright." she said. "Happens to all of us sometimes. It's just that, usually, it's not till couple days in this place that the initial grief sets in." She said "us". Maybe super-shrew was a real person after all. Maybe she was worth confiding in outside of pumping for information.

"Yeah...sorry," Dante sniffed. "I kind of had a breakdown, there didn't I?" Lysa was kind enough right then not to agree. He took a deep breath. "When they brought me here, I heard them say that if I was one minute later, I wouldn't be allowed in here."

Lysa clapped her hand over mouth. Her eyes widened with recognition. "Oh my" she sputtered, "you mean...?" Dante could only nod. He was already all cried out. Lysa crawled over and hoisted her self onto her knees. She held her arms open, inviting him for a hug. Despite his ego, he shuffled toward her and accepted it.

She squeezed him, tightly. He squeezed her right back. No back rubbing, nose wiping, bouncing, cooing, or cuddling. This is what a hug should be like: Two people just holding each other, equals if only for the moment. The moment didn't last though. A third set of arms joined the hug, and Dante found himself on the receiving in of another sloppy drool covered kiss. The Judy looked on from outside the playpen, having already placed Midori back inside. The angel just stood there, mesmerized by the cuteness of three children playing nicely together in a big group cuddle.

"Love you too, Dori," Lysa said, sounding only slightly exasperated. "Now go play." Midori complied.

"Thank you." Dante whispered, still embracing Lysa.

"Welcome," she whispered back. They released and looked at each other for what seemed like a while. Remembering the conversation that the two Judy's had had rocked him to his very core. Why would they even tell him that? Why would they even bother to say that in front of him?

The wheels in Dante's head started turning. His eyes glazed over as he searched inward. The Judies treated everyone here like babies, no matter what. That meant talking over them like they didn't understand what was being said.

BEEN HERE SINCE 11:59 PM EASTERN STANDARD TIME.

IT'S THE 18TH NO NEW ARRIVALS TILL NEXT YEAR.

ANOTHER NURSERY.

Doors labeled 0101A, 0102A, all the way down to 1017AB and beyond.

Eureka!

"Sorry if the hug was uncomfortable." Lysa broke the silence. "Being a baby for so long kind of destroys your sense of having personal space. It's something you just have to get used to."

Dante smiled. He felt a small thrill surge through him. He was inches away from crashing his car into his parents garage. "Not necessarily." Lysa shook her head, sadly. She cupped Dante's face in her hands.

"Kid, I've already told you:" nothing but pity showed in her eyes. "There's no getting out of here. There's no winning because we've already lost. We're here because of a higher power." Dante looked over to see if the Judy was still watching. She wasn't.

"If this power is so high," Dante asked, "why is it that they have limits?" Now it was Lysa's turn to be truly dumbstruck. She dropped her hands down to her side, and stared in bewilderment.

"Lived on the East Coast before you died, didn't you?" he remarked, more of a statement than an actual question. Lysa didn't correct him. "I bet everyone here lived in an Eastern Time Zone, too. That's why the exact time of my death was important."

"And," he went on, "you died on October 17th, same as me. "That's why the door to this nursery was 1017." Dante could almost taste her disbelief. "Aaaand," Dante built up steam, "there's only so many babies that can be held here. That's why they have 1017A, 1017B, and so on. Then they have to make room for a new nursery. Tell me I'm wrong!" She wouldn't be able to.

"I don't think I can," Lysa said. Knew it! "But what's your point? What does knowing all this prove?"

"It proves that they're not all powerful or omnipotent. If they were, every kid that ever died would be in this place. They wouldn't need a filing system or separate nurseries! They have limits here. And if they have limits, that means"

"I don't like where this is going, kid", Lysa quavered. "This has bad idea all over it, and it's still just your first day."

"Oh, I'm not getting out today." Dante practically shouted, his blood pumping. "It'll take a while, obviously. But it's possible. There's still hope!" Lysa rolled her eyes and smacked her own forehead.

"Now what did I specifically tell you NOT to do?", she said. "Are you a slow learner or something? Hope is a poison here. Too much hope, and you'll go insane with despair when it doesn't pan out. Or worse."

"What could be worse than ending up like... her?" Dante said gesturing towards Midori. Midori smiled, only knowing that she was being talked about.

"What's worse?" Lysa said indignantly, "What's worse?! Let's go someplace, and I'll show you what too much hope can do to you. Mama Judyyyyy!" she called out.

Chapter 6: Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here

Lysa called out to the Judy, who came walking over to the side of the playpen. "What is it sweetie?" the angel asked, tilting her head in question.

"Take me to see Caroline.", Lysa demanded.

"What was that?", the Judy asked, "You wanna go see Caroline?" The Judy put her hand to her chin. "Welll, I don't knooooow."

Lysa puffed her bottom lip out, and made puppy dog eyes at the angel in the nursery scrubs. "Pweeeeeease." Lysa begged and threw in some baby gibberish for good measure. Dante felt a little sick. This was almost too cutesie to stand.

Well, alright," the Judy relented. "You've been a very good girl today, so I don't see the harm in visiting your little sister." Little sister? That would mean that Lysa and her little sister had died on the same day. Still, how was meeting a younger kid stuck in this place supposed to dissuade Dante from planning an escape.

The Judy walked away and disappeared from sight as she rounded a cubicle wall. Dante, looked over at Lysa. What was she trying to prove, anyway?

"So why do you want me to see your sister?", Dante asked. No argument against escape was going to convince him otherwise at this point. Now that he was already figuring out how Limbo worked, it was only a matter of time before he hatched a brilliant escape plan and got out. It might take him a year or two, maybe even longer....but he was effectively immortal. So as long as he didn't break like Midori had, he had all the time in the world.

"Just shut up until we get there, okay? Then I'll show you. Deal?, she said.

"Why don't you want to escape?", Dante asked, ignoring the question.

"Why do you want to escape already?" Lysa shot back, "Even the weakest wills take months to fully regress in this place. You're in no immediate danger. Besides," she added, "where would you go? Hell, yeah, that's a good option. And it's not like Heaven will take you."

"I could always go back to Earth.", Dante answered, "that's an option, right? Where else do ghosts come from? Better to walk the land of the living forever than to crawl the land of the dead."

"Dumbass," Lysa scolded, "You have to have unfinished business to go back to Earth."

"I had my whole life ahead of me, so I have LOTS of unfinished business.", Dante retorted.

"People like us don't go back to Earth.," she countered, "You ever heard of the diapered ghost? I didn't think so." Her nostrils flared and she was starting to huff and puff. It looked like it was about her turn to have a temper tantrum. Time for a little diplomacy.

"Look," Dante said, holding up his hands, "I'm seriously not trying to make you mad, and I'm a little confused as to why you're so pissed off about this. I mean, worse case scenario: my escape fails, I get spanked, go limp, and get put in time out or fed a bottle. I'd just have to improve my plan and try again. Right?"

The Judy walked back in, pushing a giant two person stroller and wearing a rather large baby carrier backpack. The stroller was colored pink on one side and baby blue on the other. It was pushed up to the edge. "Time for a trip, guys!", the Judy announced.

Lysa seemed to gain control of her temper. "Look," she said through gritted teeth "just get in the stroller, and let me do the talking, alright? If you're still not convinced to give up on an escape plan, I'll even help you plan it, okay? This seemed reasonable enough, so Dante agreed.

Lysa reached out to the Judy as if to say "UP!", and the nursery worker obliged, easily lifting the baby-teen into the air and placing her gently into the pink side of the stroller before strapping her in with a three point harness.

Dante copied her and sailed through the air before he was gently plopped beside her, a three point harness quickly strapping him down. He really couldn't move his upper body much, though he could still move his head freely. His feet rested comfortably on a bar. The harness pressed against his diaper slightly, making him all the more aware of it, but all and all, it felt a little bit like a roller coaster harness.

Heh. Neat. They were going somewhere. That meant Dante could get a better idea of the layout of this place. All the better to coordinate his exodus. A few minutes of cajoling later, Midori was riding on the Judy's back in the baby carrier. The Judy for her part, didn't grunt, groan or complain. The three of them might as well have been rag dolls as far as she was concerned. "Off we go," she announced, and Dante and Lysa went gliding along the bluish grey indoor/outdoor carpet and out the of the giant cubicle that marked off their area.

As soon as they walked out of the play pen area, the whole of Limbo Nursery 1017AB came alive with noise. There hadn't been a door closing off the play pen area that they had been in, not to mention a roof, but almost no noise had made it through the cubicle-walled off area that they had left.

Now, Dante was once again aware of just how enormous this place was as the giggles and cries of children echoed off the walls. It was like all of the sound was being filtered out of the play areas and into the areas in between, making each play area seem peaceful and quiet, but the outside seem abuzz with activity.

Left. Right. Left. Left. Left. Right. Circle around a cubicle wall, doing a U-Turn. Right. Right Again. Straight for about 50 feet. Left. Dante could barely keep track. The pathways twisted and turned so many ways, it was like a labyrinth. Dante only barely managed to keep his sense of direction by looking for the giant murals that adorned two of the opposite walls. No way the uninitiated could make it through this place.

Dante could catch brief glances into each area through the open space where a door would be as they passed by it. A group of twelve year olds were playing with big hollow blocks. Stacking them and throwing them. That looked kind of fun. A group of elementary school aged children were making things with play-doh. One or two of them looked to be making some decently complicated creation, like people. One of the play-doh men even looked a little like Mr. Bill. Neat.

A group of babies about Dante's age were finger painting (all food based paint, Lysa insisted). One girl was even making a beautiful and very realistic self portrait. Clearly she had been an artist in life. A shame it had gone to waste. Yet another group were being read to, all huddled around in a circle as an African American Judy with red rimmed glasses smiled and read to them; though he couldn't hear what story it was.

Another cubicle held actual babies crawling around and playing with kittens. Kittens? All dogs go to heaven, but cats go to Limbo? Wait. Animals didn't really have souls, eh who cared? Stranger things had happened to Dante today.

Lysa pointed all of these details out and more, making sure Dante wouldn't miss them. Was this her plan, then. He shouldn't leave Limbo because even though he'd be treated as less than a one-year-old, he had a variety of entertainment options? What next? A dental plan? Oh wait, unlikely. Most babies didn't have enough teeth. The point was Dante remained unconvinced.

That's when their stroller came up to a pair of doors. They were the kind you might expect to see in a hospital, except they had babyish stencils on them. Rainbows. Baby Animals. Baby versions of certain famous copyrighted cartoon characters that shall not be mentioned here. (So there was some place where Disney and Warner Bros. couldn't reach out and sue.) Above the doors in baby blue stenciling was a wooden sign that said "Newborn Room". Below that was a more plain sign that said "Quiet Please". (Thank whoever that this place hadn't taken away his ability to read!)

It was funny that he hadn't noticed these doors when he first came into Nursery 1017AB. They must be along the fourth wall, relatively under and behind the stairs that Dante had descended when he first arrived.

Their Judy stopped pushing the stroller briefly so that she could press a bright red button. The doors whirred open automatically, and they were pushed quickly through. Dante heard them whir back to closed as he looked around the new room.

If the outside area had been like a daycare or nursery school, then this place eerily resembled a newborn's ward at a hospital. It was just as big as out there, but more orderly with rows and rows of newborn cots in straight lines. A light tinkling, like a music box, permeated the air and played a lullaby as they walked around. Judy's, all dressed in flowing robes- looking vaguely like young Mother Theresa's- walked down the aisles, their faces stoic but their eyes serene.

Dante could see at least a dozen sitting in rocking chairs with a newborn baby, an actual newborn baby, in their arms. They were clearly breast feeding the babies. They were wet nurses! Another piece of conversation floated into Dante's cerebral cortex.

I THINK THE STUFF THEY GIVE TO US IN THE BOTTLES IS CUT WITH SOMETHING.

If the cut milk made someone think like a baby for a little while, and these babies were drinking straight from the tap, then these kids were in no danger of ever growing up.

"Get a better look around, you'll want to see this." Lysa instructed

Dante started to squirm in the stroller. Not violently so, just enough to get his Judy's attention. When she looked over at him, he held his arms out and in his most babyish tone, said "UP! UP!"

"Ok, hold on, little guy," the Judy said as she circled around and unstrapped Dante from the stroller. With a little cajoling, she managed to carry Dante on her hip and still keep Midori on her back. Midori had apparently been tuckered out by the trip and was snoozing in the baby-carrier. Even with two babified teenagers on her person, she didn't look any more awkward than a mother of twins might.

From up on the Judy's hip, Dante noticed two more things. The ratio of Judy to infant here was much lower. They were crawling all over the place. It reminded him of a very quiet and peaceful ant colony. Within seconds of a newborn crying, a Judy would be attending to their every need, such as it were. Newborns didn't need that much in terms of variety.

The Judy's were constantly, breastfeeding, burping, changing, and rocking the newborns to sleep. Never complaining, never tiring, never running out of milk.

The other thing Dante realized was that there were far actual babies here than outside. Dante had estimated that for every one actual baby out in the nurseries play areas, there had been ten people who were old enough to at least be potty trained and in school. Here it was the reverse: For every twenty newborns, there might be one non-newborn wrapped in swaddling clothing.

"Here we are," announced their Judy in a chipper tone as they came to a stop. "Dante, we're here to see Lysa's baby sister, so I'm going to have to put you back in the stroller, okay?" Dante nodded, as if he had a choice. He wasn't bothered, he figured he had seen what Lysa had wanted him to see anyways. The Judy lowered Dante back down into the stroller, and strapped him again.

Lysa was studying Dante, seeing if he had picked up on what she had wanted him to. He nodded that he had. This place had a completely different feel to it. Very serene. Very quiet. Kind of boring.

They were positioned right in front of a regular sized newborn cot. A clipboard on it said: "Caroline Strata. Arrived October 17, 1954 2:36 AM EST" In it sat a baby girl, so young

and tiny you could only guess she was a girl by the pink swaddling clothes she was wrapped in. (What? Newborns all look the same at that age?) Her hair, if she had any wisps, was covered by a pink wool cap.

"Excuse me," the Judy in the nursery scrubs asked a passing wet nurse, "Lysa is here for a little visit with Caroline. Would you mind if we used a rocking chair for a little while?" The wet nurse smiled politely, and led them over to an empty one. Apparently the wet nurse versions of Judy weren't very talkative.

Their Judy handed off Midori and the baby carrier to a wet nurse. The wet nurse smiled, but looked clearly uncomfortable, (not physically mind you), holding the older baby. Then she unbuckled Lysa, and picked her up before sitting in the rocking chair and taking Lysa into her lap.

"Now remember, Lysa," the Judy instructed, "Caroline is just a little baby. You're a big girl compared to her, so we have to be gentle. You just sit here, and they'll bring Caroline to you. Just let her sit in your lap and hold her head while I rock us back and forth a little bit, okie dokie?" Lysa nodded and rolled her eyes, having likely heard this for the millionth time.

Another wet nurse came over and gently put the newborn girl, Caroline, into Lysa's lap. The nursery worker, guided Lysa's hand- unnecessarily- under the baby's head to help support it. The Judy's hand never left, as if she were afraid Lysa might drop her head. Lysa allowed herself and the real baby to be rocked for a few quiet moments before looking up at Dante.

"Shame, isn't it?", Lysa said, her voice dripping with quiet regret. "Little Caroline here never really had a chance, did she? Me? I've got regrets, I guess. But at least I got to experience something outside of being a baby. I got to grow up, make friends, eat solid food, go to school. I even had a boyfriend for a little while." She smiled a little; the sadness still in her eyes. "It wasn't serious, mind you, but at least I got to experience puppy love. This is all Caroline will ever know. She'll sleep, eat, wet and poop, but not much else." She gave a small shrug. "Still, I can't help but love the little blob, you know? She's family."

The newborn looked up and grunted a little as she reached for up for Lysa's breast. Poor thing didn't understand that Lysa was a baby in here too. She was probably too young mentally to even understand the concept of "mommy", yet alone "sister". She just knew from over 50 years of conditioning that breasts meant food.

Was this why Lysa didn't want to leave Limbo. She didn't want to abandon her baby sister? She felt some kind of responsibility towards her, even now? Dante was an only child, so he had never known what it was like to have someone to take care of and look after. Dante guessed he could understand her motives, now, but what did that have to do with him?

"Maybe one of these days..." Lysa stopped mid sentence. "Damn" she swore under her breath. "Not now." Huh? The Judy's eyes widened slightly in recognition of something.

She reached over and checked little Caroline's diaper. She bobbed Lysa up and down on her knee a little bit.

"Uh-oh" she said, "I think we have two soggy sisters, on our hands." Lysa had wet herself while sitting on the nursery worker's lap. Lysa's face didn't really register any emotion, but her eyes showed that she wasn't particularly happy.

A wet nurse came and took the newborn off of Lysa's lap and started to take Caroline back to her cot. "Hey Judy," the nursery worker called, "how about a race?" The wet nurse smiled and nodded her head. The nursery worker picked Lysa up and got a very large diaper from the back of the stroller and a blanket sized changing mat for Lysa. She unrolled the mat, with one hand and laid Lysa down on it.

The nursery worker got down on her knees and hiked up Lysa's dress past her stomach, completely uncovering her diaper but still covering her breasts. Dante noted that Lysa was very careful not to let either of her arms touch the mat.

The wet nurse grabbed a newborn sized diaper from under a cot, as well as two tubs of baby wipes and joined her co-worker on the mat. She laid Caroline down and unwrapped the pink blankets so she could get at the newborn's diaper.

Caroline squirmed slightly and reached out for her big sister. Apparently, the changing mats only worked on people who didn't think of themselves as babies yet. Lysa reached out with her hand towards her little sister, and Caroline clasped on Lysa's pointer finger with a sure grip. Lysa took a deep breath and exhaled through her nose.

"Ready...set...go!", the nursery worker shouted as she and her double in the robes raced to see who could change their ward's diaper the fastest. Both angel women were giggling slightly and were definitely having more fun than the girls. Dante thought that this must be humiliating. It had to be another form of brain washing, to show how they were no different than the actual babies.

The nursery worker won the contest by a good three solid three seconds. "Good game," the nursery worker said, as the wet nurse re-swaddled the newborn and picked her up, leaving the soiled diaper on the changing mat, and ripping Lysa's finger from her grasp.

"Yeah yeah," the nursery worker said good naturedly, "I know, loser throws away the wet ones." The nursery worker picked up the soiled diapers and threw them into a lidded trashcan, never to be seen again. She bent over and lifted Caroline off the mat. "Don't worry, Lysa," she said, "we'll get 'em next time, right little girl?" She placed Lysa back in the stroller and buckled her in before going back to roll up the changing mat.

"But before you know it," the angel added, "we won't be able to play that game, cuz you'll be a big girl, and out of diapers and using the potty and everything. You're gonna be such a great big sister when you get older! Maybe you can even help us change Caroline, then. Won't that be fun? Won't it?"

Lysa turned her head towards Dante, "Don't you believe it." she said. "They say that every time I come to visit." Dante didn't need to be told not to believe it. He already didn't.

"Yeah, I didn't figure they were big on Pull-Ups here. Just another form of psychological warfare, right? Give you hope you're gonna get to grow up in here, and then dash your hopes when you're still in diapers fifty years later."

"Right," Lysa confirmed, "What's a Pull-Up?" Dante had already forgotten how long Lysa had been in Limbo.

"Disposable training pants, halfway between diapers and big boy pants." Dante informed her. (Crap watch the word choice.) "They're like diapers, but not as thick. They're easy to pull on and off like underwear, but can be thrown away if the kid doesn't make it to the potty in time. They usually have designs for bigger kids, like racecars for boys, or princesses for girls. Sometimes they have little hearts or stars that disappear when the kid is wet so that they learn the difference between wet and dry and don't sit in a wet diaper all day."

"Yeah," Lysa harrumphed, "never seen anything close to that around these parts."

The wet nurse exposed her breast, and lifted Caroline up to start breast feeding her. Lysa's eyes were immediately on the wet nurse, and they were staring daggers. If looks could kill angels....damn, there was some genuine hate there. Meanwhile, their Judy had rolled up and stowed away the mat, and taken Midori off the hands of a very grateful wet nurse counterpart. Their stroller began to move again.

So this is why you brought us here? So I could watch you get to feel like a big baby instead of a little one?

"No," she answered, "this is." She pointed to an approaching, baby blue cot. "I brought you here to see him. Dori!" She called out from the stroller. "Dori! Wake up, baby girl! Time for Boo-Hoo's!" Dante could hear Midori stirring sleepily, and then begin to wail.

The stroller came to a stop as nursery worker Judy stopped to see what was wrong with Midori. "Watch and learn," Lysa said to Dante just as she banged on the blue plastic of the giant cot. A second cry joined Midori's, coming from the cot.

A wet nurse rushed over to the cot, bent over and effortlessly picked up a Latino boy wrapped up in swaddling clothes. He looked to be about thirteen or fourteen from the size of him, though that was the only thing about him that looked like a teenager. He screamed with his mouth wide open and his eyes still shut.

Dante could see that the boy was completely toothless. If he had any hair, it was all tucked under and concealed by the blue cap on his head. Despite the crying noise, no tears came from his eyes. He had forgotten how to use his tear ducts. The wet nurse unsheathed her robe and stroked her nipple across the boy's cheek. He instinctively latched on and began nursing.

"Dante," Lysa introduced, "meet Jorge Rivera: The one who showed me the ropes when I first got here. Jorge had been here for about seventy years when I came here. He showed me how to keep my sanity. When he finally started breaking about thirty years later, he decided it was time to try and escape.

"He managed to get all the way out into the hallway before they caught him. Management decided that he was too risky to be left out in the main nursery, so they sent him here and made him drink the pure stuff.

"As long as we're here, we'll be treated like babies," she went on. "We will wear and use diapers. We will be fed milk and burped. We will sleep in cribs. But is that the only thing you want to be able to do, Dante? Do you want the rest of your existence to revolve around breast feeding, diaper changes, and sleeping? Don't hope for escape, Dante, because this is where escapees end up."

Chapter 7: Choosing Battles

Dante stared at the toothless boy who was shamelessly breastfeeding from the wet nurse. A lump formed in the back of Dante's throat. Now he knew why Lysa, despite close to 60 years being treated this way, had never tried to escape. This place might not be Hell, but it was looking close enough the more Dante learned. For all it pretended to be a daycare center, Limbo still couldn't change the fact that it was a prison for lost souls.

"Thanks for showing me that," Dante said to Lysa, as the stroller started moving again. Midori had settled down after her brief, Lysa-trained tantrum. "These guys don't mess around," he added.

"Don't worry about it," Lysa responded, "I benefit just as much as you do." Dante's eyebrow cocked.

"What?" Lysa asked casually, as though Dante were asking a stupid question. "You think I'm trying to help you just out of the kindness of my heart? I'm a survivor, kid, not a savior. Dori cracked and went full baby years ago. Now she makes a good pet, but she's a lousy conversationalist. If I don't have an intelligent conversation every once in a while, I'll go full baby too." Dante's feelings should have been hurt by this confession, but they weren't. If anything, it made him like Lysa more. Greed and self-preservation were emotions that a man could trust. Ideals and sentimentality made someone unpredictable.

The ruthless, reptile part of Dante's brain definitely liked Lysa. She was aggressive and obnoxious, but knowledgeable, and ruthless in her own way as well. She knew when to recognize emotions, and when to disregard them and go with logic.

It's a shame she had ended up here, really. If she had gone to college like she had intended, she could have had a very productive life. Once Dante got the swing of things around here, this could turn into a beautiful and mutually beneficial friendship. The fact that Lysa was being so brutally honest about her reasons only cemented the partnership in Dante's eyes.

"The Judies are getting better and better at their jobs every year." the girl went on as the Newborn Room doors whirred open and the big babies were wheeled back into the main nursery, "and because of that I'm getting fewer and fewer people to shoot the poop with every year."

"So if you train my mind up," Dante finished her thought, "we can keep close by and keep each other from ending up like Dori." Midori had heard her name and started babbling nonsensically from the Judy's back. Dante called back, "Love you too, Dori!" The babbling quieted.

"Exactly," Lysa said, a small show of pride on her face. "You know, Dante, you're pretty smart....when you're not crying like a wimp or throwing a complete temper tantrum." she giggled. She balled her hands into fists and placed them on her cheeks. She started rotating her fists to make the classic "cry baby" pose "Wah wah. I'm dead. Wah! Why

didn't they draw on my face?" Even Dante had to laugh at himself, remembering that performance earlier this morning.

"Oh yeah?" Dante said good naturedly, "You're pretty good at getting sophisticated, and thoughtful, and deep....until you wet yourself."

Lysa laughed, nodding her head. "Yeah, that's the problem with getting philosophical around here: the more you talk, the better chance you have of peeing your pants right in the middle of it, and ruining the whole mood."

"Then it's a good thing neither of us are wearing pants, isn't it?" he grinned. Lysa burst out into a full hysterical cackle. If she hadn't been buckled in so tightly, she would have definitely been doubled over in laughter.

"Good one," she said once she had regained enough composure to talk. She stuck her hand out for a high-five and Dante obliged her.

"So," Dante asked. "How'd you and your sister end up here, on the same day no less?"

"Huh?" Lysa said, caught off guard. "Oh right, that. I figured you were gonna ask that. I'd rather not talk about it right now." She looked away to avoid Dante's gaze.

"Come on," Dante gently nudged, "I'll tell you my death, if you tell me yours."

"You," Lysa said pointedly, still not looking at Dante, "probably died acting like a party animal and a hot dog after drinking too much." Damn. She had him in there. "Probably at some stupid early birthday party to celebrate your 'man hood'", she added. Ouch. This was the problem of having emotional breakdowns and ranting in front of smart girls. Against the better part of his valor, Dante still tingled with curiosity. Time for another tactic.

"Oh come on, Lysa," he persisted. "It's not like you murdered your little sister." Lysa's head whipped around and looked him dead in the eye.

"Her name is Caroline," she spat, "and I did not murder her."

"Well, what else am I to think with you doing the whole silent and guilty thing?" Dante asked, trying to sound innocent and failing miserably. "I mean, if you tell me the truth, there's no way I'd think that you were responsible for Caroline's death."

"You want the truth?!" Lysa hissed. "Fine." She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and then opened them.

"My father wasn't what you would call a good man," she began. "He drank and had a temper. Even when he was sober he had a temper, but especially when he drank. He used to beat my mother all the time. I was lucky to get even one baby sister, from all the miscarriages he caused. But the cops never looked into it. Damn sons of bitches" she cursed. Dante felt horrible and it must have shown. Lysa's face softened, as did her tone.

"It was a different time," Lysa said in explanation. As if that could explain it. "Anyway, soon after Caroline was born, he came home VERY drunk one night. More drunk than usual. When I woke up, he was shouting at my mother. Caroline was crying her head off. Something about the new baby ruining everything.

"Then," she kept talking, "I heard my mother screaming; telling him to let the baby go. To stop shaking the baby." The lump in Dante's throat reformed. He had a sinking feeling about what was coming next. But he let her continue. He had asked for this after all.

"My mom's screaming only got louder when the baby stopped. Dad decided to try and shut her up, so he started swinging on her too. Then she got real quiet.", Lysa whispered. "I ran and took his hunting rifle from the fireplace mantle. Then I went and splattered his brains all over the silly clown wallpaper." she shuddered.

"I had wanted to go to college, mostly so I could get out of that place. But after that, I knew there was no going to college. So I ran upstairs, took out his shaving razor," Lysa took two fingers and raked them across her wrist, "and ended it the only way I could bear." Through all this, Lysa didn't even shed one single tear. Only the slightest tremble in her voice gave hint at any emotion resembling sadness. Poor girl had gone numb from the ages.

"Happy?" Lysa asked.

"No." Dante answered.

"Good.", she said.

"Man, that's fucked up," Dante exclaimed.

"Yeah, it is." Lysa confirmed. They rolled on through twists in turns in silence for a few moments. "Oh look," she said, her tone brightening as the grayish blue carpet gave way to checkered linoleum. "Lunchtime!"

They came upon what looked like a kitchen set-up. A white refrigerator sat in the corner. In the middle of the floor, about a dozen high chairs- most of them already occupied with babies of various ages- sat in a semicircle. Three more Judy's: A ginger in a green dress, a tow-headed Judy in jeans and a white t-shirt with colorful handprints on it, and dark haired one in a cardigan sweater- had already begun spoon feeding their kids.

Dante hadn't spotted this area yet either, but considering there were bottomless trashcans and magical supply cabinets, he supposed it was possible for the floors and play areas to change as they needed. This might have been like a giant "Room of Requirement" geared specifically for big babies.

"Sorry, we're late gang," the Judy in the scrubs said. "We just got done with a visit to Caroline." The other Judy's just nodded and said the equivalent of "don't worry about it." as their Judy walked over to three empty highchairs and began detaching the holding trays.

They were the modern style high chairs, the kind designed to cradle the occupant as they were being spoon fed.

Dante's eye was drawn to a group of three high-school aged kids, two guys and a girl. He noticed them partially because unlike the other children, they were locked into the old-fashioned style of highchairs, with a straight back and a hard seat; their arms were all pinned to their sides by the tray. Mostly though, he noticed this because they were all stripped naked save for their diapers. (What could he say? Dante's eye was drawn to a decent rack.) Not even bibs adorned their persons, and their torsos were covered with some kind of glop. Baby food. All the Judies had plastic bowls full of the stuff placed on the trays.

"I just got them yesterday," the redhead Judy in the green dress said to her cohorts. "They're such fussy eaters that I don't even bother to dress them for meal time. I just strip them out of their little outfits and redress them when they're done." The other Judy's nodded their approval.

"Dante's new too," the blonde Judy in the scrubs said, "but he's been a little angel all day." She unbuckled Dante from the stroller and hoisted him up into the highchair. He could feel one of the boys staring at him. He swore he heard the word "freak" muttered as the tray was clicked into place. Fuck that guy. He didn't know it, but he was on the fast track to complete babification at this rate.

The three topless prisoners struggled against their bonds to no avail, as one at a time their Judy tried to spoon feed them. They twisted and turned their heads, resulting in most of the glop getting smeared on their cheeks instead of in their mouths. The fire in their eyes looked less threatening once you took in their current state of undress. One of them, not realizing that the stain would disappear on contact, spat food right at the redheaded Judy. The Judy did not even register it. She just persisted in trying to spoon feed the young man.

Suddenly, the girl wailed out, "NOT AGAAAAIIIIIN!" as she stared down between her legs. "Why can't I go potty anymore?! I just wanna go home!" She broke down and started sobbing. The Judy in the green dress assured her that if she was a good girl and finished all of her num-nums, then she'd get changed into a nice, dry diaper before nap time. The girl nodded meekly and allowed herself to be fed. The other baby teens either pretended not to notice these goings on, or were really too far gone themselves to care.

Dante's Judy went over to the refrigerator and brought out three bowls of mush. It looked like it had the consistency and texture of applesauce, save that it was rainbow colored. Dante was worried, but a quick glance at Lysa showed her to be unconcerned. He thought about fighting it- he didn't really want to be spoon fed, after all- but one look at the other three new arrivals made him think twice. Besides, his stomach reminded him, he was hungry. Other than the bottle of milk, he hadn't eaten anything since he got here.

The Judy tied a bib around Dante and his two companion's necks. Midori's read: "Spit Up Happens." Lysa's had "Lunch is on ME!" written on hers. He looked down at his own, and

read it upside down. His own bib said, "SIMH: Stuck In My Highchair." Great. These were angel moms with a sense of humor.

The Judy took out a rubber tipped spoon and dipped it into the rainbow colored glop. Dante opened his mouth and she spooned it right in. Thank goodness she wasn't doing the stupid "here comes the choo-choo train" routine. He was feeling too hungry right now to want to wait on some stupid game.

The glop wasn't bad at all. It was chilled from the refrigerator, and actually tasted a little bit like an applesauce slushy. What caught Dante off guard, though, was how the stuff expanded in his mouth a moment after touching his tongue. His cheeks puffed out as his mouth became more crowded, and Dante swallowed the stuff down as fast as he could. A little bit of the stuff burst from his unprepared lips and dribbled out onto his chin, sliding down onto the bib.

"Whoops!" the Judy cried out, not actually sounding surprised, as she used the baby spoon to scrape some of the food off of Dante's chin. "Good thing we put that bib on you, huh Dante?" Instantly Dante realized that this food was designed to make him need a bib and thus feel more dependent, more helpless, more babyish. Rather than losing his cool, Dante just smiled, nodded, and pretended he was giving her the middle finger.

