
DRAW
THE
DARK
Caedmon's LAB
Ilsa J. Bick

There are things the people of Winter, Wisconsin, would rather forget. The year the Nazis came to town, for one. That fire, for another. But what they'd really like to forget is Christian Cage.

Seventeen-year-old Christian's parents disappeared when he was a little boy. Ever since, he's drawn obsessively: his mother's face . . . her eyes . . . and what he calls "the sideways place," where he says his parents are trapped. Christian figures if he can just see through his mother's eyes, maybe he can get there somehow and save them.

But Christian also draws other things. Ugly things. Evil things. Dark things. Things like other people's fears and nightmares. Their pasts. Their destiny.

There's one more thing the people of Winter would like to forget: murder.

But Winter won't be able to forget the truth, no matter how hard it tries. Not as long as Christian draws the dark. . . .


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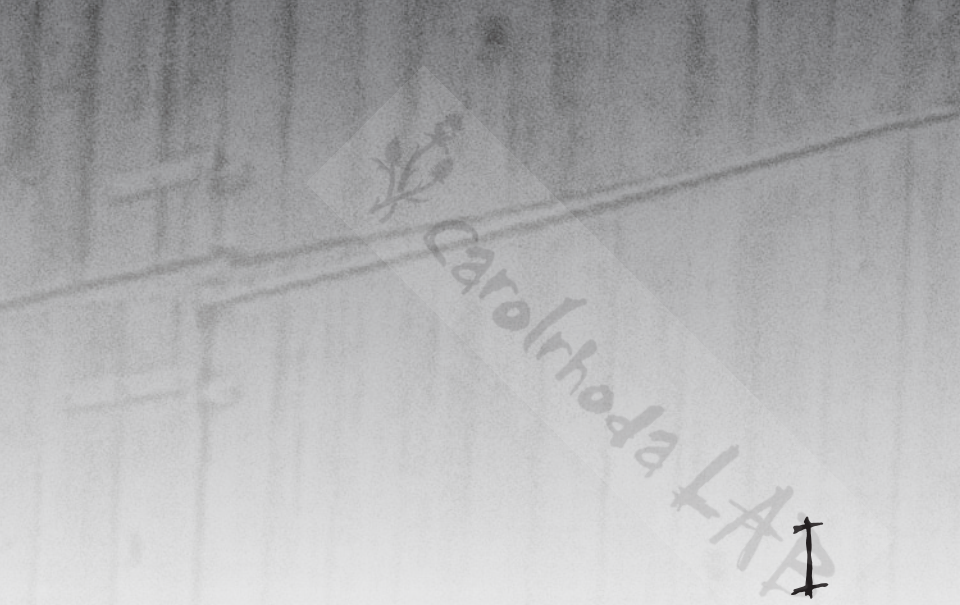
carolrhoda LAB
MINNEAPOLIS



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The morning I got arrested, I had a headache, the worst I'd ever had, like someone hammering nails into my eyes. Waking up was like clawing through cobwebs, and I swear I smelled hay and manure. I knew I'd been having a nightmare

blood . . . no Papa no no . . .

with lots of blood and horses screaming and men shouting *Papa no . . .*

and . . . had there been a knife? No, it was . . . it was . . . *Grant Wood*, I thought. That's the painter who popped into my head when I tried to remember what I'd seen in my dream. Even if you don't know who Grant Wood is, you probably know *American Gothic*, the painting he did of this small, white Gothic farmhouse, the one with the guy and the pitchfork. The guy's really Grant Wood's dentist and the woman is Wood's sister, but that's not important, not what my brain snagged on when I tried to remember the dream.

What I thought was: *Not a knife, but*
(blood on my hands)
a pitchfork . . .

My head killed. My legs were all sore and my knees ached like when I ride my bike a long time. My right arm hurt and my fingers were all cramped up, like I'd taken a million PSATs and filled in all those circles just right. And there was crud under my nails, like dried blood only bright like I'd cut myself, which I hadn't.

And one last thing: there was this weird, well, *muttering* in my head, like the growl of motorcycles or the rumble of far-off thunder. My head felt . . . crowded.

So yeah. Weird.

This was September, the second week of school, a Wednesday. It was hot and my sheets were sticky and my mouth was gummy. We don't have air-conditioning because we're only a couple of blocks off the lake and we get by with fans. So I lay there, the fan going like a jet engine, the sweat wicking away, until I started getting cold and the smell of fried eggs told me I'd better get moving. So I sat up—and that's when I noticed that my wall was a little different.

