

Long September
by Kenneth Lowe

part one
in Rosamond when I close my eyes

III – Nyssa's Saturday | forward and back

Like the creeper that girdles the tree trunk
the law runneth forward and back
and the strength of the pack is the wolf
and the strength of the wolf is the pack.
— Kipling

1

For Nyssa Concordia, it had begun, like this kind of silly kiddie shit usually did, with sticking her neck out too far for reasons not even she could have articulated.

She ran the water loud enough and hot enough that it ought to have driven any recollection of the whole thing out of her head, along with the excess black dye she was voiding from her hair, but once Nyssa started remembering something supremely embarrassing, it just stuck, and stuck, and stuck.

Things like that stuck a lot.

Stuck on Thursday. She got off at 2. That detail stuck, for some reason. The other was that the sun had been really, really bad that day, even for the end of August. Even inside the store, with its roller-shades drawn down, Nyssa had needed her sunglasses – the glare off the new DVD cases, the ones right at the wall near the register, dazzled her.

She preferred it that way, for all the pain. Wearing the circular John Lennon shades, with their black lenses, meant she got to look cool and aloof. It meant people might focus on those instead of her hair, white to translucence, or her eyes, with their bloodshot blue irises. They made her look sickly, weird, unhinged. Their tendency to dart to and fro didn't help.

Eddie's fist against the door, followed by his voice, deep and sharp in a way that was almost canine. “Hey!”

More heat, more pressure. She cranked the faucet, her fingers slipping over the porcelain handle, the gunk from the little box she'd gotten at Walgreen's hardening under her nails, staining the skin of her fingers, scalp, forehead, the back of her neck—

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up whenever the door opened. It was something about the way the plexiglass windows of the storefront, situated behind her, bubbled at the pressure change. It gave her a feeling that something was moving around where it ought not to be. One hand still poised over the VHS copy of *Gladiator*, she caught Kimberli Burke coming in.

Fucking Kimberli Burke. It wasn't even the weekend yet. Couldn't she be spared having to deal with the popular kids for at least two more days? But it was summer. Nyssa had forgotten it was summer.

“Two bucks,” she said to the customer, without looking at him.

According to his account, he had rented *Gladiator* twelve times since its release. Between the rental price and the late fees he'd already accumulated, he'd bought the movie twice. He was a tall, fat man, wearing all denim, with crazed hair and a star-spangled do rag wrapped about his head, of all things he could be wearing. His stare – for that's what it was, not a “gaze,” nor simply a “look,” but a dead-eyed,

glassy stare – was fixed upon her wrists, his torso bent noticeably down, as if regarding them was some essential part of checking out.

It was a couple of minutes before he had the quarters, then the dimes and nickels, counted out. He had counted out \$2.05, overshooting by way of putting another dime in after he'd reached \$1.95 in assorted coins. When Nyssa gave him the nickel back, he seemed annoyed, like this was her fault somehow.

But he didn't say anything. Never a word. There were things in life to be thankful for, at least.

As he left, the storefront windows bubbling in the wake of his passage, Nyssa saw something else. Tim Priestly had come inside the store during Nickel Gladiator's little performance. As Nyssa watched, he stalked up to Kimberli, shoulders and arms tense, jaw set. Kimberli, Nyssa realized, wasn't so much looking at the movies on the wall as cowering there. She was crying—

“Hey! Let me know how it feels, being a little phony like your new friends!” Eddie called, his voice somehow carrying through the door, the pain of the hot water, the roar of the faucet, the memory of what had happened next.

Nyssa pulled her head out of the sink, the water and dye going everywhere. A thick rope of ersatz blackness splattered across the front of her shirt, darkening out Winnie the Pooh's face. Who gave a shit, anyway?

“Last I checked *you* were the phony, Eddie!” she shouted back at him over the sound of the water. “Maybe other people know something you *don't!*”

He struck the door again, shaking it in its frame, cursing and storming off.

She turned back. The face in the mirror that looked back at her was the same, but the hair was a knotted, tangled clump of black.

“Fuck,” she snarled, and plunged her head back in—

“Fuck,” she said under her breath as Priestly reached out and grabbed onto Kimberli's elbow, forcing her around to look at him.

He was using that voice he used. Everybody heard it, when he used it on Kimberli. They were so visible at school, it was impossible not to notice. The voice had a hissing quality to it, like a boiling pot whispering on the range in the other room. He got in close to her, and then it was easy to notice how much taller than her he was, how much bigger. He always thought it was only the two of them who could hear, but it was never private.

