

“Down to Nothing”, a short story by Diego Valenzuela  
All Rights Reserved © 2020

# *Down to Nothing*

By Diego Valenzuela

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, contact the author.

# *Down to Nothing*

By Diego Valenzuela

*This story is part of “One Hour Left”  
a collection of short horror stories by the same author.*

“Don’t touch anything!” she yelled at the men who opened the door and found her.

1.

It was dusk when the three young people walked into the old abandoned chemical plant. As she had imagined from seeing the outside, the place was a hellish landscape of rust and rot that appeared to be bigger on the inside—and it was big on the outside; a reddish hulk peeking over dry trees in the middle of nowhere. The kind of thing that gave one the impression of being dangerous to the touch. Venomous, like a rusted nail.

Sarah McKinney trailed behind the two men with whom she had very little in common, hearing them speak endless nonsense to one another and almost hoping she couldn’t hear anything at all.

This feeling became stronger the deeper they went, as the noise, which had drawn them to the rusted labyrinth of chain link passages and dripping pipes, became almost deafening. It seemed to come from everywhere at once, and nowhere at all, constant yet rhythmic. It sounded like something was crawling inside the pipes, clawing at their insides to be let out. It was like venom was running through this iron beast’s veins, killing it from the inside very slowly.

A feeling she knew all too well, and from which she couldn’t escape, even if she tried.

“You think they’re cooking the stuff here?” asked Keelan, never leaving the beam of his flashlight on any one spot. It was dizzying. “That noise has got to mean something, right? I mean, it wouldn’t be so loud if this place was really empty. It’s gotta mean something. Right? Something’s movin’ in here, these pipes.”

“Something, yeah,” replied Michael, Sarah’s step-brother and the leader of the operation. He moved about the place as though he knew it. An *appearance* of confidence and leadership was something very unique to him. Michael didn’t need to know where to go for him to inspire a feeling of trust. It was not a good trait, as it had often led them nowhere.

“But not *our* something,” replied Keelan, smiling and scratching at his dry-skinned forearm, right on the crow’s wings tattoo that had looked a lot better when there was muscle on his bones and the skin didn’t look like it belonged to a man twice his age.

“Or maybe it is, I don’t know. Come on, man.”

Addiction was a horrible thing, made all the more horrible by how it did not give space for self-ignorance. All three of them knew they were addicted, and knew any denial of that reality was exactly that: denial. After all, who else but an addict would venture into a place like this in the middle of the night over the faint promise of a new rush? For all they knew they were stepping right into a den where some other junkies would rob them or worse.

But if the promised rush was real, then . . .

The name the magicians of chemistry had given the new stuff was *Nothing*. Sarah still didn’t know if the name was the result of some genuinely well-thought naming process, or if it was just a better way to get word around without making noise.

*What you got?*

*I got Nothing.*

It made sense to her. It didn’t make her laugh, but it made sense.

But then again, maybe it was just a euphemism for *vagina*. She had heard Shakespeare used it that way, though she’d never bothered confirming it. Because, honestly, who gives a shit?

Certainly not any one of them, or any end user of the stuff, really. They’d probably come up with their own names eventually.

All they were looking for was that high. Sarah had heard Nothing had a kick as powerful as heroin but without all the shit friends it brings to the party: the ones that never leave.

When it comes to drugs, one eventually learns that excluding pot, anything that seems too good to be true very often is. And yet, there they were: looking for Nothing.

And it was precisely that which made her so angry at herself: no one had forced her to be there; venturing into whatever delight or horror awaited them had been her own choice.

“There’s light over there,” said Keelan, flashlight shaking in his bony hands. “It got dark quicker than I expected.”

“You’re a mile deep into this shithole,” said Sarah, every new step inside the chemical plant a regrettable choice. “It could be noon outside and it wouldn’t make a difference.”

“Goddamn, Sarah,” said Keelan. “Seriously why can’t you just—nah, you know what, fuck that. Ain’t going to waste time educating you.”

“Easy,” said Michael, very often a mediator for his friend and half-sister’s tortured relationship. “There isn’t a reason why we should spend more than an hour here. I want to be back in your place doing Nothing and listening to Rammstein before Colbert.”

