**Judgement Day**

By Emmalisa Horlacher

You wake up in the room. It’s a bit too space-age for your liking; round, domed, and silver with blue light pulsing like veins throughout. You feel small in the room, as one does when they stand at the base of a mountain; you now feel like you're standing at the base of something bigger than yourself. Something that matters more than you do. And it is in front of you.

Three big doors. All closed. All waiting to be opened. Then you hear a voice.

*Ignorance is bliss but knowledge is power. You could stay here forever if you wanted to, but you’d never become anything more than what you are now, and what you are now, is not enough. So choose. Choose to stay, or choose to change. One step at a time.*

Blue light converges at the first door and it opens. You take your first steps as you walk through the door.

Blinding light hits your eyes and you wait for your pupils to adjust to the midday sun and crisp summer air. You’re twelve years old, living in the countryside with your mother. It’s a small town, you’ve only got a few friends. Your name is Johnson.

You were running away from home, taking that old road out of town towards the city. You will not stay in that small town. Those townsfolk all want to trap you there, just like how they were trapped. You know you’re too big for a small town like that, and you’re not the only one.

Beside you walks KJ, you’ve known her since you were both little, she’s like your sister. She had welts on her arms from her father. You were taking her away from all that. You were taking her somewhere safe.

But you lost the road a few hours back and now you’re both just wandering. You know it. She knows it. But she will not admit it. She wants you to take her away from that small town, but you are starting to realize that you can’t. How can you help her when you can’t even follow the right path without getting lost?

You’re both tired and hungry. You’ve been walking all through the night and now it's midday. People would have noticed that you’d left by now. They would send search parties. Your mom would be missing you. It was only a matter of time until someone found you two, and they would drag you back. Back to that small town and trap you there.

You’re both so tired you sit down on the dried out grass under an oak tree. You apologize to KJ. You got her into this hopeless mess and you know you’re not going to be able to help her. She says it’s ok. She knows too.

You look around for water, one last attempt at effort to be useful. You find a stream and a road. The same road that the search party would travel to find you. Now you wish you hadn’t found the stream.

You walk back with water bottles filled and you see KJ under the oak tree talking with someone. You run to her. She’s already been found. But you will not let them drag her back alone.

“It’s okay,” She says and you calm down. She’s talking to Greg, the town drunk. He’s old, got a gray beard, wears an over jacket and sleeps under the bridge like a troll. When you were little he used to give you pennies to buy candy with, but after you turned eight he didn’t give them out anymore. He’d preach that you had reached the age of accountability or something and give the pennies to some kid younger.

“Here to drag us back?” You ask.

Greg throws you a wallet, and says, “Take care of each other.” -the wallet has over $500 dollars in it- “Don’t go that way,” he points towards the stream and the road, “They’ll find you if you go that way. Try to breach the top of the hill, there’s another town just beyond, you’ll be able to see it from the top, and they’ve got a bus stop that will take you to the city. Get out of here and don’t come back. Good luck kids.”

“Wait,” KJ says. Greg stops but he doesn’t look like he wants to talk so KJ just says, “Thank you.”

Greg nods and leaves.

What happened next was something you’d blame yourself for for the rest of your life. You tried to breach the hill but they found you. They had dogs sniffing you out and they dragged you back. They caught your scent when you had passed by the stream for water. KJ doesn’t blame you. But you know it was your fault.

They want to take you back to your mother but you don’t want to separate from KJ. You’d rather have her come home with you and your mother, then back to that house with the man who would hurt her. She takes your hand, and says, “I’ll be okay.” She has a smile on her face that tells you that she wants you to believe those words. She doesn’t want you to worry. But you both know that her words are lies. But you go home. And she goes to her home. You’ve separated. You get home, your mother doesn’t say much to you. You go to bed.

The next day, you are walking to KJ’s house when a neighbor of hers stops you. She’s dead. Everything blurs. The next couple of days are fuzzy with only small moments of clarity. Each new fact brings more confusion. She was murdered. They are blaming Greg, the town drunk. They claim she stole his wallet. They claim he murdered her. You try to tell them it’s a lie. You try to tell them the truth. They don’t listen. You’re just a kid. Greg is condemned to death. You try to find more evidence. You try to prove yourself, your words, the truth. But everything you do is not enough. You are not enough. Greg is going to die.