That was why! Yes. She'd stepped in because she was sick of pretending she couldn't hear, and that Priestly didn't know he was being heard. That was really the worst insult of all, the pretense of impunity, insularity, whatever you wanted to call it. It was easy to ignore bullshit like “I told you not to talk to him” or “Where were you last night?” or “Look at me when I'm talking to you” when it was at school and there was a ten minute passing period, but this was retail: At least talking out of your ass occasionally had consequences here.

It came out of Nyssa's mouth in a way that seemed totally unbidden. The words hadn't originated in her head, but somewhere around her stomach, and they came out deep and sharp. Like her brother, Nyssa could bark, too.

“Hey. Asshole.”

Priestly fixed Nyssa with a look that was unexpectedly panicked. He hadn't even noticed her there, she saw, like somebody rocking out in their car with the bass cranked up, an activity of which, now that Nyssa thought of it, being a dick to one's girlfriend seemed to be in the same spirit.

“What'd you say to me?” he asked.

The threat was supposed to be in his voice, but it wasn't there, Nyssa thought with amusement. What

was there instead was a slight quaver, that of a boy's.

"I said 'Behave,'" Nyssa said.

"I'm not fucking talking to you."

He had at least let go of Kimberli. What Nyssa did next didn't make any sense, either, but thinking back on it, with the water scalding her scalp, her brother's priggish attitude still stinging her, she took a savage sort of pride in it.

She lowered her shades, glaring at him, the flash of the sun reflecting fully into her eyes and blinding her. She kept her eyes open and still, looking right at him, even though she couldn't see him.

"Yeah, well I'm talking to you. Get out of my store."

He seemed either on the verge of shouting or hitting something or crying. Nyssa kept her stare up, the light beating his silhouette into her persistence of vision. He was the one who blinked, but only because she couldn't see him by then.

"You better call me later!" he called back to Kimberli, and was out the door, the windows rippling in the wake of his exit.

Nyssa closed her eyes and rubbed them, wiping tears away. It didn't occur to her until a moment later that she'd stared down a 20-year-old.

When Kimberli came to the counter, the rims of her eyes were as red as Nyssa's. The only thing she'd brought up was a single ice cream sandwich. Nyssa rang it up in silence.

"He's... I don't know what that was," Kimberli said. "Thanks."

This was the part Nyssa had been totally unprepared for. Kimberli Burke had probably just said more words to Nyssa in that one sentence than she ever had in all the years they'd gone to middle school and high school together. There was some other stuff, but as far as Nyssa was concerned, it was in the zone of happened-when-we-were-too-young-to-count-for-or-against, or else too-bizarre-to-be-certain-if-it-actually-happened, and no part of her wanted to think too hard about any of it. It never occurred to Nyssa that people like Kimberli *did* cry, or that they thanked people for anything.

"Eh," Nyssa said, a noncommittal, too-cool-for-school noise she instantly regretted. There had to have been something better she could've said—

"I'm sorry he, like, threatened you," Kimberli said. "That was bullshit. I'm just... through with him."

Nyssa had nothing to say to that, so it was fortunate Kimberli's cell phone rang. It was one of those newish flip phones, Nyssa couldn't fail to note. Kimberli saw the caller ID and made a snarling noise no occasion under age 25 ever could have warranted, and slapped the phone shut again, burying it in her Louis Vuitton bag.

"Now he's trying to fucking call me," she said. "God, I'm stupid."

She turned away from Nyssa and shed silent tears for a moment. Try as she might, Nyssa couldn't hate her then. She reached out and put her hand on Kimberli's arm, and their eyes met – dirty hazel and bloody ice-blue.

"I need a smoke break and you need a smoke."

The "Back in 10 minutes" sign in place, Nyssa lead her to the back door in the stock room, past the boxes of unopened videos and stacked crates of candy whose alluring scents had long ago ceased to have any effect on the downtrodden teens who toted them around every day.

"It's weird, I've been here a million times and I've never even thought about what's back here," Kimberli said.

"I know," Nyssa said. "It's like that."

She opened the door that lead out to the dock in back, reaching for her Lennon shades as the wash of light seared—

—seared her to the roots of her hair. She looked up then at the face in the mirror, framed now by the deep, inky, almost-purple black she'd stained it with. It was still a stringy, clumpy mess, but at least it wasn't the shock-white any longer. Her skin looked so pale, so pristine.

“Fuck you, anyway,” Nyssa muttered to Eddie, or to herself, or to anybody.

Her eyes wandered down to the shirt. Winnie the Pooh was pretty much gone now, blotted out entirely by a long archipelago of dye. Piglet was gone, too, leaving only part of the legend above his door, reading in its cartoony lettering: TRESPASSERS.

