

Christian Haunton

The Palest Ink

Collette Aster switched on the single bulb in the storage shed and surveyed the clutter. Every year she looked forward to the long Labor Day weekend as a chance to begin transforming the junked furniture accumulated over a summer of garage sales and thrift store excursions into desirable antiques. There stood before Collette some two dozen tables, chairs, dressers, and trunks. Each was marred, or painted, or broken in some way that left the item ugly, but reparable. Collette scanned the room, looking for something that would be fun to refinish without being too labor-intensive. Her eyes stopped on a garish blue chest of drawers settled in the back corner. Collette smiled to herself and began excavating the would-be treasure from the dinette set that surrounded it. As she recalled, underneath a quarter inch of what looked like tempera paint the chest was made of oak. But it was not the quality of the piece that would lure an interested buyer, but its provenance. Collette had found the piece at a garage sale in Auburn, a locale now more infamous than Pearl Harbor. Auburn had been a tired, dirty warehouse district known only to its own residents and a few lucky souls who had moved on to better things. It was one of those dumping grounds for sad stories, like Flint, Michigan, where industry had evolved past the need for the laborers who had made a home there. A year ago few people could point out Auburn on a map, but everything had changed since then. Last year the first dirty bomb ever detonated on U.S. soil had vaporized what had once been Auburn. America remained perplexed and frightened by an event that was never completely explained. The most popular, and official, theory was that a terrorist cell hiding in Auburn had detonated a bomb that had been intended for a major metropolitan area when they believed authorities were getting too close. More imaginative sorts had proposed that the explosion was an industrial accident, an alien attack, or a government attempt to cover up an experiment gone terribly wrong. All these stories were supplemented by the fact that Auburn had a long history of making its residents ill, both physically and mentally. Whatever the cause, the fact remained that the blast area was now an officially designated fallout zone, and the name Auburn conjured feelings of dread and uncertainty in all Americans. Still, Collette mused, there would be plenty of insecure Americans ready to part with some cash to have a piece of Auburn from 'before the blast'.

She hoisted the chest out of the corner where she had put it two or perhaps three summers ago. She dragged it out to the garage, where her workspace was, and set it upright on a low workbench to look it over more thoroughly. The second drawer from the bottom hung out like a thick, blue tongue, mocking Collette. She tried to slide it back into place, but it only moved a few inches before it wedged in place. Collette turned the chest on its back and pulled the drawer out again until it stopped. On the underside was a small piece of wood that kept the drawer from being removed. Collette eyed the chest from two or three different angles before sighing and pulling a wide screwdriver from her toolbox. There was almost certainly a better way to get the drawer free, but the thick crust of blue paint made it difficult to see how the piece was assembled, and Collette was not about to spend two days

stripping the gunk off if the chest was still going to require major internal repairs. So she pried off the front molding between the bottom two drawers, cautious not to break the wooden strip. With the molding gone the drawer pulled out easily. Collette tipped the whole chest toward the hanging fluorescent light to see into the cavity left by the drawer. She was relieved to see that there was no damage to the drawer slot, just an obstruction. A book had fallen behind the drawer and been jammed underneath, until now.

The book was small, about half the size of a magazine, red, with two Karate Kid stickers on the cover. It had a faint musty smell to it that the chest of drawers didn't have. Collette opened the book carefully; the pages were frail and stuck together. A name was written on the inside of the front cover. "KEVIN MARCUS - AGE 13," it read in stout capitals. Colette ran her hand over the words considering their age. She concluded that the author would be in his early thirties by now, about the same age as Collette. She turned the page.

"March 2nd, 1985 - Dad says that Auburn will fit us better than the old house. I know he means that we're poor now so we belong in a shitty neighborhood. He made me promise I wouldn't complain for the first month, and he bought me this diary, so I had some place to let off steam."

Colette smiled to herself as she read the boy's words. She remembered when her family had moved out of Baltimore when she was ten. She had thought it was the end of her life. She wished she could reach across the years and assure this boy that it would be alright, but then she read on.

"Dad says I shouldn't blame mom for killing herself, but who am I supposed to blame. Him? Me? I hate it here." The entry ended. Colette thought for a moment, the garage quiet in her stillness. She finally sighed and made a seat for herself on the bench, next to the blue chest of drawers. She turned the page and read on.

