

Mark realized it was his turn to tell his tale. After hearing the other stories, he still had no idea what to say, and still wanted to know how he got to the Gates. No one there knew his name; he had not yet revealed it to them. In a desperate attempt to put his life, and death, together, he decided to tell the tale of his life. He figured that if he could retrace most of it, looking at his life from the outside this time, he could find himself and remember the means by which he died.

“A child growing up in a household without love knows not what to expect from the real world upon entering it, “ he began. “Markus had witnessed the beating of his father for the third time this week. You’d think a mother would do something to prevent this, but in this case it was the mother who brought the fear. This fear, accompanied by the impact of the death of his brother is what drove Markus out of that miserable house. His brother died of pneumonia, simple, treatable pneumonia. His parents didn’t even seem to notice he was sick, let alone care. Markus dedicated so much time and energy to him, trying everything he could to keep him well, but it just wasn’t enough.

Going to college early was the best thing for Markus in so many ways. If you’re going to leave home, college is surely a better place to stay than on the streets. Although he didn’t have any friends, he loved college for all the learning opportunities it presented to him. He followed a normal schedule most would think boring. Wake up, attend classes, return to his dorm with no roommate to

look forward to, study, sleep, and wake up the next morning to do it all again.

He followed this schedule until accidentally, his whole life was changed forever with a simple “bump” in is routine.

While rushing back to his dorm from classes one day, Markus felt like taking a risk, which for him was as simple as a shortcut. Sprinting through a seemingly empty alley too fast for him to take notice of his surroundings, he suddenly hits something hard and tumbles to the ground. This object he hit was a person, who was now unconscious and sprawled out on the ground, holding a gun. If this wasn't enough of a surprise, he felt a shaken hand grip his shoulder and heard a female's voice behind him. 'Thank you so much! You saved my life! Oh, I thought no one could hear me! Thank you, thank you, thank you!' She could tell by the puzzled look on his face that he wasn't aware of what he'd just done. She explained to him that the man on the ground was trying to kill her and that Markus had knocked him down and away from her.

The woman tells Markus she doesn't want to report the incident because she never liked police involvement and somehow casually asks him if he would like to go out for some coffee. This situation could not be real. Markus agrees, but still feared all women because of what his mother had done to his father. It's a good thing this woman was petite, this lessened the fear.

She introduced herself to him as Paradise, and asked for his name. He quickly replied, 'Markus'. Paradise squealed and asked, 'Ooh! Can I call you

Mark?’ He just looked at her and could say nothing more than, ‘Markus’. He didn’t understand why she was so interested in him; all he did was save her life. After this day at the coffee shop, Markus and Paradise began seeing each other more and more frequently.

Paradise introduced him to so many new people and experiences, he felt so new and alive. Markus realized he loved her, but after an unpleasant incident at a party. Some drunken idiot started a fight with Markus and Paradise had to rescue him and bring him to a room where the two of them could cool down. It was when she said not to worry and held him, that he felt a feeling like never before. He thought maybe it’s, ‘I love you’. She said it. That’s the feeling. He knew he loved her too, he felt so safe and comfortable with her that it gave him confidence to overcome his fear of rejection and tell her he loved her too.

But Paradise wasn’t the only new thing in Markus’s life. There was a new student in Markus’s favorite class, and given this new confidence, he decided to introduce himself to Czech after class. Czech seemed delighted and relieved, but somewhat concerned because he didn’t have a dorm to stay in. Of course Markus offered to share his, and Czech happily agreed. He was excited to have a roommate, but became suddenly paranoid when he thought of Paradise. She was always in his dorm with him, and he was afraid her beauty would attract Czech to her. After a trial day of hanging out with both of them, Markus heightened his level of respect for Czech because he didn’t seem interested in Paradise at all.

Thinking nothing could go wrong in his newly perfect life, Markus almost drowned in his own sadness when Paradise became ill with pneumonia, the same thing that killed his brother. He couldn't stand to lose her too. For a week he didn't attend classes so he could care for her. Czech was kind enough to get his assignments for him. Nothing seemed to help so he took her to the hospital. There they told him he wouldn't be able to visit her for at least two weeks because this seemed like more than pneumonia and they'd have to run some tests on her. She would need to rest almost constantly and couldn't be bothered by any more than the doctors. Markus knew this would undoubtedly be the longest, loneliest two weeks of his life. At least he could catch up on his schoolwork.

That Wednesday, Markus return to the dorm after classes to find Czech painting. Markus asked why he wasn't at a class and Czech replied, 'I never have classes on Wednesdays, duh,' and smiled. Markus asked what he was painting and saw that it was of Paradise and himself. Czech wanted it to be a surprise and was hoping to have it ready before Markus came home and quickly finished it for him. 'This is for you.'

Markus's eyes filled with tears and couldn't help but hug Czech. 'I just hope she'll be okay soon,' Markus sobbed. 'Me too' replies Czech as he rests his head lovingly on Markus's shoulder. It was then that Markus realized he'd never hugged anyone but Paradise.

