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She was newly born; her face gave it away. The shadows of death hadn't marked her yet. The smudgepot glow of the stagelight flickered bloodily on lily pure cheeks as she gaped, aghast at the spectacle. I moved to intercept before some other eater caught the scent of her naiveté. She was angelfood. Pure vanilla-spun sugar.

"Just another Saturday night," I said, slipping an arm wreathed in the ink of demons and skulls around her shoulders. She didn't shrug me away, as I'd expected. I chalked her acceptance down to shock, not invitation.

"I don't understand," she said. Her voice was a whisper of sadness. The lovers before us mortified her. I didn't know how she had ended up here. Maybe she was reborn right there, in that spot, and opened her eyes to see the depraved sex show as the first vision in her new home; it happens. Regardless, she remained utterly disconnected.

Angelfood indeed. Innocent and clueless.

"It's just sex." I squeezed her bird-thin shoulders. I hesitated in pulling her closer, worried I would snap her in half unintentionally. Death was like that. A land of unintended consequences.

"But they're...they're..."

"Bloody?"

She nodded, unable to verbalize the horror that coupled in

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front of us as the entertainment for an audience of shadowed thousands all around.

On the stage, a man and a woman did, indeed, rut without regard to the spectators. But unlike an underground sex show hidden just off the Times Square police beat, this couple were not, in any way, pretty to see. The woman was thick in the waist and long of burnished bronze hair. It was impossible to tell her age, not that age meant anything here anyway. But if she had wrinkles or grey hair or sagging breasts...it was all moot now. The scroll of her life had been skinned off, leaving only her true self. A skein of veins and slippery muscle leavening shape atop ligaments and bone.

The man, gangly with silver hair and an odd, spastic jerk in his lovemaking rhythm was in the same, blood-slick state. His teeth were bared from the loss of his lips, making him appear apish, inhuman. He had mounted her missionary style on the bare stage, and the floor around them was slick with their sweat and semen and mostly, blood. The scent of their bodies bled from the stage like the perfume of the slaughterhouse—warm, rich, and redolent of iron. Both screamed with every thrust of penetration, as their stripped, shining muscles shivered and shimmered together. He took her close, wrapping bloody, meaty arms around her. Their raw muscles slapped together wetly, unencumbered by hair or skin, an abomination. They flowed together into a single large, writhing travesty of exposed, twisted sinew and shrieking pleasure. My new friend turned away and buried her face in my chest.

“Why do they keep doing it?” she cried. “Who skinned them?”

I shrugged. “It just happens. The exaggeration of balance. With ultimate pleasure comes the ultimate pain of scourge.”

“But they’re screaming! Where is the pleasure in that?”

“Look at their fingers grasping at each other,” I said, pushing her gaze back to the stage. “It’s as if they want to climb inside each other; with their skin gone, they almost can. They

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can also feel every touch a thousand times more intensely. Look at their tongues. Watch the urgency of their fucking, the desperate way they pull closer even as the equal and opposite force of pain drives their throats to scream. They feel it *all*. They are in ecstasy as much as anguish.”

She shook her head, completely disgusted. I saw her eyes light as she took in the room behind me, around us. “Where are we?”

“The Amphitheater. Love given and broken every hour. When they finish, some of the crowd will dine on their remains until they are born again. Come on, I’ll show you around.”

She followed me out of the crowd, but when we stepped onto the street, she looked up into my eyes, and no doubt saw the hunger there. The blood may already have been beading on my forehead and face; my body thirsted for the heat of her, the sweat of her, so close, so close.

She pushed against my chest with her hand and then squealed something, before turning to clatter down the alley in a panicked, staggering dash. I started to follow, but then relaxed. There’d be other food inside tonight, and she was, maybe, too green to choose yet. As the click of her heels faded, I thought that the first thing she needed to do was to get herself some sensible shoes. This place was bad enough without having blisters on your feet.

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God knows how she survived her first night without getting flayed. But I saw her again, a day or two later, still unblemished. She was picking through a produce cart in the market square, looking for an apple. I saw her lift one, hold it up to the light and press it to her face to inhale the scent. Her eyes sparkled in the dull, wormy fog of morning for a moment as she breathed in the ripe tang of the fruit, but then her brow wrinkled, and two things happened almost at the same time.