It was a good thing that Sarah had become more peaceful with motherhood. Or rather, the closer she got to it. She was not yet pregnant—as far as she knew, though the monthly guest was a few days late to its appointment—but making the decision to become a mother immediately changed her way of thinking, and with it, her impulses.

Confrontation, insults, violence, it all seemed smaller than her now that she planned to be more than herself, now that she would become member of a new family, one that would actually be bound by love.

“I hope,” she said, looking at her phone. “There is no signal in here.”

“Yeah, none at all,” agreed Michael.

The sound of the pipes, the one constant in their exploration, suddenly stopped, and the whirring of machinery with it. The factory was suddenly dead silent.

“Aw, yeah, something’s working in here,” said Michael. “This can’t be all automated, right? We’re good!”

A few minutes later, the sounds returned, but Michael had no wit to comment on it.

Keelan stopped suddenly and Sarah could see his dark silhouette against a reddish light that came from beyond a chain link fence. He grabbed at it and rattled; it seemed very loose, and the sound went on forever, though it didn’t drown that other drone that both followed and led them.

As they came closer to where Keelan had stopped, the sound became even louder—and more obviously coming from the thick pipes above their heads and below their feet.

“I thought this place had not been in use for years,” she said, unable to shake off the bad feeling these pipes—and the contents that moved through them—gave her. It was like seeing a mechanical beast’s digestive system. It was hungry.

And it was also weak, they would soon find out.

“Decades,” said Michael. “I guess that’s why they chose this place to operate.”

“Why is there stuff moving through the pipes?” asked Keelan, flashlight on the rusted pipework. “What is all that shit? There shouldn’t be anything going on here.”

“Dude, who cares? Just give me light right here. The guy said something about a chain link fence,” said Michael, finding an edge at the bottom of the noisy fence which he could pull up. When Keelan finally shed some light on the base of the fence, Michael found a spot which had been recently clipped to create an opening. A strip of cloth, something torn from someone’s ragged and bloody t-shirt, was tied into one of the links: a clear, deliberate sign. “We’re on the right track.”

It was not the first sign of abandoned clothing she had seen; at least twice before she had seen clothes left on the filthy stained floors of the plant. Baseball caps, t-shirts, some seemed reasonably new if not for the dirt and filth.

The anxiety that had begun building up in her receded a little in seeing progress to their journey; Michael knew where they were going, and his plan of being home soon seemed more plausible.

Michael held the opening for her to crawl through, then did the same for Keelan, who held it up for Michael himself. Sarah was already taking the first step down an iron stairwell—led by the source of rust-colored light—when she heard Michael cry out. She stopped and turned.

Without the flashlights or the light coming from the stairs behind her, she could see next to nothing, and the oppressive anxiety returned. Even Michael’s words as he illuminated a small cut in his hand, letting him know that it wasn’t anything serious, failed to give her any comfort.

They were trapped inside a monster made of rusty iron. It was hungry. It wanted to eat them, dissolve them and digest them. It was a thought that kept returning to her; she could not visualize this hulk in any other way.

Before she knew it, before she asked for him, Michael was already upon her, wiping the blood from his hand with his shirt.

“Sarah,” he kept saying from somewhere above her. The darkness was too much. For a moment it seemed as though Michael had grown several inches taller, but then she realized that she had fallen to the floor. She felt the cold concrete and all the trash and debris, peeled plaster and paint on her hands. “Sarah!”

“We have to get out of here,” she said. “My baby—”

“Sarah, I know it’s scary but we’re safe. It’s us three, remember? And we’re armed,” he said.

“We are?” Keelan said, licking the two fingers he had cut holding the fence.

“Shit yeah,” said Michael, lifting his t-shirt, though neither Sarah nor Keelan could see clearly until the flashlight’s beam focused on him. He had a 9mm stuck to his waist, and just looking at it made her feel slightly safer. “Look, I know these guys are supposed to be legit, they have the rep, but I wasn’t going to come out here without a get out of jail free card. I might be a dumbass but I’m not dumb.”

Keelan laughed, and so did Sarah.

She finally got up, helping herself with the wall, hand on her belly.