On the day Greg’s sentence is to be followed through, your mother drives you to the nearby town, to the bus stop. She’s seen your struggle, your confusion, your anger, she’s seen everything. She doesn’t want that for you. She never did.

“I’m sorry. I know I’m too late. I didn’t know what I could do. But if you want to, I’ll let you go.”

She gives you some money. Enough for a bus ride to the city and a week’s worth of food.

“If you want, I’ll let you go,” She says again.

She’s asking if you want to get out of town. She’s created a way for you to leave. But if you leave, Greg will die. But if you stay, what can you do? You want to be someone that can do something, but you know that the town will never let you be that person. If you accept that there’s nothing you can do for Greg, then you can have a shot at becoming someone worth something. But if you leave, you prove what the town has created you to be; a nobody that can do nothing. You stay in that car for a long time. Your mom waits for an answer.

Finally, your mom says, “I know, it’s not enough. I just want you to be happy, and even now, it’s not enough. ”

You stop her from saying more.

“No mom, it’s enough.”

You take the money and get out of the car. The bus arrives. You fall asleep on that bus and you will never return to that old town.

You wake up in the round room with the three doors. You hear a voice.

*Are you nothing, or are you something?*

You don’t really know. The second door opens. Not sure what to do, you walk through.

It’s a quiet evening and you blink as the lights overlooking the city come into focus. You don’t live in the best neighborhood but it's a nice one, and it fills your needs. You’re twenty-two years old, or was it twenty-four, and a police officer. You call yourself a ‘somebody’.

You get a call on duty and you’re heading out. A young girl is missing, about five years old. You need to help find her. Her name is Kate.

You pass by the old parlor where you and your wife used to have breakfast. Your wife. Were you married at this point, do you remember? Things blurred in these years. Except Kate. You remember Kate, don’t you? You spent hours and hours looking for her. You searched old warehouses, side streets, and asked neighbors about the family. Nobody knew anything. Until you found one lead. A necklace with a gold chain that looks like it was soldered together. It’s a long shot, but you’re out of leads; You search for local jewler’s stores.

Then you met the store owner who knew Kate. He seemed to be the only one who did. She’d come into the store every week and look at the necklace. Finally, the owner just gave it to her. The store keeper tells you that Kate's mother came in recently, looking for the necklace and taking care of personal business. Odd. You haven't talked to her in a while so you decide you need to stop by.

She greets you coldly at the door but she lets you inside. Her house is familiar to you, it has the same feel as the house you first bought with your wife. You ask her about the recent trip to the jeweler's. She asks you where her daughter is. You tell her you don't know. She wants you to leave. You ask her again, why she went to the jeweler's. She gives you a receipt from the jeweler's for a returned ring. In the margin there is written an address. She starts crying.

She starts pleading, “Get her back for me. Give her back to me. Please, I want her back. Give her back. Get her back."

You leave. You follow the address on the receipt. It's in your neighborhood. You arrive at a storage locker behind your apartment. You use a key and open the locker and hear a small squeek coming from inside. Like a mouse coming out from its hole, a little girl creeps forward from the back of the locker.

"Kate?" You ask.

The little girl comes into the light. It is Kate. You take her away from the awful place. You return Kate to her mother. You watch as the girl and her mother drive away. You remember watching your wife drive away with your daughter. You wonder if you’ll ever see that little girl again.

Someone else wraps up the case. They tell you that Kate's mother was threatened by the kidnapper not to reveal who they were. The jeweler, who had connections to the kidnapper, had suspicions as to where Kate was being held and passed the location on to her mother. The storage locker was owned by some woman who was distantly related to Kate. A cousin to her mother or something. She was the one who was arrested and convicted for kidnapping Kate.

It was all wrapped up like a present. Only one loose end remained. How did you open the storage locker? Where did you get the key for the storage locker? You can’t remember. You don’t remember. You won’t remember. You are not the one who will be blamed. You can’t remember.

You hear a voice.

*One step at a time. Each choice brings more consequences. You learn, you grow, you become. But what are you becoming?*

You blink and you are back in the round room.