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The first was that the apple collapsed into mush in her hand, its thin exterior giving way to the slight pressure of her clutch. The meal spattered her face, and her hand was suddenly a mess of brownish paste, and squirming, twisting, yellow maggots. They spilled from her hands like confetti.

The second was that she screamed, a horrible, high-pitched, trapped-in-a-burning-vehicle kind of wail.

She shook her hand wildly in the air, maggots and apple meat flying in all directions. Her scream turned to a tight hiss, and her breath came in short, fast gasps. I stepped up and wrapped her befouled hand in the fold of my shirt, taking the corruption to myself.

“You again,” she said finally, when she’d calmed somewhat. “Thank you.”

I grinned and bowed. “No problem mi’lady. Happy to help a hysterical angel in need.”

“Angel my ass,” she snapped. Her pale brows creased together and moisture gathered at the corner of her dark-outlined eyes. “Clearly I didn’t make the cut.” She pointed around to the market square, where screams erupted nearly every minute and children and their dogs lay gutted and convulsing on the sides of the road. Patrons walked hunched, in thrall to beast-like men of ebon skin and crimson eyes. Some dragged cages on wheels where other men and women were whipped and kicked and raped in full view, while still more marched locked in harnesses of steel chain and leather spikes. A gang of thrashers walked along the curb, razors moving rhythmically. With each slice, the gang pocketed long slabs of meat peeled from the flanks of the kids and animals and men who lined the gutter, trying to heal from whatever their last abuse had been. Instead they screamed and bled anew.

As I watched, two men dodged in and out and around the crowds, murder in their eyes and long rusted field scythes in their hands. When at last the man in front turned to confront his tail, the second man took off the first’s head with a clean swipe

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of the scythe. The spray of blood from the riven soul's neck spotted the fruit and vegetables all around and the cries of the merchants' anger rose in a howl that superceded the screams of anguish all around the market.

"Why am I in hell?" she whispered, and before I could answer, she was gone again, running hard through the carts of half-rotten potatoes and kicking up clouds of carrion flies and sewer bees in her wake. I thought I might slice myself a meal from the weakened souls in the gutter, but first I reached down and found a healthy apple, and took a bite. Its juice was pure and sweet, its pulp hard and crunchy in my mouth. I enjoyed several bites, and then spit the last one out, and dropped the core of the fruit on the ground to rot.

Balance.

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It took me a long time, I remember, to become acclimated after being born again, so many years before. My skin was flensed the first time I fell in love after death, to a black-haired girl named Rhee. My heart tore to shreds when she bore us a baby with cloven hooves and a rattlesnake tongue. I couldn't believe that such a beast was mine, yet, how could she have endured the pain and disintegration of sex with anyone but me? I would have known if she'd had another; skin doesn't grow back in a day.

One night, as Rhee kissed our twisted child goodnight, its newly sprung rattlesnake teeth poisoned her, offering death even here beyond the grave, and she took the bait and faded before my eyes. I took the beast up from its steel crib with tongs from the kitchen and flushed it down the toilet. I still wake to the echo of its hideous, accusing screams in my dreams.

I never fell in love again. Too dangerous.

There are ways to live and ways to die. I keep to myself and don't bleed much that way. The physique I died with doesn't

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hurt my chances of being left alone; I stood six feet four when the reaper, dressed in the grill of a green Ford took me down on earth. Here, I find my steroid-enhanced forearms, embellished in a living artist's depiction of the depravities of hell, serve me as well as they did in life. My tattoo artist could have really found some inspiration here, I often think, but he did ok. No one fucks with a guy who looks like a killer.

Never mind that the worst thing I ever killed was a dog that had two broken legs. Don't ask me how long I had to hold it underwater before it stopped kicking with its good ones. I'll go through eternity with the scars from where its desperate toenails cut into my gut. The damn thing would never have run again, and still it struggled desperately to stay alive. It wouldn't let go. Stupid beast.