"Thassa good boy!" the Judy praised. "Now give me just two more bites, and it'll be Lysa's turn, then Midori's turn, then yours again." Dante accepted that he couldn't do anything to make this situation better, and accepted the two spoonfuls; mouth exploding applesauce and all.

Then, their Judy went to Lysa and did a similar routine. Three spoonfuls, then switch. Then to Midori. Then back to Dante. This routine continued till the Judy was scraping the bottom of the bowl and Dante was feeling good and full. The other babies were finishing up at about the same time.

"All gone," Dante's Judy proclaimed as she spooned in the last of the expanding glop past Dante's lips. There wasn't even enough left to leak out of his mouth, so Dante just gulped the stuff down. "Now, time for a milky ba-ba and a niiiice nap." the Judy said as she collected the bowls, threw them down a bottomless trashcan, went to the fridge.

Dante shot Lysa a look. "I thought you said...?" he began.

"I said they feed us the milk AT LEAST twice a day." Lysa interrupted. "Sometimes they do more. I'm guessing it's because of those three." she said, indicating the three struggling prisoners in nothing but their diapers. "They wouldn't calm down enough.", she said.

The ginger Judy in the green dress had already managed to force the nipple of one bottle past the lips of one of the struggling boys, and his eyes had gone vacant. The Judy let out his tray enough so he could move his arms and hold up the bottle himself. The broken girl in the wet diaper accepted hers without struggle and was just starting to smile idiotically from behind her bottle.

"When someone makes a lot of trouble here," Lysa said, "they make it harder on all of us. Just let it happen," she sighed resignedly, "and it'll be over with before you know it."

Dante did his own sigh, as the Judy in the scrubs handed him a bottle filled with the milk of human kindness. He accepted it and drank in the creamy liquid.

Instantly, his cares melted away as his thoughts became more infantile. He was engulfed in a sense of peace and serenity. He was so lucky to be here, he reflected. It was as if everything was going to be okay, no matter what. Dante could literally do no wrong here. He could play all day, or laze around, even pee himself, and no one would scold him. No Mrs. Applegate to quiz him. No parents to lecture him. This ruled!

Even though in the back of his mind, he knew this was all a lie, honestly, it wasn't that different from being drunk. When you're drunk you can rush to the bathroom, puke up the 5 rum and cokes you just power chugged, clean up a little bit, look in the mirror, and say "Damn, I look good." Then go back to the party for more rum and cokes. You know you don't really look that good, and you know it's all a booze induced feeling of euphoria; but right then, you don't really care because you're euphoric. This was even better though, because there was no hangover, guaranteed. This milk got rid of hangovers.

Mama Judy took his empty ba-ba away, wiped his face with the bib, and unlocked the tray. She had been so good to him today. She checked his diaper and told him that he was dry (though he likely wouldn't be for very long, not that it mattered.)

He could pee-pee in her arms right now, and she wouldn't get mad. If he was really lucky, maybe Mama Judy and her friend in the green dress would have another race using him and the topless girl. That way he could "accidentally" cop a feel on her while he was having his penis wiped and stroked by Mama Judy. Dante's padded crotch crinkled a little as his nether regions readjusted themselves at the thought.

Still dry, Dante made Mama Judy proud by giving two loud burps as she patted his back. Then she carried him out of the kitchen area and around a corner into an area with extra-large cribs. Mama Judy laid him down on his back in one of the cribs.

Looking up, Dante could see a mobile hanging over him. Stars, the sun and the moon, and a comet all hung over Dante's head. Even better, they all had smiley faces painted on them. They were all happy celestial bodies! (Weird that Dante could remember the term "celestial," but still couldn't think of a synonym for potty.) Still tripping, Dante reached up for the plastic bodies, not even thinking to sit up. It was comfortable in this crib, and he didn't want to sit up anyways. His hand didn't even come close to grasping them.

Mama Judy reached up and flicked a switch. The mobile started turning, a soft mechanical whirring the only indication that it wasn't magic. Dante had never been to a Pink Floyd concert, but he assumed it must be a lot like this. He was in awe.

"Sleep tight, little Dante," Mama Judy cooed. "See you after your nappy nap."

Entranced by the mobile, and high as a kite from the milk, Dante didn't even hear Mama Judy as she left to go get his friends. Instead, he drifted off into a dreamless slumber just after popping his thumb into his mouth.

Chapter 8: You Win Some, You Lose Some.

Dante woke up an hour or two later, feeling refreshed, sober, and wet. His second diaper change went much easier than his first one, partially because he really was starting to accept this process as inevitable. It didn't hurt that he had wet in his sleep, either. For some reason, it was easier to take knowing that he was unconscious when the inevitable happened. Maybe bed wetting was slightly more grown up than wetting while conscious, and that's why toddlers could wet the bed up to a certain age and it be no big deal.

He had been feeling very cold and clammy below the waist, so the change was a welcome one. Dante did some rough estimation at that fact. He must have wet soon after he fell asleep, his bladder further loosened by the fresh dose of angel milk.

Now dry, and rested, Dante found himself and his playmates plopped down in the middle of a cubicle room filled with toys, books, baby books, and other such diversions. Their Judy set them each down, gave them a pat on the tushie and told them to go play. Apparently, now was free play time in the nursery- or more accurately time to stretch their legs in the prison yard.

Within minutes, they were joined by other babies, their Judy's carrying them in one at a time and setting them down. A few Judy's took position as activity supervisors, attempting to coax the baby-kids into some form of play or another- maybe offering to read a story. Other Judy's simply hung back at the perimeter of the cubicle and talked to each other while pointing at and making various side comments about their infant prisoners.

The Judy in the green dress was nowhere to be seen. Likely her wards were too rebellious to be allowed to play nice with the others, so they had been sequestered for further conditioning. Poor saps. Dante felt a (perhaps) undeserved sense of pity and superiority over them. If they kept struggling so openly, they'd never get any freedom at all. Even small freedoms presented opportunities; opportunities that could be taken advantage of when the time was right....

Nope, at this rate they'd be just as doomed as Midori in no time; their Judy watching them like a hawk, smothering them with conditioning and pre-programmed motherly affection. Quiet defiance was the way to go, as far as Dante was concerned. If Dante was going to keep his sanity and even escape this place one day, (What, let a little threat like eternity as a newborn stop him completely? Naaaaaaaaah.) he'd have to play it cool and lay low. Right now, laying low meant getting with the program and getting some serious playtime on.

"Looks like we lucked out, today" Lysa said, surveying the population. Their Judy had decided that she looked "too precious" in pigtails and so had done her hair back up after nap time. "Not everyone here has been broken down yet."

Dante spotted the girl who had done the wonderful finger-paint portrait, dressed in a pink onesie. Wearing denim shorts, (lucky punk) was the elementary kid who had made the play-doh man. A few others who Dante hadn't seen earlier the day also seemed to possess the spark of sentience in them.

"I was afraid I'd be stuck with you all day," she said, batting her eyes in a facetious attempt to look innocent. She was back to playfully messing with him. Dante didn't take the bait.

They started spreading out and crawling around, looking for activities to do and talking to each other; those that could talk anyways. A few of the older kids occupied themselves by playing with and talking motherese to actual infants. Dante supposed that fawning and cooing over a real baby allowed them to keep the sense that they were at least mentally mature. All in all, there were probably about two dozen rugrats and eight rug watchers in this area.

"Is that a T.V. over there?" asked Dante, pointing to a big-screen at the far end of the play area. A large quilted blanket was spread out on the floor directly in front of it. Some stuffed animals were scattered over it, though there were plenty more elsewhere.

"Oh...yeah." Lysa answered, "that? You can go watch T.V., if you want. You go lay on the blanket, and they'll turn it on for you. I wouldn't waste my time though."

"Why?" asked Dante. If this was another brain washing thing like the milk, Dante needed to know up front. Then again, if it were, wouldn't T.V. time be mandatory?

"Unless you're interested in reviewing your ABC's and 123's", Lysa told him, "again and again, and again, it won't be very stimulating. Even if you show you learned something, the Judy's ignore it or don't believe it."

"What do you mean?" Dante arched an eyebrow.

"One time," Lysa explained, "early on, I wrote an entire letter in crayon about why I should be treated like an adult. I showed it to one of them. They laughed and said it was the cutest thing they had ever seen. They asked me who wrote this for me, and started passing it around to each other, trying to figure out who REALLY wrote it. I was so pissed off I started bawling my eyes out. All I got for my trouble was a bottle of milk. " Though Dante couldn't say he was at all surprised, he did feel a slight tinge of anger on Lysa's behalf. These Judy's were either willfully ignorant or sadistically stupid.

"Some of the cartoons are so lousy, I swear the Judies actually made them right here in Limbo just to torture us. Like, there's this stupid show called 'Dora the Explorer' ", Lysa mimed gagging herself with her finger down her throat. "It's about this little Spanish girl that-

"-I've heard about it," Dante interrupted. "It's actually a real show among the living right now. It's very popular among babies and little kids. Lysa paused and stared, completely silent.

"I am soooo glad I'm dead right now." she said finally. "Anyways, I'm going to hang out with some of the other non-droolers. You comin'?"

Dante shook his head. "Nah, I still need some time to adjust to this place. I need something a little more quiet and low stress. I think I'll go try my luck and be a couch potato."

"Don't you mean a blanket bean?" Lysa corrected. "No couches here, see?" Dante rolled his eyes but allowed himself a smile. "Oh well, suit yourself, kid. Come on Dori, let's go play with the smart kids." Dori grinned and shook her head no. She stuck out her tongue and blew a raspberry at Lysa, as she crawled up beside Dante.

"Seriously?" Lysa asked. She shrugged her shoulders, "Oh well, whatever. I'm going to be building block towers with the others. Maybe we can play King Kong when we're done and I'll get to be Fae Wrae. You two can come hang out when you're done vegging." Lysa then crawled away in a bit of a harrumph.

"Seriously?" Dante asked, looking at Midori. Midori grinned again and gave a spastic head nod. She must really like him.

Dante crawled towards the television, with Midori close behind. The crinkling sound they made as they crawled made Dante think of unwrapping a hundred little butterscotches. Clearly, Midori had some level of intelligence since she responded to verbal questions and commands. Then again, Dante had read in his AP Psychology class that babies tended to learn to understand language first before expressing it. So this could be all according to her programming.

Dante found himself acutely worried about Midori's affections. He was totally not down with flirting with someone who, for all intents and purposes, was the infant they were dressed up as. The whole thing was just a giant turn off in that respect.

Midori for her part didn't seem to notice Dante's reluctance or discomfort. Maybe Dori just looked at him like some kind of a big brother, he hoped. If Dante had to give the "let's just be friends" talk to someone who was genuinely interested in munching on her own toes, his existence will have hit rock bottom. Just considering the possibility that he might have to give that talk was bad enough.

They reached the large blanket in front of the T.V. and Dante stretched out to lay on his belly. A Judy with black hair wearing nursery scrubs, like his Judy, came over and turned on the set for him. Midori, more interested in Dante than the T.V. leaned forward and stared at Dante, forgetting that her butt was sticking up in the air.

The screen filled with pastel colors. Two cartoon babies, a boy and a girl in nothing but pink and blue t-shirts and diapers came on screen. A real life woman walked on screen beside them. Great, blues-clues rip off. She looked at the cartoon babies, and started signing. "Come on Alex and Leah, it's baby signing time." she spoke as she signed.

Ah-hah! Baby sign-language. This place really did keep up with the times. Teaching babies sign language before they could talk was a trend that was really gaining steam in America. Proponents of it said that infants learned to communicate visually way before they

learned to communicate verbally. This resulted in far less tantrums since they could communicate their needs and much easier potty training.

Midori's eyes instantly became glued to the screen. She was obviously enthralled. While not as hypnotized as Midori, Dante was genuinely interested. If these angels kept up with the times and trends of child-rearing, then if he learned sign language, even at a basic baby level, the Judy's would have to respond to his signals. They'd respond as if a baby signed them, but they'd still respond. This could be useful.

The woman- Rachel she called herself as she broke the fourth wall and talked to the audience- wore a bright yellow jacket and plain black pants. More interestingly, she had a blue band around each thumb and forefinger, while her other three fingers one each hand had an orange band. Clever. This made it easier to see which fingers she was using for her signs.

What followed was basically what one might expect. The woman talking to the camera, teaching basic signs that babies might need. Every single example (without exception) was followed by cutaways of actual babies practicing the signs, and other children (likely 3 or 4 year olds) doing voice over work identifying what each sign meant.

For example: The word eat would flash on the screen, and the hostess would say "Eat. It's like you have food in your hand and you're putting it in your mouth. Can you sign eat?" Then she would mime the sign for eat. A babyish voice from off screen would echo "Eat." Then the camera would cut away to various infants and toddlers signing "Eat" while the same babyish voice would say "Eat" or "He's signing eat". Then there'd be a thirty second song of the hostess singing about eating her favorite foods.

Repeat this basic process for "drink", "crackers", "water", "cereal", "milk", "banana", and "juice", and you basically had the first ten minutes of the program. Simple, easy to learn, and sooooo boring. Dante only needed to see the example from the hostess and hear the mnemonic device, and he had it. The rest of the sequence was just padding to him. (Heh. A baby show with padding.)

Midori, on the other hand, was practicing right along with the real babies onscreen. Her mindset was clearly the target audience for the show, even if her body was in the wrong demographic. Still, for the sake of his experiment, Dante was determined to watch this program and learn sign language.

Dante suddenly felt the urge to urinate and instantly let loose a stream into his diaper. Once you got over the whole "I've been discouraged from doing this for the vast majority of my life." and looked past the thought of "that nice warm feeling on my crotch is my own urine," this whole forgetting potty training thing wasn't that bad.

Actually, Dante remembered vaguely, using the potty involved stopping what you were doing and going to it to pee, and you probably weren't allowed to play during that time or watch T.V. . What a drag! If he had still been potty trained, Dante would have had to get up, gone to find a potty, figured out how to use it, and then come back. During that time he would have missed learning the signs for "mom", "grandma", "dad", and "grandpa". He

would have wasted potential knowledge because he was expected to take care of his own bladder. Instead, he had gotten to just let loose. Instant satisfaction, delaying of consequences, the American way.

Still, as the padding and gels did their work, and the urine inside began to cool, the diaper would become cold and clammy. Dante definitely did not like that feeling. Then he'd have to get a diaper change, and as far as time constraints went, that was just as bad as going potty. Dante could just deal with the coming discomfort until the end of the show, or...

"Judy!" Dante called out, "Mama Judy!" The Judy who had turned on the television had stayed close by and monitored Dante and Midori's behavior. She bent over, her hands on her knees so that she could look at Dante.

"What's wrong sweetie?!" The Judy asked. Her face didn't show terrible concern, but then again, Dante's face didn't show terrible distress either.

"Drink!" Dante said as he held an imaginary cup and tipped it to his lips. "Drink!"

The Judy "awwwed" uncontrollably. "Do you want a drink, honey?" she asked. Dante nodded. "Do you want a milky ba-ba?" She squeezed the air, kind of like she was milking a cow. Obviously she had been watching the program too. Dante shook his head vigorously. He purposefully giggled as he did so, copying Midori's natural tendency so that the Judy might be disarmed.

"Water." Dante said, making a "W" shape with his hand by holding up his middle three fingers and touching it to his chin. "Drink water."

"You want some water?" Dante spazzed his head in an affirmative nod. Finally, an adult figure that could understand him! Even though he was the one in a wet diaper, Dante felt like he had just taught a chimp to communicate. The Judy walked over to a nearby mini-fridge and pulled out a baby bottle filled with water. "Here you go, kiddo," she said as she handed him the bottle.

Dante repositioned himself so that he was laying down on his back. He grabbed a nearby teddy bear and requisitioned it as a pillow, and started sucking down the water as fast as he could, even though he wasn't particularly thirsty. Midori was so busy looking at the screen, if she noticed Dante's change relative to her, she didn't show it.

While Dante repositioned himself, a new segment came on. It was titled "Diaper Dance". Basically it just showed a bunch of clips of babies dancing in nothing but their diapers; maybe a T-shirt or two. In the middle of the song, Rachel the hostess came on screen and said "Diaper. Close two fingers and your thumb, right at your diaper." She lowered her hands to her waist and started miming like she was playing two invisible castanets. "Diaper," she repeated.

Then, she took placed her thumb between her pointer and middle finger and shook her whole hand like she was waving hello. "This is the sign for potty.", she indicated. "Potty."

Then as predicted, the camera cut to clips of various babies and toddlers, signing "diaper" and "potty". Dante gave a yawn of contentment as he finished his bottle. The next segment of the show taught him the sign for "more", which he quickly used as he ordered the Judy to get him "more water". This order she quickly complied with and he chugged the water bottle and gave a loud burp in response.

As the ending credits to "Baby Signing Time" rolled, Dante's diaper had already begun to cool and itch. His nether regions were just starting to become uncomfortable when his brilliant plan sprang into action. Dante let lose a second barrage of liquid gold into the thick and thirsty padding between his thighs.

The padding immediately encasing his penis was already saturated from his last wedding, so the pee bounced off and tickled his pubic area before soaking into the bottom area around his taint. Dante let out a giggle and wore a satisfied smirk on his face. If he could keep very hydrated, he could pee into his diaper often enough where it wouldn't get cold.

Granted, he'd have to get changed eventually, as otherwise the diaper would leak or burst, but this was more on his terms.

"Yay! Dante learned baby signs!" the Judy cheered. "Dante learned baby signs!" "Who's a clever boy? Who's a clever boy? You are! Yes you are!" Dante nodded. He was indeed clever, he agreed; though perhaps not for the same reason as she was thinking.

The diaper continued to bulge and expand, pleasantly encasing Dante's loins. Dante wondered if he peed enough, would his diaper break free of the onesie he had on? Now this feeling was good. All warm, wet, and mushy in all the right places. Dante wondered if this is what the inside of a woman felt like. (Yeah, yeah, he had died a virgin, so what?)

Dante was interrupted by a gurgling noise coming from his gut. Cramps soon followed. Uh oh! Somehow, Dante had forgotten about the OTHER inevitability where total lack of potty training was concerned. He really didn't want to poop in his diaper. It was something he just wasn't ready for, and even his positive experience with wet diapers couldn't convince him to try this willingly.

Dante was desperately wishing there was a potty nearby. Even though he couldn't remember how to use it, maybe he could figure out how to once he found one. Or maybe the Judies could help him. That's it! The Judy's! They acted like caretakers and mommies! What mother wouldn't help a small child go to the potty? It just made sense.

"Judy," Dante cried out as he sat back up, "Mama Judy!" The same Judy who had watched "Baby Signing Time" with him came up and asked what was the matter. Dante put his right thumb between his right forefinger and shook it. "Potty!" he said, "I need to go potty!" He used his left hand to hold his poor stomach as the cramps got more intense. Any second now.

"Potty?" she asked, then shook her head. "Noooo, Dante, you wear diapers. Diaper." She started playing invisible castanets around her waistband. "Diaper." She bent over and patted the front of his diaper. She felt it squish as soon as she touched it.

"Ooooh" the angel woman concluded, "You mean you went potty in your diaper? Is that it?"

"No you dumb whore!" Dante, swore through gritted teeth while doing everything he could to clench his cheeks. "I want you to take me to the potty!" A rude noise escaped from between Dante's clenched cheeks.

"Ooooooh !," the Judy said with some realization. "Are you about to have a poopie diaper and you want to go potty?" Dante nodded his head emphatically, both arms clenching his gut as the cramps went to new levels. "Don't worry about it, baby." she smiled a little too sweetly, "Just make poopies in your diaper and Mama Judy will change you when you're aaaaall done. But you gotta make the signs for it." She waved her hands in front of her face as if to say "no more, no more" and then played invisible castanets on her waist band. "All Done!" she chirped. "Diaper. All done!" she repeated. "Diaper!"

This was madness. What kind of caretaker would deliberately tell a child who was trying not to poop themselves to do just that? The kind who's job it is to treat their child like their not competent enough. The angel had to know that he wasn't really a baby, she had to. It's the only option that made sense.

Finally overcome with pain, Dante rolled onto his back. His legs lifted off the ground and scrunched up slightly as his body started to push the mess out. Dante felt the warm mess leave him and enter the back of his diaper, pressing up against his bum.

He started grunting, deliberately trying to get the vile stuff out of him, so that he could get this over with. He wanted to gag at the smell. The diaper's perfume did a decent job of disguising the scent of stale urine, but it was no match for the brown bombs that he was dropping in his backseat.

Dante closed his eyes. Even though he couldn't see, it felt like everyone must be watching him. He didn't hear the sounds of playing elsewhere in the nursery. He couldn't even hear the television. He was in a black hole of sound. The world had stopped. Him dropping a deuce had become the main attraction of the afternoon.

Finally, the cramps subsided and Dante felt he couldn't push out anymore. He lowered his legs, and instantly felt the mess being moved around in his diaper. The sounds of playtime had entered his ears again, but he still had the feeling he was being watched. When he opened his eyes again, he saw all 8 of the Judies staring down at him, expectant smiles on their faces.

Defeated, exhausted, and still on his back, Dante waved his hands in front of him. "All done." he said. Then he placed his thumbs down on where the tapes to his diaper were around his waist and clapped his first two fingers against his thumbs. "All done diaper."

"See? I told you he learned to sign." The Judy who had turned on the television said to her cohorts.

"Who's a clever boy?!" They all praised as he laid in his own mess. "Who's a clever boy?!" Dante grimaced.

"More importantly," one of them said, "who's going to change him?"

Chapter 9: Of Anchors and Epiphanies

After spending the better part of a day in Limbo Nursery 1017AB, Dante found the following truths to be self evident: A clean diaper felt comfy. A warm, wet diaper felt pretty good, too. A cold wet diaper felt uncomfortable. A really wet, warm diaper was practically a pocket pussy. A poopy diaper felt disgusting and was made of fail; it was just this side of water-boarding.

Speaking of torture, while the Judies had in fact drawn attention to Dante's predicament over by the television, they weren't the one's who had made it worse. They had ignored his please for the potty as he made a bowel movement right in front of them, but once he had given in to their demands- like a pet chimpanzee learning a new trick- a Judy picked him up and carried him over to the changing table.

The only really big difference between a wet diaper change and a messy diaper change, Dante found, was that the wiping was much more thorough and the process took longer. Still, it had been embarrassing. Dante now sat up against the wall and sulked in his public humiliation. Experimentally, Dante poked his finger ever so slightly into the leg hole of his diaper. He pulled his finger out quickly and it came back a shade whiter. The Judies had really overdone it with the baby powder.

Another baby about his age, a black guy in a green romper, crawled up and tried to console Dante.

"First time pooping your pants?", he asked. Dante nodded. "Hey don't worry about it," the guy said. "Everybody goes through something like that the first time." Dante felt a little better about that. "Hey," the guy said, "what was with you shaking your fist while they were surrounding you? You tryin' to fight them off?" Dante shook his head and briefly explained the incident - minus a few of the more intimate details: the learning sign language, the need to go potty, the caretakers' demands, and him having to acquiesce .

When Dante had finished, the new guy's eyes looked as if they were about to explode, and his lips had vanished inward from a failing attempt to stifle a laugh. "And...whuh...heh, heh. Sorry...what were the signs you had to use?", the guy asked. Dante showed him.

The stranger's head bobbed up and down more than nodded. "Fuckin...awesome. Thank you for the story, sir." Then without another word, Dante's new acquaintance crawled off towards a cloister of prisoners. Within minutes, Dante could hear laughing from across the play area. THAT ASSHOLE WAS POINTING HIS WAY AND LAUGHING AT HIM. Dante could even make out a pantomime of sorts. They were reenacting his whole horrid ordeal.

Dante's eyes darted around the room. Several other kids were doing the same, instantly hiding their smiles as soon as they realized Dante was watching. A few were even more brazen. Making the signs for "all done" and "diaper" right in front of his face. Dante slumped down, his face growing hotter by the moment.

Before he knew it, Lysa was practically on top of him. "What were you doing talking to Jamal Adams?" she asked, indicating the black kid in the green romper- seemingly infuriated.

"He said he wanted to know why I had been so upset...when I...you know....popped my butt cherry," he winced. There was an awkward moment of silence before Lysa palmed herself in the face.

"First of all," she began in a tone what was quickly becoming a recognizable trademark, "don't ever call it that again. Second of all, that's Jamal Adams, one of the biggest assholes in this place. I think he gets off on demeaning people like it's his anchor or something." Dante nodded in agreement. Hindsight being 20/20, the jerk seemed the type that liked making jokes at other people's expense. Lysa was right, that probably WAS his anchor. Wait...what?

"Anchor....?" Dante let the word fall into the air.

"Yeah, anchor," Lysa said as if it were the most obviously apparent thing in the world...something so utterly simple and understandable that to give it a definition to it would only overly complicate its meaning. Dante might as well have said the word "Chair...?". Dante heard her swear under her breath and saw her bite her lip when all she got was a blank stair.

"Look," Lysa said, "It's your first day in Limbo, and I didn't want to overburden you with information, but I guess there's no point in not telling you. Besides, with the Judy's paying special attention to you, and jackasses like Jamal having put a bull's eye on your butt, you'll need to know sooner rather than later.

"Every person here who's lasted more than a couple of weeks, has an anchor." she explained. "An anchor is a hobby, or a talent- a passion really-that helps that kid hold onto their sense of self. It's something they can do or cling onto that helps them feel more grown-up when the only options seem to be growing down. You know, something to keep them anchored to who they are instead of what this place is trying to turn them into. Yes, going with the flow and keeping your emotions in check is what's going to make you last in here, but that anchor is your emergency break when you find yourself careening off that cliff"

Dante took this all in. It made sense, really. If you had nothing at all to look forward to or enjoy in this place, you were better off just giving up and becoming a full baby.

"Like painting portraits or making clay dolls?" Dante asked, looking for clarification.

"Just like that," Lysa answered.

"Or checking up on a little sister?" Dante continued.

"Mmm-hmmm," she replied.

"Or teaching new fish the ropes around this place?" he asked, very pleased with himself

Lysa just signed sighed resignedly. "Yeah...", she said.

"Well the thing is, Lysa," Dante smirked, "I'm way ahead of you on that. That's why I kept watching T.V. in the first place."

"Oh?" Lysa asked. "Do tell." Dante proceeded to tell her the whole story, intimate and embarrassing parts included. (It was only fair, he had already seen her vulnerable in the Newborn Room.) By the time Dante was done, Lysa was laying flat on her tummy, her chin resting in one hand, while the other one drummed the carpet floor.

"So let me get this straight," she began, her sarcasm building with each syllable. "You're watching Baby Signing Time. You're thinking about how cool it is that you don't have to stop playing to go potty anymore. Then you get the brilliant idea that you can stay comfortable in a wet diaper if you just keep wetting it again and again, so you sign to a Judy to bring you a bottle of water and you start chugging. Then you get cold feet about taking your first dump, and so you beg and plead them to take you to a potty. They refuse, so you shit yourself, and then sign for them so that they'll go change you. That about right?"

"Uh-huh" Dante sheepishly confirmed.

"Now what about anything in that whole scenario makes you feel like something remotely resembling an adult?" Lysa scolded.

"Well," he answered, "I was learning a new language."

"Pfft," she snorted, "a language designed so that babies can tell mommy when they need to be changed, or that they'd rather eat a banana than crackers."

"Well, I was getting an erection." Dante said a little too loudly, as the timing for Jamal Adam's latest round of laughter was just too well timed to be anything else.

"I already told you," Lysa hissed, "Sexual arousal is just as much a baby thing as it is an adult thing. From the moment he's born, a man wants to get his pecker wet. It's just that here, your only regular option is getting it wet au natural." She sat up and crossed her arms. "Hell, if babies don't think about sex, then where does Oedipal complex come from?"

"That's been disproved by now," Dante shot back, "besides, if babies have anything resembling a sex drive, then how come you don't hear about babies having sex, or even dry humping?"

"Because they're still just babies and they wouldn't know what to do anyways!", Lysa sneered. "If they did, I'm sure you'd hear about it!"

"Oh yeah?!" Dante growled back, "Then why don't we put that to the test? We might as well be babies, and I'm sure you know what to do so-"

WHACK.

Dante just sat there, stunned that Lysa had just slapped him. Lysa did not. She immediately threw herself into his arms and wrapped herself around him before any Judy could turn around see what happened. She pressed her cheek against his, masking the handprint that she had just left across his face. Her mouth was positioned perfectly across his ear.

"Don't you dare scream," she hissed in his ear, "or I swear I'll bite your fucking ear off and swallow it! They'll kiss it better, but it will hurt like hell before that and you'll have to wait for them to sift through my shit before they can reattach it." Dante didn't dare move. "I like you, really I do, and you have some potential, but if you EVER talk to me like I'm some kind of whore, I will turn this place into hell for you. Got it?!"

Dante slowly nodded his head, paying very close attention to the feeling of her breath on his ear. "Good", he heard.

Lysa detached herself, and scooted away to. Dante was left completely speechless. He made a note in his head. It read: Do. Not. Fuck. With. Her. "Okay then," she said as she smoothed over her dress, composing herself. "I'm gonna go give Jamal Adams the business to make sure he doesn't mess with you anymore. I'll just pretend that he's you and take my frustrations out on him. See you when I'm done venting. In the meantime, try and come up with an anchor that doesn't directly involve your genitalia."

As Lysa crawled away, her dress didn't even pretend to cover her diaper. Dante allowed himself a look, as the clouds on her ass got farther and farther away from him. She didn't smell bad either. The perfume and baby powder in the diapers were strangely intoxicating if you didn't automatically associate them with babies. All of the padding made her butt look bigger too, in a good way. Maybe if -

DO. NOT. FUCK. WITH. HER. The message in his head flared. Damn! Had his mind really wandered back to sex so quickly? Was he like that before when he was alive, or was that just another affect of being in Limbo? He needed something of a turnoff; and with no Mrs. Applegate around to disgust him, his sights landed on Midori. Please Midori, do something unattractive, or at the very least something awkward and unsexy. Midori did not disappoint.

Midori was on her back, grunting with her legs curled up in the air. A nauseating wave of déjà vu hit Dante. The only difference was that Midori didn't seem nearly as distressed as Dante had been. In fact, her hands were occupied and her grunts muffled because she was simultaneously drinking a bottle of milk. Yeah, she was drinking and pooping at the same time. Midori was nothing if not efficient in her infancy, a regular multi-tasker that one.

Midori finished her bowel movement, and her legs lowered themselves back down as Midori continued to nurse the bottle. She didn't even seem to notice or mind. Priorities. Once she finished, she rolled over onto her stomach and propped herself up on all fours, and started crawling around; her not-so-undergarment sagging slightly from the deposit

made. It wasn't until she stopped and sat in her own mess that she seemed to notice anything amiss. When a Judy came to check on her crying, Midori immediately signed "all done," and "diaper". Wow. At least someone else was making use out of that baby sign language video.

Two hands lifted Dante up into the air by the armpits complete with a Judy's "Up we go". Great, what now? Dante didn't need changing again (he hoped), and it was too early for dinnertime, so what new embarrassment was he for now?

He found himself being lowered, legs first, into a bizarre contraption. It was round, like a flying saucer and made out of plastic. In the middle of the whole was a suspended seat with two leg holes, kind of like the harnesses that amateur rock climbers wore. Dante's bare legs were threaded through the holes, and he found himself in an odd sitting position. It was like he was trying to sit in a very small, folded up hammock. The good news was that his feet could touch the floor.

He tried to stand up, but he wouldn't budge. He was locked in there good. More likely though, his legs were too weak. He scooted his feet along the carpet and found that the contraption moved forward a few inches. It was on wheels. He was on wheels. Shit!

A baby walker. He had been put in an over-sized baby-walker. Frankly, Dante shouldn't have been surprised, given the circumstances, but he honestly hadn't thought to see this coming. "Time for walkies!" the Judy cooed from behind him, and gave him a little push to encourage him. The walker pattered a few feet along the floor, and Dante instinctively slammed his feet down to stop it. He stopped!

Dante grinned. Admittedly this was pretty cool. After a whole day of being carried around, or having to crawl, it felt good for Dante to be moving while in a vertical position. Plus, the feeling of the carpet brushing the soles of his feet felt so foreign after an entire day lying on the floor.

Dante tilted his head downward and noticed a yellow plastic steering wheel on the front of the walker. Walkies? Fuck that. If Dante had to pretend, he'd pretend to drive, not to walk. He grinned.