I've been drawing and painting on my walls since forever. Uncle Hank and Aunt Jean didn't care, said creativity shouldn't be stifled. Or maybe they were remembering my mom and figured they couldn't stop me. That's about right because I couldn't stop myself if my life depended on it. First, I did kid stuff: mostly rockets and stars and things like that. The stuff with Mom—her face and eyes . . . that didn't start until maybe I was five, six. There are things I paint over, either I can't look at them anymore or they aren't important. But I never paint

over my mother or her eyes. You know how when a peacock unfurls its tail, the feathers all have those cobalt blue eyes and so there are hundreds of eyes staring from that tail? Well, I did that on one of my walls, made this peacock fan of my mother's eyes. Only you see things in her eyes, the way you would if my mother's eyes were mirrors or stuffed with memories. So in her eyes, there's me when I was little and then Uncle Hank and Aunt Jean and other eyes with real-place buildings, things I recognize from around the town.

The sideways place, though, that didn't start up until after Aunt Jean died. I think that's because the afternoon *before* she died was the first time I let myself get really, really mad—so mad I reached through to the sideways place or it shot out of me, I'm not sure. All I *do* know is that by that night, Aunt Jean was dead, her car spinning off black ice and into the water, and I knew that was because of me.

Anyway . . . *that* Wednesday morning in September there were two things on the wall with the sideways place that hadn't been there before.

The first was a pair of eyes I didn't recognize. Not my mom's. Not mine. More like . . . a wolf's: slanted, the color of molten gold.

The second was a door. No knob, just a black rectangle painted a little to the right of that spiked mountain. Somehow I knew that the muttering in my head was from the things squatting just *behind* that door.

That really gave me the creeps. So I got out of bed pretty fast. Did the shower, dug out clothes from under a pile of books on Dali and Picasso, and hurried downstairs. Because I just didn't want to think about it. Not the muttering or the dream

(blood and horses screaming . . . no Papa no)

or things waiting on the other side of that door. Or the eyes, especially those weird golden eyes. I didn't know whose they were, and I sure as hell didn't want to find out.

Uncle Hank doled out a plate of eggs and sausage like usual for a Wednesday. (We have this system: Cereal on Mondays and Thursdays, oatmeal Tuesdays, eggs and sausage on Wednesdays, and pancakes on Friday. Trade cooking duties every other week. Saturday and Sunday we sleep late, only I sometimes get up early on Saturday and bike on downtown to Gina Pederson's Bakery for cinnamon rolls, especially if I know that Uncle Hank's working third shift on Friday.)

That morning Uncle Hank did a double take, gave me the squinty cop eye, like the Marlboro man without the lung cancer. "You look like you've been carjacked and drug about ten miles." His voice sounded like tires on gravel, and he leaned in a little closer and frowned. "There're smudges under your eyes. You worried about something? School?"

I mumbled I was fine and just tired, which should've satisfied him because that's about all I ever *do* say, and I'm comfortable with Uncle Hank. Only I don't think Uncle Hank would've let it go, if he hadn't gotten a call from the dispatcher. Then he was jamming on his Stetson while I shoveled his eggs and sausage onto bread and wrapped that up with waxed paper. I practically had to throw the sandwich at him, he was out of there so fast. Didn't say what the call was about, but you get used to stuff like that when your uncle's the sheriff.

Tugging on my shoes, I noticed that my new Chucks were wet, which was weird because my shoes were on the mat inside

the back door. So there was no way they should be wet, but they were and smelled like grass too. So I had to hunt for an old pair because I didn't want to stink up my Chucks.

I biked in. We live south of town, which is right on the lake, and the school's about four blocks west of Eisenmann Ironworks and Ceramics Plant. If the wind's blowing the wrong way, you smell the factory before you see it. I don't know how many acres the factory takes up, but it's pretty much half the size of the town, what with the foundry and ceramics buildings, the warehouses, water towers, and all. The plant even has its own railroad.

To hear most people, you'd think the Eisenmanns are gods or something, which I guess they kind of are, considering that just about everyone works for them. (Me, I'd known for a long time there was no way I'd ever stay in this town one second longer than I had to. It's not just that I've never been very popular or had much to say. People here have known each other all their lives; they probably know things about you that you've forgotten. To them, Milwaukee and Madison are like foreign countries.)