“Anyway, we’re going the right way,” said Michael, taking the lead down the stairs, his feet making loud noises despite the fact that he was far from being a heavy man. He offered Sarah his hand, and she took it, following him down the stairs to a lower level—an underground level—which finally had some actual lighting.

It all came from a series of red-tinted lightbulbs that hung from exposed wires, held by carelessly put gray masking tape.

“The red speaks the way,” said Michael, and Sarah didn’t know if he was reciting some kind of direction given to him or if he was just spouting nonsense to give himself the aura of a trustworthy leader.

The level below no longer looked like the entrails of a mechanical beast, though it still maintained the oppressive maze-like quality that had almost made her faint just minutes earlier. Now it looked like a different kind of industrial complex, like a factory—all walls peeled plaster and brick, and before them there was only one long hallway lit by red.

Deep, overwhelming red, as though this entire underworld existed sieved through blood.

“Hello?” cried Michael. “We can hear you!”

She hadn’t heard anything, and wondered if Michael was planning something she hadn’t picked up on. She hadn’t been paying attention ahead, as she was curiously enthralled by the writings on the wall. There were layers and layers of graffiti, and the topmost seemed almost recent enough to still be wet. There was a certain degree of relief in seeing that many others had been there before and had made it out alive.

As they walked farther into the long hallway, they crossed two things that made her uneasy: first, a noticeable gap in the ceiling very obviously not caused by architecture but a messy mishap, through which they could see the pipes like guts spilling from a wound; second, a sliver of red light stretching like a blade across the floor, which told them one of the many heavy doors was ajar.

“Red,” said Keelan, and Michael nodded.

“That’s the sign. We’re on our way.”

The noise of the machines and the pipes stopped again.

Then returned, further adding to the terrifying impression of being inside a living thing that was too large to even notice their presence in its bowels, but



smart enough to not let them go once they had wandered into its belly so willingly.

She looked at her phone; whatever signal she could have in the upper floors was gone. She began to understand the value of a place like this to cook.

The group reached the door and Michael pulled it, spilling more bright red light on the hallway. The inside was a very strange room, the former purpose of which she couldn't quite figure out. It almost looked like a cage. There was no ceiling to speak of; only chain-link and pipes, and she could see the high ceilings of the factory through the cracks in the pipework. Below, rusted iron plates so old there were cracks big enough to fit her entire leg, though there was nothing except a deep and oppressive darkness beneath.

She imagined it had to be some sort of laboratory, though it did not seem big enough. There were many things about the room that made her feel uneasy and reluctant to step inside—some obvious and some far more abstract. It wasn't until she heard the loud sound of a dog barking that the alternative seemed even scarier.

“*Shit,*” Keelan said as they all turned to see the shape of a large pointy-eared dog, probably a Doberman, coming at them. It didn't take much more than another bark and the first clear look at the snarling, disease-ridden beast for the three of them to run into the room.

“Fuck, *fuck!*” screamed Michael, slamming the door shut.

“Where did it come from, did someone—,” she tried to say, but the sound of the dog's claws scratching at the door cut her off. “*Fuck!*”

“No one said anything about fuckin' dogs, man,” Keelan said. “I fuckin' hate dogs, man. You know what they did to my arm!”

“Where did it come from?” Sarah said as the dog stopped scratching at the other side of the door and continued barking. “It came from the stairs! It was behind us this whole time!”

“Did someone release it on us?” Michael said, and the fear that twisted his eyes was contagious.

“Fuck we’re trapped here. We’re not going anywhere now,” Keelan said, scratching at the scars on his shoulders, where—according to stories he told, but she had always been hesitant in believing—a giant Rottweiler had once bitten him.

“Shut up,” said Michael, and as though it was talking to the dog, the animal stopped barking.

All three of them stood still, trying to remain quiet but unable to keep their breathing steady. Sarah could feel her heart in her throat, as though it was as desperate for an escape as she was. She looked up and saw the old pipework above them.

“Do you think—”

The dog started barking again. Until whoever had released him on them came and realized they were not invaders but customers, they were trapped.

“Fuck,” Michael mouthed.

Keelan sat down in the corner of the room, his back against a crack on the steel plate walls. He put his hand on his mouth and bit down, eyes shut and watering, a scream building up inside his throat. His hands were shaking, jaw quivering.