Dante started to shuffle around the play area in the walker, slowly gaining momentum. This was so cool! Dante started to circle the play area, making sure to hug close to the walls. He even started making fake engine noises and screeched as he rounded corners. None of the other kids seemed to be in one, so this must be a special treat just for him.

He swatted the air, and turned on his imaginary radio, singing "East Bound and Down", as he powered along the carpet. He was Bandit, and Smokey was right on his tail. Ever since he saw that movie, Dante had loved the idea of driving fast cars. As soon as he discovered the ultra-fast punk rock cover of the theme song, Dante had downloaded it to his iPod and blasted it in his car whenever he felt the need for a surge of adrenaline or had to work up the nerve to floor it. All of these memories got his blood pumping something fierce.

He felt so alive, so free! Maybe cars were his anchor, or adrenaline. Dante caught Lysa staring at him. Her face told the story of a political spin-doctor who's job was just getting

harder with everything her candidate said. Dante pulled up to Lysa in his new hot-rod, even going so far as to "screech" as he came to a stop. Lysa looked mortified. Jamal Adams, looked like he had just hit the mother load.

"So he's not even close to the threshold yet, is he?" Jamal mocked. Lysa glared at him. "What? Did he die in a car crash and is having flashbacks? Did the brain damage carry over?" The sumbitch was mocking him to his face. Dante started getting red in the face.

"Oh wussamatter baby boy?" Jamal egged on, "You gonna cw y for Mama Judy to come and make the big bully weave you awone? Maybe when she's done, she can sit you on the potty if you sign real nice to her like a good boy!" Who the hell did this guy. Was he actually calling him a baby for trying to use the potty?" The fuck?!

"Hey Lysa," Jamal chortled, "After Dori fell through, I figured you wanted another friend, not another idiot." Lysa said nothing, just growled under his throat. "What, is that maternal instinct finally kicking in, girl?!" the jackass howled. "Hey, do you think if enough of your friends crash and burn, the Judies will let you help change them?!" Murder was in Lysa's eyes. Time for Dante to intervene.

Dante had actually met jackasses like this while he had been alive. No amount of logic or witty quips would shut them up. Either they were too clever and lob another insult back in your face, or too stupid and weren't affected by your comeback.

There were only two ways to get through to these types: Either show you were more mature and walk away, clearly unaffected by their verbal barbs, or show them that you were just crazy enough to make them want to think twice. Dante was in no mood today to be mature about this.

Dante powered forward and angled the walker so that one of the wheels came directly leaned in hard. At least 180 pounds of flesh and bone plus what easily could have been another 50 given the size and materials of the walker, laid into Jamal's left foot. Physics might take a backseat to kisses in this place, but apparently the rule of "a lot of weight, focused on one tiny spot hurts like a bitch" still applied.

Jamal's foot immediately began to swell, his eyes watered, and his mouth opened. "Go on, and cry." Dante spoke up, "Have the Judy's kiss it and make it better. Bet that will make you feel like a man." Jamal's jaw clenched shut at that.

"If this were a movie, this would be the part where I finish you off with a witty remark, but you're not worth the effort. Fuck you, dude. Fuck you." Dante looked over at Lysa, just as shocked as her adversary. She opened her mouth to say something. Then closed it. Then twisted her mouth this way and that. Finally, she shrugged, and smiled.

"Thank you, Dante." she finally said, before giving Jamal a "I told you so" look.

" Welcome, Lysa." Dante replied with a shit eating grin before making his walker motor off without looking back. The imaginary soundtrack in his mind started blaring "I don't

give a damn about my reputation," as he silently pumped his fists in victory. Damn that felt good! Redemption.

Going around in his pretend car, Dante was possessed by a flash of inspiration. Knuckles white at the plastic steering wheel, Dante zoomed forward as fast as his inept legs would propel him, right toward the nearest wall. This was going to be so awesome! He'd stop just before the crash, with an inch to spare! Even if he crashed, this thing was practically a bumper car. What's the worst that could happen.

Dante never got to find that answer. He had made it within a foot of the wall before something dragged him to a stop. A Judy, his Judy, had grabbed the backside of the walker and pulled him to a stop with ease. Her look said it all.

"Oh no you don't, little man." she scolded as she wrapped an arm around his chest and lifted him out of the contraption. Before he could protest, he felt a hand pop across his behind and he went limp like a puppet with its strings cut. The Judy with blonde hair in the nursery scrubs, carried his mobile form across the room, and strapped him into a giant baby swing.

"Mama Judy knows what you were doing, and you should be ashamed of yourself. What if you had hurt someone running around so fast. What if you had hurt yourself, crashing into that wall? Mama Judy would have felt terrible knowing you were hurt. If you can't be safe, you're going to have to sit in time out. Now you just sit here and think about what you've done." Then she turned on her heel and walked back to check on the rest of the baby prisoners.

Where did that monster get off on calling herself his "Mama?" His real mother never talked to him like that. In fact, he was pretty sure his parents were anti-spanking. They had never treated him half as inferior as these things did. He was practically their equal. They cared about him too, they had bought him things.

They had bought him his car, all his clothes, not to mention the awesome party...granted, that part didn't end well, but it was the thought that counted. He was practically the center of his parents life, and they showered him with affection and gifts to prove it.

Hell, he was pretty sure his dad had been grooming him to work in the restaurants and one day take over the family business. His old man never told him such out loud, but he had seemed happiest that summer when Dante was bussing tables and spending more time in the restaurant. His dad even had showed him how to balance the books, check the inventory, and even cook a little too.

"Your mother fell in love with me because I could cook," his dad had told him that hot summer night. "Learning this stuff was the best decision I ever made."

His mother had always been the steady one, the one to bail him out when he got in over his head, not just with money either. She had spent countless nights staying up and studying with him till he was ready to drop. First it was spelling tests in elementary school, then it was algebra in middle school, and helping him edit term papers and book reports in

high school. He never would have gotten into his AP classes junior and senior year if she hadn't pushed him.

Dante even remembered an argument one summer where she had put her foot down and insisted he take the honors courses, instead of the easy ones. "You won't be challenged there." she insisted. "You need a challenge if you're ever going to develop into a worthwhile human being and not some lazy lay about." In hindsight, he had been grateful for it, but he hadn't ever told her as much. Right now, he wished he had.

With them out of the picture, he wouldn't get anything except stuffed animals and stupid baby toys.

That's when it hit him: An epiphany. Holy shit! He had been dead for the better part of the day, and hadn't even once been worried about his parents. Did they know yet? Had news of his death reached their ears? How would they handle it? He was their only child, and the one time they had left him alone so they could enjoy themselves, he had fucked it up and died on them. Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck!

Now their anniversary would forever be associated in their minds with his death. He hadn't even considered their anniversary as anything other than a ploy to get him that party, and now he had ruined it for the rest of their lives. How long would that be?

What about the neighbors? What would the community think? Once the story got out, and oh it would get out, how would his parents be looked upon? Would they get labeled as "abusive" or "neglectful" parents? Would they be taken to court, or scandalized in the news, or sent to prison? It was all over, once an autopsy showed how much drugs were in his system and the cops found all of the pill bottles and the note. His selfishness and lack of forethought had ended his own life, and ruined theirs.

Dante was a selfish, self-serving prick: He had no doubt about that right now. His very first coherent thought in Limbo was that he had hoped he wouldn't have to clean up his own vomit after he puked all over the floor. As soon as he had laid eyes on Lysa and Midori, he immediately was sizing them up for conquest.

What a mistake that had been. Midori, who was the poster child for what Limbo was all about, and Lysa who was so much more than she had seemed. That girl was like Rosie the riveter crossed with Laura croft. Man, that was what was so awesome about her, the way she- DO. NOT. FUCK. WITH. HER. Oh yeah. Almost forgot.

That's another thing that Dante figured he shouldn't be too proud of, how easily he allowed himself to be led around by his penis. Yeah, it was funny when it happened in comedies (really funny), but it wasn't how a decent person should treat or think about another. Okay, maybe think, he compromised, but definitely not act on...at least not as much.

Come to think of it, in life, did he even have any friends who were girls that he wasn't explicitly interested in for romance (read: getting laid)? Did he even know Melissa's last

name or anything she had been interested in outside of cheerleading (which she totally advertised by wearing that kinky outfit?) He did not.

SHHHIIIIIIIT!

Not only was he an ungrateful and selfish prick to his parents, he had been an asshole to women too.

Then Dante remembered lunchtime: Just before naps, Dante had hoped he would pee himself and get changed on the floor with that half naked-girl so he could cop a feel. That was just the milk talking-the milk that takes away ambitions and inhibitions so you're very, very, very, honest with yourself and who you are.

Dante found that he could move again, his body rebooting from the spanking. He shuddered in the baby swing. He had basically wanted to molest that girl. That poor girl who had been completely broken down and desperate and worn out. The poor girl who probably had no idea where she was or why they were doing this to her. He didn't think about that all, he had just wanted some tits. Maybe he had had more in common with Lysa's baby sister than he realized.

Maybe Dante hadn't been such a good person. Maybe he was really just someone who never took the opportunity to be bad. Maybe he belonged here, in Limbo...or worse.

When he was finally out of the baby swing, Dante was in a somber mood, not quite hysterical. He sat wherever the Judy plopped him down, looking inward more than outward and thus not even really aware of his own surroundings. By the time Lysa had found him and crawled up to him, Dante had been muttering "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry" for roughly 25 minutes straight.

"If this is about earlier," Lysa told him, "it's ok. I've already forgiven you. That thing you did with Jamal was pretty smooth. I'm glad you can take care of yourself."

"It's not that," Dante shook his head. "I just realized what kind of person I was..." he hesitated, "am." Lysa looked confused. "I just now realized how my death probably ruined my parents' lives. I belong here." Dante felt her arm around his shoulders.

"It's not your fault," Lysa consoled him, "it's nothing you did. It's what your parents didn't do to you. If they had even gone to church once and dunked you, you'd be hanging with the halos right about now."

"I'm not so sure," Dante remarked. "Even if I'd gone to church, that in of itself wouldn't have made me a good person. My parents' only mistake was trusting me to make good decisions." Dante felt cold inside. Numb. He didn't even notice the uncomfortable and scared look in Lysa's eyes before she withdrew and crawled away.

The rest of the afternoon was uneventful. Dante idly played with some toys, did some minor socializing, (The girl who did the amazing finger paintings was named Vivian.), and wet himself just before dinner. The Judy in the nursery scrubs proclaimed that bath time

was right after dinner, so Dante could wait a bit and eat dinner in a wet diaper. Therefore, Dante squished instead of crinkled when he was buckled into his highchair.

Dinner was served via spoon in a highchair, just as lunch was. This time, the mouth exploding mush was warm and tasted of mashed potatoes with melted butter. The Judy in the green dress returned with her three charges, still dressed in nothing but their diapers. The girl that Dante had eyed earlier, was much calmer than before, and ate every bite without complaint.

One of the boys, the one that Dante had heard refer to him as "freak" loudly pooped while in the highchair, his whole body turning red. Lysa and Midori both giggled at his expense, Midori was just amused by the sound and laughed because Lysa did. He started swearing, and got his bottle of milk early.

Dante felt a wave of relief wash over him as he accepted his own milky ba-ba. The milk of human kindness was good cure for feeling guilty too as it turned out. Oddly enough, he didn't fantasize about grabbing anyone's tits, but just let himself float through space. He wondered if there were different formulas that had different effects, or if this was really just how he felt and thought at the moment.

He wasn't sure where he was in relationship to the rest of the nursery he was when his Judy carried him from the kitchen area to the bathroom. For all he knew, this place only existed when it needed to. The bathroom looked to be roughly a quarter of the size of the main nursery, with much less cavernous ceilings. It had all white tile, with orderly rows of large bathtubs, more like modified Jacuzzi hot tubs, actually. What was more noticeable was what was missing, ie: anything that wasn't a bath. No mirrors, no sinks, no potties, nothing.

Each tub had large shower curtain that hung from the ceiling in a greater circumference than the tub. The curtains made a kind of privacy shield, all the better for the Judies to bathe their children with some sense of privacy, though why start now, Dante didn't know.

His Judy had donned rubber gloves and an apron- as if the angel needed them. She could have wiped his ass with her hand, and his excrement would disappear from existence rather than stain her. Why use baby wipes? Likely, Dante thought, to keep up the illusion that they were the babies they were treated as.

His onesie was undone and yanked over his head, and his wet diaper was removed and balled up. It seemed more swollen than it should have been. Had Dante unknowingly wet himself a second time during dinner?

His naked and hairless body was placed into an empty tub, while the Judy went to go get Lysa and Midori. He heard other children, both young, old, and young of mind, being carried in, cooed over and babbling. No chance of getting out here, and the milk of human kindness was still affecting his fight or flight impulses.

He looked down at his hairless crotch. How strange, not only was this the first time he had gotten to see his private parts in private, but this was the first time he had seen his

genitals from some position other than his back today. He tentatively touched his knees together like two old friends who hadn't seen each other in a long time.

The sound of Midori's babbling, and two more sets of diapers being untaped alerted Dante of Midori and Lysa's impending arrival. The pending embarrassment immediately shocked Dante out of his angel milk haze. As soon as they were placed in the tub, the Judy turned the water on- perfect temperature- and Dante averted his eyes. "What's with you?" Lysa asked, a dopey smile on her face from the milk.

"You guys are naked." Dante blushed.

"So? We're all naked" Lysa pointed out as the water quickly rose in the tub. "Modesty goes out the window in this place, I told you. Dori's too out of it to care, and you must've seen my box at least twice today."

"That's not the point." he told her.

"What is the point?" She drunkenly asked, her naked breasts bobbing slightly as she did. Those perky, wonderful, glorious bre- DO. NOT. FUCK. WITH. HER. Damn this situation was getting hard...er...difficult. The Judy poured in some lavender scented bubble bath, creating a screen that blocked certain parts. Thank you bubble bath.

"The point is, I don't want to think of you as...as...as..."

"Girls?"

"Yes!" Dante yiped, "I mean no."

"Then what do you mean?" she asked, giving him a surly look. Crap. He was in it now. Just say it just say it just say it.

"I mean I want to think of you as a person, and not just another way to get my dick wet.

Lysa's eyes glazed over, and then she shook her head, as if waking up from a dream or coming out of a buzz.

"Wow", she said, covering her breasts. "That has got to be one of the crudest...and nicest things a boy has ever said to me." The three of them sat there for the rest of the bath, letting the Judy do her work.

After the bath, Dante was quickly towed off, re-diapered, and dressed in footie pajamas. It was by far the warmest and least revealing thing he had worn since he got to this place. The Judy in the nursery scrubs carried him out into the main nursery. While he had been bathing, the whole layout had been replaced. Other than the occasional changing table and trashcan, most everything else was gone. All of the cubicle walls had vanished, and in their places were rows upon rows of cribs, not unlike a scaled up version of the newborn room. The lights were low, and a soft tinkling music flooded the air. Time for sleep.

Dante was lowered into a crib, and a bottle of milk was handed to him, though not forced upon him. "To help you get to sleep," the Judy said as she passed him the drink. Dante opted to place the bottle by his feet.

Dante laid down in his crib, perhaps being a little more grown-up than he had been when he had awakened this morning, despite his change in attire. The last sounds he heard before he drifted off came from Lysa, one crib over.

"Good night Dante. Happy Birthday."

Chapter 10: Second Chances

Blackness. Dante Willis was surrounded in blackness. The first sounds that came to his ears were screaming. Horrible, terrified screaming. Then the jumbled mumbled walla walla of a crowded room, and the deafening silence of speakers being cut off. He vaguely thought he heard some kind of bizarre gibberish screaming hysterically.

"Blah blah blah not breathblah" he thought he heard, "Someblah blah 911." Then Dante went deaf again, swimming through an ebony morass.

Blackness. It was nice. This is what death should be. Just silence and stillness, with nothing to bother you. OW! FUCK! A giant cat had landed on his chest and was kneading it like bread dough.

"And 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and 5 and 6 and 7 and 8 and 9 and 10 and 11 and 12 and 13 and 14 and 15.", the cat meowed.

The silence in his ears was replaced by a steady ringing that made Dante feel hung over. Great, that bell meant he was late for school. He was late for school and a giant cat was trying to rip his chest off. He opened his eyes to scowl at the cat.

What he saw in the cat's place was a woman, looking into his face. She seemed pretty old. Late 50's or early 60's. But she looked to be in good health. Must've worked out and laid off the cigarettes and booze. Her hair was mostly gray, but Dante could make out a few strands of blonde. Weird though. She had the most familiar eyes. She was wearing a uniform of some kind, complete with a badge and everything.

Dante struggled to look at the badge. His eyes felt so heavy and hard to focus. He thought he could read the name "Caroline" on her badge. His eyes scrambled, nothing around him but mattresses and cramped metal walls. The sound of a siren hurt his ears.

"Blah blah blah pulse", she said "blahing blah recoverblah position." Dante bounced up and down and was vaguely aware of a loud THUMP. "Blah! Watch those blahing speedblahs!" the woman yelled. So tired. Time for a nap. Time to go swimming again.

Suddenly, Dante was engulfed in a bright light. A burning bright light that threatened to steal him from his comfortable dark home. He swung at the light, bashing it away so that he could crawl back into his hole and go swimming in the morass. He was rewarded with the light shouting "Whoah!" Dante was instantly awake.

Dante was no longer in his crib, he realized. He looked around and saw a black man in a doctor's coat, a bemused smile on his face. The man looked to be fairly old, what hair he had left on his head turned white, but he had a youthful air about him.

"You got quite an arm there, son," the doctor said, sounding oddly like Morgan Freeman (why can't more of everyone have that amazing voice?) "You almost nicked me, there." He smiled a devilish grin. Dante took a moment to take in his surroundings.

He was in a hospital bed, laying down at a 45 degree angle, wearing a green hospital gown. He was hooked up to some wires and surrounded by machines; his ears greeted with the steady beeps and boops as each machine measured a different statistic of his heart rate and breathing. Dante looked around.

The left wall had been painted with a big picture of happy children playing in the grass, with blue skies ahead. The right wall, had a picture of different animals from around the world in their natural habitat. The details were so intricate. Each painted habitat couldn't have been more than a square foot. The entire room had a border depicting smiling cartoon characters.

"What happened?" Dante asked.

"I was shining a light in your eyes, to see if you'd respond, and you decided right then to take a swing at me." The doctor told him. Seeing that he had not answered Dante's question satisfactorily, he added "You woke up." Well duh Doctor Asshole. "Don't look so smug," the doctor told him. Damn, he had to work on that poker face. "It could have just as easily gone the other way."

Dante stared straight ahead. "I overdosed, didn't I?"

"That's what the tox screen says, young man." The doctor nodded. "If one of your little friends hadn't fallen over you and noticed you weren't breathing anymore, you and me wouldn't be having this conversation right now. You're lucky to be alive." Dante averted his eyes in shame.

"Where am I?" he asked.

"You're in the children's ward of the county hospital," The doctor explained "Our ICU unit is over populated right now. Once you were stable, we moved you here, instead. It's not the most dignified of spaces for a man of your age, but one way or another, we figured it would only be temporary." Dante felt a twinge of anger and it must have shown. Doctor or not, this guy was beginning to push it.

"Well, you don't need this lecture from me right now," the old man in the coat went on. He smiled a little. "I'll leave that to your folks. I'll bring them to you." Then he walked out of the room, leaving Dante to his thoughts.

HIS PARENTS! Holy shit! They were here! They were here and he was okay! He wasn't dead, after all. He had swum in the black morass of death and come out the other side alive. He breathed a huge sigh of relief. He really had been too young to die.

So it had all been a dream, he thought with a little bit of sadness. Everything: Limbo, Lysa, Midori, the Judy's, everything. A crazy, fucked up, at points wonderful nightmare of a dream. But a dream none the less. Still, he was glad to have dreamt it. He had faced his inner demons and won.

Dante's parents came rushing in, the doctor close behind him. They looked like they hadn't slept in days. Both rushed in immediately and gave him a giant hug. PAINPAINPAINPAINPAINPAIN. Dante gasped through gritted teeth.

"Careful," the doctor warned them, "the EMT's had to administer CPR. His ribs cage is in pretty rough shape. Nothing that won't heal though."

"Mom. Dad.", Dante spoke up. "I'm sorry. For everything. I really have taken you guys for granted, and I abused your trust while you were away." His mother wiped tears from her eyes.

"Apology excepted," his mother said, "but we're still going to be having some serious words once you get home." Dante smiled and nodded. He deserved it and would take whatever punishment they had for him like a man. It couldn't be any worse than what he had already thought he endured.

"And you're going to be doing a lot of table bussing and dishwashing, buddy," his father chimed in. "I'd say, oh I don't know, for the rest of the school year, and through the summer till you leave for college just oughta about make us even. Oh and you'll be waiting tables too, except I get to keep the tips."

"Sure dad," Dante sighed with satisfaction. "I deserve that."

"And more," both his parents said in unison. They were clearly upset with him, but just as clearly relieved that he was still among the living.

A strange and familiar figure walked through the door. She wore short shorts, and long socks. A black T-shirt with glow in the dark paint splattered upon it was cut open and drooped, showing hints of the dark purple sports bra she was wearing underneath. Her wrists were covered with glow in the dark bracelets that shook whenever she walked.

Her ebony hair was kept back with a hot pink bow. Her smile seemed silly and bashful and flirty all at the same time. Even from across the room, he could tell that her gaze was directed only at Dante. Her smile looked vaguely familiar, but it was the pink pacifier dangling from her neck that gave her away.

"Dori?!" Dante exclaimed

"This was the girl that saved your life.", Dante's mom said. "She's a foreign exchange student, from Japan."

"Her exchange family told us that she crashed your party, thinking it would be a rave or something, and fell onto you when you were on the couch." His dad told him, "When she realized you weren't breathing, she screamed so loud the entire party stopped dead in its tracks".

"私はあなたがより良い感じて嬉しいです." The girl said with a slight bow. Dante didn't speak Japanese though, so it all came out as gibberish to Dante's ears.

"Mr. Willis, Dr. Willis, I'm sorry to interrupt," the doctor butted in. "I'm Doctor Jamal Adams, and I've been watching over your son for the last 24 hours since he lost consciousness." Wow, so he had been unconscious for over a day? Trippy. Wait. Dr. Jamal who?

"Your son was legally dead for nearly 20 minutes before we managed to revive him. The human brain can go up to six minutes without any oxygen before it suffers permanent damage. Your son's brain went over 3 times as long. Now I just got the scans back and we know what parts have been affected." Brain damage? Dante didn't feel brain damaged. He could think just fine.

"Give it to us straight, doctor." Dante's dad said, already his jaw was clenching as if bracing for impact.

"Well for starters," the doctor began, "most of his fine motor skills and coordination are shot he may never walk again. With some physical therapy he can manage a crawl, but not walk." What...?

"This goes for when he sleeps, too." the physician continued. "I'd recommend getting him some bedding with a railing so he doesn't fall out. Perhaps a crib of some sort. He'll need to be strapped in when he eats too, and spoon fed. I doubt he'd be able to get the food to his mouth otherwise. He may drool a little bit too, so don't let that surprise you." Was this happening? Was this seriously happening?!

"The language centers of his brain took some damage too," the old quack continued, ignoring Dante's look of distress. "He'll have a diminished vocabulary that may or may not ever rebuild itself." Doctor Adams looked at Dante.

"Young man, can you tell me another word for... potty?" he asked. Dante couldn't. All he could manage to do was sign "potty" with his hands. "Hmm," Doctor Adams arched an eyebrow, "there's an idea. You may want to each learn sign language as a way to communicate to each other, if Dante is unable to regain his old vocabulary. Which brings me to the last part." The doctor said as he ripped the sheets off of Dante's leg. "He's also completely incontinent."

Dante looked down. To his horror, cherubs playing on rainbows and puffy clouds stared up at him from his crotch. He was wearing a diaper, the same baby diaper that he had dreamed about. Dante felt a wetness spread in between his legs.

"That's the hospital's special incontinence brief for children that can't get up and use the bathroom." the doctor said pointing to Dante's mid-section. "They seem to prefer that to bed pans when given the option. That's the largest size we have. If you like it, we can give you a discount if you buy in bulk." Dante waited for his parents to say something, anything.

"This is great!" His mother beamed. Wait what?! "I've been reading about experimental regression therapies for years, but never got the opportunity to try it on someone. Dante would make the perfect test subject! Plus I get to be a mommy again!" SERIOUSLY?!

"Aaaand," his father added, "now that Dante is 18, we could make a few extra bucks by setting up a site on the internet. There's a demand and market for everything these days."
FUCK A DUCK!

Midori stuck her pacifier in her mouth and began sucking. She squatted and started to grunt.

"Uh oh," Dante's mother cooed, "looks like Dante's little friend wants to be a big baby too."

The doctor, unfazed just said, "Yes, I'll call the nurse. Nurse Judy!" Oh. My. Fucking. God. No.

A very familiar looking woman, with bleach blonde hair, wearing nursery scrubs came in. She looked to be in her mid thirties to early forties. She was beautiful, but not necessarily hot. Kind of like the way you could look at a statue and think "That's a pretty statue", but you wouldn't want to bone the Venus de Milo.

"Uh oh!" Nurse Judy exclaimed in mock surprise. "It looks like two someone's had an accident! Don't worry, Mama Judy will make it aaaaaalll better! Time-for-a-change." From behind her back, she drew out two very babyish looking diapers, one for Midori, and one for Dante. She laid them there by Dante's feet, as Dante found he couldn't move from his hospital bed. His body wouldn't cooperate. It was like parts of him were stuck to fly-paper.

All Dante could do was close his eyes as he heard the scritch scratch of Velcro tapes being torn off a diaper.

NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

Dante sat bolt upright in his crib. The lights were still out in the giant nursery. He was still dressed in Dr. Dentons, covered with sweat and could tell that his diaper was soaked. Lysa and Midori were in the cribs right next to them. Both were snoring softly in their footed PJ's.

So. It had all been a dream. The recovery, the rescue, him getting to say sorry to his parents. Everything. Figures. No happy ending.

There was no such thing as a happy ending. Only happy pauses. Dante grabbed the bottle of angel milk that he had left by his feet and put it to his lips. He had grown a lot as a person already. He had matured. But he was dead and stuck as a baby in Limbo. It didn't matter if you learned your lesson and became a better person when it's already too late.

Chapter 11: Communion

Dante immediately told Lysa the next morning about the horrible nightmare he had had the next morning. "Don't let it rattle you," Lysa had told him. "It was just your typical survivor's dream. We all have it from time to time. It's perfectly natural."

"But it seemed so real," Dante had said to her.

"Homesickness is a bitch." she smiled sadly. "Anyways, let's just focus on you getting used to this place."

It had been a little over two weeks since then. Much like spending two weeks at summer camp, where you're kept constantly busy and away from everything and everyone that was familiar, it felt much longer. Two weeks of constant babying- the scheduled feedings, the naps, the stupid activities and playtime, and of course the diapers- made Dante feel like he'd been there for a month, not half of one.

After a rough first day, Lysa and Dante had really hit it off. They did everything together. They played, ate, and bathed together, but mostly they just talked. And talked. And talked. And talked. Dante felt as if he already knew more about her than he knew about any other girl he had ever met. (Not hard, considering his past, but still cool.)

They knew each other's favor color, (Him: Blue Her: Purple), favorite book, (Him: I am the Cheese. Her: Frankenstein) favorite movie (Duck Soup for both of them oddly enough.) and favorite song (Him: Come Out And Play. Her: Paper Moon). For her part, Lysa was fascinated on what had been going on in the living world when last Dante left it. So intense was her questioning, that at times it felt more like an interrogation at times.

"Who's the president, now?" she asked one day.

"Barack Obama." he answered.

"Of America, I mean." she clarified.

"No, that's his name. He's black...er...Negro" he replied. Lysa rolled her eyes.

"I know what 'black' means, you big dope." Lysa informed Dante. "I'm lost to current events, not language. Wait. Black President? Seriously?"

"Seriously."

Lysa thought about it for a moment then tilted her head sideways. "Huh...neat." That was pretty open minded for a girl who had died the same year Brown v. The Board of Education was decided.

"What kind of music do people listen to, now?" From president and straight to top 40. That was how Lysa's mind worked.

"Um...let's see," Dante began. "There's a lot. There's Alternative, Punk, House, Acid House, Metal, Hip-Hop, Folk, R&B, Blue Grass, Pop, Blues, Electro, Dub-Step, Fusion, Ska, Gangsta Rap, Grunge, Goth, Industrial, Goth-Industrial, Alternative Hip-Hop-"

"Stop!" Lysa cut him off. "What I really wanted to say was, 'Is Rock n' Roll still around?'"

"Yeah, that's what I just said." Dante remarked. "Rock n' Roll kind of evolved and split off into a bunch of different branches and some new styles were invented and thrown into the mix. Your Rock n' Roll is all on the oldies stations now." That had him a playful shove that knocked him flat. Playful. Yeah. At least she had been smiling that time. Consult mental note made on first day.

The only thing that interrupted their long talk sessions was Lysa's visits to the newborn room. She visited Caroline once a week. Unlike the first time, she visited her baby sister alone, leaving Dante and Midori without her presence.

That didn't mean Dante was ever truly unsupervised though. Another Judy always came to watch over Dante while Lysa and the Judy in the nursery scrubs had been gone. One time, the Judy with the green dress had babysat him, and brought over her wards. Dante had tried to explain things to the other kids- as an act of kindness- but none of them seemed to buy it or even want to talk about it. They had completely rejected any and all outside help. By then, they had all also developed an unconscious need to have something in their mouths at all times. Dante didn't bother to learn their names. Soon enough, he figured, they wouldn't need them anymore.

As Dante sat in the highchair today, awaiting his next dose of mush and milk, he couldn't get Lysa out of his head. All and all, she was pretty damn cool. Not just for a girl, for anybody. If only. Crap. Was he starting to crush on a dead chick? Worse yet, was he starting to get a crush on a girl who- were she still alive- was old enough to be his grandmother? Was Lysa a G.I.L.F. ? One thing at a time, Dante. One thing at a time.

The Judies had also caught on to their blossoming relationship...friendship. The Judy who watched over them regularly had dressed them similarly every day this past week, usually modifying them so Lysa's outfit was decidedly more feminine. When Dante was put in a green onesie, Lysa had been dressed in a pink one with a completely pointless skirt attached.. When he had been dressed in a blue romper with a baby bee on the front, she was put in a pure white romper with a violet on the front. When she was clothed in a frilly purple dress with puffy sleeves, they dressed him in Navy Blue Shortalls with a baby polo shirt (Yes, something resembling pants!)

This morning, as Midori chomped away on her not-quite-baby cereal in her bib and yellow checkered sun dress, Dante and Lysa were wearing solid, blue and purple baby t-shirts and diapers. What sicko invented these, anyways? The shirts didn't even pretend to cover their diapers. The hemline of the shirt literally stopped centimeters from the

diaper's waste band. There was literally no concealment whatsoever. If he and Lysa had been wearing shirts like that as teens, he would have been called gay and she a slut. Right now, they were "adorable". Stupid fucking backwards double standards.

That was another thing- the weird backwardness of babyhood: As an adult, (or at least close to one), Dante would go to a special table to eat all his meals. A while later, when the food worked its way through his system, he would go sit on a special chair designed to get rid of the mess that his body produced. Now, as a giant baby, Dante went to a specially designed chair to eat all his meals, and later, after the food worked through his system, he would go to a special table designed to clean up the mess that his body produced. All he needed right now was a bad Russian accent, and he could be a big baby Yakov Smirnoff. (In Soviet Russia, Diaper Change You!)

Hmmm, maybe that was Dante's anchor, social commentary and ironic inner monologues. Heh. An ironic anchor. Word play. Loved it. That was another obstacle: Dante had yet to find an anchor; something he was so passionate about that it made up a piece of his adult identity that he could cling to instead of regressing.

He tried painting, but it did nothing for him. He just wasn't any good at it.

"It's not about talent," Vivian the painter girl had told him. "It's about loving what you're doing. I couldn't paint for beans when I first got here. I had always wanted to try though. This is what a decade of practice will do for you." she held up a finger paint recreation of Van Gough's "Starry Night".

"It's not even about improvement." Kevin the play-doh kid added later that day. "I've been here for about 18 years, and this stupid doll is the best thing I can make." He pointed to the Mr. Bill look-alike, as well as several more identical versions on the plastic play mat. "The thing is, every day, this junk gets torn apart, rolled back into little balls, and stuffed back into the containers. My goal is to see how many I can make in a given day. Maybe eventually, I'll make so many that the nursery will run out of play-doh, or the Judy's will get tired of cleaning up after me and leave these creepy little things be. I know it's a Sisyphean task, but it keeps me going.