I live now in a tiny room just above the Chinese grocery. That doesn't tell you much; there's a Chinese grocery on every corner here. But that's where I live, just the same. I keep some things there to write, to eat, to drink. But never much.

Corruption here comes fast and unexpectedly. I only had to clean up once after a scourge of roaches descended on my canisters of flour and cereal to know better. One night, I went to bed with a fridge full of milk and meat and fruit, the next, I was spraying ammonia on every surface of my kitchen, drowning thousands of tiny black roaches, smothering the maggots that looped and leered at me from the fouled mess that had been a raw slab of soul meat on the top shelf of the fridge. When I opened the milk, my stomach released itself instantly, hot acid dripping over the hair of my hands and into the opening of the gag-inducing jug to join with its spoiled contents in a stew of sour. When I poured the foul mess down the sink, it gathered at the drain in clumps so large I had to pick the clotted remains up and throw them into a garbage bag with the meat and the dustpan piles filled with skittering, dying roaches.

Corruption here comes without reason or warning. I keep my house empty. Like my heart.

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I saw her next at the Wall of Life.

I don't normally go there; I'd advise anyone against it. Nothing good can come of spying on the living. All that it brings is disappointment and bleeding. And once you start bleeding, you're prime prey for the thrashers, and eaters like myself. Food is food. Here, you bleed whenever an emotion stretches itself out of balance.

For some reason, on that day, I took a longer walk than usual, and found myself at the edge of Death. There, against the invisible glass that reached to the sky and into the subterranean depths, I saw her again. My heart leapt at the sight of her short-cropped hair, almost white in the ever-twilight that is our day and night. Her waist was narrow as a girl's, and her hands clutched helplessly against the transparent, but impassable wall between life and death. Her fingernails pressed against the invisible, white with tension. I wondered what she saw. The window, vast as it seems, is individual; one sees the places and people one's soul begs to see. Its view then is different to every eye.

"How could he?" she whispered to herself, as I walked closer. She was crying.

I put my palms over her hands, and pried her from the wall. "Come with me," I insisted. It was like moving a statue to drag her from the precipice of eternity.

"With my best friend," she said after a while. Her voice was raspy, as if she'd been screaming at a sports stadium for hours. "I trusted him."

"You're not there anymore," I reminded her. "Life goes on."

She flipped around in my grasp and beat a fist against the iron of my chest.

"Well what did I do to deserve being here?" she yelled. "Why was I sent to hell, what did I do wrong? I took care of my

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husband for more than 30 years. I never complained when he stayed out late and didn't tell me where he was. I washed his socks and cooked his dinner and bore his children. I lived for him and our family and never asked for anything back."

"Did you love him?"

She shrugged. "I guess so. What's love anyway, after the lust is gone? I did what I was supposed to do, that's all."

"What about your children?" I asked, leading her away from the edge and towards the square. A brief smile lit her face. "We had two. Jonas and April." Her face clouded again. "But they grew up and moved away. They had families, but never brought them to visit. I loved them more than life itself, and they walked away from me and never looked back."

"There's something to learn in that," I said.

She put two bony arms on her hips. Her nostrils flared. "What—to spurn those that love you? That's not what I taught them."

"No," I said, and patted her shoulder. She bristled and pulled away. "Sometimes you have to learn to let go."

"I did let go," she said. "I felt the pain in my chest for months, but I didn't take the chemo. And now I'm here."

She was crying.

"You're not in hell," I said.

She laughed. "Well it certainly isn't heaven! There are people murdering in the streets, the food turns to poison in your hands and people watch bloody skinned corpses fuck for entertainment. I didn't read about that in Revelations."

"No doubt. Nevertheless...look at that."

I pointed to the Gossamer Cathedral, one of the key landmarks of Irish Square. Its base was built of perfectly glossed white granite, and golden towers rose from its four corners, with a final fifth glimmering with blinding beauty atop the center of the structure. All of the stonework was wildly etched with amazing filigrees and designs. As we walked towards the church, I pointed out the intricate detail of Christ's passion, told

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in Technicolor beauty via three-story high stained glass windows spaced along the main wall of the building.