Suddenly, Czech ends the embrace with a playful grin and says, 'You have to think positively! I know what will put you in a better mood!' while placing a paintbrush in Markus's hand. 'Paint with me, darling!'

They lie out a seven by seven foot canvas on the dorm floor and begin to paint with pinks and greens, their favorite colors. Czech playfully paints Markus's nose pink. Markus retaliates by splattering Czech's shirt with green. Czech says, 'Hmm, there's only one solution to this,' and removes his shirt. Markus's eyes felt mysteriously locked on Czech's long caramel brown fingers unbuttoning each button slowly. He was either taking his time or time had just slowed down completely.

A rush of excitement shot through Markus's body. That hadn't happened since... The first time Paradise told him she loved him. Markus didn't care what this meant, he wasn't into labeling anyway. He took the white paint on his finger and made a white trail from Czech's strong jawbone to his chest, to the waistline of his jeans. Markus didn't know what to do next, so he looked up at Czech who was looking directly into his eyes. Czech removed Markus's shirt for him, put his hand on his cheek and said, 'I don't want to be the bad guy here, okay?' Markus nodded and leaned the rest of the way in for his first kiss with Czech. He couldn't believe this feeling, it exceeded any feeling he'd ever had with Paradise.

He wanted more, but didn't know what, but Czech knew. They both dove for each other's waists, unbuttoning and unsparing away. Paint was everywhere,

as was clothing. They both felt as if everything in their lives had just been thrown away, giving them both total concentration on one another. Markus never had sex before, had never done anything but kiss. He didn't know what to expect. But as it happened, he had no regrets and was concerned about nothing more than the soft, tan body pressed against his.

As the end of the week neared, Markus started to realize that graduation was sooner than he'd been aware of. Two weeks, that horrible, horrible deadline of two weeks weighted his soul every single time the phrase brushed past his ears. To interrupt his dread, the telephone rang and he sprung up to answer it, hoping it was good news about Paradise. The man on the other end said to come into the hospital right away, not indicating with his tone of voice whether it was good or bad. Markus promptly hung up the telephone and left the dorm for the hospital.

Markus watched Paradise slip away from life as he entered her hospital room. Unable to comprehend, he broke out in tears and ran out of the hospital. Back at the dorm, Czech comforted him somehow and they switched to a lighter note, graduation. It's odd how Markus didn't let this death bother him as deeply as it should have.

Czech and Markus promise to keep in touch as they throw their caps into the air at graduation. Markus had more emotions swimming through him than he even knew existed. In which direction would his life go? What would become

of Czech? He couldn't leave Czech, he was the only one left for him. Markus had to do little convincing to get Czech to want an apartment with him.

Five years had passed and Markus hadn't held a steady job even once since the day he moved into the apartment with Czech. Arguments broke out frequently between the two, and the final one resulting in Markus walking out of the apartment, bruised physically and emotionally. He could never go back, he knew he was silly for trusting someone so much. This day began the rest of Markus's life, a life without a home.

He got used to life on the corner of Stuyvesant and Westbrook, that particular corner provided the most customers. He had to support himself somehow. Each night was spent in a different person's home, which didn't seem to bother him. It made him feel popular and desired. He had seen it all by now, this "job" had no surprises, nothing new at all. But yet again, another "bump" in his schedule would change that.

The one night he had no place to stay, he decided to crash in an alley he had only been down once before, but he couldn't remember when. He couldn't sleep after he heard rustling and footsteps coming nearer and nearer. Beastly large hands from behind him suddenly grabbed him and threw him against the cold brick. 'I knew I'd find you someday, where have you been hiding you little nerd?' Markus remembered where he was now, this was the same alley in which he had saved Paradise, and this was the same man with the same gun. If only

Paradise could save him now.

‘Do you know who that girl was? Huh? Do ya? That girl was going to be the mother of my child!’ the man growled. ‘I didn’t want her though, or the kid. I don’t need that baggage cramping my lifestyle. You know what else has been cramping my lifestyle for years now? You. You stopped me from killing her and that stupid kid. I know she’s dead now, but the fact that I didn’t get to kill her just pisses me off.’

Markus wished he could speak, at least say or do something. He knew he was pathetic, a waste of space. He didn’t fight for his life, he could only see scenes of it flashing past his eyes. He wished he could take back the day he accidentally became Paradise’s hero, he would have had Czech anyway. Czech. Oh, Czech. Why did he have to leave him? All over one fight. He could have changed himself.

His ability to speak returned as he told this man, ‘If you know a man named Czech Onaas, tell him I love him and that I’m sorry. My name is Markus Dellan. You can do whatever you want to me, just please, do that for me.’

The man’s eyes pulsed with hatred. ‘Czech Onaas is my son!’ were the last words Markus remembered hearing as life faded from his body as it had from Paradise and his brother.”

“And now I remember how I got here,” said Markus to the crowd of people listening to his tale at the Gates. “Hello everyone, my name is Mark, not

Markus, but Mark. Paradise would have liked for me to introduce myself that way.”