With a single, violent motion, she torqued the hot water tap shut, snatching up the conditioner bottle with her other hand. She was so pissed she was shaking. Ridiculous. Why the hell should any of it matter to anybody but her?

She stripped the shirt off and hurled it, wadded, at the crack under the door. The conditioner was cold, slimy, with a cloying scent of what-they-call-flower-scent, and combined with the sudden sharpness of her exposure and the odd cooling of the bathroom with the hot tap off, made her shiver. Cursing again, she whipped the shower curtain aside and swatted the water on, cranking it all the way up. Steam filled the room, wreathed her in its warmth—

—smoke wreathed Kimberli's face. There was a small pond back behind the store, brimming with algae-bloomed, scummy water. Somewhere in the pond floated the other cigarettes Nyssa had smoked. It was only her first pack, though Kimberli didn't need to know that.

“You didn't have to do that,” Kimberli said.

“It was no problem,” Nyssa said. Her eyes still hurt from staring him down, and part of her vision was still a haze of prickly blue shapelessness.

Kimberli, still a bit sniffled, nodded toward Nyssa's glasses.

“You really need those all the time, huh?”

Nyssa focused on a point somewhere on the lake.

“Just when it's really bright.”

“You should get contacts. You have pretty eyes.”

Kimberli had said it so simply, so matter-of-factly. Nyssa looked over to see the girl smiling at her. Kimberli reached over and tugged on a lock of Nyssa's hair.

“You could have color, you know.”

Nyssa shrugged, an awkward laugh coming up and catching in her throat.

“I can't really...”

“You can too afford it,” Kimberli said. “What are you doing tomorrow? I know a place.”

Nyssa looked down—

—at the ruined shirt, crumpled up, as the steam condensed on the walls and crept down toward it.²⁰ Had it been three minutes? It was supposed to be three minutes, or maybe five. The box was already buried in the trash. Try as she might, Nyssa couldn't feel the roots of her hair any longer. The heat in the bathroom had become oppressive, the tendrils of mist snaking over her body and bringing with them shivers so violent her teeth chattered.

Then she was in the shower. The streaks of darkness crawled from her hair, sliding in stark lines against the paleness of the skin that made her sick in summertime, burn in the slightest ray of sun, that she hated with an intensity reserved only for things into which we're born.

The blackness oozed from her, spreading in a lightening cloud around her toes, and she could see just how purple the stuff really was—

—and how reluctant she was to actually spend any money on it. Kimberli touched her arm.

“It's *perfect* for you! I could never do it, but this would really look hot on you.”

Nyssa frowned. Tia was one aisle over, in her uniform, stocking shelves. Why had she come here with them?

²⁰ “What's that, Nyssa? What's that? That's RIGHT, it's Winnie the Pooh and Piglet! Your brother picked it out for you all by himself, didn't he? Thank your big brother. Say 'Thank you Big Brother!' Go give him a kiss.”

“I don't know. It looks kind of purple,” Nyssa said as quietly as she could.

“It'll be dark enough, trust me,” Kimberli said.

“No, I think she's right,” Allison Novak said, not looking at Nyssa or the box of dye in the way 17-year-olds have of not looking at things they're talking about. “And it's a really... extreme... kind of color. Won't be any getting it out. You don't want to get stuck with something that doesn't flatter you.”

Nyssa heard the footsteps at the mouth of the aisle and didn't want to look, but had to. In the split-second before she turned away, her eyes caught Tia's. There was the look of recognition, the beginning of the friendly smile Tia had always used to greet her. Then Nyssa was looking away, feeling heat on her scalp and in the pit of her stomach.

She was spared having to witness Tia's face when the girl realized Nyssa was ignoring her. Nyssa heard the footsteps leading away, the tap-squeak of Tia's Chucks as they pattered off, and Nyssa did not need to see Tia's face then to remember how it became when she was hurt.

“Don't listen to her,” Kimberli said—

—“Don't listen to him,” Nyssa said to herself.

The muted color inhabited the water, spread through it, and like a swarm of creatures so fine they appear only as a cloud, slunk into the drain. She stood motionless, her breath held at its passage.

When she looked in the mirror, she was a different person, but she did not smile. Allison Novak was a fucking bitch, but she had been right: There wasn't any getting it out.

4

Johnstowne Mall in Shelbyville sits abandoned now, but the wind is silent there. When there's nothing to vibrate against, the wind has no lips with which to whistle.

This is after the storm clouds, the whispering and wailing of disembodied voices in the unnatural dark, and so many things besides...