She wiped the tears from her face presently, and stared. "It *is* beautiful," she admitted. "How could they raise a church in hell?"

"There is no hell," I corrected. "There is only here. If you sit watching long enough at the Wall of Life I just pulled you away from, you'll realize pretty quickly that every soul that dies on earth awakes here. You can see them coming."

"So this is limbo," she said. Excitement beamed in her eyes as the idea bloomed. "This may not be my final stop. There's still hope."

I didn't want to say it. But I couldn't help myself. "There is no hope," I said. "There is no other place."

"But what about God, the angels..."

"Lies," I said. "Feel-good fantasies. You'll hear rumors even here. People like to talk about a light that opens up sometimes, and souls slip into its spotlight like moths to a porch light. But it's just talk. This is where the strong souls come, after the body dies. This is the abode of the stubborn, the willful, the greedy and the needy. This is where people who will not go quietly, end up. This isn't hell," I said. "This is forever."

"If there is no God," she said, "than why is there a church?"

"I told you, this is the place for the thick-headed and hard-willed. Some still believe in a higher power. But come around here, I have more to show you."

We walked around the flower gardens of beautiful tropical flowers and bougainvillea and as we stode past, the leaves of mimosa plants closed behind us, as if they were rolling up the welcome carpet. A thousand shades and scents lined the walk up to the glowing golden wood doors of the most beautiful church in creation. A fairytale castle sprung to form in the afterlife in honor of something that never existed. Dreams inside of lies inside of illusions.

As we approached the far side, I felt her body stiffen.

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The walls of the church on its far side had given way, or been blown away. Instead of granite and stained glass, there was a ragged hole through most of the long wall. It was ringed in soot, as if a great fire had destroyed half the church, yet somehow left the other half completely untouched. What she gasped at was not the destruction of the architectural miracle, but rather, the line of gallows and nooses that hung from every peak where a stained glass window had once been mounted. There were 13 in all, and from 13 thick rope nooses hung 13 skinned and bloody corpses, faces twisted in a communal rictus of anguish and insane pain. Every now and then, they would twitch and swat with swollen, ropy arms at the flies that buzzed with a vacuum cleaner drone through the air, biting and sucking at the flesh, fresher than fresh. The hanged men were still alive; or rather, animatedly dead. The flies ate their skin off as soon as it could regrow itself, an endless cycle of rebirth and death.

“Oh god,” she cried.

“For every good, there’s a bad, for every love, a hate,” I recounted. “We live on the razor’s edge of balance. This is heaven *and* hell, together in a yin-yang ouroboros. There is no pleasure without equal and opposite pain here. No beauty without horrible ugliness. No angel without devil.”

I wrapped my arm around her again and pulled her from the scene. A scream, horrible and ululating, rang out behind.

“I don’t believe you,” she said, but the emptiness in her voice said otherwise.

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I was falling in love. Still, I had never asked her name. It was better that way, a means of keeping distance. But now, distance was receding. I found her again and again by the Wall of Life, crying about Jonas, her son who had molested his own child, and April, her daughter who was snorting enough white powder that it was only a matter of weeks—or even days—before she joined

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us. Still, she insisted on following their lives and seeing all of the bitter mistakes and hidden sins that a mother should never be allowed to witness in her children. She cried blood every morning, and I sweated it as I walked her home.

I was well-established here, and she only fumbling her way. I rented her a small room on the corner of Efluvium and Serenity, and I held a key. I used it now to let her in, and then closed the insanity out behind us. The place was clean; I had quickly instructed her on the proper ways of avoiding a corruption episode when I saw a counter full of bananas and oranges on my first visit.

Now the counters were clean, and the single couch offered us a sterile respite I dared not indulge in. I knew all about the yin-yang of pleasure/pain that love caused in death. And I liked my death quiet, and with little blood— little of my own anyway. At least, that's the thought that crossed my mind as I wiped a pink smear on the cuff of my shirt. I was falling in love. We were doomed.

“Come, sit with me,” she begged.