*What have you become? Is that a question you can answer?*

The third door opens. You hesitate.

*What is it? Don’t you want to know the ending of this story?*

You don’t.

*This was something you already chose.*

The third door comes rushing towards you…

Everything is dark. You’re lying in your bed which is nothing more than a hole in the wall with a mattress and a blanket. The room you’ve been living in for the last decade or so is not even 15 square feet long. The island you're detained on is hardly more than a couple thousand feet wide.

You're somewhere between the age of fifty-five and seventy. You’ve in a heavily guarded island prison and you can’t remember why you’re here. Your name is Johnson. Johnson. You may forget everything else in life, but do not forget that your name is Johnson.

You don’t remember what the world is like anymore or what has changed. You wouldn’t fit in there anyway. You never did fit in.

You run your fingers across a small 5 by 7 picture of a little girl. You’re granddaughter. It’s too dark in your cell to see the details of the photo but you remember what it looks like. A little baby with outstretched arms, wrapped in a white blanket with pink polka dots. She’s got extra chub around the cheeks and just whisks of blonde hair on the top of her soft head. Her eyes are that of an angel, a deep brown, just like your mother’s. She’s your little angel. She’s your little Katherine. And you were going to find her.

During your days here you’ve been collecting odds and ends and hiding them inside your mattress. So far you had a spoon, a few paper clips, a wax candle and two matches. You thought you had a knife once, but you can’t remember. They probably found it. You counted yourself lucky for the small treasures you were able to keep hidden.

You moved your mattress and started digging a tunnel out. The dirt was loose and you broke a hole to reveal a tunnel already dug. That’s right. You already dug the tunnel, it led to the pipes below the prison. You had to crawl to get down to those pipes and your old bones and withering hands just wanted to quit. It was too cold. But you needed to see Katherine. You needed to see those angel blue eyes and that blonde hair. You wonder how much she’s grown up. Would you even recognize her?

Your thoughts subside as you make your way to the pipes. You use one of your matches to light your candle. You see there’s a pipe that is barely big enough for a man to crawl through. The pipe is rusty and thin. It looks like someone has already been trying to cut an opening. That’s right. You did that. You look around and see the place where you hide the knife. You get the knife out and find a box full of matches as well. You start to use the candle to heat up the knife and begin cutting into the flaky old pipe. You might finish getting the pipe open tonight. Except the pipe pops open. You’ve already done this before. How far did you get? You crawl through the pipe and begin your next trudge. You smell open air. This pipe leads outside, you slightly recall that you’ve already been outside. What did you do while you were there?

You reach the opening of the pipe and break off the grate. You’re on the beach of the island. You know you can’t swim to the nearest land mass, you don’t have the strength. If only you had a boat or something you could use to help you float, like driftwood… you left the driftwood under the overhang by the cliff so the prison guards wouldn’t see it. The prison guards. You look up to see if they saw you. They didn’t. You back yourself up against the wall and shimmy yourself over to the driftwood.

It’s today. Today was the day you would finally go find Katherine. You remember that now. You were prepared.

You ready yourself and the driftwood. You plan to stay under the water and only take small breaths as needed until you’re out of sight. Then you’ll swim all night till you reach land. You’ll find a place to hide and stay there till you recover. Then, you’ll find Katherine.

Under the starlight you want to see what Katherine looks like, one last time. You pull out the picture. There, on the page is a little baby, completely wrapped in a solid blue blanket. She looks thin and her eyes are closed as if she were asleep. She’s your little angel. She’s your little Katherine. Katherine Johnson, maybe her friends will call her KJ.

You hear a gunshot. Then pain. You’re on the ground. Then nothing.

This was your last memory of life.

Again, you're in the round room. All three towering doors stand open in front of you. You’ve lived all three memories.

*Would you like to move on? If you stay here, you will fall asleep, and when you awake, you will have forgotten everything again, and the three doors will be closed. But I will give you a second option. Take what you learn and act.*

The three doors coverage into one. The final door opens.

*Who are you? After everything you’ve seen and done, what will you do? What will you become? Will you change, or stay the same? Who. are. you.*

You stand in the room. Then you decide.