"What? I died as a nine-year-old, so I can't know the meaning of the word 'Sisyphean' ?"

Even Jamal had added in his two cents. "Look man, find something to pass the time besides cuddling with teddy bears and pissing in your britches. This place is like any joint; you can make it if you just find a way to pass the time without losing your mind. Oh yeah, and fuck you."

Dante had tried everything with little to no success. Forget learning sign language. Playing with blocks has the exact opposite effect on him as he felt especially juvenile with those. He must have played with blocks a lot as a real infant. He had never had any little brothers or sisters, so playing with actual babies just felt awkward and bored him to tears. Even his walker was losing its initial thrill. Playing pretend car just didn't compare to the genuine article and made him seem more infantile. He needed something real to hold onto.

Speaking of "pretend", playing "Dress up" seemed asinine to Dante. He was already dressed up like a baby, why did he need to dress up even more? Oh look...he put on a hat, now he's a baby policeman. Oh joy, a white coat, now he's a baby doctor....wooooooh. (Thank goodness he hadn't regressed too far, so he could still maintain a difference between "dressed as a baby" and just "dressed".)

But Dante had regressed, anyway. Not as fast as some had, though. The three rebels from his first day now sat comfortably in cradling high chairs, dressed in baby clothes and bibs and behaving well. When they talked at all, it was in short bursts with infantile language and pronunciation, such as "Pwease" and "Fankyuu". Dante swore he saw the Judy in the green dress mouth the words "Not long now" to her fellow angel nannies.

Dante was slipping, still. He could feel it. On more than one occasion, Dante had been genuinely surprised when a Judy checked his diaper and found it wet. Originally, he had enough warning from his bladder to know that the dam was bursting. That was happening less and less.

Now he was constantly worrying whether or not he was wet or dry. He literally had to rub the front of his diaper to be able to tell. Hell, he was beginning to be unable to tell the difference between wet and dry at all! Even the smell of a wet diaper didn't register to him anymore. It was like when you're in a chain smoker's house so long that you don't notice how everything in there smells like smoke until you step inside into the clean fresh air.

Yesterday, he was sure that he had pooped his diaper and not realized it. He had just zoned out for a moment- no more than a daydream- and when he came to, he was sitting in his own mess.

What was creepier; strange, alien thoughts were creeping into his head. Thoughts like: "What would that taste like if I put it in my mouth?", or "If I cry loud enough, mommy will pay more attention to me."

He kept most of this from Lysa as much as he could. She didn't need to worry about this. She needed him for companionship, just as badly as he needed her for staying sane. She already knew he was looking for an anchor and hadn't found it, yet. (She being as close as he got to an anchor right now.) No need to worry her with some kind of countdown clock

Oddly enough, immediately following breakfast, Dante and his friends did not get a bottle of milk. Instead they were taken directly to their playpen while the Judy in the nursery scrubs bustled around, making herself look busy. That was weird, normally right after breakfast was bottles and burping, following by trip time as the angel milk affected their minds.

"What's going on?" Dante asked Lysa once they were set down in the pen.

"Must be communion day," Lysa whispered back.

"Like with the wafers and grape juice?" Dante asked.

"No." Lysa smiled. It was a sad smile, nervous too. "It's where they take us to right outside the gates of Heaven and we visit with our relatives that made it in."

Really? Dante would get to see someone who wasn't in diapers that wasn't a Judy? "Don't get too excited though," Lysa cut off Dante's train of thought. "They still see and talk to us as if we were babies. Personally, I think it's just another elaborate form of brainwashing."

Meanwhile, the Judy was busy stuffing two diaper bags full of supplies.

"Let's see," the Judy said to herself, "Wipes? Check. Bottles of Juice? Check. Bottles of Milk? Double Check. Baby food? Check. Pacifiers? Check. Toys? Check. Book? Check. Changing mat? Check. Extra clothes in case of an accident? Check. What else? Oh my God!" The Judy laughed at herself. "Diapers! I almost forgot the diapers. How silly of me, they would have killed me if I hadn't packed any diapers. Helllooooo Judy!" she smacked herself lightly in the forehead.

"It's the closest thing a lot of these Judy's get to a day off." Lysa told Dante. "Not that they really need one."

"Huh," Dante remarked, "Why is she only packing two diaper bags, then?"

"Midori's not going," Lysa said quickly.

"She doesn't have any ancestors that are in Heaven?" Dante asked.

"Well," she thought for a moment, "she's been dead for only a little over 11 or 12 years. Her parents are probably still alive. Her grandparents might be too."

"What about other ancestors?" Dante asked.

Lysa shrugged. "For some reason, they never introduce you to people in your family who died before you were born. Same thing goes with family members that never knew you existed."

Dante scratched his head at that. "I guess long lost relatives are too much of a hassle." Dante chuckled at a thought. "Heck, if you take the Bible literally, we're all descended from Adam and Eve."

"Yeah," Lysa allowed herself a smirk, "I guess there's something to be said against extended families. Besides, wouldn't it suck to find out that you and I were somehow distantly related?" She winked at him.

"Uh huh," Dante nodded, starting to drool slightly. "Wait, we're not related, are we?"

"No." Lysa laughed. "At least you don't look like anyone from my family."

Speaking of which..."Wait, why are you going?" Dante questioned. "I thought you said your father killed your family."

"Yes," Lysa rolled her eyes, "and we all know that murdered people don't go to Heaven."

Before Dante could ask any more questions, their Judy came, scooped the two rugrats up, and buckled them into the twin stroller, diaper bags loaded. Midori waved goodbye from her playpen, as the Judy in the green dress wordlessly approached and they strolled off. As their stroller was wheeled around the corner, Dante and Lysa were pushed out a door that definitely hadn't existed until right before that moment.

After weeks indoors, the blast of sunlight, tyrannical sunlight...barely did anything to Dante. It was actually surprisingly gentle. He wasn't blinded at all. Dante winced from expectation, more than from anything else.

Dante looked around from the stroller. Below his feet, was what looked like smoothed blocks of paved concrete, like a sidewalk. It wasn't very wide, either. Dante estimated that maybe two strollers of this size could fit on it, but not much more. The Judy was walking on the right side of the sidewalk, and since Dante's baby blue half of the stroller was on the left, he was on the inside of the track.

Looking outward, on the left and right of the floating sidewalk, Dante saw a ten foot drop, and only clouds after that. No ground or sky below, only clouds. You couldn't see anything else. It was like all of those cartoons of the afterlife, where angels walked on clouds as easily as if they were solid. Only difference here, no one was walking on these clouds.

"Where is this?" he finally asked Lysa.

"They call it the narrow path." she said. Well named.

"Aaaand, what happens if you go off the narrow path?" he wondered.

"You fall." Lysa told him flatly. "Very. Very. Far." Dante didn't need to ask any more questions on that.

About twenty feet ahead, Dante could see another stroller, with a Judy pushing it. Ahead of that stroller in the distance, was another stroller. Beyond that was another stroller. Dante was pretty sure that behind them, soon enough, would be another stroller. They moved steadily for about 15 minutes of relative silent.

"So," Lysa broke the silence, "who do you think you're going to meet here? Why are you coming along for communion?"

Dante shrugged and searched his memory. "I dunno" he said finally. "My parents aren't dead yet. I hope. Maybe they died in a car crash coming to try and save me. Maybe they committed suicide. Probably not, though. I hope." Dante didn't like the idea of talking

about his mom and dad being dead. It felt like he were wishing death upon them. Then again, it wasn't so bad if you ended up in Heaven. Limbo or Hell though...Dante shuddered.

"If they killed themselves and were older than us, they probably wouldn't have gone to Heaven." Lysa added. "But don't worry. You're young to be dead right now. So it's probably not them." Lysa was probably right. Who could it be though?

What must have been Heaven came into view in the distance. Tall spires and glorious palaces rose on the horizon. Bright lights and auras shone forth. There were two suns right now. Dante didn't know how he knew, but this was Heaven. It's like how one knows Disney World as soon as the giant Mickey ears come into view. There was something hardwired into his brain to recognize this place and know what it is. This though was the Taj Mahal, the Great Pyramids of Egypt, Disney World, and the Emerald City of Oz all rolled up into one and multiplied times infinity. Since the Tower of Babel, no human language has been able to accurately describe Its grandeur.

Just as it came into sight, the strollers ahead of Dante seemed closer. Just like at Disney, the line was starting to slow down and condense. Dante heard the crying of other babified Limbo inhabitants as the line grew more packed, their Judy's doted on them as if they were just fussy infants, which most were- in mind if not always in body.

"Sooo..." Dante asked to break the silence. "You ever been in?"

Lysa smirked. "Nope. Never will either. They'll let moms, dads, uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandparents come out and play with us, but we never get to go in. At least the walls aren't too high so we can see some- Turn your head!" She cut herself off as her eyes widened. Dante immediately snapped his head around the other direction. Lysa was peeing.

A few minutes later, their Judy checked their diapers and declared both of them wet. She pressed a button on their stroller and their seats tilted back. Then she came around and changed them. Dante and Lysa held each other's hands while the angel did her work. Proclaiming both done and "aaaalll better", she balled up the used diapers and tossed them over the side of the floating sidewalk. Dante watched as the clouds swallowed them up.

"You know you could have told me you were wet too," Lysa chided Dante. "I would have looked away while you were going." Dante looked ashamed. Dante hadn't even realized he was wet. "Typical boy," she giggled nervously, "you'll go anywhere in front of anyone." Her giggle didn't hide anything. She knew he was starting to lose it. She knew.

As they got closer, the clouds rolled up next to the sidewalk and were replaced by green grassy fields. Lush, green grass rolled around with big shady trees. It looked a lot like an old fashioned park. All around, Dante saw families playing with children. As expected, regardless of actual physical age, each "child" was dressed as though they were no more than a year old. Dante even saw some actual newborns being cradled. Sad to have died so young, but at least they were with their parents now.

"Let me guess," Dante said turning his head to Lysa, "Elysian fields?"

"Got it in one." Lysa confirmed. "Though I've heard the Judies refer to it as 'The Garden' before. Probably Eden."

"Either way," Dante added, "it's the archetype of a natural paradise."

"Yeah," Lysa agreed, "I can think of worse places to spend time away from the nursery at." Dante couldn't argue with that.

The sidewalk ended at a patch of grass. The gates of Heaven were still far off in the distance, but Dante saw no further strollers. There was a small tent labeled "Limbo Stroller Parking" that Dante saw another Judy push an empty stroller into it. Looks like he was now at the front of the line.

Two figures walked up to the stroller. A man and a woman; vaguely familiar. The woman had her gray hair put up in a bun. She had laugh lines on her face and silvery gray eyes. Her blue blouse and ankle length gray skirt complimented her sandals and unpainted toe-nails. The man kept his white hair trimmed short and close cropped. His blue eyes didn't match his red and white checkered shirt. Nor did the shirt go particularly well with his blue suspenders, gray pants, and black loafers. Still, he had a self-assured smirk that Dante had inherited and a nose that unmistakably belonged to his father.

He remembered! His Grandparents! It had been over a decade since he had seen either one alive. His grandfather had died of cancer when he was a little over two years old, and his grandmother had died from a stroke two years later. As a result, most of Dante's memories of them weren't actual memories, but stories that his parents had told him so often, that the stories had become the memories.

They looked almost exactly like they did in his baby pictures. Old, but fit, strong, and healthy. If there was such a thing as being "in their prime" and "elderly" at the same time, these two looked it.

As soon as he recognized them, Dante's hands shot down to cover his diaper. "Don't bother," Lysa told him flatly. "It's not like they recognize you as anything other than a baby, anyways."

His grandma ran towards the stroller. "My grandbaby!" she squealed as she repeatedly pecked his cheeks and forehead with kisses. She smelled of lilacs. His grandpa strolled up and knelt down; he smelled of tobacco and peppermint.

His grandpa took Dante's hand in his own and said, "Well hello there, grandson." before dramatically grasping his arm in mock pain. "Ow, ow, ow!" his grandpa said, withdrawing his hand and shaking it in the air as if it had been in a vice. Dante hadn't even squeezed. "Quite a grip yah got there. Yer gettin' strong, yessir." Dante wasn't sure what to do, so he just stared. "Hmm," his grandfather said when Dante didn't respond, "he used ta love that one. "

"Frank," Dante's grandmother said to his grandpa, "he was two back then. Now he's too young to get that joke." So they did remember him being older. For some reason, they only thought he was a baby now. Did senility develop and carry on after death? Grandma unbuckled Dante from the stroller and hoisted him up on her hip with nary a groan or grunt. She shouldn't have been able to do that.

Maybe the Judy's weren't actually super strong. Maybe something had been done to Dante and the other "babies" do make them easier to move and pick up. Or maybe this was all an elaborate disguise and attempt at deception. Who says that angels couldn't shape shift?

The Judy handed his grandfather the blue diaper bag. She started talking to them. "I made sure to pack everything you'll need for the day. Diapers, wipes, bottles, toys-

"Thank you kindly, Miss Judy." Grandpa said cutting her off. "But we've had yungins before, ma'am. We can handle ol' Dante for a couple a' hours." The Judy smiled graciously and nodded. The three of them turned away and began to walk through the fields. Dante looked back and saw another elderly couple approach the stroller and pick Lysa up. They looked about Grandma and Grandpa's age. They must have been her grandparents.

Grandma carried Dante as easily as any Judy. Grandpa was constantly shifting the diaper bag from shoulder to shoulder, never comfortable. "Geez Molly," he joked, "I think they packed enough stuff in this baby bag to make a whole 'nother baby."

"I offered to carry the bag, Frank," Grandma replied, "but you insisted."

"I did." Grandpa confirmed, giving Grandma a smirk, his eyes gazing lovingly into her eyes.

Grandma returned the smile and patted Dante's bum. "His mother and I had just managed to get him out of diapers when I last saw him." she sighed, "Now he's right back in them."

"Why do you s'pose they're turned back into babies anyways?" Grandpa asked.

"Some things we weren't meant to know." Grandma answered. "Maybe it's to lessen the pain from being separated from the Heavenly Host. Maybe things are just simpler at this age."

"I'm not a baby," Dante jumped into the conversation. "Seriously, I'm not. I'm just dressed as one."

"That's right, Dante!" Grandma cooed at him. "You're just our little man, now. Oh but you're soooo cute!" Great. They acted as though he were a baby too. Maybe these two really were Judy's. The Judies ignored his speech and treated it as baby babble. Then again, the Judies refused to acknowledge that he was ever anything other than a baby. When he had first arrived in Limbo, one had looked at his soiled briefs and insisted that they were a ruined cloth diaper. Grandma remembered him being potty trained at one point. Fuck. It was getting harder for Dante to remember being potty trained.

"How do you think Bob and Julie are holding up?" Grandpa asked, continuing the conversation.

"Not well I'd imagine," Grandma said.

"Nope. I reckon not. We'll have to pray for them- see if we can convince an angel to watch over them for a while."

They came to a shady oak tree. A checkered picnic blanket that matched Grandpa's shirt and straw basket waited for them. There were even some backless benches nearby to sit on.

"Here we are." Grandma announced. "And it looks like everything is where we left it." She set Dante down in the middle of the picnic blanket.

"Course it is, Molly," Grandpa chuckled, "who 'round here would steal anything?". He set the diaper bag down by the edge of the blanket.

"Oh quit picking on me!" Dante's grandmother slapped Grandpa playfully on the shoulder. "Anyways, it's time for Grandma to play with her grandbaby!" She sat down in front of Dante and covered her eyes. "Wheeeeere's Grnadma?" she said. She uncovered her eyes. "There she is!" She repeated the game. "Wheeeeere's Grandma?! There she is!"

Dante just stared at his grandmother and shook his head slightly. "Seriously Grandma? Seriously?".

If she didn't understand the words, Grandma obviously understood the tone. Her face drooped a little in disappointment. Then she tried covering his eyes. "Where's Dante?"

Dante felt a little guilty. It wasn't her fault that he wasn't actually a baby. A normal baby would have found this entertaining as all hell. A very small part of him that he was fighting was enjoying the attention, even if he did know where Dante was. He decided to humor her a little bit.

"There he is!" she squealed as she uncovered Dante's eyes. Dante made his eyes widen in surprise and a big stupid grin spread across his face as he giggled and clapped his hands. Grandma's face lit up, and she covered her eyes again. "Wheeeeere's Dante?"

Dante rolled his eyes, while his grandmother's She was getting more of a kick out of this than he was. This must have been what it was like for Lysa when she faked baby to get something from the Judy's. This time though, it wasn't to manipulate someone as much to make them happy. This process repeated itself for lightning rounds of "patty cake", "got your nose", and "bouncy bouncy" as he was bounced up and down on Grandma's knee. It's a good thing he was already dead, because Dante's overriding thought was "Somebody kill me."

Dante's grandfather took Dante off of Grandma's knee when she was done. "Oh come on Molly, he might be a baby again, but he's not a baby baby. He's too old for most of this stuff." Grandpa paused for a moment. "But you know what he's not too old for?" He flashed Dante that inherited smile of his. "A piggy back ride!"

Dante was almost immediately slung over his grandfather's back, his hands hanging on for dear life, while his legs were supported. Grandpa took off running and Dante bounced along for the ride. The wind whipped through Dante's hair as Grandpa dashed through the field at incredible speed. For an old, dead guy who died of lung cancer, Grandpa had the stamina and speed of an Olympic athlete. Heaven must have a heck of a health plan and Grandpa had cashed in on the gym membership.

Now THIS was fun! Other families pointed, smiled, then quickly became blurs in the distance as Grandpa long distance sprinted past. Dante couldn't help but shriek with delight. This was the closest thing he had had to a thrill ride or roller coaster since he had died. This was a rush!

Much too soon, the ride stopped, and Dante was back at the picnic blanket with Grandma. Grandpa was panting heavily, though maybe a little too heavily to be real.

"Strained yourself, didn't you?" Grandma smiled.

"Jest a little," Grandpa panted. "I'm too old to be a good piggy." he said, Dante still on his back. "Buuuut...I'm a terrific horsie!" Grandpa dropped to all fours and started trotting around the picnic blanket.

"Hahahah!" Dante laughed. This was hilarious. This was great. The weird part was, Dante didn't feel like this was causing him to regress. He was enjoying this, but it was because of pure nostalgia. They were treating him like a baby, sure, but for some reason, it felt like they were treating him like a baby person, not just some dumb pet.

"Careful now!" Grandma warned, as Grandpa bucked and Dante rolled right off of Grandpa's back, tumbling to the blanket covered ground.

"He might be a baby again, Molly," Grandpa said. "but he's still all boy."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Grandma agreed

They started talking about bringing a push cart on his next visit, something to really get momentum. Dante started to zone out. He felt like something was off. He felt plugged up, like something was blocking his own personal feng shui. Like he was a clogged up pipe. All it would take would be one final blow. On instinct, Dante decided to blow. He imagined himself blowing air through his entire body, and moving all of the negative energy out. His cheeks puffed out like he was holding his breath.

Grandma and Grandpa stopped their conversation to look at Dante, on all fours with his cheeks puffed out. "Awww, look at that, Frank," Grandma said, " just like when Bobby was that age."

"You know what that means," Grandpa chuckled and shook his head.

"I know. I'll get the diaper bag."

There. All done. All cleared. Dante felt great now. His Grandma had already spread out a changing mat behind him and pushed Dante back onto it.

"Hey what gives?" Dante yelled in surprise. Then Dante felt the mess spread in the back of his diaper as he was laid down and the smell hit his nose. Oh. Oh. She had already laid aside a fresh diaper and a tub of wipes.

Dante hid his face in his hands.. He had already accepted the Judy's as basically nanny robots. But his grandparents seemed like actual people. Not only had he pooped himself without realizing it- again- but now actual people were going to wipe his ass for him.

He grit his teeth, as Grandma opened the diaper and used the front of it to wipe the bulk of the poop off of him. He felt a lump form in his throat as his gag reflex kicked in- a mixture of the smell and his own humiliation. "Wheeeeere's Dante?!" was all his Grandma said, his face behind his hands, as she dragged cold baby wipes across his backside.

"Heh," his grandfather smirked, looking over Grandma's shoulder, "must take after his mother's side of the family." HUH?! Was his grandfather laughing at the size of his penis?! Now that's just plain messed up! Dante uncovered his face just long enough to give Grandpa a complete and total death stare.

"Oh Frank, hush." Grandma shook her head as she finished wiping Dante. "Bobby was the same way at this age. Most babies are. You're so bad!" Grandpa just shook his head and smiled.

"Now hold on, Molly," Grandpa interrupted as Grandma was about to unfold the new diaper and slide it under Dante, "don't wrap him back up just yet. Why not let him crawl around and be a little jaybird for a while?"

"But Frank," Grandma asked, still keeping an eye on Dante's privates, (she had already raised one baby boy, an unguarded penis could be a dangerous thing) "what if he has an accident?"

"Nothing we can't clean up." Grandpa said. "We're outside anyhow. 'S not like there's any furniture around for him to ruin. Besides," he added motioning to the balled up diaper that Dante had just made a deposit in. "I think the worst of it has passed."

Grandma thought a moment. "Well all right," she finally said, pulling Dante up into a sitting position and yanking his shirt off of him. "Besides, he's probably kept in diapers 24/7 in the nursery. Kids need a little personal time every now and then."

"And," she added as Dante rolled over, "he does have the cutest little tushie." She gave it a playful smack on his but. Dante braced himself. Nothing happened: He didn't fall down. He didn't go limp. He just kept crawling. Interesting. So anyone could pick him up and tote him around, but only Judy's could spank him.

Dante should have felt embarrassed, but after pooping in front of his grandparents, and being on the receiving end of a size joke, being naked in front of them didn't rank that high. That and after two solid weeks of padding between his thighs, and nothing but indoor/outdoor carpeting and padded playpens to crawl on, being naked and rolling around in the grass was too much of a highlight.

It was positively electrifying. Every blade of grass tickled his bare skin. Sweat trickled down his skin as he crawled through the blades and dug his fingers and toes into the sod. He felt alive. All the while, Grandma and Grandpa followed close behind him, talking about nothing in particular, and laughing as Dante experienced the simple joy of being naked in a field. This must have gone on for what was at least an hour.

"Let's walk with Grandma!" she said as she hoisted him up by the armpits. Rather than picking him all the way up, though, she supported him under the arms and let his feet brush the earth. She was helping him walk! The soles of his feet came alive as he trod upon the earth. All the while, his grandmother encouraged him.

"That's it, take another step big boy." she said as he clumsily put one foot in front of the other, only her support keeping him from falling. "That's a big boy! Walkin' for Gramma!" Grandpa, started walking backwards, coaxing Dante closer with each step, only to take a step back as Dante grew closer.

"That's right, feller!" Grandpa coaxed, "Come an' get me! Come an' tackle yer ol' Grampa!"

They were definitely no Judy's. Real parents encouraged their kids to grow up and become more independent. The Judies did everything they could to remind you that you were still a baby to them. Right then, Dante knew he loved his grandparents, and regretted them dying when he was so young so that he never got to know them. At least now he had a chance to get to know them, even if they would never actually meet the real him.

Suddenly Dante felt something wrong. Floodgates were about to open. He was about to pee! Reflexively, he reached down and grabbed his penis, pointing it away from his grandfather. A stream of urine gushed out, just barely missing Dante's grandfather.

This was weird. He felt the surge of relief come upon him as he emptied his bladder on the grass, but not the accompanying feeling of warmth or wetness around his crotch. He was doing an open air whiz, and it was wonderful!

"Ha ha ha!" Grandpa laughed as he moved out of the way to avoid a golden shower. "So you and Julie managed to potty train him, huh?! Looks like the ol' boy still has some moves left!" Dante felt a surge of pride well up inside him. Grandma giggled behind Dante as he finished his wee.

Then he remembered! This is what going potty was like! You had to stand in front of the potty, use your hand to aim your pee-pee towards the water, and then go tinkle! It was all so simple! How had he forgotten how to do that? "What next?" he wondered as his stream slowed to a drip.

Then the bridge to a Good Charlotte song came to his mind. "Shake it once, that's fine. Shake it twice, that's okay. Shake it three times, you're playing with yourself." Dante took his penis and shook it twice before letting it drop.

"Bwahahahaha!" Grandpa about fell over as he saw this. "I'm tellin' you Molly, the kid's a natural!"

Dante grinned from ear to ear in victory. He had remembered how to potty! Timing, aim, and bladder control were still an issue, but it was a step in the right direction. Wait till he told Lysa about this!

"Okay, I think that's enough close calls for one day" Grandma laughed, as she picked Dante up and carried him back over to the blanket. She laid him down on the blanket, and unfolded the diaper she had set aside earlier and slid it under Dante's bottom as she lifted his legs.

"Still," she went on as she re-diapered her eighteen-year-old grandson. "Maybe we can stop by the preschool next month and pick up some Pull-Ups or a practice potty."

"You think we could find any training pants small enough for him?" Grandpa asked as Grandma finished fastening the tapes "Or a seat that won't swallow him?"

"Oh, I doubt we could REALLY potty-train him again." Grandma said, reaching for the baby t-shirt. "But I bet if we timed it right, we could teach him to go whenever we sat him on a potty." Dante let this run through his mind, as he was re-dressed.

Him. Sitting on a potty. Maybe even with a pair of blue Pull-Ups around his ankles, their learning designs not yet faded. His hands up in the air in victory as his urine splashed against the plastic bowl instead of into padding between his legs. To dream the impossible dream.

"Time for a little lunch," Grandma said. Grandpa walked over and picked up the picnic basket, getting out sandwiches and some bottled waters. Grandma sat on the blanket, and spread her legs into a "V". She sat Dante in between her legs and held him gently. Grandpa rummaged through the diaper bag and brought out a jar of baby food, a baby spoon, and two bottles; one juice, and one milk.

Dante's stomach growled loudly and both of his grandparents smiled. "I think he's all empty," Grandma said, dipping the spoon into the mush, "so it's about time we fill him back up." Still sitting in her lap, Grandma offered spoonfuls of the mouth exploding baby mush to Dante. Dante gratefully accepted every spoonful. Grandma was right there to catch all of the spill-out and didn't miss a drop. She was an old pro at this, after all.

While he ate, Dante's grandfather chomped into a baloney sandwich. Every now and then he would stop long enough to lean over and hold another sandwich to Grandma's lips and let her take a bite. Grandpa was feeding Grandma, and Grandma was feeding Dante. None of this wasn't an act of babying, an act of establishing dependence and dominance. This was all an act of love. This was one of the few moments that Dante could remember since coming to Limbo, that Dante felt good, instead of just not bad.

A thought occurred to Dante: Maybe his grandparents could be his anchors. They didn't make him feel especially like an adult, but they definitely didn't make him feel much like a baby. Not the way the Judy's did anyhow. But could he last and keep his sanity if he only got to see them once a month?

When Dante had finished his mush, his Grandma picked up the milk filled bottle and offered it to Dante's lips. Ohnonononono! He was enjoying this moment too much to want to trip out on angel milk.

"It's too warm for milk anyways," Grandpa said when Dante violently shook his head "No!". Grandma put the bottle down, and instead offered him a bottle of apple juice instead. Dante greedily grabbed the bottle, and washed down his meal, allowing himself a satisfied sigh as Grandma rubbed his tummy.

Two weeks of supernaturally enforced conditioning can't be counteracted with just a few hours of genuine parental love, however. So within a few minutes of finishing. "Looks like Dante's about ready to check out on us." Grandpa observed

"Oh let him sleep," he heard Grandma say as he drifted off to sleep, a relaxed smile on his face.

Dante was moving when he woke up. He was being cradled in Grandma's arms as they walked back towards the narrow path back to Limbo.

"Days like this make me wish we had had more when we could," he heard his grandmother say.

"Yep," his grandfather agreed. "So, how do you think he died so young? And not baptized?"

"Hush now", he heard Grandma say, "he's woke up. We'll just have to ask Bobby when he gets here someday, God willing."

The Judy in the nursery scrubs was already waiting with an empty stroller when Dante and his grandparents approached.

"Here you go," Grandma said as she handed Dante back to his captor. "I think he's a little wet. We can change him here before you go if you'd like. The Judy placed him back in the stroller and checked his diaper.

"Don't worry about it," the Judy said to Grandma as Grandpa loaded the diaper bag back on the stroller. "Like you said, he's only a little wet, and these things can take a lot of punishment." She patted the front of Dante's diaper. "I'll just change him when we get back to the nursery."

"Did you have a good time with your grandparents?" the Judy cooed. Dante nodded "yes"; for their sakes, not for hers.

"Bye Dante, see you next month!" his Grandma said as they both waved goodbye and walked back towards the shining city in the distance.

"Bye Grandma! Bye Grandpa! I love you!" Dante shouted out, even though he knew, it would only come across as baby babble. "Love you too, Dante!" Grandpa's voice came echoing back. Was this what Midori went through for real?

The two elderly people who picked up Lysa came back with her soon after. "We're not late, are we?" the old man carrying Lysa on his hip asked.

"Nope," the Judy said, "you're just in time." Lysa's grandfather placed Lysa back in the stroller and buckled her up himself. Her grandmother gave her a quick peck on the cheek. Lysa for her part, seemed very nervous. "Bye bye, Lysa. We love you."

"Love you too," Lysa mumbled, as the old folks walked back towards Heaven. Then the Judy ruined everything.

"Wave bye bye to Mommy and Daddy, Lysa!" she said. Mommy? Daddy?! Something was not right, here. Dante knew it. He didn't want to, but felt compelled.

"Lysa, what's going on?" Dante asked as the stroller turned around and started heading back to Limbo.

"What do you m-m-mean?" Lysa stuttered, her eyes darting around. She started chewing on her lips.

"The Judy called those two old people your mom and dad." Dante told her.

"Yeah, and...?" Lysa took a big gulp.

"You told me that your dad killed your baby sister and your mom. Then you killed him, and then yourself. If that's true, what is your dad doing in Heaven? Why are your parents so old? From your story, they couldn't have been more than in their 40's when they died; probably younger. Why are they so old? And why isn't Caroline with us visiting your parents with you?"

Lysa looked away. In a tone that Dante could barely hear, she said "Because of the rules. They never knew about her when any of us were alive."

"Your mother and father never knew about the existence of your baby sister? Of Caroline?" Dante couldn't believe what he was hearing. Then it all clicked.

"Yeah," Lysa said, still looking away. "I'm not really Caroline's sister. I'm her mother."

Chapter 12: Lysa's Lies

Dante sat in the stroller, eyes blank. Time and feeling had decided to take a backseat yet again. His intellect though was already playing catch up. It all made sense, now: The baby instinctively reaching for Lysa's breasts, Lysa's death glare at the wet nurse, Jamal's crack about maternal instinct. Lysa saying she would never lactate, get pregnant or have her period AGAIN. God, how could he have been so naïve? (To be fair, he thought the AGAIN only applied to her period.)

Even the Judies insistence on Caroline being Lysa's baby "sister", made some sense. The Judies were determined to baby everyone, and no matter what the figure of speech was, babies simply couldn't have babies. That just wouldn't go with their methods or programming or whatever it was that made them do what they do. So instead, the Judies created a lie, and Lysa went along with it. But why?

"Lysa," Dante said, feeling an ache as his emotions thought to creep in. "why the hell did you lie to me about who Caroline was?" Lysa looked deep into Dante's eyes, her pigtailed framing her face. Her tough façade melted, and she became softer. Her lip quivered a little.

"I was scared to tell you," she said. "I thought you would judge me. That you'd condemn me as some whore who got knocked up and not listen to what I have to say."

"Really?" Dante asked.

"Really." Lysa said. "I told Dori the truth about me, and she completely turned her back on me. She thought, she was better than me. She ignored everything I had to tell her; everything that Jorge had taught me before he finally ran for it.

"Without me, or anyone else, she slipped away. First she started wetting and not realizing it, then she started baby babbling. Then one day she went to sleep, and when she woke up, she was pretty much like you know her now. She's a lot nicer to hang out with now, but I still miss the real her, even if she was a bit of a bitch."

Dante couldn't imagine Midori as anything other than a babbling kidfant. Had Midori once been a regular girl? A raver maybe, or a bit of a know-it-all catty bitch? The Midori he knew was such a simple creature. All she was concerned with was attention, affection, and what she could and could not put in her mouth. Little things like who you were before she knew you or what was going on in her underwear didn't matter to her.