I followed, and my blood began to boil beneath my skin as I smelled the lilac rich scent of her. She handed me a goblet of purple nectar, and told me to drink.

“The grocery downstairs had this,” she said. “Transcendence Nectar. I have never tasted anything like it!”

I inhaled its fragrance, and knew then that the lilac smell was not her, but the drink. It made the brain reel just to take one sniff. I gingerly tested it with my tongue, and nearly choked at the heaven of its taste. “Oh my God,” I gasped, and she giggled like a girl, hitching herself up on her knees to lean in and whisper in my ear.

“I thought there was no God,” she laughed.

I tossed back a shot of the thick purple elixir, and the room disappeared in a spiral of fireworks. A thousand hands rubbed and traced each nerve of my skin. I think I passed out for a moment. It was amazing; just what heaven should be about.

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“No,” I said finally, minutes later. “There is no God, but Transcendence is definitely from heaven.”

“You said sometimes souls here do die...or at least they fade away,” she said. “If they are not going to a heaven, where do they go?”

I stroked her cheek, and when my fingers pulled away, her skin was slick with blood. Hers, or mine, I wasn’t sure. But it had begun. When we touched, our hearts bled. The pain was soon to follow. And the flensing. I shivered.

“Perhaps they are recycled and reborn again to life,” I said. “That’s what the Buddhists would have you believe.”

“What do you believe?”

“I believe there is a time and a place for everything. And when yours is done, you should let it be done and stop holding on to past and memory. I think that those who disappear have finally stopped holding on to nothing.”

“Letting go,” she sighed.

I nodded.

“The shopkeeper told me to buy the Transcendence in small doses, because it is as vile when it corrupts as it is exquisite when it is fresh. Should I run downstairs and get some more, for both of us? He also said it gives you an awesome buzz if you have more than a shot or two.”

I laughed and said sure, I’d have more, if she was buying. Then I opened my wallet and gave her a slip of currency so that she could actually afford to buy some. Even in death, we continue to live by the false principle of valueless paper equaling valuable goods.

She slipped out the door and down the stairs, and I leaned back on the couch and felt my heart pound. What was I doing? Just days before I had scouted her out as a worthy meal, someone whose fear and flesh I could feed off of, for a while at least, until she either faded or flew. Now I was almost playing house with her, and surely about to indulge in the ultimate act of sacrifice—love kissing lust in a bloody twine of razor wire and delirium.

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From outside the small room, a scream broke high above the din of traffic, and then another. Fear gripped my heart. I ran to the window, and saw the body lying just outside, in the middle of the street.

It was her.

I dashed out the door and into the night to save her. Once on the street, I saw her tormentor was still there, taunting her with unknown words, and thrashing her back and face with the lash of a long leather whip. Its end was threaded in wicked barbed hooks, and my love's face was already all but torn away after what I supposed was only a handful of blows. The white of one of her eyes looked doubly large, as he'd ripped the eyelid off with his hooks.

But it was the sickle in his left hand that had truly done her in. He'd swiped a clean, deadly sweep right across the line of her knees, and the street was heavy with the pools and splatter of her blood. Her legs lay separate from the rest of her; they looked like gore-tipped prosthetics amid the crumpled newspapers and trash of the gutter.

"Serves you right ma," the man laughed. "You should have known better! This is all your fault!"

He brought the cruel whip down on her again, this time it caught in the flesh of her side, and he yanked it back to open a three-inch rip in her white skin.

"You fucking bastard," I screamed, and drew back a fist to deck him.

"Exactly," he said with his last breath. When my fist made contact, it hit him so hard that he lifted from the ground and stumbled across the pavement to land in a motionless heap a few feet away. I hit him so hard that two of his teeth were left embedded in the flesh of my fingers. I flicked the teeth from the wound and knelt at her side.

She tried to speak as I leaned down to kiss the bloody mess of her mouth.

"Shhh," I said. "Save your strength."

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“It was Jonas,” she said. Her voice gurgled with a gargle of blood. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I looked to where he had fallen, but there was nobody there. Had I punched him clear to oblivion?

“I’m sorry,” she hissed, between pants of pain.