That morning, though, Nyssa and Kimberli walked past the light poles atop their concrete bases and the trucks looming above them.

“Am I really that bad at stick?” Kimberli asked, and even that was wonderful of her to say, because she said it with a demure hand poised over her mouth, her whole body shaking with embarrassed giggles barely stifled.

“You are a shit show,” Nyssa said, and they both laughed as they entered the mall and Nyssa could take her shades off and for once feel confident, pretty, popular, accepted. If only she had something better to wear than her flats.

The interior of the mall had always seemed abnormally dark during the daytime, and while that meant a feeling of unease and discomfort for others, it meant Nyssa was in her element. That she almost never got to go to it because it was half an hour away and she never had any money only made each visit that much more precious, the ride to it an exciting journey rather than another period of drudgery.

Had it been a year? It must have been, Nyssa thought, because the last time she'd been back here, she remembered distinctly, had been when her mother had bought them²³ new clothes for the school

23 Nyssa, age 7, peered through the door at her mother hunched over the counter with the phone cord wrapped around her body. The shadows that fell from the window were in the shapes of leaves, and crawled across her mother's body. Nyssa knew her mother could not have been looking in her direction – that was impossible – yet the memory persisted: The darkness hid her face, leaving only the glow of the lit cigarette in the gloom.

“I never ask for anything, okay? Have I ever asked for anything? I know what you're risking, but they're *ours*. They

year. The previous school year.

Time had marched on since then. The very first shop inside the doors, a sewing and alterations shop, was gone, she saw. The metal gate stood half-open, a foreboding sign in front of it reading FOR LEASE in an indignant font. Nyssa caught only a glimpse of the shadowed interior. It stood empty but for a sheet of paper laying on the ground that Nyssa's eyes, uncommonly sharp in such half-light, could plainly see was covered in a thick layer of dust. If she moved that single page, the ground beneath would be a hue lighter in a single, page-shaped depression.

“What happened here?” Nyssa asked.

“I don't know, but I come here every weekend and I'll be fucking pissed if they shut down. Chad's right, you get to liking a place it fucking moves or shutters, or who knows what. I'm moving far the fuck away from here as soon as I can.”

Nyssa was about to ask where she would go, why she thought she could move away, which one was Chad again, but these questions sounded immediately bitchy in her mind and she wanted to find some other, less combative way to phrase them (or at least adjust her tone of voice to make it sound ~interested instead of just offended), when Kimberli's cell phone took precedent.

“Whawt's uuuuuuuup?” Kimberli said, the first word in low D and the second drawn out and in A#, Nyssa guessed, or something else within a few shades of Bruce Lee's creepy battle keening. “Yeah! Great, we're already here! So. Cool. Yes. Yes. Great,” and then she blew a kiss over the phone and snapped it shut. “Eve's on her way! We'll get makeup while you're getting looked at.”

“Looked at?”

While she'd been on the phone, Kimberli had been leading Nyssa to a corner of the mall that didn't look like it had anything in it. In point of fact, the lights along the ceiling were only partially lit, one burning for every two or three that had gone dark. There was a store, though, sandwiched in between two others that were shuttered: Glancy's Optics – First eye exam HALF PRICE!

It dawned on Nyssa that she wasn't just getting cooler shades. Kimberli held her hand.

“My uncle – he's a friend of the family, but he's my uncle – his mother was an albino, too, and she couldn't even get out of bed on days when the sun was too bad. But then she got these special contacts that cut down glare—”

“This is too much money, Kimberli,” Nyssa said. It was the first time she'd ever addressed Kimberli by her name like that, and the hell of it was, they both understood the significance, the vulnerability, the cost of doing it, so that when Kimberli squeezed her hand a little harder and took her into the shop, it was a friend who was doing it.

The place was a poor eyeglass vendor and an optometry practice rolled into one barely-functioning store. A couple of shelves of glasses and shades stood more or less abandoned, the individual pieces looking out onto a small, peculiar corner of the world that never changed. The interior of the place was well-lit compared to the rest of the mall, but not so much that Nyssa felt uncomfortable.

Kimberli marched her up to the counter, where a disinterested girl three or four years older than them checked Nyssa in, or rather listened to Kimberli check Nyssa in.

“Fill these out,” the disinterested girl said, thrusting a clear plastic clipboard with a pen attached to it via curly phone cord, the clip holding down six pages worth of paperwork with blank lines, checklists, and a whole section that appeared to Nyssa to be a short essay portion.

Without any recollection of exactly how she'd gotten there, Nyssa found herself seated next to the children's play area and its diseased plastic chew toys and torn issues of *Highlights*, staring the paperwork in the face.