"I didn't want that to happen to you, and it was still the first day," Lysa told him, "so I lied to make things simpler."

"Simpler?" Dante asked. "What do you mean?"

Lysa's eyes remained sincere; honest. Her jaw set. "If I had told you that my parents had given me up for adoption when I was little, because they couldn't afford me, AND that I was an unwed teenage mother, AND that my foster father and foster mother were the ones that were arguing that night...about me and my daughter. Would you have believed me?"

"Yeah..." Dante said. Lysa pinched his cheek a little bit and gave her sad smile as they were rolled back into the Limbo nursery. It was just after nap time, and so the nursery was opened up into a free for all; toys and babies scattered all over the place.

"Well then," she said. "That means you're either a horrible liar, or a really swell guy, Dante." Her eyes darted down, the sad smile still on her face. She was glowing, really. Well, not literally...but...skip it. As soon as she was unbuckled from the stroller, she leaned over and gave Dante a peck on the cheek. Awesome.

He was about to reciprocate when the Judy lifted him out of the stroller and shifted him over to his hip; the front of his diaper squishing as she moved him. Oh yeah. That. Lysa was helped out of the stroller, and crawled away to go play. Dante was carried over to a nearby changing table and was laid on it.

As the Judy undid the tapes, Dante buzzed at having just been kissed. It wasn't much of a kiss, just a peck on the cheek, really. Still, it felt amazing. With him figuring out how to use the potty today, and then feeling Lysa's soft lips on his cheek today might be the best -

"Looks like someone likes having their diaper changed!" the Judy noted Dante's growing erection at the thought of his playmate. Dante grimaced slightly at that comment, made worse by the cold wipes beings dragged across his groin. He was aroused because a girl that he liked had kissed him, not because he had peed his Pampers! (Wait, these weren't Pampers. Not Huggies either. No diaper brand really looked like these things. Cherubs? Angel's Choice? Cushies? Naw. Who would name a diaper brand that?)

"Wow, Dante," the angel went on, "we made it just in time, bubba. You were THIS close to leaking." She finished wiping Dante, balled up the used diaper (Bambino? Cuddlez? Comfies? Oh Skip it! A baby diaper is a baby diaper), and threw it in a nearby trashcan. "You must be dehydrated, mister."

Hold on. Dante could have sworn that not twenty minutes ago, Judy had proclaimed Dante only "a little wet." Had Dante really wet his diaper even more since he was checked? He hadn't even noticed. Was everything he gained while around his grandparents leaving him already? He took his thumb out of his mouth when the Judy offered him up a bottle of apple juice. (When the hell did he stick his thumb in his mouth?!)

He sucked down the apple juice as his bum was lowered onto a fresh diaper. How do you use the potty? Remember. Remember. First you need to- his stream of thought was interrupted by another stream coming out of him. "Whoopsie!" the Judy giggled as she quickly and deftly yanked the diaper up to block the air born urine. Most of it was soaked

up by the diaper. Just a little got on the changing table and the floor. None of it, of course, got on the Judy.

Dante giggled, then gurgled a bit around the nipple of his ba-ba. He was drinking juice-juice and going pee-pee at the same time. That felt good. And Mama Judy was so silly! She was making those faces at him while she held the front of the diaper down to cover him up. "Geez, Dante", Mama Judy smiled sweetly down at him. "you could give me a little warning next time." Dante smiled up at her. "You couldn't have done that earlier? Or at least wait till I had the diaper all the way up? Oh well," she smirked, peeling the sodden garment back, "here we go again."

Something was wrong. Dante shook himself awake and yanked the bottle from his lips. He wasn't even drinking milk, and was acting like a complete idiot. Going pee-pee while drinking a ba-ba...fuck...urinating while drinking, was something Midori would do, not Dante. He wasn't even paralyzed on the changing table, he realized. He had had almost total motor control while the Judy was changing him. It seemed anytime he let his mind wander, babyish thoughts and tendencies came right in and made themselves at home in his brain. He might have had a brief respite by the gates of Heaven, but back in Limbo, he was still making negative progress.

The Judy finished changing him for the second time in a row, and sat him down on the floor. Dante quickly crawled over to a corner to sulk in peace. He didn't want Lysa, or anyone seeing him like this. The fact that he was dressed like Tommy Pickles, and had no way to hide his diaper made him feel more self-conscious after what had just happened. If he had been wearing shortalls or even a onesie, he could have maintained some form of dignity. Instead, all he had on was a T-shirt that came down to his belly-button, and a bulky diaper on full display between his legs.

Speaking of which, the bulk between his legs seemed a little, well, bulkier. Was he wearing a thicker diaper? Were they padding him up because of his extra wetting? Or worse yet- Dante remembered something about newborn diapers being relatively bulkier- were they getting him ready for the...DON'T. EVEN. THINK. ABOUT. IT.

Dante poked at his crotch and experimentally tried to bring his legs together. All the same. No difference. Just his imagination. The extra puffiness was just in his head. Jamal Adams crawled up to his corner of solitude. As always, Jamal wore his usual asshole smile, as well as a white t-shirt and denim shortalls. (Son of a bitch). You could barely see where the diaper was unless you knew what to look for.

"Heeeeeeey buddy," Jamal said, all teeth, not even trying to conceal his insincerity. "Hooooow-ya-doin?" he sang.

"Fuck off, dude. I'm in no mood." Dante tensed, "I know what just happened by the changing table, alright. You can go around making fun of me. Just leave me alone."

"For the record, kid," Jamal replied, "it's not like everyone just stops and watches every time the Judy's gather 'round you so they can see you humiliate yourself." he paused. "But yes, I did see it, and likely so did most of the playroom the way you two were carrying on.

Her all cheery and giggly that you were pissing into the wind, and you acting like you...that is to say, a freakshow baby."

Dante just stared at him. It would be so totally worth it to punch him in the face. Right now. One swing.

"Anyway," Jamal went on, ignoring Dante's death glare, "I just thought I take my time to say my goodbyes."

"Where are you going?" Dante asked. Shit. He just walked into that one.

"I'm not going anywhere, kid." Jamal answered, "It's you." (Told ya.) When a kid starts acting like well, how YOU were just a minute ago without the aid of angel milk, that means their getting close to the threshold." Dante was confu-

"And before you cock an eyebrow and go 'Threshold?'," Jamal interrupted Dante's train of thought, "let me break it down for ya. You're close to crossing the line, kid, that point of no return. A few more awkward steps, and everything that you are takes a permanent vacation, and everything that you were circa- I'm guessing 1995?- takes up residence. Nice knowin' ya kid."

Dante bit his lip. He wanted to argue, but he couldn't right then. He just couldn't. Jamal tilted his head, and an emotion that might have been sympathy crossed his face.

"Well this isn't nearly as fun as I thought it would be," he said. He sat against a wall so that he was more or less sitting beside Dante instead of in front of him. "Look kid," Jamal said, dropping his arm around Dante all chummy-like, "if it makes you feel any better, it's not really your fault. You never really stood a chance." Dante didn't reply or ask. He just listened.

"I'm guessing you had a relatively normal and stable life, am I right? Sure I am." Jamal went on, not waiting for Dante to respond. "Your parents loved you, you loved them, all that good stuff. Kids like you? You don't last here in this place. You just don't. You have all of these happy, fuzzy memories of child hood. That way, it's easier to slip back into those old roles. You secretly want to, even if you don't want to admit it." He took his arm away.

"Me and the rest of us who survive here- not so much. None of us had it good back then, so we keep our sanity now. Take Kevin over there." he pointed to Kevin, the play-doh kid. "Kevin died of AIDS, before they even really knew what AIDS was. Bad blood transfusion or something.

"He was so angry with life that he got kicked out of 3 different schools for fighting. Funny thing is, everyone was so scared of catching his AIDS, that nobody ever fought back; they didn't want to make him bleed. He told me once that he started making the play-doh people when he was a kid to use them like voo-doo dolls on the kids he picked fights with.

"Vivian," Jamal pointed to her who was even now making an exquisite piece of art using nothing but finger paint and construction paper, "is a genius. But she has a rare mental

disorder that makes it impossible for her to differentiate the passage of time. If you pissed her off once a year ago, all of those feelings, all that anger, that hurt, is just as fresh to her now as if you had just insulted her today. Even I don't mess with her. I hear the painting helps with that though. Meh."

"You know what little Dori was?" Jamal asked rhetorically. "A schoolgirl. An average school girl that had the bad luck to get hit by a drunk driver. But she's all better now. And soon you will be, too." Midori was busy rolling on the floor and giggling at the top of her lungs.

"And what about you?" Dante asked. "What's your story?"

"I'd tell you kid." Jamal answered, "But seeing as how you just got changed into a fresh one, I'd hate to ruin it by telling you. Besides, you forgot to ask about your little Lysa." Dante's eyes narrowed. "I saw the kiss. Good huh? That kiss means that she has you wrapped around her finger. Did she tell you that you were a swell guy? She loves that line.". Dante wanted to tell Jamal where he could stick it. He wanted to punch Jamal's teeth down his throat, but something made him stay silent and still.

"Lysa's the oldest kid still sane in this place." Jamal whispered, "She's a true survivor. Fuck, she might be my role model if she wasn't a sociopath and a compulsive liar." He shot Dante a smile. It wasn't friendly. "She tell you one about how her dad killed her little sister, then she killed him and offed herself in grief?"

"It was her daughter, and her foster father." Dante growled.

"Oh, so you already caught her in that first lie, eh?" Jamal hissed. "That's her favorite. You must have had her cornered for her to whip out her backup. If you call her on that one, she does a one-eighty and is the hooker with the heart of gold. You really think she killed herself?"

"She did kill herself," Dante insisted.

"Wake up kid!" Jamal practically shouted. Then backed down to a whisper. "Suicides don't last here. They don't make it a month, yet alone close to sixty years. Self-haters didn't have the will to go on in the first life. Why would they persevere in the after-life? Besides, she keeps fucking one big thing up." He shuffled around so that he was looking Dante straight in the eye.

"When she told you that story? Did she say she cut her wrists like this?" He dragged his fingers across his wrist, just like Lysa had. Dante nodded. "Where have you been dude?" Jamal said. "Everybody knows, that for wrist slitting it's go 'down-the-lane' not 'across-the-street'". He mimed slitting his own wrist downward. "It's like she almost wants to get caught."

He was right. How had that slipped by him? "How do you know all this?" Dante asked.

"Because, kid." Jamal looked Dante straight in the eye. "Once upon a time, I was you. When I first got here, they put me in that playpen with Lysa and Midori and I heard the same lies that you've heard. About keeping control, accepting it, not thinking of escape, fighting it by not fighting. Sound familiar?" Dante must have nodded with his eyes if not with his head.

"Yeah, I thought so." Jamal nodded. "New fish always get brought to Lysa, especially the fighters. Because she cracks them. By the time she's done with them, they're nothing more than Dori over there. She destroys your sense of self better than the Judies ever could just by babying you.

"I don't know if she's a screw up, or plays the Judies game so that they go easy on her, or what. Truth is, I don't care. But Lysa gets respected around here because she's the litmus test that determines whether or not you keep your shit together in here."

"Wanna know how I passed?" Jamal asked, grinning wickedly. Dante shook his head. Jamal answered anyway. "I beat the shit out of her. When I realized what she was doing to me; that I was becoming more infant than man, I knew I had to break ties with her. Had to get her voice out of my head. So I beat her. Badly." Dante's eyes went wide. The lump in his throat expanded. He started to sweat.

"I won't go into the details, but it was pretty fucked up." Jamal grinned like the Cheshire Cat. "Good thing nobody can actually die here, and the Judies can kiss it all better in an instant. But the real finishing touch? I bit off her ear and swallowed it. She got it back, eventually. Best change I ever had. Heheh, why do you think Lysa trained Midori to be her attack dog?" There was silence for a few minutes. Jamal, a cat staring at Dante as if he were a piece of meat. Dante, a mouse hearing about salvation from the Devil.

"Then what happened?" Dante finally asked.

Jamal's face softened, his grin becoming a thin smile. "I got my freedom. The Judies whooped up on me. Put me in time out and did some extra punishments, but it all went uphill from there, friend. They decided me and Lysa should be separated; so I was assigned to a new playgroup. Now sure why I'm telling you all this. Just, you know...food for thought." If it was possible to swagger and crawl at the same time, Jamal would have just done it.

Dante sat there. Stunned. Amazed. Disbelieving. He didn't want to believe. But too much of it made sense. He brought his knees up to his chest and hugged them hard, as if they were his anchor to reality. He buried his face and closed his eyes, trying to shut out his senses. Maybe he fell asleep. When next he knew, Lysa was sitting next to him.

"You okay, Dante?" she asked. Dante just looked at her. His vision blurry, his eyes glassy. Had he been crying? He couldn't remember?

"Why did you lie to me?" he whispered. Lysa brushed his almost too shaggy hair out of his face and looked him in the eyes.

"Sweetie, I already told you. It was the first day."

"I meant today," Dante pressed. Lysa looked confused. Hurt even. Was Jamal the one who was manipulating him? Had he fallen for some cruel practical joke? No. "You didn't kill yourself. You cut your wrists the wrong way for you to bleed out." Lysa shook her head, spasmed really.

"No, I said I slashed them left to right, not up to"

"It's up to down to bleed out." Dante growled. She HAD lied to him. She didn't know the first thing about what she was speaking of.

"Oh," Lysa paused. "Then it must have been the gunshot-"

"The gunshot?" Dante interrupted. "The one that killed your father?"

"It backfired on me when I went to shoot my dad again. I was dying anyways, so I slit my wrists to speed the process up. Make it less painful, you know."

"You just told me this afternoon, that it was your foster father that you killed. That's why your real parents were in Heaven." Lysa's jaw dropped. He had her trapped. He had her trapped and he hated it. Lysa bit her lip and bowed her head.

"Fine, you want the truth? Here's the truth: I'm a royal fuckup. Just like you. My parents loved me, and gave me everything I ever wanted. Then I went and got pregnant." Lysa looked up. Tears were flowing down her cheeks.

"I was lucky. I didn't start showing till about six months. By then, everyone in school knew it, but my parents were clueless. It was...a different time then." She wiped away here tears as more came seemingly unbidden.

"I was too ashamed to tell my parents, so I ran away. I lived on the streets doing...things...things I'm not proud of." The phrase "hooker with the heart of gold" echoed in Dante's mind. "I didn't live well, but I lived. You'd be surprised," she sniffed, "there's a demand and a market for everything, even underage pregnant..." she sobbed a little, not finishing her sentence.

"I died giving birth to Caroline out on the streets. No hospital would take me. I never even got to feed her." she cried. "And now we're here. Forever. Because of me she never even got to have a life!"

Dante deadened himself inside. This was just too tragic to be true. He fought every compassionate instinct, every impulse to hold her and tell her it was okay. "You expect me to believe that story?" he managed to choke out.

"It's the truth," she whispered. "I swear. The only thing my parents ever did to me was let me choose whether or not I got baptized." Either she was telling the truth, or she was a brilliant liar. No. Nononono. Fuck her. She lied to him She was probably lying now.

She must have sensed this. "You wanna know what my real anchor is, Dante?" she said wiping her nose on her sleeve, her face beet red. "Guilt. I'm the biggest screw-up in Limbo. Not only did I trap my daughter here, but almost every single person I've tried to help has ended up like Dori. I don't deserve to check out mentally or escape. I don't deserve to let go of that guilt.

"I tell those stories and lies about myself to try and help people. No one wants help from the screw-up. You feel sorry for the screw-up, but you never rely on them. Even if a screw-up is saying the exact thing you need to know and hear, you're gonna ignore them. I didn't want you to think I was a screw-up Dante. I wanted to help you. And now that I know you, I don't want to lose you!"

She was baring her soul to him. But all Dante could feel right now was resentment, anger, rage. She had manipulated him so that she could feel better about herself. That no good little bitch. He had almost fallen in love with her, and all he was to her was a pet project to improve her track record. "Say something, Dante" she whispered, "please talk to me. I- I'm sorry. I...I...I...I lo-"

"- And you're going to fail me too so you can have more guilt to hang onto? Is that it?! I'm part of your pity party?!" Dante couldn't let her finish that sentence. He'd have been trapped forever if she had finished that sentence. Lysa just shook her head. She was biting her lip so hard, a bit of blood trickled out. "You gonna keep telling me lies? Distract me till I end up like Dori? That way you can teach me pet tricks so I'll bite and cry on command too?!"

Lysa pleaded with him. "That's not it at all! Please....just listen to m-"

"FUCK YOU!" Dante roared, "YOU DON'T GET TO BE THE VICTIM HERE. YOU AREN'T THE VICTIM! YOU NEVER WERE! YOU'RE JUST A STUPID SPOILED WHOR-"

SMACK!

Lysa's hand came right across Dante's face. The whole play area stopped. Silent. Everyone was looking at them. There was no covering it up this time. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jamal, smiling, giving him the thumbs up. Now was the time. It was now or never.

Dante reared back his hand, clenching it into a fist. Lysa shrunk back. "You talked to Jamal," she whispered, her voice quavering with fear." Dante clenched his fist, and closed his eyes, and swung. His aim hit true.

WHAM! CRACK!

Dante Willis broke his own nose as he punched himself in the face. He couldn't do it. He just couldn't bring himself to hit her, even after the truth came out. He hated her right now. Hated her lies, her meddling, her stupid fucking pigtails. Note amended: FUCK. HER.

But he couldn't bring himself to strike her. It was wrong. He was not Jamal Adams and he never would be, even if meant he was doomed to become a baby.

Blood gushed from his nose and his vision flooded with saline. Lyrics danced around his brain as he continued to brutalize himself. "I wanna put my tender, heart in a blender, watch it spin around to a beautiful oblivion. Rendezvous then I'm through with you." Great. Just great. Here he flipping out, and the best his brain could manage was Eve 6. Lysa just staid there, crying, pulling on her pigtails as she curled up in a fetal position; reliving a past trauma she had suffered.

Judy's rushed to Dante. They kissed his nose and it healed. Even the blood was instantly gone. He didn't care. He kept crying. They checked his diaper and found him dry. He kept crying. They blew raspberries on his tummy. He giggled for two seconds as a wave of happiness surged through him, and then cried harder.

They were forced to treat him like any mother without super powers would. All they could do was just take turns holding him, and try to comfort him with their presence and touch. He let them. He didn't put up a fight. If he cried loud enough, the mommies would pay more attention to him, and he needed attention right now. At least the Judy's were honest in their intentions. You knew what to expect from them.

Dante Willis cried all through dinner, all through bath time, and eventually bawled himself to sleep. He didn't know whether his tears were that of a whining child or of a heart-broken man. And that was what scared him the most.

Chapter 13: Threshold

It had been Valentine's Day when she had become a woman. She was 15 and the wait had been well worth while. Robbie had taken her out to dinner, and a movie. He had been a gentleman the whole night. After the movie, he took her out to lovers' lane. He lowered the roof of his convertible so that they could see the stars.

It hadn't snowed that night, so the sky was clear. It was so still cold though, so they cuddled up close together. One thing led to another (doesn't it always), and he started kissing her neck. Everything tingled. Everything. She felt his hands, his gentle touch as he nibbled on her ear. She melted for him. He could have asked for the world, and she would have given it to him. All he had asked was for her to get into the back seat with him and turn him into a man.

She was saving herself for marriage. That's what she told her parents, and all of her friends at school. But right then, she didn't care. She was going to marry Robbie Simmons anyway, so it didn't matter when they consummated their love. She was invincible.

She didn't know then that months later Robbie would bail on her as soon as she told him what he had done to her. Deny the whole thing. Call her a whore and a slut. So she said the only word she could think of. "Yes."

Robbie scooped her up in his arms, and carried her out of the front seat, like a groom carrying his bride across the threshold. Then with a playful growl, he plopped her down in the backseat, hiked up her poodle skirt, and ripped her wet panties off of her so he could go to work.

Nearly 60 years later, it was still not lost on Lysa Strata that it was that one moment that changed the direction of her life, and after life. She had taken her first steps to claim her womanhood by letting someone hike up her skirt and remove her soiled undergarments so he could go to work. Now the same thing happened to her every day. Now though, her skirts were shorter and her panties were thicker; and nine out of ten times it was a different type of wetness between her legs.

Lysa had had many things in life and death. Beauty, energy, guts, determination, intuition, even brains. Judgment had never been her strong suit though. Her judgment was how she had ended up getting pregnant, running away from home, and dying on the street failing to birth her baby. Her inability to make good decisions was about to cost her again, dearly. This time, it would hurt someone else, too.

When Dante had first come in, she put on the tough girl act, the Rosie the Riveter. If this guy was going to turn out to be another Jamal then she was going to make sure he was afraid of her and listened to what she had to say.

Goddamn Jamal! This was his fault as much as hers. If anyone in Limbo deserved to be relocated to Hell, it was him. If one of the conditions of Limbo wasn't forgetting how to dress and undress, Jamal would have raped her. Lysa had never been so glad to be diapered as she had on that day.

So she wove her little stories, leaving just enough truth in them, emotionally speaking, to resonate as fact. She resented her parents, perhaps unjustly so, so she made them the incompetents and villains. The Judies had insisted that Caroline was her sister for so long, that that lie was pie. And if she had had the courage to kill herself that day, she would have. Instead God did it for her. Lysa was tough, a survivor, and this new fish was going to know it.

But then, in the course of a day, something happened. He got with the program, and actually treated her like a person. Certainly not like Midori back in her prime. And the way he looked at her in the tub that first night: It was like how Robbie looked at her when they first started going steady and he offered her his ring. After she put out, Robbie never looked at her that way again.

She was going to tell him the truth the next morning, but then Dante came and told her about that dream of his. The same way she had run to Jorge after her first night in Limbo. He didn't want a girl. He wanted a big sister. But he kept looking at her like that. The only reason he respected her was because of the shock and awe she gave him that first day. So she continued to Rosie it up for him. More bad judgment.

Then that snake in the grass got in Dante's ears and told him just enough to unravel everything. Now she was just Lysa again. Lysa the failure. Lysa the screw-up. Lysa the Liar. She had almost gotten used to that title. It was appropriate to how she survived.

Dante avoided her the next day, even when they were put in the playpen together. He wouldn't talk to her, wouldn't look at her. Wouldn't even acknowledge her presence. Lysa had slapped him once, to get his attention. He just glared at her and started crying his head off. That had earned her a five minute time out. Not worth it.

The other survivors weren't treating Dante well, though. They had witnessed the break down where he beat himself in the face. They had heard his wailing carry on through the night. They knew. Word was out: Dante was damaged goods. They gave him the same treatment that he had given her. Idiots. Like they didn't have issues of their own. It's not like they'd catch it.

Worse yet, they gave her the cold shoulder, too. Jamal had acted fast and pointed out how Lysa the Liar's plans were backfiring on her again as she laid crying in the fetal position. Monster. Of course he was glossing over why she reacted by retreating back into herself. Son of a bitch was trying to go for a double play and get both of them to crack. Good luck fucker. She wasn't much of a teacher, but she had been a great student.

The next day, Lysa had managed to sharpen a crayon to a decent point with her teeth and then jam it into Jamal's eye before he could react. That got her another spanking and an all day time out. That wasn't good for Dante. Isolation only sped the process up.

Dante was slipping: She had seen the signs. First he started wetting and messing himself without realizing it. Then his emotions got harder to control and he became subject to mood swings. The cry fest was only the beginning of that. If something wasn't just right for Dante, his lip would start quivering. Left unattended, he'd whimper and eventually all out cry till a Judy came to check on him. Then they'd feed him, or change him, or tickle him, or give him a new toy- he started playing with the toys a few days ago-, and Dante would be back to himself again. Lysa had gotten a front row seat to one of those incidents while she was perched on the naughty stool the next day.

Vivian was seeing it too, but she didn't interfere; she just went back to her paints. Selfish bitch. Why was Lysa the only one in this place that looked out for someone by herself. Then again Vivian might not realize that it hadn't always been this way, poor girl. What was Kevin's excuse though? AIDS as far as she knew didn't make you forgetful or stupid. Every survivor, had at least one big baby in their care group anyways. It's not like they didn't know what was happening, either. Did they really think they'd catch whatever was making Dante regress?

Next came the oral fixation. Dante put everything in his mouth that he could get his hands on. The Judy's safety-pinned a pacifier and a ribbon to his shirt so that he'd always have something to suck on. Most of the time, that kept Dante calm. Most of the time.

Then came the baby talk. Not quite gibberish, but people seemed to develop cute little speech impediment as their personalities slid backwards . Dante was no exception. "Pwease tawk to me, guys! Pwease! He had begged as he crawled after a group of survivors like a lost puppy, looking for a home. Complete and utter assholes.

After that, starting yesterday, came the echolalia. As the prisoners approached the threshold of no return, they started losing words, and so just mimicked other people and used their words instead. "Uh-oooh! Wooks wike someone had a' accident." Dante said as a Judy checked his diaper. "Time foh a change." It was bad enough he was turning into a parrot; but the intonation was all wrong too. He didn't understand everything he was saying, but got the gist and delivered it as best he could, kind of like a bad Shakespearean actor.

Then came the loss of speech completely; and soon after, came the big sleep. They'd go to sleep, and when they woke up, they were a baby. Midori had actually made it till her bedtime, staying awake through naps before she disappeared forever and was replaced by big, stupid, goofy, loveable Dori.

Even with all of this, Dante stubbornly refused to talk to Lysa. It was like his pride wouldn't let him. He'd rather sink into oblivion than accept her help, her meddling. Had Lysa hurt him that bad? Was what she was doing really all that wrong? What were a few white lies between friends? So what if she lied about who she was and how she got into this little corner of the after-life? It's not like she had lied or sugar coated the other stuff.

Then again, she realized, how did he know that? Maybe she had a little growing up to do.

It had taken a total of two weeks after the massive public breakdown for Dante to get this far. That made it about a month, since Dante had arrived, the cutoff point for most new fish. The three other big babies that shared mealtimes with Lysa, Midori, and Dante had already crossed the threshold. They were ahead of schedule. They must've been suicides. Now they were some of Midori's best friends, giggling and rolling around on the floor with her. They fit right in.

But it wasn't playtime right now. It was just after breakfast, and the milk was wearing off. Dante, Lysa, and Midori were all in their giant playpen together. Ironically, or rather, appropriately, they were all dressed the same as the day they had met. Midori in her pink shirt with bows in her hair, sucking on her paci and playing with some blocks that their Judy had tossed into the pen. Lysa was in her too short baby dress, her hair up in stupid pigtails. Dante was in his baby blue onesie.

Instead of asking questions though, Dante was just staring out through the mesh of the playpen. What was he doing? What was he thinking? Was he even fighting it? Had he just given up. Lysa had to meddle. She had to set things right. Somehow.

She crawled up to Dante. As if sensing her presence he tensed slightly. If he had hairs on the back of his neck, they would be standing at attention, his body language read. Good. He hated her. That meant he was still inside there; she had something to work with.

"Dante?" she said. Trying to get his attention. "Dante?"

"Dante?" he echoed back. He didn't turn around. Lysa looked up to the ceiling. "Please, Lord," she whispered, not daring to finish the thought. She shouldn't pray, here, right now. If everything was to be believed, what she wanted was going against the divine plan. No point in asking the Big Guy upstairs to sabotage his own workshop.

"Dante, please turn around." she said. It was more of a request. The kid needed kid gloves right now. Rosie the Riveter would just drive him away. Dante, looked over her shoulder, and slowly.

"Tuhn around." Dante growled back at her. As far as Lysa could tell, Dante was only echoing now. He was close to the threshold; too close. She'd never forgive herself if she didn't try, though.

"Dante, I'm sorry." she plead. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't want you to end up like this. I didn't want US to end up like this. I'm so sorry."

"I huwt you," was all he said back. Lysa didn't know if she should take that as a threat or an angry agreement. Even now on the brink, he wouldn't actually listen to her. How infuriating could you get? Here she was still trying to help him, and even in his own limited way, he defied her. This must have been how Frankenstein's Monster felt towards his creator: Angry and bitter, and driven to spite Victor Frankenstein for the lot in life it had inherited. But why did Lysa feel like she was the monster, right now?

"Damn it Dante! Stop copying me and talk to me! TALK. TO. ME. You're not some dumb baby, now prove it!" Lysa ripped out her ribbons and undid her pigtails. She always did that when she was stressed. This was the top of the list.

"Damn it blabble abble abble abble ubble mama goo!" Dante shot back. His eyes widened with surprise and he clapped his hand over his own mouth. Baby babble. The last stage before the end. That had woken him up.

"No!" Dante yelled, "nabba gabba gabba!" His face turning red from frustration, his hair getting mussed as he pulled on it in frustration. "Frug ug ug ug ug, moogoo!" He slapped the mat for emphasis. In a fit he threw himself on the floor. The Judy did not come though. She just stayed in her rocking chair, peering into the playpen and watched intently.

SHE KNEW. IT WAS COMING AND SHE KNEW.

Dante screamed, and cried, and bawled. But all that came out was baby babble. A look of certainty and horror crossed Dante's face. The end was coming. He knew it too. He rolled on the ground and kicked his feet to try and fight it off, but there was no stopping it. The death of his adulthood was imminent.

It reminded Lysa of the scene from Pinocchio where the bad little boy was turning into a donkey. Nothing short of the blue fairy would be able to stop it or reverse it at that point. She hung her head in shame. She had lost again. Another playmate of hers would regress all the way and leave her alone. She had failed Dante. All she could do now was comfort him till the end.

She held open her arms wide for a hug. "I'm so sorry, Dante." she whispered. Dante crawled over and accepted her hug. He whimpered in her ear, scared. Terrified really. And who could blame him? Not Lysa. "I know. I know. Midori went through the same thing. I was there for her," she lied. "Now, I'm here for you."

His whimpering quieted as she stroked his hair and rubbed his back. Dante's adult mind was dying; going to sleep forever. Time for her to accept it and brace herself. The world blacked out around them. Time lost meaning. Lysa was vaguely aware of the Judy coming into the pen and then carrying Midori out. Maybe the angels did have a little mercy in them. She was being allowed to be alone with Dante in his final sentient moments.

Dante pulled back. His eyes looked tired, and scared. He was exhausted. The sleep was coming. Not bothering to babble, Dante pleaded to her with his eyes. All Lysa could do was shake her head. "I'm sorry Dante. There's nothing I can do now." She breathed in sharply and held her breath to keep from sobbing.

She adjusted herself, so that she was sitting on her heels. She guided Dante's head onto her lap and laid it there. Lysa caressed his brow as he looked up at her. Time to give Dante a proper sendoff, to sing him a lullaby for the big sleep. But not a child's lullaby. He didn't deserve that indignity.

Lysa had never heard of his favorite song before he had told her. And "Come Out And Play" didn't really sound appropriate. But she didn't really know any appropriate songs. Then like a boulder, it hit her. She'd sing him her favorite song. Not just her favorite song...but a song about her. She might not have written it, but it fit. The last thing Dante, the real Dante would hear, would be Lysa's song.

"Do you like songs, Dante?" Dante meekly nodded up at her. Somehow, he knew what was coming too. Or maybe Lysa the Liar was lying to herself to make herself feel better. She sang for him.

"Say it's only a paper moon,
Hanging under a cardboard sea.
But it wouldn't be make-believe
If you believed in me."

She sniffled a little. His eyelids were starting to droop. She went on.

"Yes, it's only a canvas sky,
Hangin' under a muslin tree.
But it wouldn't be make-believe
If you believed in me."

Getting there. She could see him smile faintly as his eyes closed and her vision blurred.

"Without your love,
It's a honky-tonk parade.
Without your love,
It's a melody played in a penny arcade."

His breathing was slowing.

"It's a Barnum and Bailey world,
Just as phony as it can be.
But it wouldn't be make-believe-

Her voice caught in her throat. Dante lay in her lap, sleeping peacefully. Good-bye Dante. Lysa looked up to the sky, hoping no one saw her right now. She started to blink away her tears. She'd have another baby on her hands soon. It wouldn't do any good to have lil' Dante see her crying.

Then she heard it.

"If you believed in me."

Lysa looked down. It was only five words. Five little words and six little notes. But they were the most beautiful six notes Lysa had ever heard. Dante's eyes were opened. He smiled meekly back at her, but his eyes had a spark to them.

"Hey Lysa," he whispered. "I think I found two of my anchors."