“Don’t. Don’t scream,” Michael said, kneeling down next to him. “We’re okay. The dog came from behind us so someone set him off on us. That someone will come and they’ll see we’re just here to buy their stuff. They *want* customers, right? They want us here. We got money.”

“Did you see the dog, man?” Keelan said. “It looked weird, its skin.”

“Yeah,” said Michael and laughed. “Strays get skin diseases like that sometimes, right? I say let’s not let him bite us and we’ll be okay. Remember how to breathe, man. Remember that exercise we tried once. Like you’re trying to keep a feather in the air, remember?”

Keelan closed his eyes again and regained control of his breathing as Michael helped him through the panic attack. Without realizing it, Sarah started

doing the same. She had no idea what the feather thing meant, but just imitating Keelan worked for her.

As Sarah’s heart returned to its rightful place in her chest, she sat down on the floor and suddenly her brother looked like Superman to her. His presence, his words, made her feel strangely safe; he might as well be wearing those tights and cape.

“Thank you,” said Keelan.

“We’ll be out of this room soon, one way or another.”

2.

Two hours passed and the factory had grown cold, but not much else had changed. The whirring of machinery, the sound of liquid being pumped through the pipes still came and went at entirely arbitrary intervals. Keelan still went into sudden bursts of panic which Michael was quick to help him control, and the dog still appeared to be making rounds outside, waiting for its next meal to have the balls to step into his reach.

During that time, Sarah had noticed Michael looking up several times, probably seeing the same thing she had: there was a way through the complex network of rusty pipes that made a ceiling above them.

After another hour passed, he finally said: “I think that’s going to be our way out. Fuckin’ dog isn’t going anywhere.”

“You have a gun! Just shoot the fucker,” said Keelan.

“I’m not shooting a fucking dog, man, not if there’s another way out! I mean, some junkie with a knife maybe, but—,” Michael stopped himself, listening to his own logic, or lack thereof.

“You said someone would come,” Keelan said.

“Someone has to, yeah, but maybe we don’t have to wait for them to do it,” replied Michael. “Sarah, see there?”

Sarah got up and stood closer to her brother, eyes up. There was a reasonably large gap in the canopy of pipes, promising the freedom beyond it if someone dared crawl through. It almost seemed broad enough for—

“Think you could squeeze yourself through that?” asked Michael.

“Me?” Sarah said. “I thought you’d tell Keelan. He’d fit better than me. He’s bones.”

Both looked down at Keelan, who looked back at them with sunken, watery eyes but with no further objection or the insults she had expected. Sarah understood the man wasn’t strong enough to climb or trustworthy enough to follow through with whatever Michael had been planning.

Maybe she would have to be the one to do it.

“What’s your plan?” she asked. “What if there are more dogs up there? Or worse.”

“When you’re up there, I’ll hand you my gun. You can get out of here and call for help. You should get a signal outside. Call Blade, or Vic. Whomever, just bring someone else to take care of the dog and get us out of here. We could be out of here in an hour. We might miss Colbert, but . . .”

Sarah looked at Michael, who suddenly didn’t look like Superman anymore.

“It’ll be all right, Sarah.”

Her desperation to see the outside became too strong thirty minutes later, and she decided to make the climb. Michael helped her up and she managed to squeeze herself past the first layer of pipes, which were far more rigidly set than they appeared.

Their nightmare truly began when she tried to pull herself up from another thick tube above. Though the sound of the liquid being pumped was louder up there, she couldn't feel any sort of vibration on the first layer of pipes. However, as she touched the second, she could immediately feel the movement of the beast's blood through the steel.

Michael and Keelan held her by her feet as she grabbed at the living pipe. And as she pulled, the thing came apart.

She first felt the cold liquid as she screamed her way back down to the room. Sarah fell on top of Michael and Keelan as the pipes above them cracked, spilling the liquid they were carrying over the trio like the shower they desperately needed. The sound of iron falling continued, as though she had started a chain reaction and the whole factory was coming undone.

She got up with a start, pressing herself against the wall and seeing the liquid pour down from the ceiling onto Michael and Keelan, both of whom stepped back and looked at the shower until, suddenly, it stopped.