"March 6th, 1985 - School sucks too. There's no honors program at all in Auburn and when I asked if there was a comic book club my homeroom teacher looked at me like I was joking. Ike hates it here too. He barks at every shadow and he whines all night. We can't put him out at night because we don't have a yard anymore. There's some little girl on our floor who cries almost every night. I'll bet she hates it here too."

"March 10th, 1985 - I met a kid named Tom out behind the building today. He lives here too. He goes to my school, but he's a year younger. We talked about comics and he says he'll loan me all his issues of New Mutants to read. That's really cool."

"March 11th, 1985 - Dad stayed home from work today. He was feeling sick. I know he needs to go to work really badly right now. He told me if he loses this job there might not be any other for a long time. I asked him if he was thinking about mom. He had that same look. But he just said no and stared at the wall."

Colette shifted on the bench. She felt like an interloper, intruding on a hurt child's pain, but she didn't want to stop. The next entry was undated.

"Ike won't shut up. I can't get to sleep. I think I might have what dad's got. I just feel sick, not sick, just...bad, all the time."

"March 15th, 1985 - Something really weird happened today. I was talking to Tom about Ike whining at night and I asked Tom if he knows the girl on my floor who I hear most nights. He just froze and said really quietly, "She whispers." Then he started crying and when I went to help him he tried to hit me. He's crazy." Colette frowned. The garage seemed too cold. She got up and plugged in the little space heater in the corner of her work area. Its coils bloomed into orange heat, beaming greater warmth than the little machine looked like it would produce. She looked at

the diary. It wasn't really hers. It certainly wasn't her business. She picked it up and sat down again.

"March 18th, 1985 – Dad didn't go to work again today. I didn't even know he was home until it got late and I called his work. They said he never showed up. He was in his bedroom, not asleep, just sitting on the floor."

"March 19th, 1985 – Ike got hurt last night. I found blood on the floor and Ike was behind the couch whimpering. One of his eyes is bloody. He won't let us see it close. I think it might be gone. Dad says we can't afford a vet. I know he's right. I'm scared. The blood I found was in my bedroom, but I shut the door at night."

"March 23rd, 1985 – I think I know what Tom meant when he said, "She whispers." The entries that followed no longer had dates.

"Ike's gone. Dad says he probably ran away. I know he's really dead. I just don't know if it was dad who killed him or me." Colette read the sentence again, and a third time. I still said what it said.

"I didn't go to school again today. I don't think it's me that's sick. I think it's Auburn. Why did my father put me here? Leave me dead? Buried under the senseless living."

The next entry was written in a shaky, panicked hand. The page was smeared here and there with rusty brown. "I woke up and they were GONE! How the fuck? Oh GOD it HURTS. I don't know what's happening. Dad cries all the time. There's only two of us in the house. HOW THE FUCK!!! Where are my fucking fingernails!?!?" Colette shuddered and edged her fingers back so they didn't touch the stains, but she didn't look away. She only turned the page.

"She's in the house. She's in everyone's house. The dead girl that sleeps in Auburn's basement. She's in our televisions and our mirrors, our dreams and our closets. She's in our heads and under our fingernails, like filthy, filthy dirt." Colette tried to turn the page, but it was stuck with rusty stain to the next. She did not hesitate, but tore it loose and dropped the book as rusty chips the size and shape of boys fingernails rained down on her lap and on the bench. Colette stared, but made no sound. The space heater hummed an accusative drone that made the room seem suddenly unbearable.

The diary had landed open on the garish blue chest of drawers. The visible entry was written in a steady hand, the words spaced neatly on the page. "My mouth tastes like pennies, and the living room smells. I don't think I will go to school anymore. They aren't going to let me. I know the dead girl killed my dad, but she used my teeth to do it."

If there were entries after, Colette would never know. She snatched the book shut and held it tight like a dangerous snake. She took a Mason jar of varnish off a shelf as she walked to the rear door of the garage. When she opened it the air outside seemed too cold for summer, made colder by the artificial heat of the garage. She walked to the back corner of her property, to the old oil drum she used to incinerate garbage. Without hesitation or deliberation she dropped the diary in and dumped the contents of the Mason jar onto it. She took two matches out of a Ziploc bag that lay on the ground and struck them against the side of the drum, dropping them in. The varnish burst into light and heat over and around the book, but it looked as though it would burn itself out. Then, as the flames subsided, the diary caught. It curled and blackened and shed flakes of ash that peeled off like dead girls skin and floated upward, black snow in the summer night.