"DANTE!" she screamed. Tears rained down from her face, and she bent over and showered him with kisses. They rolled around the pen, giggling like idiots. Like lovers. Then they did something more. If one of the conditions of Limbo wasn't forgetting how to dress and undress, they would have done a LOT more. The spanking and ten minute time out they both got for "wrestling" was totally worth it. Totally.

All through the rest of the day, Dante's songs rang out through the nursery. Some say even the magic that filtered outside sounds from the cubicle walls couldn't keep it out. Some songs, Lysa sang along with in harmony, others she sat in awe of him and just listened. But Dante never stopped singing. Some say, on that day, even the Judies paused and heard something more than just baby babble.

Chapter 14: Sunshine

Dante had been close, tantalizingly close to complete mental oblivion. Having slept through his actual death, Dante found skirting the edge of his adult threshold very similar to what many people must have thought death was like. As he had lain there in Lysa's lap, he could feel himself losing things. Memories, concepts, and words had been slipping right out of him. Everything that he had was going the way of the dodo.

It was like every bit of knowledge he possessed had been a grain of sand, slipping through his fingers. As he had looked up from Lysa's lap, everything was leaving him. Reading, math, science, history, art...everything. Even little words escaped him. He couldn't remember words like "food" or even "potty". Words and concepts like "diaper", "crib", "highchair", "bottle", and "baby" were leaving him just as fast, even though he had been barraged with those concepts since he first entered limbo. He was becoming a blank slate with only curiosity and impulse to drive him. Near the end, his own name lost meaning to him as he closed his eyes.

But just as he was about to lose himself something flowed into him. A series of soft and pretty sounds: music. Sounds that had meaning: Words...no...lyrics.

"It's a Barnum and Bailey world
Just as phony as it can be.
But it wouldn't be make-believe-"

Dante had reached out and grabbed at those words, like they were child about to fall over the edge of a cliff. They had to be saved! Those words had meaning. They came from a song about unrequited love; about how that love could turn a world of lies and illusion into something meaningful and real. It was sung full of regret, and sadness. It echoed of lost opportunities and dying hopes. It was Lysa's song.

LYSA!

He still remembered Lysa! He latched onto that thought and refused to let it go. Limbo would not take that from him. It would not take his music from him, and it would not take his only friend in this place from him. He refused. They were all he had left that was worth saving. Lysa's voice and music leaked into his very being and wove a knot around him, refusing to let go or be cast aside. With Herculean effort, he held fast to those concepts and began to reel in the rest, like a fisherman dragging up a net.

He remembered the adrenaline rush that singing a fast punk song would give him as he drove, or even just pretended to drive. He took back the genuine look of confusion and gratitude that Lysa had given him when he first stood up to Jamal. He recovered the pneumonic device that had helped him remember to "shake it once that's fine, shake it twice that's okay," from "Another Loser Anthem." He remembered the time with his grandparents.

Then, much more quickly, he reeled in every other memory, concept and piece of knowledge back into his brain; for his thoughts were not really sand, but an ornate woven

tapestry constantly building on itself. He had gotten a grip with two strong hands and reweave himself into being.

The look on Lysa's face when he opened his eyes and sang back to her had made it the best day since he died. What followed after, the pure unbridled joy of victory and feelings he had grown for Lysa being honestly returned had made that day the best of his entire existence. Welcome back, Dante. Welcome back.

His decline had been similar to a drug addict going cold turkey. First came the shakes, then the jonesing, then full withdrawal. Without Lysa, and his music, something that he could understand better and more deeply than some squalling infant; he was lost. Now his twin drugs coursed through his veins once again. With them he was complete. Now he was a true survivor. Now he was invincible.

Dante was still glowing with pride and victory when he sat up in his crib, soaking wet as usual. Even though he had passed the worst of it, Limbo still had sway over him. He still couldn't walk, still couldn't dress himself, and he still didn't have enough bladder or bowel control to make going potty anymore than a passing fantasy. The good news was, he could once again remember what was required to use the potty; even if he couldn't quite remember another more grown-up word for the device. That put his potty training, he estimated, as a little less than a two-year old toddler, which was more than he could say for anyone else he had met in Limbo.

Dante noticed that his diaper was soaked, but still warm. That was odd. Dante had grown used to wetting in his sleep, but typically he was cold and clammy first thing in the morning. He must have done multiple wettings, the most recent one just before he woke up, he reasoned.

Dante peered over at Lysa in the next crib over. She was still asleep, snoring lightly as she breathed. It almost sounded like a kitten purring. Dante looked on at her. She was beautiful; hot too. This could have gone on forever, this moment could be his eternity, and that would be fine by him. Wow. That was sappy. Was this what love felt like?

All around, the Judy's started to do their morning chores, waking the infants and dressing them for the day. The Judy in the nursery scrubs with the bleach blonde hair, their Judy, carried Midori and set her down on the blue-ish grey indoor/outdoor carpet by their trio of cribs. Midori had just been changed and put into a yellow onesie. Her babbling caused Lysa to stir a few moments before their Judy scooped her, purple pj's and all, and toted her over to a nearby changing table.

Dante felt a certain stirring in his nether regions as he saw Lysa being undressed, and he licked his lips a little as the Judy undid the tapes to Lysa's diaper- proving that he was in fact, sappy love or not, still a teenaged boy. He scolded himself a little as he slammed his eyes shut and turned his back to the scene. Damn it, he loved her. Maybe later they could have a talk about it.

But how do you talk to a girl-one that you genuinely like as a person no less; one that you might even love- and tell them "I think you're hot and it turns me on when I see you

getting undressed. Still don't mind if I watch?" It was almost easier when Dante was so overwhelmed by thoughts of maintaining his sanity in this place that he didn't have time to ask himself these questions. It was, in fact, easier to be shallow.

A few minutes later, Lysa was toted back. Her blonde hair done up in pigtails as usual, she was in what must have been the least revealing outfits in this place. She wore a purple shirt frilly sleeves, and denim shortalls with a sunshine on the chest. Though she wore no shoes, her feet were covered with matching frilly ankle socks.

Still groggy, she yawned as she and Midori were deposited back into the same crib. She experimentally tugged at her shirt, as though it were a little too tight. She managed to look down the front of her shortalls and give a questioning look.

Dante didn't see anymore as his Judy scooped him up and easily toted him over to the changing table. Once again, the changing table's paralysis properties were in full effect now that Dante had his grown mind back. He could only lay there as the Judy stripped him, wiped him, powdered him, and pulled a fresh diaper up between his legs and fastened it.

A red onesie was pulled over his head and he was laid back down so the Judy could snap it shut. Matching red socks found their way onto his feet. But the dressing didn't stop there. The Judy pulled a pair of denim shortalls onto him and fastened them on too. That was a little weird. The Judies were usually super-efficient when it came to dressing the babies. Yeah, there was nothing wrong with dressing him in a onesie and shortalls; both garments had crotch snaps for easy access, but the Judies typically never left more than a layer of clothing between them and a diaper. Now, when being changed, any Judy would have to go through two layers of clothing and then a thick baby diaper before they could get to his....his....

Hahaha! Holy crap! The Judy hadn't forgotten his and Lysa's little "wrestling" match from yesterday. In their overwhelming joy, they had started giggling and rolling around on the floor, coupled with a series of kisses. Even babies could become sexually aroused on some level though, and so both had started thrusting their hips into each other in the heat of their passion.

Now the Judy was putting more layers of clothing to between them! No doubt Lysa had noticed she was put in a onesie as well. So between the thick diapers, onesies, and shortalls, there were a total of 6 layers of clothing separating their genitals. As if either of them could remember how to dress themselves! It was actually kind of funny the lengths that were being taken.

Dante was deposited back in the same crib with Lysa and Midori. She chuckled and shook her head, looking down at the floor. Evidently she had figured the wardrobe change out too.

"Okay babies," Judy looked at them, "be good while Mama Judy goes and helps set up the breakfast area. We'll get you some num-nums in your tum-tums in no time." She gave a slight warning look as she walked away. It wasn't anything too horrible, about the same intensity that a doting mother would give to a mischievous child with a propensity for cookie stealing.

"Hey," Dante said to Lysa. He smiled bashfully, his eyes darting from side to side.

"Hey," she said back, just as awkwardly. It was very awkward. Still wonderful, though.

The morning after was always the problem. After you've had the greatest day with someone in your existence, what do you do? Duh! You make today even better. Dante made the first move and pecked Lysa on the lips before she could react. Lysa lips disappeared instantly, embarrassed. Then she reciprocated with a peck of her own. Two pecks actually; one on the lips and a second one on the nose, like she was dotting an "i".

They hugged each other and laughed, giggled really. Both were still reeling in a giddy feeling of victory. Their laughs became louder as Midori, feeling left out joined the group hug and squeezed tighter than either of them had; babbling nonsensically.

"Love you too Dori," they both said in unison.

Breakfast and bottles came and went, though the two couldn't take their eyes off of each other. Dante's eyes glazed over as he was burped and placed in the playpen with his friends. They all rolled around on the floor together, taking turns. Soon he'd wet and Mama Judy would change him when he got cold and icky. It was so much fun. Dante gurgled as he kicked his legs in the air and saw his red socks. He wondered what the sock would taste like if he could only fit it in his mouth.

WAIT!

From his haze, Dante's rational mind poked forward. Like a drunk who just realized how bad off he really was, Dante forced himself to wake up. He was still under the affects of the milk of human kindness flowing through him, only now he consciously realized. Having only too recently been stuck as this state, Dante wanted no part of it at present.

He looked up at the ceiling, he needed to focus on something long enough to come all the way back to his adult mind. Purple haze came into his brain. "Purple haze, something something right," Dante mumbled. "Don't know if it's day or night." Come on! Power through it! "I'm going crazy, and I don't know why! 'Scuse me, while I kiss this guy, I mean the sky!" It was working! It was working! Dante celebrated as he sucked on his thumb and goo-gooped in triumph. Nope wait. He was wrong.

Dante shook himself again. He couldn't let himself drift too much in this state. Even now he was too afraid of regressing. He had to gain control. Then he saw Lysa, her chin down on the floor while her butt was in the air. She swayed as if drunk. Too.

Lysa. He focused on her. Even if she didn't realize it, she could be anything that she wanted: Bitch, mentor, friend, survivor, con-woman, savior...lover. She had limitless potential and she didn't even seem to know it. New words sprang forth from Dante's lips.

"I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together.
Man, you been a naughty boy you let your face grow long."

Even abridged, he could feel himself rising to the surface above the milk again.

"I am the eggman"

"Ooooh!" Midori cooed.

"They are the eggmen"

"Ooooh!" Lysa echoed.

"I am the walrus! Goo goo g'joob!"

There! Dante was himself again. With Lysa as his muse, and the songs in his brain as his conduit, Dante easily came out of his haze. He was sober, again. Check that. He was just tripping on a better drug cocktail. His mind cleared to the sounds of scattered claps coming from Lysa and Midori.

"Pwetty!" Lysa cheered while using her entire arms to clap, fine motor skills not being high on her priority list right then.

"Blagagag!" Midori agreed. Oh yeah. Just because he wasn't forced to act like a baby, right now, didn't mean it had worn off on Lysa. Oh well. She'd come down soon enough.

Thirty minutes later, Lysa and Midori were stuck in the middle of a patty cake marathon, with neither one of them showing any signs of fatiguing. God damn it! Did the milk really normally last this long? Dante had never noticed before. Being the only sober one stuck in a room of boozehounds sucked. Maybe next time he'd allow himself to come down from the milk more slowly, after all. Maybe. Probably not.

Suddenly Lysa stopped and grabbed at her stomach as she doubled over on her knees. Her eyes sparked open, suddenly awake. She grit her teeth and started grunting as she shifted her weight to all fours. Dante didn't even need to be told to turn around.

A minute or so later, a positively revolting smelling Lysa crawled up and tapped Dante on the shoulder. Dante crinkled his nose instinctively, but hid it as best as he could.

"Man," Lysa said, "I hate it when that happens. I don't know if it's the pressure in my gut that snaps me out of it, or if my butt just revs it up into high gear right as I'm coming down...but it happens." She shifted her wait. "Great. I think I peed too. Oh well," she shrugged. "If you'll excuse me." Lysa then launched into her patented fake cry, guaranteed to make any Judy come running.

The Judy picked Lysa up and took her out of the playpen to change her. It took a little longer than usual, due to the extra set of crotch snaps that had to be undone, but eventually they came back, Lysa smelling strongly of baby powder.

"Sorry about that." Lysa said.

"It's all good," Dante told her. He moved in to give her a hug but his path was blocked by the Judy.

"Let's check you, Dante," she said as she pushed him down on his back unbuttoned the snaps on his shortalls. Dante felt two fingers probing the front inside of his diaper. "Hmm," the Judy concluded, "dry." Did the Judy sound a little disappointed? The angel, buttoned Dante back up and went over to check Midori and declared her in need of a change, too before toting her off.

Lysa's gaze followed the Judy in the scrubs as she started to unbutton Midori's snaps. "You know," Lysa said, "it's times like this that I miss wearing cloth diapers."

"I thought you said disposables were better." Dante replied.

"Yeah, they are," she answered, "but there used to be a certain satisfaction at the idea that the Judies had to wash them." They both had a good chuckle at that. The thought of a Judy, a Stepford Mommy, having to lower herself to cleaning loads and loads of cloth diapers instead of just. Then again, the Judies were perfect at their tasks. They couldn't even get dirty. If Judy's had ever had to wash poopy diapers, they probably looked glamorous while doing it.

Instead of bringing Midori back into the playpen. The Judy came back in and brought Lysa and Dante out of it. She sat them on the floor, and took her seat into her accustomed rocking chair. "Okay, kiddos, it's story time!" the Judy chirped. The Judy reached behind her back and pulled out a book. "Ooooh! What do I have here?!" she asked rhetorically. "Oh I love this one! Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Once upon a time," she began.

Great, not even some good playtime now that Lysa was out of her high. Worse yet, it was a baby story that he already knew by heart. Dante groaned inwardly. There had to be tons of baby books out there, new ones being written every year. Couldn't he at least have something stupid he hadn't heard before forced on him?

Around the part about how the third bowl of porridge was "just right", Dante became aware of a growing discomfort in his nether regions. Any minute now his bladder would auto-release sending warm urine into his diaper encasing his loins. Dante took a deep breath and closed his eyes, waiting for it to happen. And waiting. And waiting.

Could it be? Dante needed to pee, that was for sure, but nothing was forcing him to release. He could actually hold it in for a time. He was still uncomfortable, but he was pretty certain he could decide to let go. Then Dante got an idea. Dante got an awful idea. He had a wonderfully awful idea!

Dante's lip began to tremble, his breathing hastened with distress. Then he started crying out, "WAAAAAAH! NOOOOOO! NOT AGAIN! WAAAAAAH!" Dante began to pat and poke at his crotch, still freaking out. The thing is, he was still dry, and he knew it.

"Ooops," the Judy said, putting aside the story book, "looks like I checked you a little too soon, huh Dante?" Dante waited until he felt Judy's fingers poking around inside his diaper. Then he let loose. The Judy "eeped" as Dante peed on her hand and yanked it out of his clothes. Score one for personal space.

The Judy's finger was still glistening with urine, when she pulled it out. She quickly wiped it on her pants, trying to hide it. "Gee you little stinker!" the Judy laughed uncomfortably. "You coulda warned me, little guy." Lysa's eyes widened. She had seen it too. The Judies were Teflon, nothing stuck to them, least of all bodily excrements. It hurt, (man it hurt), but Dante managed to stop his stream mid-pee. He was still pretty soaked, but he had to save a little...just in case.

"All done, yet?" the Judy asked, as she picked Dante up. Dante nodded like an idiot. Dante felt her hand feeling the front of his diaper, once bitten twice shy. The Judy nodded, satisfied, and took him to the changing table. Dante purposefully crossed one of his arms over his chest so that it wasn't touching the changing table as he was laid down.

His bladder ached as soon as he felt the open air hit his crotch. He wanted so badly to release and finish it. But not yet. He had to time this next part just right. He might not ever get another chance like this again. The Judy wiped him down before lifting his legs and sliding the wet diaper out from under him. She balled it up and threw it into a trashcan.

Before she could even reach for a fresh diaper, Dante released and started peeing again, using his free hand so that it aimed right for the Judy. Epic win! The Judy was caught dead on in the chest. Panic flashed in her eyes, followed by simmering anger as she used the unfolded diaper as a urine shield. The angel nannies had had it too good for too long, and this one had gotten sloppy. Everyone knew that when you changed a baby, especially a baby boy, you made sure to at least have the new diaper already unfolded before you threw the used one away. The nursery worker had left herself open and paid the price. True, Dante had deceived her into thinking he was empty, but that's besides the point. Best part was, for whatever reason, her clothes were soaked and she did-not-look-happy.

"Agggh! Juuuuudy!" the Judy screamed. Her red-headed sister in the green dress came, a drooling baby teen in her arms.

"What's up Judy?" the duplicate asked.

"Would you mind watching my babies for me for a few minutes? Dante here got a little trigger happy, and...and..." she couldn't even finish the sentence. She just gestured to her pee-stained scrubs.

"Sure thing, hon, my other babies are in their pen" the Judy in the green dress replied. "You go get cleaned up, I'll finish with this little rascal." she said as she tickled Dante's tummy. Dante couldn't help but giggle. Lysa was hysterical, rolling on the floor laughing. The Judy in the nursery scrubs gave Dante a suspicious last look before turning the corner and vanishing into whatever kind of locker-room Limbo likely had.

Midori babbled, pointing to her shaving cream covered face. Her face had become so lathered up that it looked like a soapy beard. She pointed to herself and made a sign with her hands.

"Oh Midori! How cuuuute!", the Judy praised. "But you're not a boy sweetie, even if you do have a bubble beard." Was Midori's sign vocabulary increasing? Lysa and Dante shot each other quizzical looks before turning to face Midori and applauding.

The rest of the morning went by uneventfully. They played with puzzles, which Midori seemed to struggle with, while Lysa and Dante were bored to tears. They rolled a ball around in a circle, and were even allowed some quiet time back in the playpen before lunch.

Finally, lunch came, followed by nap time. Dante already knew what he wanted to do when free play time came around and he got the chance. He smiled as he fell asleep.

Dante woke up satisfied and dry from his nap, but needing to pee. Hot damn! That last time wasn't just a fluke! This time he released the full reservoir from his bladder, and allowed himself to be changed without incident. Just in case though, his Judy had made sure to unfold the clean diaper and place it under him before she even unfastened the wet one. Good move Judy! Good move!

Dante strut crawled around the open play room, looking for his target. Jamal was at least partly to blame for his near baby experience, and deserved a taste of his own medicine. The best part was, even with his singing all last night, Dante was sure that word hadn't spread quickly enough yet.

Jamal was dressed today in nothing but a bright yellow baby t-shirt and his diaper was on full display. Oh perfect! Someone up there might not have liked Dante enough to grant him access into Heaven, but some kind of higher power must be watching over him this day.

"Follow my lead," Dante whispered out the side of his mouth as they approached Jamal. Jamal, for his part, was all toothy smiles.

"Hello, Lysa!" Jamal said too cheerily.

"Jamal," Lysa responded flatly.

"And how's your little baby friend doing?" Jamal gestured to Dante. Lysa fumed but didn't open her mouth. Good. Let him take the bait. "Is ickle Dante weddy to suck on his ba-ba and have fun wetting his dipees?" Jamal asked patronizingly, not expecting Dante to respond coherently.

"Oh. My. God. Lysa!" Dante exclaimed in amazement. "Jamal's talking again!" Dante grabbed Jamal in a rough embrace. Jamal just sat on his knees, stunned. "Jamal, buddy! I was so worried you were past the threshold! When you started babbling nonsense I thought you were a goner for sure!" Jamal remained stationary.

"But... I didn't...I thought..." Jamal stammered, shaking his head in disbelief.

Lysa sniffed the air and wrinkled her nose. "Well, he's not all the way back. He's still shitting himself without realizing it." She patted the back of Jamal's diaper. "But it's a step in the right direction."

"True that," Dante agreed. "Good job, buddy!"

"Wait a minute!" Jamal protested, finally breaking Dante's embrace. "I wasn't the one going over the edge, you were!" he pointed an accusing finger at Dante. "And I definitely don't shit my britches on accident!"

"You sure about that, lil' guy?" Dante cocked his eyebrow. "I'm pretty sure it was you, kid." Dante sniffed the air and grimaced. "Uh, you wanna do me a favor and get THAT taken care of." he indicated Jamal's dirty diaper.

Jamal started wailing and kicking his feet till a Judy came over.

"What's the matter, Jamal?" the Judy asked. Jamal just kept crying, waiting for her to smell the mess he had made. She picked him up and checked the front of his diaper. "Still dry," she declared before patting his rump. She pulled back the waist band of his diaper and looked in. "Not poopy, either." Jamal quieted down, and was set back down on the carpet. "I'll go get you a ba-ba." she told him before leaving.

"See," Jamal declared, "I told you guys I hadn't messed myself. No way I'm slipping!"

"If that's the case," Lysa asked, a smirk of superiority plastered across her face "how come you didn't know for sure? Why'd you need a Judy to check you?"

"Later! Baby!" Dante laughed as he and Lysa crawled away giving each other a high five. Jamal was so furious that he didn't notice the front of his diaper getting warmer and start to sag as he glared at their retreating forms across the nursery.

Next, they approached two of the other survivors, Kevin and Vivian. "Oh, hi Lysa," Vivian acknowledged as they approached. "Look, sorry about the last couple of days. It's just that it always squiks me out when I see someone approaching the point of no return; and with...your rate of success...you know...look I already feel horrible. Let's just let bygones be bygones. You're welcome to hang with us again if you want to." She finally looked at Dante.

"Hi Dante!" Vivian cooed. "Go on and play with the other babies, the big kids are just gonna do boring talky stuff for now." She shooed for him to go away with her hands.

"Actually," Dante spoke up, "I wouldn't mind a little boring conversation, myself, if no one objects."

"Whoah," Kevin gawked. "Dante? You back dude?"

"Naw!" Dante rolled his eyes, "You've all just crossed over too and have learned the secret language of infants! Next comes the secret of the universe. Course I'm back, dumbass!" He smiled cockily

"But how?" Vivian asked. "I've never seen anyone come back from the copycat stage! That's flippin' amazing!"

"Well, you see-" Lysa took a deep breath, looking at Dante.

"Lysa did it!" Dante interrupted. "Everything she taught me just kicked in right before the end, and she dragged me back. She deserves all the credit. She saved me." Lysa's jaw dropped, and she got a little glassy eyed.

"Dante-" she said, unable to finish the sentiment.

"Dude," Kevin remarked, "that's awesome. Congrats to both of you!"

"You did it you did it you did it you finally did it!" Vivian squeed, bouncing up and down manically. "I'm so happy for you!" She hugged Lysa and kept bouncing.

"How'd it go down?" Kevin asked after Vivian's siren shriek died down.

So Lysa told them the story. Dante's break down, his babbling, her holding him in what would have been their last moments as people together. Her singing to him to say goodbye. Him finishing the song. Them celebrating the rest of the day through song.

"That was you?" Vivian asked in disbelief. "I heard you yesterday. I thought maybe they had gotten a guy Judy who sang really well."

"That has got to be the most awkward compliment I've gotten." Dante said, rubbing the back of his head.

"No man," Kevin added, "you were good. Really good. If they ever bring Star Search to Limbo, you'd be a shoe in!"

"They call it American Idol now," Dante informed him.

"Whatever," Vivian said, "not the point. So music is your anchor, huh?"

"Well, that and someone else," Dante answered looking over to a beet red Lysa.

"Sing for us, Dante, you gotta!" both of his fair weather friends begged.

"Well... I don't know-okay" Dante said, his ego getting the best of him. "But what do you want to hear?"

"Something happy," Vivian chimed in. "But actually happy, with meaning, not like a nursery rhyme or something."

"Forget that!" Kevin objected, "Sing something wild, something to rage against these angel bitches! Give them the middle finger through song! You-can-take-your-Limbo-and-shove-it!" Kevin sang in a bad southern accent. A song trickled into Dante's brain from his personal play list. It was an oldie, and he'd have to tinker a little with the lyrics but it fit.

"I think I can do a little of both." Dante smiled knowingly, nodding to himself. Dante closed his eyes and thought of Lysa; how she must have resisted and defied the Judy's for decades all while seeming to play by their rules. Just enough cooperation to keep her out of the New Born Room permanently, but still being defiant in her own way.

The volume in his mind cranked up. Musically it was fast paced and happy, a song of celebration, but lyrically it was about defiance; a strong contrast This song was about both of them, now.

His muse empowering him, he wove the song like a spell inside him and readied to release it. He could almost hear the acoustic guitar strumming quickly in the background. He sang:

"Sunshine go away today,
I don't feel much like daaaaaancing.
Someone's gone and tried to run my life.
I don't know what she's aaaaaskin'"

"Nice," Kevin nodded his approval but kept listening. Vivian was grinning from ear to ear.

"She tells me I better get in line,
Can't hear what she's saaaayin'.
When I grow up, I'm gonna make it mine,
These ain't dues I been paaaayin'!"

Lysa, never having heard the song before, only bobbed her head and clapped in rhythm. Laughing as she drew connections to the lyrics. Dante glanced around the room. As his voice carried, he realized, more people were looking at him, even the Judies seemed enrapt, their eyes glazing over and their mouth's dropping slightly. Dante grinned. Time to bring it home! He closed his eyes and belted out the chorus.

"How much does it cost?
I'll buy it!
If time is all we've lost,
I'll try it!
She can't even run her own life,
I'll be damned if she'll run miiiiiiiiiiiiine!
Sunshine!"

He heard Lysa gasp, and Vivian's scream caused him to open his eyes. He couldn't have been that bad, could he? He looked down at Lysa's trembling form, on the carpet. He bent over to get a closer look. She looked horrified.

Looked down? Bent over?

He was standing up!

WAP!

Dante crashed to the floor like a puppet with its strings cut as a Judy spanked him. Not just any Judy, his Judy. As he tumbled to the floor, he noticed that she had been wearing earplugs. Why was she wearing ear plugs? The Judy tackled Dante and pinned him to the floor despite him not being able to move.

"ORPHEUS! ORPHEUS!" The Judy screamed at the top of her lungs. In an instant, Judy's were dog piling on top of Dante. One was even lifting his legs up and continually, manically, frantically spanking him!

Dante could hear Lysa's screams as a Judy unbuttoned her blouse, exposing her breast. She got on all fours and guided her breast to Dante's face. If only he could sing. If only he could see Lysa. If only-

The nipple brushed across his lips, and his lips instinctively latched on and he began sucking down breast milk. It was delicious! Dante did not want to let go. He accidentally released a stream of pee-pee into his diaper. He didn't care. He felt a mess squeeze out the back of him and coat his backside. Didn't matter. His vision blurred, and it got harder to see. So what? He could still taste. His gums itched as his teeth retreated back into them. Awesome! That meant he could suck mommy's titty harder and it wouldn't hurt her. Dante's head felt chilly as a Judy brushed some hair off of his head, leaving him bald.

The other Judy's got off of Dante. They started undressing him, but Dante didn't care. Clothes didn't matter, only the Milk. So he just lay there as his layers of clothing were stripped.

Dante was in pure heaven as the Milk continued flowing down. He started to whine as mommy had him switch breasts, but soon enough he was suckling on her other tit. The scary giants around him were all screaming and crying. Too LOUD! Too LOUD! He needed quiet. He needed warmth. He needed Milk.

He felt hands touch his diaper, then withdraw. "We'll change him when we get back to the Newborn Room," he heard someone who sounded like mommy say. Dante felt himself being wrapped up in a warm blanket. He couldn't move his arms or legs, but he didn't care. He was warm and mommy was holding him and feeding him Milk. That's all that mattered.

He heard a familiar voice start to yell something weird and scary. It sounded like a lullaby, like pretty music to sing him to sleep. Something about paper moo. Maybe cows. Cows

made milk. The girl sounded like she was crying a lot while singing it so it didn't sound as pretty as it could have. Then he heard a WAP, and the cow song stopped.

The last words Dante heard before his eyes rolled into the back of his head were "Contact the Saint."

Chapter 15: The Orpheus and the Saint

Dante dreamt of bright, brilliant colors. They shimmered in his mind's eye with the twinkling of a thousand diamond stars. Hendrix couldn't top this. His dreams were a kaleidoscope ; mesmerizing, soothing. There were no troubles here, no worries, no nightmares. All was as it should be. Perfect comfort, perfect warmth, perfect everything.

Dante opened his eyes and gave a yawn. His tongue absent mindedly probed his toothless gums, the saliva running over onto his chin. He couldn't move, that was normal. He couldn't see very much. The walls of his cot rose up around him and kept him safe, blocking his view, and he couldn't pick up his head. His vision wasn't focused anyways. All of that was normal, too. What was wrong then? He had felt like there was something bugging him at the back of his mind.

Then it hit him: He was hungry. He was very hungry. He was very, very, very, hungry. There were no other words. If he didn't get fed, something bad would happen, he just knew it. He hated being hungry. He wanted Milk, and he wanted his Mommy, and he wanted them right now!

Dante began to whimper and mewl, calling for Mommy. Somewhere deep in the back of his mind he thought he was doing something wrong. There had to be a better way to communicate. Then he remembered. LOUDER! He cried out louder. He cried out louder and louder until he couldn't even remember why he started crying! HUNGRY! That was it! MILK!

After forever, he saw Mommy. She smiled at him, and made shushing noises. Dante suddenly felt cold as Mommy unwrapped him. He couldn't pick up his head, but he felt his diaper become more slack as Mommy. Then he felt the cold baby wipes washing him all over.

No Mommy! He didn't want a diaper change. Even if he needed one, that wasn't what had been bothering him. Dante redoubled his crying, though no tears came forth! He wanted Milk! Milk, Mommy, Milk! Dante was only vaguely aware as the new diaper was put on him. He wanted Milk!

Mommy wrapped him back up and picked him up. At least now she was holding him. That was a step in the right direction. Then Dante felt the nipple brush against his cheek. He latched on and began greedily sucking down Mommy's Milk! Joy! Rapture! The Highest of Highs! This is what it meant to be alive.

Dante started to calm down as he suckled and Milk slid down his throat. Dante began to make soft little animal sounds as he nursed, and was rewarded with Mommy stroking the back of his head. He couldn't love Mommy more than he did right then at her breast. He couldn't love anyone more right then. This was Heaven.

He mewled in protest again as Mommy switched him over to her other breast, but the absence of Milk was mercifully short lived. This was all he needed. Just this. This perfect little moment reverberating throughout all eternity.

Finally, he was full and he stopped suckling. Mommy was making happy noises; she liked it too. "Guh deeter!" she told him. "Susha guh deeter!". Dante didn't know what those noises meant, but he liked the way they made him feel.

Mommy started gently patting Dante's back, and a funny sound came out of his mouth. He didn't mean to make the sound, but it seemed to make Mommy happy. He made them again and again, and when he finally ran out of funny sounds, Mommy rocked him in her arms and Dante drifted off to sleep.

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"DON TAY! WAY KUP DON TAY! WAY KUP! LEE VIM LOAN YOOB ISHES! PLEEZ DON TAY PLEEZ WAY KUP!

WAP

Then another voice. It sounded a lot like Mommy's voice. But that was impossible. Mommy was holding him.

"Bad Bay Bee! Bad Bay Bee! Maw Maw Joo Dee Spank!"

Then the loud noise stopped. Good. Dante drifted off to sleep.

Dante dreamed

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Dante opened his eyes and gave a yawn. His tongue absent mindedly probed his toothless gums, the saliva running over onto his chin. He couldn't move, that was normal. He couldn't see very much. It was dark all around him, and he couldn't pick up his head. There were no lights anywhere. His vision wasn't focused anyways. All of that was normal, too. What was wrong then? He had felt like there was something bugging him at the back of his mind.

Then it hit him: He was hungry. He was very hungry. He was very, very, very, hungry. There were no other words. If he didn't get fed, something bad would happen, he just knew it. He hated being hungry. He wanted Milk, and he wanted his Mommy, and he wanted them right now!

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After forever, Dante felt something enter his mouth. Mommy! Milk! Dante bit down, ready for Milk to squirt down his throat. It wasn't Mommy. It wasn't her nipple, either. Dante bit down on something hard and cold. Too hard. It didn't taste anything like milk either. It didn't have a taste. It tasted like...Dante searched for the word...plastic.