The factory returned to silence as all three of them looked at each other, realizing all three were covered head-to-toe in the clear liquid.

“What the fuck,” she yelled, looking at her wet hands and clothes. “*What is this?*”

The liquid had fallen on her eyes and hair, some on her mouth. It was colorless. It had no taste and no smell and the viscosity of water. She looked at her phone. It was dripping, dead.

“Is it just water?” Michael said, smelling his hand. Michael took his shirt off, which still dripped with the transparent liquid.

“It looks like it. Some fell in my mouth,” she said, shaking, and spat it out. Seeing blood in her spit, she realized she had cut her lip.

“Yeah, it’s just water,” Michael said, laughing. He started twisting his shirt like a rag over his head, letting the water fall into his mouth. “Good, I’m thirsty as hell.”

“Me too,” said Keelan and did the same, though far less elegantly: Keelan only sucked the water from his sweatshirt.

“Wait,” said Michael, and her heart stopped.

“What?”

“The dog’s gone, isn’t he?” Michael said and took a deep breath that seemed more labored than it should. “We just made a big fucking racket and I haven’t heard a sound. I bet it scared it away. If anyone’s here, they’re coming, right?”

“Are you okay?” Sarah asked, noticing Michael start blinking more quickly, eyes disoriented.

“Yeah, just the scare. But hey, I think they’re coming. And if not, the dog’s gone. Let me—”

Michael touched the doorknob and tried pushing it open, making an effort with his shoulder. “Something is blocking it outside. Shit.”

“Maybe the pipes broke and fell outside,” Sarah said.

Michael touched the doorknob again and jerked his hand back, as though it had suddenly been searing hot.

“Michael?”

“What the fuck—”

“Michael?”

“Mike?”

When Michael turned around, he was holding his hand up. Sarah immediately noticed that the skin of his hand was abnormally red.

And two of his fingers were missing.

“What the f—,” Michael started saying before his words were lost in a wet gargle, as though he was about to puke. Sarah’s eyes went from Michael’s gnarled hand to his face. “Sar—”

She screamed.

Michael’s expression began to change. First in what looked deliberate—his eyes drooping down in fear—but then in a far more horrifying way: his eyes hanging downward unnaturally. His eyebrows and his nose were not where they should be—they were way too far down on his face.

His twisted inhuman mouth exploded with red vomit that drew out his teeth, making them clatter on the floor. Hair began sliding down skin that stretched downward and tore away from a skull that appeared to be caving inward.

Sarah screamed again as Michael walked towards her, his body twisting—still recognizably human in parts, but not so in others. His mouth opened far too much as his toothless jaw fell downward as he let out the last scream his melting lungs allowed for: a thin, impossibly high pitched and painful wail.

Michael’s eyeballs became slants and disappeared in a torrent as the rest of his face melted. He tried screaming again in obviously excruciating agony, his movements jerky and unpredictable, trying to reach for something to save him. Michael stopped walking towards her when he started diminishing further. His entire head fell downward, stretching the remains of his neck as though it had become wet clay. Bones and muscle snapped and lessened. His skin dissolved layer by layer until she could see his brother’s ribcage, his insides spilling out in long strands, no longer keeping their individual and separate shapes. The thin strips of flesh that held his head finally snapped and his head fell, exploding upon impact with the floor, liquefied.

Sarah could no longer breathe as suddenly her brother was reduced to a lump of flesh and hair and bone that spilled on the floor and bubbled. The lump further disappeared as it lost all its solidity and dripped through a grating into the darkness below the rusted iron plates, leaving of Michael only blood-soaked clothes and an unused gun.

3.

There was relief when she opened her eyes because Sarah realized she was waking from a nightmare.

It wasn't until the muffled sound of Keelan's screams took shape that she realized that the nightmare had been entirely real. As her eyes focused and she saw that Michael was still gone, reduced to nothing before their eyes, she vomited what little she still had in her stomach.

It was almost impossible to tell how much time had gone by since Michael disappeared. Sarah seemed to phase in and out of wakefulness, constantly sent to blessed unconsciousness by forces she couldn't name—*anxiety, hunger*—and then jerked back awake by nightmares. She didn't know how many times she had seen Michael go from Superman to a lump on the floor that leaked into the darkness below, either through nightmares or vivid memories.