The Eisenmanns are the American Dream. In fifth grade, we had this special civics unit on the Eisenmanns, how they were dirt-poor and came over from Germany before World War I, made the trip all the way into iron country and built up the factory, put the town on the map . . . blah, blah, blah. The second Eisenmann was the one who actually created the town when you get right down to it. Being one of the first German immigrants to come out this way and a guy who knew iron, he decided he wanted other skilled Germans to be his workforce. So he built a couple of big dormitory-style buildings about a block away from

the plant and then paid for all these workers to make the trip from Germany and Austria to Wisconsin. Living in the dormitories, all they had to do was walk across the street to work. Eisenmann even paid for these guys to go to school when they weren't working their shifts. Learn about America, the language, all that. Even now, most everyone works for the Eisenmanns in one way or another. So, yeah. The Eisenmanns are gods.

School was school. Less than five hundred kids, all grades. Small. Everyone knows everything about everyone.

I was in second-period U.S. History after World War I, and the teacher was talking about our independent projects for the semester when the principal came to the door and asked to see the teacher a couple of seconds. My chair was on the right side of the room, same as the door, and in the back, so I had no idea if anyone was with the principal. Everyone else kind of started in talking, though no one talked to me. Which is okay because I'm used to it. There was my mother leaving the way she did that made other mothers tell their kids to stay away from me. Then there was that business with my first-grade teacher, Miss Stefancyzk, how she had this breakdown and put her head through a noose not an hour after she yelled at me, but I was little and I'm still not sure I did that. And then there was Aunt Jean, which I do know about—although nobody else does, especially not Uncle Hank. If he knew, he'd hate me for life. He might even kill me himself.

Anyway, it was okay that no one talked to me. Not like I have a lot to say. Probably safer that way.

Instead, I doodled an idea I had about a charcoal I was working on in art. I'd found this old picture of a lady trying on

a hat in front of this four-paneled mirror. The woman's back faced you—like a Magritte painting—and *her* face was reflected in each panel of the mirror at four different angles. I took a look at the Magritte and that old picture, and I thought, yeah, this is a way of seeing my mom from, like, all around. So I'd recognize her no matter what and then . . . and then . . .

And then I was *drawing*, my head growing hollow as a gourd, the knuckles of my clenched brain relaxing and fingers unfurling and filling me like skinning on a glove. I love this feeling. I'm not very good with words, but I know there's what you do with a pencil or brush and then there's *drawing*, like hauling up water from a well, sometimes so deep you wonder there's anything there at all. Michelangelo used to say that the statues he created were trapped in the stone; the stone already *was* David or the Pietà, and all he had to do was, well, free them.

I guess you could say that's what I do when I draw. I . . . draw out something just as I channel something else. Like if I draw a tree: I'll pull out what the tree is from what I see, but I'm also drawing *from* the tree, its energy. I know that sounds weird, but . . . I don't know any other words to say it. I think that's why artists say they're tapped out, nothing more in the well. For them, there's no more water, nothing left to *draw* from or out.

But for me, when I draw, when I'm at my best, there's this tiny click, the flick of an inner light switch, and then I'm pulling, *drawing* from this hidden place in my head and the drawing swells and grows larger and *is* me. When I draw, there is nothing between me and the pencil and the paper because we're all one unit, with a single purpose.

So as I drew out my idea for my mother, the world thinned, then shushed to a whisper, then simply went away, and I was at once diamond bright and formless as a nebula, floaty and yet so concentrated with purpose, and it was the best feeling. It was like I wasn't there, and still, I was most *intensely* there, in the smell of graphite that filled my nose and the sturdy feel of the pencil between my fingers and how my vision sharpened so the weave of paper was hills and valleys and threads all connecting together, and it was a real high, the best, and I loved that, I would kill to stay in that place—

"Christian."

My name dropped like a hammer. I blinked away from my drawing. The teacher and the principal stood together at the front. Every single pair of eyes from every other person in the class was on me—like they'd been calling my name for a while and I hadn't heard, which was very likely. I felt myself, all those great expansive feelings, shrivel, collapse, and go black as a lump of coal.

The principal said, "Christian, would you come with me, please? Bring your books."

"Sure." My stomach was a little fluttery. When this happened at school, it was either somebody's relative was sick or something bad at home. The only thing I could think of was something had happened to Uncle Hank.

Heads swiveled as I walked to the front of the class. A couple of people started whispering. About the only one to look as worried as I felt was Sarah Schoenberg. We used to hang around a lot when we were kids. Her parents and my aunt and uncle were good friends. Then Aunt Jean died and Sarah started getting popular, and since that was never one of my

problems, we didn't see much of each other except every couple of Sundays for dinner and to say hi and how are you, that kind of stuff. Sarah's eyes are warm, buttery caramel. Da Vinci eyes. She's not beautiful, but you can tell she's a nice person when she smiles. Only this time, she wasn't smiling.

At the front, the teacher wouldn't look me in the eye and I thought: *uh-oh.* Uncle Hank was the only family I had, and if he was hurt or . . .