Teeth ripped out of Dante's gums, and Dante screamed. He reflexively bit into the thing in his mouth. It helped him feel better, but not much. Finally the hurting in his mouth stopped and he spit it out. It was still dark all around Dante. No lights. No nothing. Dante was scared. He wanted Mommy.

Something else forced its way into Dante's gaping mouth. The spoon withdrew and Dante swallowed the stuff. Eugh! Nasty! It tasted like bitter applesauce mixed with overripe pomegranates. Dante thrashed on the ground, unwrapping himself as his arms and legs regained strength and something resembling coordination. His head itched as hair grew back in. Soon he was free of his fleecy confines, but not finished yet.

Memories flooded back. His mom and dad, the party, his death, Limbo, the Judy's, the survivors, Jamal, anchors, and Lysa. Lysa! Dante looked around, and his eyes adjusted to the dark. He was sitting on a baby blanket in a very large diaper- even for this place. By his left leg, sat the teething ring that he had just bitten down on moments ago. Where was he? Where was Lysa?

"LYSA!", Dante called out.

"The girl is not here." A voice quietly answered back from the darkness. "Do not worry. She is well. A bit fussy, perhaps, but well; and very much her worldly self." The voice was calm, almost friendly but very formal. Old. Definitely old. There was a strength to it, though. More like a quiet confidence.

A light shined down out of the darkness. It wasn't blinding, or even "Heavenly", more like someone just turned a low hanging ceiling light on in a warehouse. Even so, Dante winced and squinted as his eyes adjusted to the new stimulus.

Standing in the middle of the light, was an old man wearing white robes. His hair was white, with most of his face covered by a thick beard. Not quite a Santa Claus look, but close. His skin was tan and rough, like he had spent years in the sun. It might have been leather. A golden rope held his robe together, and his feet were adorned in leather sandals.

With a snap of his fingers, his clothes began to move. They twisted and turned around his body, while he remained still. They stretched in places and tilled and others. Their texture reshaped and their color darkened and shifted. Before Dante knew it, the robes had reshaped themselves completely. Now the geezer was dressed in a red turtleneck sweater, a pair of slacks, and a black leather belt with a gold buckle. The sandals, for whatever reason, still remained.

The old man reached into the darkness and pulled a wicker chair from it, setting it down. He groaned slightly as he sat down. "I hope you don't mind if I sit." the old man said. "I won't object if you stand."

Dante sat there, flabbergasted. "Uh, I don't think I can." he told the old man.

"Nonsense," the old man waved his hand, and made a cross, "in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti, you may stand for as long as we are having this conversation. Even Midori could stand if I allowed it, now."

"No, I mean...eh, I don't think I CAN walk." Dante pointed down to the scaled up newborn diaper that hugged his hips. His legs were spread so far apart by the bulk that crawling would be a challenge at this point.

"Ah, yes." The old man observed. "I see what you mean." The old man stood up, reached into the darkness and had a relatively thinner diaper and tub of baby wipes in his hand when it next came into the light. Not feeling at all in control of the situation, Dante just laid down as the old man went to work.

He wasn't as skilled as the Judies; clearly he hadn't had the millennia of practice they had, but he knew what he was doing. Dante didn't take the time to feel embarrassed. For once he was genuinely grateful to be changed. He never thought he'd be happy to be in the regular scale diapers, but he was.

He waited till the old man had retaken his seat, the baby wipes and used diaper being reclaimed by the darkness, and stood up on his two feet. It was still awkward standing and talking to a fully clothed man while wearing nothing but a diaper.

"Can I have some clothes too?" Dante asked.

"It is not yet decided if you'll need clothes anymore," the geezer spoke. It didn't sound like a threat, merely a statement of fact. That unnerved Dante more. Dante waited till it became clear that the old man would not speak.

"Who are you?" Dante asked after a brief silence. The old man looked confused, then offended. Then he leaned forward in his wicker chair; his chin resting in his hand. It was as if he were sizing Dante up. Finally, he exhaled slowly and spoke.

"Forgive my arrogance and impoliteness," the elderly gentlemen spoke up, his voice raspy with age. "I am Saint Jude, Regent of Limbo until the end of days.

That was a new one. "Do you run this place?" Dante asked.

"Of course, lad." the priestly man replied. "Why do you think the angels here are all named Judy?" He laughed dryly. "They took the names themselves, without any urging on my part, I assure you." A guy named Jude running a place just outside of Heaven; every angel named Judy. Worse yet, wasn't St. Jude the name of that children's cancer hospital that always advertised in the movie theatres? Dante wouldn't have believed it if not for all that he had already been through.

"What are you the Saint of?", Dante asked. It came off as more of a "Oh yeah?! Prove it!" than initially intended. The Milk of Human Kindness must still be in his system, messing with his emotions. The Saint didn't seem to notice though.

"Lost causes, among other things," Jude answered. He folded his hands in his laps, waiting for further questions. Dante didn't not keep him waiting.

"Lost causes?" Dante questioned. "Like...?" Dante let the question hang in the air.

"Fighting the good fight, even though you know you'll lose." Saint Jude lectured like an old professor who had given this lecture too many times to count. "Crusades, martyrdom-

"Treating dead kids like babies so they don't go to Hell?" Dante interrupted. It was rude to interrupt, especially when this guy clearly held all the cards, but something about him got under Dante's skin. It figured that a Saint would have a "Holier than Thou" attitude about him.

There was a long pause. Saint Jude didn't even blink, didn't even shift his weight. Finally, he said "Precisely."

"Why?" Dante wanted to know.

Jude nodded his head, as if Dante had asked the correct question. "Because," he said, "even though everyone deserves to go to Hell for their sins, no one should go there if it can at all be avoided."

"So you built this place, instead." Dante concluded. Saint Jude looked genuinely tickled by this.

"Built it?" the Saint laughed more hardily this time. He slapped his knee and tapped his foot as though Dante had said the most amusingly ridiculous statement ever. "No, my dear boy. No. I am Limbo's Regent, not its architect." The old man slumped his shoulders slightly. He looked tired. "I don't even rule this place as much as I", he let out a weary sigh, "manage it. But yes, I am the one responsible for your current plight."

Dante said nothing in response to this. He just listened. It was this stranger's turn to talk for the moment.

"This place was originally nothingness." Jude went on, his wizened arms spread wide to indicate the vastness of it all. "A between spot that was a barrier between creation and the hereafter. Then it became a haven for infant souls- innocent souls that had not had the original sin of Adam and Eve washed away." He leaned forward a little bit, "It was intended to stay that way, for the poor innocent babes that fell through the cracks."

"Sadly," the old man said as he leaned back in his chair, "mankind has been plagued with a dearth of good judgment ever since the Garden. Slowly, over the millennia, Mankind has sought to increase their childhood, and delay their responsibilities. The descendants of Seth that spread to what you call America are particularly guilty of this. It's ironic that they still make up a decent majority of the faithful."

Dante took this all in, but Saint Jude paid no mind. The old man just went on, more talking to himself than to Dante at present.

"There was a time," the old man continued, "when you were a boy as soon as you could coherently confess your sins, and a man as soon as your second set of hair started growing in." The old man's face shriveled up in what might have been disgust. It was hard to read his features. "Now, you're all practically infants till you're eighteen- hardly accountability or responsibility at all! Even after that, you're still children!" He let out something between an exasperated sigh and a growl.

"And that's why you treat us like babies?" Dante asked, more curious than anything; though that element of resentment still lingered.

The Saint's features softened. "You are treated like infants," he said, "because it was the one concession the Creator demanded of me when I proposed providing this service," he gestured around indicating Limbo itself. "Besides that, it's appropriate, don't you think?" Dante tilted his head in question.

"So many of you were ruled by your baser impulses before," Saint Jude started to list off on his fingers. "Food, drink, sexual pleasure, leisure, sloth, a sense of entitlement, and the personal fable running through your mind that told you your elders didn't understand you despite your obvious brilliance." The old man bobbed his head in mock inspiration. "It's only fair that these things all become the elements of your cage."

Dante felt his face getting hot. How dare this old fucker lecture him! Yeah he wasn't perfect, and had made a lot of mistakes. Hell, from an objective level Dante even agreed a little, but that didn't mean the high and mighty snob could rub it in his face.

The Saint must have seen Dante's expression. "It's not as if you're treated poorly, here," he said. "Limbo is no Heaven, mind you, but what would be the point of Heaven if it was?"

"No Heaven?" Dante spat, "I shit myself when I got here."

The old man chuckled. That caught Dante off guard. "Everyone soils themselves after they die," Saint Jude told Dante. "The saved are bathed in heavenly oils, wrapped in silken robes, and a crown placed upon their heads. You were cleaned and diapered, with the

knowledge that you would continue to make a mess of things time and time again." (A poop joke, ha-ha, very funny.) "The damned, I imagine are just left to stew in it."

Dante rolled his eyes. What was the point of all this? "Why are we even talking?"

"There's the question I was waiting for!" Saint Jude pointed at Dante, his eyes lighting up. He rubbed his hands together. "The true heart of the matter. Why did the Judy's attack you? Why were you even able to stand when it is fact that no denizen of Limbo may do so?"

Uh oh. The codger had suddenly gotten a little too excited for Dante's liking. "Yeah...why?" Dante asked hesitantly.

"You child," the geezer smiled, "are an Orpheus." He said this as if it were obvious and well known. He might as well have said "You have brown hair," or "You're a male." Dante just stood there, trying to comprehend the words that had passed the old man's lips. There was a long silence before the Saint deigned to explain.

"God made man in his own image," Jude finally said. "Do you think that means God has two arms, two legs, and a head?" Dante shook his head. Frankly, he had never really thought much about what God looked like, but he knew what answer Jude was looking for. Dante knew a straw man question when he heard it.

"No," Saint Jude stated firmly, "but he did gift us each with a bit of the Divine Spark, free will. Every human has the ability to make their will manifest, to create or destroy for no other reason than it is their desire to do so, much like God.

"Sadly," he went on like a professor who had just turned the page in a dusty textbook, "they lack perspective. Too often, man will favor their own will over anyone else's-even the Creator's. They try to become gods unto themselves." He looked up at Dante. "If you know even the basics of the Word, you know what happened to the first being that tried to be equal to God." He shook his head sadly and clicked his tongue, "Poor self-righteous Devil." Wow, this guy must be a Saint. He was actually showing sympathy for the Devil.

"What does that have to do with me?" Dante asked, missing the point.

"You're an Orpheus," Jude restated. "You're a human with enough will and passion to defy even God's edicts, if only temporarily."

Dante gasped. He the chosen one? He was Keanu Reeves? He was the Matr-

"Don't look so cocky, boy." the old man scowled, interrupting Dante's train of thought. "Anyone can do it. Most just don't. They never figure it out." He shrugged, more to himself than to Dante. "It typically starts with an emotional conduit or form of expression."

"Like singing." Dante stated this just as Jude had stated the Orpheus comment. It wasn't a question. It was fact.

"Yes," Jude conceded, "like the original Orpheus. Man went into Hell and coerced the Infernal Triumvirate into giving him his wife back with the condition of proving his love and trust by not looking back before he left Hell."

"He looked back", Dante finished, remembering the old Greek Myth.

Jude nodded, his hands folded in his lap. "It's what happens when man becomes a god unto himself. He trusts only himself, and loves himself above all others." He cleared his throat as if he were uncomfortable about what he was to say next. "What the story fails to mention anymore is that afterwards, the Orpheus decided women were too much trouble, and spent the rest of his life laying with boys. Ruins the romanticism of the account, I know, but it's the truth. Humans are capable of great and petty things."

"I bet you've had this talk with a lot of singers." Dante changed the subject and allowed himself a nervous chuckle.

"Not as many as you might think." the old Saint answered, "It doesn't have to be singing either. Any creative form of expression will do", the geezer started looping in a circle, showing an imaginary list that went on and on and on.

"Preaching, writing, painting, sculpting- even particularly barbed insults or clever lies will do. You were not marked as an Orpheus because of your talent. You were marked because you managed to defy God's decree that the inhabitants of Limbo will be as infants in that they may not stand or walk."

"I didn't do it on purpose," Dante said defensively.

"I'm aware." Jude replied. "That is why we are having this talk and you're not sleeping in a cradle till the end times...yet."

"Yet?" Dante did not like where this was going.

"You only have this second chance as a courtesy," Saint Jude summarized. "Around here, ignorance is still just barely an excuse. So I have seen fit to remove you from the Newborn Room. From now until you prove otherwise," he continued, "your treatment in Limbo shall be as it has always been."

"BUT," he added with emphasis, "if you are to be returned to the crèche, where your Lysa waits for you, then you must never sing again." the old man paused to let it sink in. "If you break this arrangement, you shall be subdued and returned to the Newborn Room for all time.

Dante didn't know how to feel. He'd get to see Lysa again, but he was forbidden his music. "But singing is one of the ways that I stay...well...me!" he pleaded. "It's how I came back to myself the first time."

"I am aware." the old man grunted. "I am also certain that the Judies would prefer to pick up where they left off and make sure there's not a second time that you come back to

yourself." He drummed his fingers on the armrest of his chair. "Some, I've heard, would even prefer that you not be given this second chance and be returned to the cots and swaddling clothes immediately." Dante opened his mouth to speak, but the old man waved him off with a gnarled hand.

"Don't worry, that will not happen until you provoke it."

"But what if," Dante paused, "without my singing, I regress again?"

"Then you shall be innocent, loved, and cared for." Saint Jude replied, starting to lose patience but remaining neutral in tone. "All will be well."

"But I don't want that!" Dante raised his voice and took a half-step forward, only now remembering that he was still diaper-clad.

Saint Jude did not react. "Then I will pray that your connection with the girl is strong enough to sustain you; or that you develop a new connection that does not defy the Creator." He stood up from the wicker chair and pushed it back into the darkness. He turned as if to leave. Oh fuck this! They weren't done talking yet!

"This isn't fair!" Dante yelled, "You might as well sentence me to Hell!" The old man stopped and turned around. His sweater and slacks reshaped themselves into flowing white robes. He marched up to Dante and stared the boy right in the eye.

"If you had even glimpsed the torments of the pit, you would not dare say that!" the Saint whispered. "And as for fair?" his voice gained a little volume. "You know what's not fair? Postponing your eternal reward earned from a lifetime of devotion and martyrdom so that spoiled children may evade the flames of the inferno!" His voice was booming now. "So long as I am Regent of this realm, I may not enter Paradise!" The echo of this voice thundered in Dante's ear.

"MEANWHILE!" he boomed, "I MUST ENDURE LISTENING TO WHINING BRATS A FRACTION OF MY AGE AND THEIR PROTESTS- BECAUSE THEY ARE WELL CARED FOR BUT HAVE LOST THE PRIVILEGE TO WIPE THEMSELVES!" Dante swore he saw a literal flash of lightning in the man's eyes. "THAT'S what's not fair!" Dante shrunk down, put in his place.

The wizened elder exhaled and stepped back. His voiced lowered to a whisper again. "But I am the Saint of Lost Causes. It is my duty, so I will endure." That was all there was to it then. Dante could either go back to the nursery and try to get along without his ace in the hole, or be sent back to the endless loop of consciousness that he had already experienced.

"I like you, boy. I do." Saint Jude said, nodding slightly. "If you last long enough and manage to grow up a little more, perhaps we'll talk again. Until then." he turned to leave once more.

"Wait!" Dante called out, more a request this time than a demand.

"Yes?" Jude turned his head back around.

One last thing was still nagging at Dante. He knew he had seen the lightning in the man's eye, heard the power in his voice. "You told me of divine sparks. Of using my will and emotions to defy God." Dante began. "That's why the Judy's called me Orpheus."

"And?" the old man in the robes let the question hang in the air.

"What do they call people with all of that inside them who don't defy God and look out for other people?"

"Saints," Jude winked. "They call us Saints."

Chapter 16: Better A Man In Hell...

Dante was alone in the darkness after the Saint walked out. His legs lost their balance and strength and he collapsed to the floor, back on all fours. Saint Jude had said that as long as they were speaking, Dante could stand as a man. Clearly, the conversation was over. Dante sat there, alone in the darkness, waiting for something to happen.

The darkness receded, and Dante's senses were slowly barraged by a bevy of familiar of sights and sounds. Bluish gray indoor/outdoor carpeting, the smell of baby powder and crying. Lots and lots of crying.

Dante was in a playpen, he concluded as the world came into view around him. He was all too familiar now with the mesh walls and padded floors. He turned his head to the sound of the crying. It was a girl, about his age, blonde, with her hair done up in a pink bow.

She wore a pink t-shirt that was puffed up and frilled around the sleeves. Useless buttons ran down the front that made it resemble a blouse. Stitched onto the left breast of the shirt was a cursive "L" Her short cotton poodle skirt barely concealed the puffy disposable she was wearing.

"Lysa?" Dante called out. "Is that you?" Lysa looked up. Her face had been red and puffy from crying. Her eyes were pink as if she had been stubbornly.

"Dante?" Lysa asked. "Is that you? Is it really you!" She lunged forward to hug him and fell on her face. She started sobbing. "I....thought...I...had...lost...you...forever!" she managed to choke out between gasps for air and sobs. Forever? Dante couldn't have been in the Newborn Room that long.

"Lysa, get a grip, girl." Dante said as he helped her up to her knees. "It was scary for me too. But I'm back now, so it's going to be okay."

"You were in there for nearly two weeks!" she blurted out. "I visited Caroline twice and saw you on my way out the first time, and got an early visit back where I tried to wake you up. You didn't even notice me!"

"I'm so sorry, Lysa." Dante said. He rubbed her arm for comfort. "What's going on, Lysa? Why are you dressed like that?"

"Oh Dante," Lysa cried, "things have changed here. Badly. When you stood up, you scared all of the Judies. They've been cracking down, trying to break all of us into babies. 'No more survivors, no more anchors,' I heard one of them say. This," she sniffed, and gestured to her clothes, "is what I was wearing the night I got pregnant with Caroline." She hiccupped a little. "Kinda. They're trying to humiliate me and shame me so I don't wanna be who I was when I was alive. And it's woooooorkiing!" The poor girl broke down again into another round of sobs.

No survivors? No anchors? And what they were doing to Lysa was nothing short of a mind fuck. Had Dante really caused all of this? Had the Judy's come to the conclusion that

every person holding onto their identity was a potential Orpheus? A rebel in the making? Dante had to know more.

"What about the others?" Dante asked.

"Jamal's already baby talking," Lysa rambled, "Kevin is throwing tantrums all the time, and that BITCH Vivian is always sucking on a goddamn paci!" She beat her fists against the padded floor.

"Easy Lysa," Dante tried to calm her, "that's not the real you talking."

"Yes it is!" Lysa snapped back at him. Dante jerked back a moment. "That bitch has a paci...and I want one tooooooo!" She whined like a two-year old. "I want it worse than a cigarette, and I haven't smoked in fifty-eight years!"

Instinctively, Dante moved in to hold her. She rested her chin on his shoulder, and he began to rub her back. Time for him to be the adult right now. "Shhhhhhh," he soothed her, "it's okay, it's okay. We're gonna make it through this. We're together again. Nothing can stop us when we're together." He closed his eyes and held her, and rocked back and forth to calm her. Her bawling lessened.

A rubber nipple entered his mouth and he began robotically sucking down milk. His eyes popped open in surprise. He looked up and saw the Judy in the green dress smiling wickedly down at him. A thousand curses popped into Dante's mind and vanished just as quickly as the milk took hold of his brain.

His muscles relaxed as he saw the Judy in the green dress take a hold of Lysa's shoulders and ease her down to her back. Her legs lifted up and she bent her knees so that they were close to her stomach. He felt another set of hands grab him and ease him away. Dante looked up as he held his ba-ba-(Bottle...bottle...ba-ba) and saw his Judy in the nursery scrubs easing him away. She still had earplugs in.

The two angels had snuck up on either side of them and simultaneously forced the bottles of angel milk into their mouths. "Gotta keep our babies hydrated," the Judy in the green dress snickered. Dante tried to lean back but his Judy held him so he was still sitting up.

Lysa's tears were drying, her eyes glazing over. She started grunting and lifted her legs a little higher to make room for what was about to happen. He tried to turn his head, but found it being held in place by the Judy. He felt the Judy's fingers above his eyelids, ready to pry them open if he shut them. He was being forced to watch Lysa poop herself. "It's okay, Dante," green dress said, "Lysa doesn't mind if you watch. Do you sweetie?" she tickled under Lysa's chin as the girl finished her ba-ba. Lysa giggled a little and blew a raspberry. But something in her eyes reeked of desperation.

"Babies don't care who's watching them when they poopy in their diapers, cuz they don't know any better. Good thing you're not a big girl, though, because this would be so embarrassing if you were." The Judy's speech swayed in a sing-song manner, like a cobra

about to strike. Lysa stopped babbling and gasped. She hadn't actually realized she was shitting herself.

Lysa's diaper puffed out and rude noises came from her backside as the mess pushed itself out. "It's a shame she finished her ba-ba so fast," the other Judy said. "It's so cute when they're pooping and drinking from their ba-ba's at the same time." Lysa's legs came down and she started bawling again. The girl who had preached remaining calm had no control over her emotions as present.

The Judy in the scrubs released Dante and picked the crying girl up. One hand supporting Lysa's messy bottom, the other patting her back. Lysa burped loudly. "Good baby!", the Judy praised. "Just a couple more burps, and we'll go change you."

"I bet this brings back memories," the Judy said as she hiked up Lysa's poodle skirt. Dante didn't have to guess what that meant. These things weren't angels. They were monsters! All along these things had known they weren't dealing with children, and yet stubbornly refused to act otherwise. Now that Dante had accidentally pushed the envelope, they were doing nothing short of conditioning and brainwashing everyone.

Dante needed to act, to do something instead of just sit there. He opened his mouth so he could sing and start thinking straight, but a glance from the Judy in the green dress made him stop. Instead he popped a thumb in his mouth and began sucking on it. Admittedly, it felt pretty good, but it wasn't what he had intended to do. Green Dress smirked when Dante started sucking; Dante felt like he had been caught reaching into the cookie jar. Cookies were yummy, he hoped Mama Judy would give him one la-stop it!

Dante kept shaking his head, trying to snap himself out of it and failing miserably. He felt the green dress Judy's hands grab him and lift him up by the arm pits. He giggled unintentionally as she shifted him onto her hip. "Baby swap!" she announced. "I'll take the boys, and you take the girls."

"That'll work," the Judy in the nursery scrubs called back, still changing Lysa. "You want some ear plugs?"

"That won't be necessary," the other angel replied. "The Saint made it clear ahead of time that lil' Dante here wouldn't be allowed back in the nursery unless he promised not to do sing like a naughty boy again. Isn't that right, baby?" she turned her head. Dante gave a frightened nod, slightly sobered by fear.

"How long?" the first Judy asked as she finished taping up Lysa's disposable.

"Ooooooh, I dunno. I think a week will be about enough." the other angel answered, bouncing Dante slightly on her hip.

"Suit yourself," the familiar Judy said, pulling down Lysa's poodle skirt, her chore now finished. She picked Lysa up and grabbed her by the wrist. "Buh bye, Dante!" she made Lysa wave. "Buh bye!"

"Okie dokie!" Dante's present tormentor beamed. "Be right back, Judy," she called out as she turned around, re-entering the rats maze that was the nursery when all the cubicle walls were set up and sectioned off. "We are gonna have so much fun Dante!" the Judy said. "I'm going to teach you how to be a good baby, just like how I taught my kids."

Half a minute later, Dante was in another play area, very similar to the one he just left. There was a playpen, a changing table, a trashcan, and a rocking chair. The walls had an alphabet border running along the top.

Instead of Lysa or even Midori though, were three fairly familiar faces in the pen. The Judy in the green dress's three wards, the one that Dante had witnessed breaking down day by day at mealtimes. The boys were dressed in matching red rompers. The girl in a yellow sun dress. They smiled up at their captor, eyes blank and curious. Babbling greeted Dante's ears.

Having appeared out of thin air in just a diaper, Dante expected to be toted over to a changing table at some point and dressed. Instead, he was taken into the playpen and sat down. Without another word, the Judy went and picked up the girl in the yellow sundress.

"Adam, Andy," the angel nanny said to the boys, "you play nice with Dante while I go drop Amy off." Dante whined from his position in the playpen, his thumb still in his mouth. The Judy looked down at him, and Dante used his free hand to gesture to himself indicating his naked state.

"Oh, don't be a silly baby." she wagged her finger at Dante. "You've got your diaper on. That's enough for now." Before Dante had a chance to pull his thumb out of his mouth and reply, the Judy walked out of the playpen, shut the gate, and left with the girl in tow. "Baby swap." Now he got it.

They were sequestering him away from Lysa, his last anchor. They were trying to break him, break Lysa, break them all. No more survivors, no more residents with their mental faculties intact. This nursery in Limbo would be a complete and total mental wasteland once the Judies got their way.

Dante concentrated. It was hard to talk right now, with the milk flowing through him. He had to concentrate. He looked at Adam and Andy, he wasn't sure which one was which. "Cam...yew...underhand...me?" He said, focusing on each word. Then he took his thumb out of his mouth and tried again. "Can...you...understand...me?"

Their heads turned to the sound of Dante's voice, but they didn't react otherwise. "Hi..." he waved to them. Neither of them waved back. One smiled and babbled a little, then fell over on his stomach. The other's attention drifted and he crawled to the other end of the pen as if Dante hadn't said anything. Even Midori was more intelligent than these two. They were placing him with the bottom of the barrel babies, no doubt. Infancy would seem a blessing, a sweet release when compared to the loneliness of being with these two.

Dante crawled over to a corner of the playpen. There he found a large teddy bear sitting in the corner. It was a big one, like the kind you'd win for 10,000 tickets at a carnival. It's

right ear was stained darker than it's left, more chewed up too. Dante gave in to the urge to compare and contrast.

Yup, right ear was definitely better. His saliva glands kicked into high gear, and Dante began working up a fine drool. He held the body of the bear close to him for comfort. It was good. It was sooooo good. If only everything in life (after-life...whatever) could be this simple. A little voice in the back of Dante's mind told him it could be. Dante jerked up a little at that thought.

Dante wanted to start humming Infant Sorrow's "Furry Wall", but decided against it. Humming might be taking it too far for the Judies' tastes, even if it was a song from a movie about a fictional rock-star. He didn't want to give the Judies any excuse to send him back to the Newborn Room. Almost anything would be better than that.

Dante instead adapted by taking a more meditative mind-set. His body was comfortable so he could allow his mind to fixate on other things. The fact that it was comfortable doing something completely ridiculous was a moot point. He breathed in slowly, and out quickly, focusing on each breath till he had control. He began to be able to think clearly.

The Saint had lied to him. Dante had been certain that he would at least be with Lysa, and not mind fucked. Then again, the Saint never made any such guarantees, only that he would be returned to the main nursery. The old prick also never guaranteed that the Judies would forgive and forget; only that he would be treated as he was from the beginning (like a crawler instead of a newborn) and that the Judies would pick up where they left off (but not forgive and forget.) Dante had assumed- or been led to assume- that he still had a fighting chance in this place.

Dante felt angry. That bastard Jude had played him for a fool. It would have been worth going back to the Newborn Room if it meant swinging on the bony butthead and breaking his nose. It felt good to be angry. Righteous even. Dante might not have a fighting chance in this place anymore, but Jude wasn't the only one who'd fight a losing battle to the bitter end.

His reverie was interrupted all too soon by a Judy's obnoxious chirps and coos. He opened his eyes. It was green dress again. "Looks like Dante's found Teddy!" Her again. Whatever variation on a theme this Judy was, it was definitely annoying. She came to the side. "Come over here little guy, Mama Judy's got something for you."

Dante had to bide his time, to figure a way out of this. Best not to rattle cages right now. Grudgingly, he crawled towards her. It took him longer than it should have because he was dragging the bear with him in his mouth. The big clunky thing slowed him down. "Awww how cute! Some-one-thinks-he's-a-puppy", Judy sang. This gave Dante an excuse to growl, and he took it.

He was being practical though. He remembered the comment about "keeping hydrated". If he bit down on the bear, the bitch wouldn't be able to shove a ba-ba in his mouth. The bear was his insurance policy against surprise attacks. That and it felt sooooo good to be chewing on its ear.

Green dress dropped something at Dante's knees. Dante took a closer look at it. It was a toddler book, foam padded, thick with only a few distinguishable pages. The kind that parents read to their kids and expected the kids to teeth on when they were done. "It's my favorite book," the Judy said as Dante picked it up. "I wrote it myself. I give it to all my babies when I first get them, and you're no different."

Dante wearily turned it around in his hands, examining the front cover. The front cover had a picture of a baby reading a book. The book in the picture had the letters "A B C" written on it. The title of the book was "YOU CAN'T READ."

Dante opened the first page as he chewed on his teddy's ear. The first page was blank. So was the second one. So was the third, and fourth. Dante closed the book and looked up at Judy, still smiling at him. "Good baby!" she said. He looked back down at the cover and realized that the text had changed.

Instead of the words "YOU CAN'T READ" on the cover, Dante could only make out scribbled lines. Even the ABC's on the book had changed to nonsense scribble. He looked up to the alphabet wall, only to find that the entire alphabet was replaced by meaningless symbols. The letters hadn't changed, Dante realized, he had lost the ability to read!

The Judy dangled another baby book in his face. Dante got a full view of the book before he snapped his head around the other direction. He couldn't read the title, but the book had a picture of a large red circle next to a little blue circle. Oh God! What had he just lost? Shapes? Colors? Opposites? WHAT?!

Dante yelped and closed his eyes as he scooted back across the pen- leaving the teddy in the process. He bumped into a tower of wooden blocks- presumably alphabet blocks, not that Dante could tell anymore- and burst out crying.

"Awww" the Judy taunted as he curled up in the fetal position, "wussamatta baby? Did da big bad book scahe you?" At one point in time, Dante had thought that the three wards of this Judy were all weaker willed than him, that they were suicides who had given up on life before coming here to Limbo. Maybe they weren't. This Judy was vicious. She wasn't any run of the mill, either. It was like she was a specialist in breaking people down to their. And now she was on consult and apparently giving tips to the others.

He was aware of her presence when he felt her footsteps in the pen. He heard her declaring both of the regressed boys wet and felt her checking his own diaper. "Wet", she said. "but you all can wait till after lunch for me to change you." Neither of the regressed seemed to mind the decree, or even notice their privacy being violated.

Had he really wet himself already without noticing? That was phase one of reaching the threshold. Then again, maybe she was lying. He felt dry. Maybe that's why he wasn't being changed. Maybe the bitch was lying to him to shake his confidence and make it harder for him to tell the difference between wet and dry. Make him fail before he actually had.

The Judy in the green dress loomed over him now, with a milky ba-ba in her hand. He already had milk going into his system, why was she holding another one. Was she trying to make him overdose? Was it her intent to keep him constantly milked up so he couldn't rebel? Dante closed his lips tight and drew them in. He found himself flipped over and his behind swatted, forcing him to go limp. He was force fed the ba-ba as Mama Judy rubbed his tummy and tickled him and blew raspberries.

She was enjoying this. So was he, (against his will, part of him screamed.) He had never tried acid mixed with ecstasy, but Dante was pretty sure this is what it must feel like. Before he knew it, the Judy had declared that it was lunchtime.

Dante soon found himself in a highchair on the far right of the kitchen feeding setup. Clad only in his diaper, he waited as more babies were brought in for the meal to begin. Finally, the blonde Judy in the nursery scrubs, his longtime captor came in with the three girls. Amy; who he barely knew, Midori; a giant rugrat yes- but one he had grown to like, and Lysa; looking physically drained and exhausted.

She was placed in a highchair at the other end of the room, so that she and Dante were as separate as possible. She too was wearing nothing but a diaper and her naked breasts were barely concealed by the bib that was tied around her neck.

"Sorry we're late, guys," scrubs Judy said. The other Judy's just nodded. She was usually late for lunch, anyways.

"What happened to baby Lysa's pretty clothes?" green dress Judy asked, sounding way too scripted for it to be coincidence.

"Oh, I gave her a choice," her cohort answered, also too scripted, "she could either wear the pretty outfit we had her in, or she could wear nothing but a diaper. She likes this better, I think. What about Dante?"

"Oh I haven't even dressed him up yet- good baby" she said as she spooned mush into Dante's mouth. Dante swallowed uncomplainingly. The milk was still affecting him and he was intent on listening to what they were saying for some kind of clue, a weakness, any valuable peace of information. "Anyway," she said "-good baby- I figured I'd just leave him like this for the rest of the day. I'm feeling a little lazy, and he wasn't complaining."