“Don’t be. Consider this a payment to balance a nice afternoon.”

“What...will...happen to me?” she said. Already her jaw and cheeks were swelling thick, and I could barely understand her. “Will I...die? But I’m already...”

“Shh,” I said again. “You’ll heal. We can get us some more Transcendence in a few days and you’ll be right as rain again. Only...”

She screamed then, as the pain overcame her, and I looked hard at her, covered in her deathblood, the street slick with her stubbornness. At her legs, so lifeless and strange, as they lay disconnected from her body. A trail of tears bled through the ragged red gore of her flayed cheeks.

“...Only, maybe it’s time for you,” I concluded.

She grunted, a questioning sound.

“You’re fighting hard to stay here, in death. You have never learned when to let it all go,” I said. “You’ve told me how you stayed in a loveless marriage for 30 years. Of how you stayed in a thankless job that you hated, bullied by a sadistic boss for equally as long. You’ve cried over and over again of how you tried to bring your children closer, only to have them move farther away. Maybe it’s time for you to stop trying, to stop being so dogged.”

“But, I want to be with you,” she gurgled, dark blood spilling from the side of her lips. “I...I love you.”

“And you’ll pay for that for the rest of eternity if you stay here,” I said. Now I was crying, and red tears bled and ran down my face to fall and mix with the ruin of her soul. I kissed her, and the sensation was electric, amazing. When I pulled back, I could feel the skin of my face degrading, the pain spread like a sizzle of acid across my mouth and nose.

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“Look at me,” I said, and she struggled to open her right eyelid fully. Her left was gone, but the skin around it had puffed and swelled. “Do you want to watch me decay every time you kiss me? Do you want to scream every time we make love? I don’t want that for you.”

She was crying harder now, and I knew it wasn’t from the pain. “Jonas’ father raped him, and he blames me,” she whimpered.

“Do you really want to wait around for April, to see what venom she’s held for you all these years?”

The blood seemed to have slowed its torrent from the stumps of her legs, and I knew what that meant. Soon, her ethereal body would begin to pull itself back together. She would heal, and in a couple days, be good as new, so that someone else could scalp her or rape her or beat her.

That’s what happened here. That’s what happens when you put the most stubborn, self-centered, maniacal souls together for eternity. Oh, there was beauty, sure. But the horror lurked so close. Too close.

“The secret of life, and death, is letting go,” I whispered, and with a finger, pressed her right eyelid closed. “Whatever happened to Jonas, it wasn’t your fault. Stop hanging on to the past. Open your arms, open your heart to whatever will come. Accept oblivion.”

She struggled a little, pressing to open her eye against my finger, but I held it closed, and with my other hand stilled her mouth.

“Don’t be afraid,” I whispered. She jerked as if in a seizure beneath me, but I held her firmly and in a moment, her breathing slowed. In another, it stopped.

Her face just...relaxed. Her whole body settled against the ground; you could feel the tenseness, the energy, the stubbornness that rooted her here, dissipate. When I took my hands from her, the skin of her face was already healed. The soft, tight lines of her cheekbones, and that thin, proud patrician nose were,

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again, perfect. She was beautiful in death after death. Stunning, actually.

And fading.

One moment, and the beauty of her quiet face wrenched at my heart, which screamed for me to call to her, to rouse her, to bring her back.

And the next, she was just...gone. All of her. Blood, legs, body—it was as if she had never been. Was the sky above us just a little brighter as she passed?

I cried so hard that soon my blood pooled in the street as much as hers had. I don't know if I did the right thing to send her to...wherever she went. A new life? Annihilation?

And what kind of coward was I, to push her away, when I had always been afraid to let go myself? Why else was I still here, living in an empty room, eating the pain of others, too afraid to live. All I did in death was hide.

Something clicked then, with that cold self-realization. After a century of denial, I decided to take my own advice and follow her. Still crying and shaking with the horrible, ever-tragic pain of love, I lay down in the street amid my bloody tears and closed my eyes.

A hypocrite no more, I took a deep breath and released it slowly, forever. Finally, letting go.