Every time she'd wake to Keelan, still screaming, looking at himself in desperate horror because, like her, he understood one thing:

What had happened to Michael would also happen to them.

“What did it?” Keelan eventually asked when he saw Sarah's eyes open for more than a few minutes. “What happened to him?”

“It was the liquid!” she said. “It fell on me too!”

“It fell on all of us, but why are *we* still here?”



Their conversation stopped when the whirring noise of the mechanical beast’s bowels returned. It had been silent for the longest time, and Sarah had assumed the accident had broken its guts beyond functionality. But she had been wrong. As the beast reawakened, the acidic liquid pumped again and—

Keelan screamed as the liquid reached them and once more spilled into the room. Both of them pressed themselves as far back as they could to avoid a single drop of it, as though just the smallest additional dose would trigger the dissolving.

It was harder for Keelan, who had chosen a spot close to the broken pipes, but between his minute size and his desperate cling, he cleared it. Sarah was farther away, but she also wanted to avoid Michael’s clothes, as though they were as poisonous as the dissolving liquid.

She pressed herself as much as she could, eyes closed and crying, until the water stopped pouring again. When it did, Keelan ran closer to her, afraid of being caught behind the waterfall of acid whenever it returned. He screamed in pain, and when she looked at his back, she noticed he had cut himself on the sharp edges of the cracks on the wall. The gash was deep and red, but the least of their concerns.

“We need to get out of here,” he said and walked towards the door. “The dog is gone but even if it wasn’t, I’d rather get eaten by the fucking—”

“Wait!”

Keelan stopped.

“Don’t touch the door. Michael was fine until he touched it. That’s when it happened. There’s something in it!”

She knew how absurd what she saying was, but Keelan still took a step back from the door. Like she, he wouldn’t risk it.

“That makes no sense,” he said, looking at the hand that almost touched the doorknob, then down at the Michael-stained clothes left on the floor over the grating. “Why didn’t it happen to us?”

“I don’t know,” she cried. “I don’t know but I don’t want it to happen.”

Keelan shook his head, his jaw quivering, and her gut knotted, recognizing it as the beginning of what had happened to Michael. Keelan almost seemed to feel it as well, as his eyes almost seemed to pop out in fear.

But nothing happened. He was still there.

For now.

“What was it? What caused it?”

“I don’t know!” she yelled, and sat back down on the floor. “I don’t know but I don’t want it to happen to me!”

4.

“He cut himself earlier,” she said, arms wrapped around her knees, remembering she herself had cut her lip, and the liquid had surely made its way into the cut.

Keelan tried reaching for the cut of his back. “Yeah, but me too.”

“And?”

“He got a hit earlier, back in the apartment. Rocks. I saw him. Maybe—”

“I did too,” said Sarah. “If fit was that, I’d be dead.”

“Then what is it, why him and not us? *Fuck.*”

“The door.”

“I don’t think so,” Keelan said. “But I don’t want to try it.”

“He drank it,” she said.

“Me too,” he said, coughing. “There must have been *something* that made it happen! What did he do?”

“Or what *didn’t* he do?”

He took his shirt off. He drank it. He had a gun. He touched the door. He got high on rocks. He cut himself on the fence. He was the oldest of the three. He was the heaviest.

Maybe it wouldn't happen to them.

She knew she would go insane with horrible anticipation.

The beast came awake. Its blood started pouring in a waterfall in the middle of the room again, so she and Keelan tried standing as far away as possible without touching the heavy door, until it was gone. They noticed one important difference: the liquid was no longer clear, but had a reddish tint to it.

She looked down. Behind the grating through which Michael had disappeared, there was running water; another connection in the beast's complex entrails. Were the remains of Michael now circulating in the iron beast's bowels? She wanted to throw up again.

Keelan's shaking hands reached for his pocket, from where he produced a small tin box.

“What is—”

He opened it. Inside, there were two joints and a lighter, both kept dry by the tin. His hands were shaking more than usual, and there was no way of knowing if it was anxiety, withdrawals, or something worse: the beginning of the dissolving.