But when I stepped into the hall, Uncle Hank was there. He didn't smile. "Christian, we need to talk a couple minutes."

I looked from Uncle Hank to the principal and back. "Okay."

"Not here," said the principal. He led the way to the office. All the secretaries stopped talking when we pushed inside. They watched us go down the hall, looking at me like I was an animal in a zoo. We filed into the principal's office, me sandwiched between the principal and Uncle Hank. The principal said, "Have a seat, Christian."

I sat. He didn't. Neither did Uncle Hank. The principal leaned his butt against his desk, and Uncle Hank stood at my right elbow. I felt like a suspect getting sweated by the police. Maybe I was.

"What?" I asked.

Uncle Hank said, "Christian, that call I got this morning was from Mr. Eisenmann." He paused like that was supposed to mean something.

"Okay," I said.

"Someone took red spray paint to that barn on his property, the old farm about ten miles outside town. Not graffiti, either. It got reported by some of the workers coming in for first shift."

"Yeah?"

"You know anything about it?"

"*Me?*" I blinked. "No."

"You sure about that?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"What if I was to tell you that when I saw what was painted on that barn, I didn't think of anyone else *but* you?"

I was going to say, *Well then, I don't know what to tell you*, but I didn't because I thought about my Chucks being wet and how my arm hurt, about that nightmare, and all that blood . . .

Uncle Hank gave me that cop eye. "What?"

I didn't say anything. After a few more seconds, the principal said, "So you won't mind if we open your locker."

I shook my head. Actually, I was a little relieved, to tell the truth. I mean, how stupid would you be if you hid cans of spray paint in your locker or at the bottom of your backpack or something?

~

Three guesses how stupid.

~

There were two drippy cans in my backpack that I somehow hadn't noticed even though I'd dug around that sack that very morning. Of course, the paint was still tacky.

"I didn't put those there." I turned to Uncle Hank. "I didn't do that."

The principal said, "Who else would have access to your locker? Who would do that to you?"

Everyone. Anyone. "How should I know? I mean, you can test these for fingerprints, right?" I looked at Uncle Hank again. "Right?"

Uncle Hank put a hand on my shoulder. His hand felt like it was weighed down with lead shot. "Let me see your hands, Christian." He studied the rust crescents under my nails, and then he pulled out a little penknife and scraped out a bit of the crud. I think he and I realized what that stuff was on the blade at just about the same moment. I was stunned, but he only looked sad.

"All right then," he said to the principal. "We'll be going now."

~

Uncle Hank drove. He made me sit in back. We didn't talk.

We headed southwest, the road cutting through hills and farmland. The corn had petered out two weeks back and the stalks had been cut back, leaving the fields covered with brown stubble. Seven miles out, Uncle Hank hung a left onto a dirt track, and we clattered due south another couple of miles, spewing dust clouds. The farmland here hadn't been cultivated in a long time.

I was certain I'd never been here, but a weird swell of déjà vu crashed against my mind. Then, after hours of nothing, that weird muttering started up in my head again . . .

The barn perched alone on a rise coming up on the right. The barn might've been white once, but this eastern face was weathered gray, the soot black trim of its shutters mottled and looking moth-eaten. The barn was maybe a hundred feet long and fifty feet wide. A weedy ramp curled away to the northwest, probably to hay doors. All the windows were long gone, just blank sockets.

Far off to my right, I saw what remained of a house, reduced now to a foundation and rubble where there was once

a chimney. As we ground up the rise, a dozen crows rose in a cloud from the bare spindles of a weeping willow bowed over the ratty ruin of a well.

I swung my head back to the barn—and then I got a good look at that northwest face. That's when my stomach kind of bottomed out.

There, just below a broken-out window, were three words in big splashy red letters:

I SEE YOU.

These were bracketed by two swastikas, one on either side. Sprayed above the words was a pair of bloodred eyes, and those eyes . . .

Dread whispered up and down my spine.

Those eyes were not my mother's. They weren't mine.

They were the eyes of a wolf.

They were the eyes of someone new.

Ilsa J. Bick is a child psychiatrist, as well as a film scholar, surgeon wannabe, former Air Force major and an award-winning author of short stories, e-books, and novels. She has also written for several long-running sci-fi series, and her original stories have been featured in numerous anthologies, magazines, and online venues.

Frank Strukel, © 2009

Ilsa currently lives with her family and several furry creatures in rural Wisconsin, near a Hebrew cemetery. One thing she loves about the neighbors: They're very quiet and only come around for sugar once in a blue moon.

Follow her blog at www.ilsajbick.com.

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