Liar. Dante had asked in his limited capacity for more clothes. Then again he hadn't rebutted...don't defend them!. All of this was just a show of power, anyways. Dante puffed out his cheeks in frustration, holding his breath and counted to ten so he didn't erupt. (Thank whoever he could still count to ten.)

"Good baby!" the Judy feeding him praised. "You made poopies for Mama Judy!" He had?! Dante shifted around. Sure enough, he could feel himself sitting in his own mess. He had pooped himself and not even realized. Maybe it was all of the angel milk, or maybe it was some kind of infant muscle memory, but Dante felt himself sliding unusually fast. The first step towards the breaking point was using your diaper without noticing. He had been free from the Newborn room for half-a-day, and he was already back at that point.

After a few more spoonfuls of baby-food, Dante was fed a milky ba-ba refreshing the infantile feelings coursing through him. Dante was taken back to the play area. Mercifully, the Judy laid him down on a changing table and stuck a paci in his mouth. He sucked contentedly while the Judy went to work.

"You know Dante," she mused for a moment, "if you were a big boy, you would have eaten all by yourself. Instead, instead Mama Judy had to feed you in your highchair." Dante started to suck harder in exasperation. He could see where this was going.

"If you were a big boy, you would have asked to go potty, instead of using your diaper," she continued, untaping the diaper. "In fact, even if you were a big boy stuck in diapers, you would have been very upset at making such a mess. Instead you sat in a wet diaper most of the morning, and sat in a messy one halfway through lunch without even a sniffle."

She lifted up Dante's legs. "If you were a big boy, after using the potty, you'd wipe yourself, and pull up your big boy pants. But Mama Judy has to take your diaper off, clean you up with BABY wipes. And sprinkle your cute little tushie with BABY powder so you don't get all rashy." Dante grit his teeth onto the pacifier. Talk about blaming the victim. Dante couldn't help any of this and she knew it. "If you were a big boy," she kept going, "you'd still be wearing the big boy pants you woke up in. But Mama Judy has to put a new diaper on you cuz you made a big accident in the last one. But that's okay, you're just a baby."

She picked Dante up and toted him over to the crib, laid him down and tucked him in. "You're not a very good big boy, Dante," she concluded. "but you're a wonderful baby." She kissed him on the forehead. "Oh, and one more thing, baby." she whispered in his ear. "The last two milky ba-bas that I gave you, didn't have any special milk in them. Everything you did as soon as you got over to my little play area, was all you. Good baby."

Dante got no rest during naptime.

He was taken to a different play area with unfamiliar babies around him. Still the layout was similar enough, and he could point out which ones were the survivors. They were the ones who seemed to be the most distressed; the ones getting the most attention from Judy's. People who Dante didn't even know were being cracked down on. He made one mistake, not even on purpose, and now the entire nursery was suffering for it. Praise the justice of the Divine.

Dante crawled up to a survivor, a young boy, younger than even Kevin who was swearing up a storm as a Judy patted him on the head and walked away.

"Hey, dude," Dante said as he approached. "What's going on here."

"The fascists have stepped it up another notch! That's what!" the boy spat.

"I'd kill for something to suck on right now, but they won't let me have it. Says I have to be a big boy! They want me to say it! They want me to tell them that I want to be a baby! Goddamnit I can't do it, but I'm losing my mind here."

"I think that's the point," Dante said dryly. Dante had long gotten over children speaking like middle aged sailors here.

"Heh, good one, buddy," the kid said, "Name's Victor, what's yours?"

"Dante", he answered.

Victor's eyes widened. He scooted back. "You?!" he pointed, "You're the one's all the Judies are talking about! This your fault! This is your fawt! Stay away fwum mee! Go 'way!" he screamed till a Judy came and picked the boy up, depositing a pacifier in the kid's mouth. She smiled down at Dante and mouthed "Thank you" to him before walking away.

Dante had already been blacklisted. No one would talk to him. The Judies were making it clear that they were doing all of this because one boy had literally stood up to them. Dante would only be able to find company with those who were too far gone to care. This company he refused on principle. Being surrounded by strangers didn't help. The isolation only made it worse.

Over the next few days, Dante knew he was slipping. His emotions were getting harder to rein in, everything was either ecstasy or misery. He chewed on the bear more often. He might be spouting baby talk, but not even the Judy in the green dress could coax him to speak now. Instead he hardened on the inside, building up a wall of anger to replace his previous desperation.

He did his best to zone out or sulk. He'd only see Lysa at mealtimes, and each time she looked worse for wear; like she hadn't been sleeping or had been crying a lot. She never spoke either. His sleep wasn't very restful either. He kept having a reoccurring nightmare that he had been taken to the Newborn Room only to see Lysa and her daughter, Caroline breast feeding side by side. Each mealtime was a blessed reminder that that had only been a nightmare.

It must have been a week when Dante was returned to see Lysa. It was right after breakfast, when he was traded back and put in a playpen with her. She looked better rested than he remembered, but her eyes were more sad. She sucked her thumb, wearing nothing but a purple baby t-shirt and her diaper. He was matching in a blue ensemble.

She stared at him, and then opened her mouth. "Me so sowwy Dante," she said. "I wuv you." Lysa was already at the baby-talk stage. Soon enough it would be echoing, then babbling, then gone. A week without him and intense, purposeful, savage humiliation by the Judies had undone close to 60 years of willpower and resistance. He loathed those THINGS more than he thought humanly possible.

"No be sowwy," he said. Damn. It was happening to him too. Figures. "My fawt. Not you."

Lysa shook her head. "No. Not Dante fawt. Mama Judy....Judy fawt." Dante shook his head slowly. It was his fault. The Judies were doing all of this because of him. If he hadn't been a threat to them, they wouldn't have taken things this far. Now they'd obliterate his mind, and everyone else's just to be sure.

Future generations of Limbo prisoners could expect the same fate if they were successful. These tactics would be justified as a pre-emptive strike on future Orpheus's. All the better to enforce the will of the Lord and serve their Regent. In a world without ethics, without humanity, this was the end result. Limbo was becoming a place without humanity; because of his actions it was turning into a second kind of Hell. Dante couldn't think of a worse fate.

Then a thought entered his head. What if he was gone? What if he wasn't around to justify the Judies tyranny? What if he escaped? No, that wouldn't work. The Judies could easily chalk that up to as another win if he just ran away or miraculously snuck out the back.

He'd need to give the Judys' a reason to be afraid. Not just afraid of him, but afraid of the anger they invoked in him, of the anger that could come from anyone that was treated this way. He'd need to send a message. He couldn't win, he had no illusions about that. One kid, even one who could temporarily undo a spell that made him an infant, wouldn't win against the Hosts of Heaven. If he fought, he'd lose and he'd lose hard. They'd spank him and send him to the Newborn Room; giving each other a pat on the back and a "told you we shouldn't have given him a second chance". That would accomplish nothing

But, if he combined the two ideas....fought his way past the guard and leave Limbo of his own accord. Bloody their nose and rob them of any kind of retaliation. That MIGHT just be crazy enough to work. The only problem was, Dante had a goal. Not a plan. Not even something resembling a plan.

Then he saw the Judy packing two diaper bags and readying a stroller. It had been roughly a month since he had seen his grandparents. Now he and Lysa were wearing matching outfits again, baby t-shirts and diapers. It Communion day. The wheels in Dante's head began turning.

"Wysa," he said, "I'm weeving."

"Whu?" Lysa said, panic in her voice. "Dante no weeve! No go to udda Judy!"

"No," Dante furrowed his brow. "Me weeving Wimbo."

"How?" Lysa, doe eyed, asked.

"You see." Dante told her.

"Why?" she sniffled?

"Mebbe I go. Mebbe they stop pickin' on you." he said as solemnly as he could.

"Wheh you go?" she whimpered.

"Wheh you think?" he looked down.

"NO!" she screamed. "Not theh! Any when else!."

"Don't wuh-we. Not goin t'day." He lied. It had to be today. He wouldn't make it another month at this rate. That calmed her down.

"I tawk you owt. You see!" She said as she hugged him. They both quieted down as the Judy approached. Lysa was picked up and strapped in the stroller. She struggled and squirmed, so the Judy took a little longer than usual.

Midori crawled up, crying softly. She knew. Somehow she knew too. She knew and she saw things too simply to believe the lie. She sat on her heels and crying, opened her arms. She signed, "D no go. I love you."

Dante hugged her and focused. "Good-bye Dori," he whispered clearly. "I love you too. I'll miss you." He released her, and the Judy in the scrubs picked Dante up and buckled him in the stroller next to Lysa. Dante was glad it was her. He hated Green Dress now, but this bitch had it coming too.

He smiled as he was strapped into the stroller and it started moving into the twisting paths of Limbo. His adrenaline surged as the doors opened out onto the Narrow Path to Heaven. The music in his head turned up to full blast, stronger than ever. If he did this right, the Judies would be talking about this for eons. Dante Willis was bringing war to Limbo.

"Wait till they get a load of me."

Chapter 17: I Am Mine

Everything had come down to this: Dante's death, the Judies, Lysa, Midori, the Newborn Room, Caroline, regressing, Jamal, Vivian, Kevin, his Grandparents, the truth about Lysa, approaching the threshold, finding his anchor, singing, standing, being punished, Saint Jude, things getting even worse, and now this. Dante was about to commit his one last act of defiance against the forces of Heaven and their jailors in Limbo. They would see the mortals in their care as something to be respected, not manipulated; that they were more than just simple children to be rewarded or punished as deemed appropriate.

Some very small part of Dante questioned himself; felt guilty. Maybe the Judies were doing the right thing in the long run. Then he remembered that the Devil was once an angel as well. Not even angels were perfect. They only held onto that pretense. These things were just as capable of fault, pride, and monstrosity as any sentient creature. They just had special tools to help them in their designs. Hopefully Dante's plan would shock them bad enough to where they'd think twice, but he wasn't doing this for them. Not at all. Fuck them with a giant spoon and twist it sideways.

Dante always thought that guilt was the last thing to go. Apparently not. He had so many other emotions running through him that he couldn't register them all. Anger, fear, hope, even a little bit of pride. He'd never felt like this.

He counted to a hundred slowly, as the stroller moved along the winding narrow path. Then he counted backwards from a hundred just to be sure. He wanted to be at about the half-way point before he started, too far away from Limbo or Heaven for reinforcements to arrive in time to make a difference. It was fortunate that the Judy in the green dress hadn't stripped him of his ability to count. Dante smiled. Then again, maybe she did, and he was just taking it back anyways.

Dante knew exactly what song he wanted to use. It wasn't "Come Out And Play", but he liked it better in this instance. "Come Out And Play" was a story about punk kids that shirked responsibility and consequences. "You're under 18 you won't be doing any time. Come out and play." That wasn't who Dante was anymore.

This song, Dante's new song, was about all the wonderful things that people had inside of them, and how they shouldn't shut those things away. They'd be incomplete without them. It was about how indomitable the human spirit was and how in the end, everything was going to be okay. That was Dante now. It wasn't what people wanted him to be, but it was what he chose to become.

Dante started tapping his foot in the stroller, counting to himself to keep the beat. It was in 3/4 time so it was trickier than your average pop song. The strongest part of the beat came on the downbeat at the beginning. Kind of like a waltz. ONE-two-three, ONE-two-three, ONE-two-three. Okay Judy, let's dance.

Dante began to sing, just barely above a whisper. Weaving his final, greatest spell. He sang:

"the selfish, they are all standing in line,
faithing and hoping to buy themselves time.
e i figure as each breath goes by,
i only own my mind."

He felt the strength and coordination return to his arms. He could picture the words in his head, with actual letters.

"the north is to south, what the clock is to time.
there's east and there's west and there's everywhere life.
i know i was born and i know that i'll die,
the in-between is mine.
i. am. mine."

Lysa looked over at him. She had heard. She started tearing up in realization. She mouthed the words "No". Dante kept going into the chorus. Louder this time, with pride, so that Judy could hear. He unbuckled himself from the stroller.

"When the meaning gets left behind,
All the innocence lost at one time"

The stroller stopped suddenly. It shook a little as the angel tried to unsuccessfully spank Dante through the back of the stroller. It was too padded and reinforced to make it through. Dante sang on in wait.

"Significant behind the eyes."

Dante looked to his left and waited. With the road being so narrow, it was Judy's only route.

"There's no need to hide."

He reached out and jabbed the Judy in the stomach. The angel wasn't used to full strength contact and doubled over.

"We're safe tonight!"

Dante lunged sideways out of the stroller, and like a tiger swiped at his captor's head. A smile formed on his lips and Eddie Vedder's guitar riff sounded that much louder when he saw her ear plugs fall out. Dante glanced around. Just like last time, every angel that could hear his voice was still and entranced.

Especially, to his satisfaction, the Judy in the nursery scrubs. Time to bring it home.

"THE OCEAN IS FULL CAUSE EVERYONE'S CRIED"

He stood up on his own two feet.

"THE FULL MOON IS LOOKING FOR FRIENDS AT HIGH TIDE"

He ripped off the blue baby t-shirt.

THE SORROW GROWS BIGGER WHEN THE SORROW'S DENIED

The diaper followed.

"I ONLY KNOW MY MIND"

He strode up to the Judy, the hairs on his body sprouting out of him, stubble coating his face. Dante reared his fist back....

"I! AM! MINE!"

WHAM!

The Judy stumbled back from the force of Dante's blow and tumbled off the side, down through the celestial sky. Apparently, having never been designed or purposed to leave Heaven or Limbo, these so-called angels lacked wings. Dante nodded his approval and grinned. His turn now.

"What in God's name is happening to the Judies, Molly?!" a familiar voice rang out in the stillness. Dante's head whipped around. His grandparents were no more than 30 feet from him. What were they doing here? He turned to face them.

"Frank, he's staring at us...and he's naked," Grandma whispered a little too loudly. "Do something."

"Uh...sorry to interrupt." Grandpa stammered. "We got permission to walk on down this road and pick up our grandson early so we could spend some more time with him." Dante saw that Grandma was holding a child's potty under her arms, and Grandpa had a package of what could only have been Pull-Ups.

"Wait a second, Frank." Dante's grandmother said, squinting at Dante. "He looks just like our Bobby did when he was a teen-" then it clicked.

"Dante?!" they both said in unison. The plastic potty chair rattled as it was dropped to the ground.

Dante smiled. It wasn't a happy smile, but it was for them. An idea occurred to him.

"Hey Grandma, hey Grandpa!" he shouted. "Tell everyone what you saw here, and give my regards to the Big Guy. Pass this along to Him for me, would ya, Grandpa?" Dante raised his middle finger in the air. His grandparents didn't move. Only nodded.

Dante peered over the side. Nothing but clouds blocking his view, but Dante knew what lay below them. Here goes nothing.

Dante felt a hand grab his wrist. A Judy. It had been too long since he had stopped singing. He spun around and swung his fist at top speed. His fist stopped an inch from connecting with Lysa's face.

LYSA! She was standing...SHE WAS STANDING! Just like him she was standing, and completely naked.

"Please don't go." she said, looking into his eyes.

"How?" Dante asked. "How did you-?"

"As soon as I realized you were singing, I started talking to myself. Lying. I kept telling myself lies again and again, and next thing I know, here I am."

"What lie did you tell yourself?" Dante questioned.

"That everything was going to be okay." A single tear danced down her face. They just stood there. Holding each other between two after-lives. Not a word was spoken. Enough words had been spoken, lies had been told, and songs had been sung to last an eternity. Dante surveyed his battle field.

Judy's were starting to come to, shaking their heads as if they were waking from a dream. As soon as they laid eyes upon Dante and Lysa, the Judies gasped. No shouting of "Orpheus" or "Contact the Saint." No battle cries or bum rushes. Instead, each angel knelt down and bowed their head.

They were in the presence of the Adam and Eve of Limbo. These two were idealized perfection about to fall from Grace. Whether from some form of reverence or pity, the Judies all stayed their hand, and waited.

"Come with me," Dante whispered.

Lysa shook her head. "I can't," she told him. "I can't leave Caroline. Stay with me. Don't go to Hell. You don't deserve that."

"We all deserve it," Dante said.

"Doesn't mean it shouldn't be avoided at all costs.", she pleaded. She hugged him harder. "I'm not letting you go, Dante. I refuse."

"BOY!" an ancient voice boomed out. "STOP THIS MADNESS!" It was Saint Jude. Floating in the air above them. "STOP THIS AT ONCE AND I SHALL SHOW YOU LENIENCY!" He commanded.

"SORRY OLD MAN!" Dante shouted back defiantly. "YOU DON'T GET TO MAKE THE RULES! NOT THIS TIME!" He leaned over and whispered in Lysa's ear. "I love you. I'll always love you. I am so sorry." Then with all his might he bit down into her ear. Her screams echoed out into the open air. The Judies all covered their ears at the sound of her pain. Dante torqued his neck and clamped down on her ear.

With horrendous effort, followed by a sickening ripping sound, Lysa's ear came lose in Dante's mouth. She let go of him and covered herself retreating back into the fetal position. The hair on her womanhood was already beginning to recede. Dante spit the ear down next to her so it could be reattached. Then, he took a step back and unfolded his arms, mimicking a cross. He fell back into nothingness.

He freefell into oblivion, past the clouds. The scene changed to an ever darkening night sky, the stars twinkling like candles in the background. Long drop. Very long drop. Dante's descent seemed to slow for an instant.

"NO!" Saint Jude's voice boomed from the clouds. "I CANNOT LET THIS PASS!" In half a second, he was on Dante, his gnarled hands reaching out to snatch him up and drag him back to Limbo.

"NOT THIS TIME MOTHER FUCKER!" Dante roared. "THIS TIME, YOU LOSE!" Dante swatted away the old man's hands with one arm and struck at him with another. Dante felt a satisfying crunch as he connected, breaking the self-righteous bastard's nose. Not dismayed, Saint Jude reached down and grabbed Dante by the wrist. Dante's fall slowed to a stop. Jude's grip like a vice. Dante dangled helplessly by his wrist.

It couldn't end this way. It just couldn't. Through sheer willpower Dante pulled himself up and bit into the Saint's arm. The old man cried out in pain as Dante tore with his mouth like a dog with a bone. (Thanks Dori) Blood poured into Dante's mouth...so a Saint could bleed after all.

The grip on Dante's wrist loosened and Dante didn't hesitate to swing with his free hand. He stiffened his palm and swung his hips the opposite direction as he connected with the Saint's elbow. A sickening, satisfying cracking of bones greeted Dante's ears, and Dante laughed in the old man's face as his elbow bent the wrong way.

"Finally free", he thought, as he fell into the blackness. Finally Free. He was a man.

Dante was awake before he opened his eyes. Either that or he was in complete darkness. Soft tinkling music permeated the air, like a lullaby.

"Wakey wakey, baby Dante," a Judy's voice caught his ear. "Time to get up and start your first day." He hadn't made it out after all. He slowly opened his eyes.

Wooden bars were in front of him. He was in a crib, again. The fleecy feeling on his skin told him he was in footie pajamas and the crinkle and bulge between his legs confirmed he was back in diapers. Something was wrong though. A Judy peered down at him in the crib, smiling wickedly. Not just any Judy though; the Judy in the nursery scrubs. His Judy. And she was enormous.

He brought his hands up in front of his eyes. They were tiny, pudgy little things. He reached to the top of his head and felt only a few wisps of hair poking out. He screamed in shock and a high pitched squeal came out instead. She wasn't giant; he was now in the body of a baby. Fuck! He had to sing, he had to sing, he had to sing. He had to get out of this place!

"Blabble abbbble goo gaa!" came out of his mouth instead of any actual words or identifiable melody.

"Poor, poor, STUPID...BABY...DANTE!" the nanny said mockingly. Her eyes literally flashed red for an instant. "You couldn't think of any worse torture than being treated like a baby for all time. Well you know what? Neither could we." She unbuttoned her blouse and reached down and picked Dante up. "We just made some improvements."

"I was sooooo mad at you when you knocked me off the path." she continued, "Taking care of little babies just like you was all I knew how to do. But now, I have a new name and a new purpose. And that purpose is making sure that you're the best baby ever!" She brought Dante's lips closer to her nipple and shoved his face in.

Dante cried as he began suckling. All hope abandoned. All bravado drained.

"Don't worry though, baby Dante," the fallen angel cooed as she stroked Dante's bald head, every word honeyed with venom. "this isn't angel milk, any more. You won't forget who you are, or regress, or anything. But I'll still get to feed you and burp you and dress you and change your diapers and bathe you and read to you and play silly little games with you. You'll just be a big strong MAN trapped in a BABY'S body. Doesn't that sound fun? Mama Lucy will take such good care of you."

Epilogue:

It had been three days since Dante had leapt into Hell. Three days since Lysa had failed to stop him from going. Failed. Again. Failed. Failed. Failed. Lysa was a failure at everything. Lysa sat in her playpen feeling sorry for herself and mourning Dante. She had expected to be taken immediately to the Newborn Room and share a cot with Caroline for all eternity, but that's not what happened.

Instead, her ear was reattached with a kiss, she was redressed as a baby, and carried back to Limbo. All of Limbo had been in such disarray after Dante made his stand that she suspected that she had just slipped through the cracks and she would be punished for her part later when it was convenient.

New Judy's, one's she hadn't recognized, had been popping up all over the place, either transferred from other nurseries or created out of thin air. Lysa didn't know why. Her current caretaker had short black hair and brown eyes. Instead of nursery scrubs, she wore a modest white blouse and black skirt; just this side of school marm.

Other than that though, everything was still the same. Calling themselves "Mama Judy", cooing, tickling, feeding; the whole nine yards. Lysa had gained back control of her emotions, speaking, and all that other semi-adult stuff. It was almost as if Dante had never existed. She didn't have words for how awful she felt for thinking that.

The new Judy came over and checked her diaper. She was wet, she knew, but Lysa didn't bother telling her that.

"Ugggh" the angel groaned as she placed Lysa on her hip. "You're getting' heavy, Lysa. Pretty soon, Miss Judy isn't going to be able to carry you anymore." Miss Judy? Hadn't heard that one before. Where had that come from? Lysa shoved the thought from her mind before.

"A moment, if you please, Judy," a raspy voice called out. It was Saint Jude- the old man who had flown after Dante and only came back with a bloody nose and a broken arm. He looked fine now...if you could still look like an old prick and be fine, that is. No broken bones or anything.

"Please leave us," he instructed and the Judy complied. He pulled Lysa up so that she was sitting on the changing table. "I wish to talk." he said. Lysa just stared at him. She let her silence be her opening volley. The old man sighed. "We'll be putting up a guard rail along the narrow path so that something like this never happens again." There was a long silence.

"That's what you came to tell me?!" Lysa spat. The old man opened his mouth. Then closed it again. He shook his head.

"Ye-...No.", he replied. "What I really wanted to say was that I am sorry for your loss. The boy was very special to you. Given time he could have been something special to all of us."

"His name is Dante," she scolded, "and this is all your fault."

"I am aware," Saint Jude replied. "Now I am anyways. I did not realize that the Judies were capable of such cruelties, that they would resort to the sort of treatment that pushed the boy...Dante, to his act of rebellion. I am Regent of Limbo, but there are many more nurseries than this one, and I am not omniscient. I wasn't alerted until it was too late."

"How's your boss taking the news?" Lysa asked, looking for something to rub in the Saint's face.

"The Father was less than amused when an old man told him the story of his grandson rebelling against his treatment and then gave Him the finger. Do worry," he added, "the Lord did not unleash his anger upon the messenger."

"Who did He release it on?" Lysa pressed.

"There's the less than satisfying part." the Saint conceded. " The two conspirators that set this into motion- one is already in Hell, and the other was allowed to be unmade. She chose non-existence over an eternity in the Inferno and so the Lord unmade her. Beyond that, it is up to me to decide where we go from here.. A task that I do not enjoy, but...I am the Saint of Lost Causes. It is my duty."

"So what now?" Lysa asked.

"First and foremost," the old man spoke, "we'll be changing the rules around here. Any resident of Limbo who can maintain their hold on themselves for more than a month without slipping back into innocence will be given the option of moving to a different section of the nursery. There they will be cared for as infants- physically at least- but they will be given the respect they deserve as dignified, intelligent, and experienced human beings. Those that wish to become as they once were in the beginning will of course be allowed to stay and embrace their innocence." Lysa waited.

"That's it?" she finally asked.

"For now," the Saint said as he turned around and began to walk away.

"That's not fair!" Lysa called out after him, still sitting on the changing table in a wet diaper. Saint Jude stopped in his tracks and spun around. He marched up to Lysa, lightning flashing in his eyes.

"Not fair?" he asked, "You know what's not fair? Postponing your eternal reward for a lifetime of devotion and-"

THWACK! Lysa slapped the old man across the face. He just gawked, rubbing his cheek.

"No!" Lysa stared him in the face. Unblinking. "You don't get to play that card. You're not the martyr right now. You don't deserve that feeling of being right, cause you're not!"

"This is my fault," the old man repeated. "But I am not perfect. To err is human, to forgive di-"

THWACK!

"Quit that!" Lysa scolded. "You don't get to do some prepared speech or wise old saying, shrug, wink, and then walk away. You talk to me like I'm a person damn it!" Saint Jude was taken aback. No one in Limbo spoke to him this way. No one.

"I'm sorry..." Saint Jude stuttered at the girl.

"You could have saved him." she insisted.

"I don't think I could," Jude defended himself. "I honestly don't think I could have. He wanted to go, and if I had pursued him any further, I would have gone to Hell myself. I have no power there. Everything of me is invested in this place. I'd be trapped, just like him." All of the pomp deflated out of the man. Practiced humility gave way to the genuine article. "I'm sorry. There's nothing I could have done. None of the other Saints could have either. They're already in their appointed roles and tasks. We can't defy our purpose, girl. We just can't."

"Just because he wanted to go destroy himself, doesn't mean you let him," Lysa countered, her righteous anger building. "You don't let a baby touch a hot stove or bang their head against the wall, do you? And even if you couldn't have saved him, you could have tried harder. Some things are worth fighting for, even if you know you'll lose."

Saint Jude looked up. "What did you say, girl?"

"You heard me," she folded her arms across her chest. The old man smiled for the first time.

"My dear," the Saint said looking her in the eye. "I can't believe I'm actually getting to say this, but you don't belong here anymore. You've grown up."

"Huh?" Lysa was confused. "I died when I was 16. I don't go to Hell. I won't leave Caroline."

"No, you're not going there. Not yet, anyways. As for your daughter, we normally don't allow babies to leave Limbo for any long period of time. But exception can be made...for Saints." His eyes twinkled with happiness and mischief. Lysa didn't know what to make of this. "I have a present for you." he said as he reached under the changing table. "It's not much, but it's a start."

He lifted her up off the changing table and set her down. She was standing on her two feet again, under her own power. She was so frightened she was shaking. With his free hand, Saint Jude untapped her diaper and let the sodden garment plop down to the floor. He took a baby wipe and cleaned her between her legs while she stood. Lysa dared not move.

Then he showed her what he had in his free hand. He presented her with a diaper. No quite, actually. It wasn't white. It was pink with a picture of Cinderella on it. It was thinner too, and no tapes. Kind of like a cross between regular underwear and a diaper, Training panties, Pull-Ups. Lysa started to cry. The moment that she never thought was going to happen was happening.

Saint Jude popped the training pants open. Lysa stepped into the leg holes and he slid the Pull-Ups up her hips and around her waist.

"It won't be easy," he said to her. "And it will take a while. Possibly longer than you've even been here, but I think you're ready." He stood up and gave her a hug.

"Lysa Strata. Your training begins today." Lysa was still trembling.

"Judy!" the Saint called out. The Judy came. "There seems to have been a change of plans. Lysa does not belong here anymore. She's grown too big. I want her enrolled in the Purgatory Pre-School immediately!" He laughed.

"Oh, Lysa, I am so proud of you!" the Judy beamed, and took the girl by the hand. Walking her out of Limbo. "You're such a big girl now! I have got just the cutest little outfit in mind for you.

A purple shirt with some matching pants, and the cutest little white sneakers. You'll love them! Then there will be your big girl bed and your big girl clothes and your big girl-" Lysa tuned her out, lost in her. A whole universe was opening back up to her. But most importantly of all, she had a hope.

"Hold on Dante, everything's going to be okay" she promised, not a lie this time. "I'll come for you."

THE END

The author would like to dedicate this story to his wonderful wife. She found out my secret, loved me for it anyways and married me. Without her encouragement, this story would never have been written and I would still be lurking on these sites, too afraid to even post a comment, dreaming

Special thanks to all who read this story and commented on it. It was good to know that there were people actually reading what I wrote. It made the vastness of cyber-space feel a little less empty.

It's been a crazy ride. Thank you all for riding it with me.

-Personalias

A Retrospective.

Hello! If you've read this far, I'm assuming you've read to the very end of my very first work, Dante's Infanzia. That, or possibly that you skipped down to the bottom. That's fine too.

I've decided as I convert these already completed stories of mine and put them on PDF for my patrons to have access to, I'd write little retrospectives on each story. Maybe you get a little behind the scenes story about something, maybe you get to feel that you know me

just a little bit better. Hell (perhaps not the best choice of words in this context), maybe I just feel like I did something besides post one of my old stories up. Feel like I did a little work and earned that sweet, sweet, patreon money.

So here goes:

I hate Dante's Infanzia.

Did that get your attention? Hope so. It was meant to. It's true, though. Keep reading.

I really like Dante's Infanzia. I really, really, like it. It was the first ever story that I wrote as Personalias, it was my first foray into ABDL stories and nothing. I love Dante and the extended cast of characters so much that I've referenced him and them in many if not most of the stories that followed.

1017AB, the number of Dante's Limbo Nursery. The AB was an obvious joke that allowed me to put scale and scope and 1017 is Dante's birth. Why? No reason. It was completely arbitrary on my part.

BUT, whenever I need a random number for a door or an apartment or some other numerical easter egg; you can bet that it's going to be 1017. It's my own little nod to the characters in my head and the start of it all.

Other people really, really, like Dante, too. Dante has fan art that I didn't commission. Dante's Infanzia is on TVTropes.com There's even a CYOA fanfic of various other pop culture teens ending up in my version of Limbo. Every time someone tells me one of my stories reminds them of Dante, I know it's a compliment and I'm deeply flattered.

Now, just between you and me, here's something that I've told very few people. I hate Dante's Infanzia. Hate, hate, hate it! I made so many rookie mistakes and stupid flubs writing it, and it was written before I was secure enough in my writing to let anyone but me take a look and edit it before publishing. So there's TONS of mistakes.

For me, reading Dante's Infanzia is a lot like looking at old highschool yearbook pictures. Every year I'm removed from it, I can only shake my head and think about how awful I feel I was, if only comparatively. My friends and relatives remember the good ol' days, and I can't but help looking at the acne.

I've been looking to top it ever since. Every time someone tells me a story reminds them of Dante or how great Dante was, I'm secretly afraid that I peaked with my first outing and will never escape the shadow of a diapered Limbo. Not so secret anymore I guess.

And please, don't get me wrong. Dante's Infanzia still brings me great joy. The characters you've just read are like little pieces of me. Dante is me in highschool. Impulsive. Capable of Growth. Not so slightly horny. And very introspective for good or for ill.

Lysa is the friend I wish I'd had growing up. The person who has my back and loves me unconditionally but also doesn't take my shit. The Judy who would ultimately become the

one and only Lucy (currently holding the record for most cameos) is my second favorite villain I created.

My other characters tend to be aspects of me or ideas that I like that I insert into a vacuum naturally just flesh out and let guide me, filling up the spaces. For example, Dante sang because I needed SOMETHING for him to do and I sing to myself. That evolved into the Orpheus lore, borrowing as liberally from Greek Mythology as I did from old Catholic Church Doctrine that had long since been revised before I even started writing.

With Judy? I didn't do that. I didn't let Judy spread out. Judies' personalities were kept in a rigid little box, but in doing so they lacked that humanity, which is what ultimately made them and Lucy such a great antagonist for me. It was a malfunctioning robot nanny with a Divine/Infernal Twist.

So as you can see, I've thought a lot about this story and the characters over the years. Everything I've done as a writer, in some way builds back to this story. I'm infinitely grateful to it and the people who read it and continue to read it. It's what started me on the path I'm on and in my own way I owe everything to Dante, Lysa, Midori, and company.

Someday I hope to write a sequel and give Dante the rescue he so richly deserves.

I just really hope that I'm not disappointing you, the reader, with everything else I've written since.

-Personalias