Keelan took his shirt off, revealing the paper-thin skin that clung to his bones. It was amazing the man could stand at all with so little muscle. He showed her his back. “Is it bad?”

She cringed. The gash on his back was sure to become infected if it hadn't already. It smelled, and she could see colors she knew skin should never have around the open wound. She was almost sure she could see his bones.

It looked like Michael's hand had looked before he dissolved.

“Yes. It’s bad.”

“Shit. The shirt is itching,” he said and grabbed one of the joints.

“Don’t,” she said. “Maybe—”

He had already put the joint in his mouth, pressing it with his thin, dry lips. He hesitated for a moment before he finally lit it with a quivering, bony hand. “Michael didn’t do pot.”

He was close enough to her for the first cloud of smoke to create a thick wall between the two. She smelled the joint, though she tried not to. Before the smoke dissipated, Keelan puffed again and coughed twice.

The second cough sounded wet.

The sound of something clattering on the grating below them made her hold her breath. She looked down and first saw the lighter; then, she saw bloody teeth.

When the smoke finally dissipated, Sarah looked at Keelan’s bony face, frozen, looking at her. He dropped the joint, and it fell, still smoking, next to the grating.

The horrifying process started as it had started with Michael: with a curl of the eyes and the expulsion of red from the mouth.

Coughing, trying not to breathe the smoke, Sarah pushed herself away from him, away from the door, as it finally dawned on Keelan what was coming. Just as she did, the beast came awake once more, but her eyes were so focused on Keelan that she couldn’t move in time to clear the waterfall of increasingly reddish liquid that poured from above, drenching her in a second shower.

She screamed again and clung to the wall.

When the water stopped falling, she saw Keelan was on the floor above the grating in a fetal position. The man’s eyes were wide open, looking at her with abject horror and defeat, before they thawed into milky nothingness. The

noise he made was almost a baby’s cry and was silenced when his neck began disappearing into the grating.

Sarah closed her eyes and screamed, trying not to inhale the smoke that still came from the blood-soaked joint. But she still opened them to see Keelan slowly go through the floor like ice left on the curb grate. Unlike Michael, he was quiet the whole time, not fighting his inexorable fate.

A minute later, she could only see fragments of Keelan’s bones, an ear and his left hand, which eventually also melted into the waterways beneath them, and the next time the water poured from the beast’s veins, it was even redder.

5.

After another eternity of falling into unconsciousness and returning to hell, there was nothing left in her stomach to vomit.

What had done it? She tried to think, but her brain was no longer working as it should. What was it that Keelan and Michael had in common that had triggered it?

Had it been the pot? Even though she had avoided breathing the smoke, she knew she had; she could even feel its effects. Was it the cut that had begun festering? Had she been safe until she was doused for a second time as Keelan began melting? Was it their addictions? Their dicks?

For how much longer could she live knowing any action could cause her to melt? Suddenly, Sarah wanted to die, but not like Michael and Keelan had.

She saw the gun and crawled towards it, no longer caring about getting Michael or Keelan on her. She took it and put the barrel in her mouth and bit down.

*My baby.*

She removed it from her mouth.

*No. I can't.*

Sarah dropped the gun and approached the door. Stretching her shirt to cover her hand, she grabbed at the doorknob, fearful of any sign that what would eventually take her had already come for her. She pushed. At first, the door budged, but then it went no farther. She used Keelan's flashlight to peek through the small opening to see that steel was blocking the door.

She didn't have a prayer of getting it open.

So she sat down and waited for it to happen.

6.

Hours later, she heard the voices of people above her. She took a deep breath and screamed over the noise of the machinery, which had begun whirring loudly and constantly at some point during her hellish sleep. The water came down steady and red, but despite her weakened lungs and the constant drone, she was heard.

The noise of iron pieces being moved outside reached her an hour later.

“Don't touch anything!” she cried as people in hazmat suits walked into the cage.

It would be reported that Sarah McKinney was the sole survivor of the horrifying events that took place in the chemical plant, but even as she was taken out of the room, away from the iron beast and to a hospital, she knew that every step could be her last as a fully formed human being.

She knew that at any moment from then on, she could inadvertently do something to cause her body to dissolve down to nothing.

She was no longer alive.

**THE END**