“Eve and I will be *right* here when you get back,” Kimberli said to Nyssa, snapping her phone shut again after a ten second call from Eve, or so it had sounded – then just as abruptly, she was gone, and

need to eat.”

Nyssa had to stare at the checklist section instructing her to indicate any medical conditions her immediate family or grandparents had.

Did her grandmother or grandfather ever have glaucoma? It wouldn't have been the first question she'd have asked them, had she the chance.

She stared at the papers for a moment, and then realized, in a brief and fitful instant of panic, that she had been staring at them for five minutes. She had stared at them for so long without doing anything because she did not know what to do, had literally never been put in a position to have to explain her medical history through the use of a checklist, and it was ~dramatic.

It was ~dramatic, Nyssa thought with self-loathing scorn, because it meant this was another gap in her knowledge that normal white girls the continent over had already grasped years ago in their development. Or was it? She could never tell, never know when some hole in her socialization was due to being too young or to the fact her mother sat at home on welfare. Of course it wasn't normal not to know how to fill out paperwork about your grandmother's glaucoma – Kimberli hadn't thought it would be any kind of problem, that's why she'd left Nyssa here with the ticking clock, the bored receptionist and her immaculate nails clicking across the keyboard behind the desk while dressed in her thoroughly unnecessary pink scrubs, the eyeglasses on their stands and shelves staring out and catching her reflection in their hundreds of scattered, refracted surfaces—

“It really doesn't matter what you put,” the disinterested girl said.

Nyssa realized then that she'd begun perspiring visibly, and her stress turned quickly to annoyance.

“I'm almost—”

“Honey, half the girls who come in here don't know who their fathers are,” the girl might've been from Arkansas, Nyssa thought, hearing something in her voice for the first time. “Doctor will just be extra careful screening you. Now, let me get you checked in. Are you an albino, sweetie?”

It was the most blunt way anybody had ever asked it, school assholes included.

“Yes,” Nyssa said, just above a whisper.

“Doctor will know just what to do, sweetheart. You put in your name and address and sosh and your birthdate and we'll take care of the rest.”

As Nyssa handed it in, the girl reached up and patted her on the arm.

“Doctor knows just what to do.”

5

Nyssa always thought optometry exam chairs looked like some creepy kind of torture rack, and were all the creepier for their ubiquity. Anywhere you went to have your eyes examined, your ass ended up in the same chair, looking at the same scramble of letters, Nyssa thought. It was like the Looney Tunes skit, where the little man from the draft board appeared behind every door.

Somehow, so was Doctor, as the receptionist had called him. His nametag read “Dr. Glancy,” a name Nyssa felt certain had to be made up, but he was still just “Doctor.” He was tall, rail-thin, with a shock of white hair despite his youthful appearance, and glasses so thick as to make his eyes appear comically small. The refraction effect was such that if he turned his head, his cheek, as viewed through the lens of his glasses, appeared to be indented. He was one of those doctors that got into the field to solve his own problems.

Good, Nyssa thought. At least he understood what it was like never to be able to fucking see without goggles on.

“What's our pleasure today?” he asked with a clap of his hands upon entering the room.

It was somewhat of an open-ended question, so Nyssa's moment of hesitation didn't surprise him.

“What I meant was... you see...” he rubbed his temple absently with one hand, Nyssa trying to find an opportunity to answer and failing as he cut her off again, “...is 'What can I do for you?' I have this peskiness, you see. With questions. Phrasing them. So, yes?”

"I'm really sensitive to light because—"

"Yes, yes, indeed," Doctor said. "You'll forgive me. Had a friend who had a cousin. Please follow my finger. Just like that, yes."

"..."

The leftmost corner of his lower lip cinched taut and he made sort of *tsk* noise, just once, that said *That is just too bad*.

"Very pronounced shaking. Oh, I know you can't tell. The brain will see what it wants to see. But that's how it is. I see it's been a while since you've had an eye exam. Won't ask why. It almost certainly isn't your doing.

"..."

"There's no need to be like that, I wasn't..."

"No, I'm not..."

"Yes. Yes. But I shouldn't have."

Doctor reached over and took Nyssa's hand. That kind of thing usually crept her out, but this man was somehow totally unassuming. It was like a five-year-old reaching out and taking hold of her skirt because he liked the material. His speech pattern suddenly settled, and for the first time, he fixed his gaze directly on her eyes.

"We carry lots of weight, but when you're young it's just what everybody else hands to you," he said. "The hell of it is that once we're old enough to let it go, some people just don't know how. It won't be much longer for you. And you *will* let it go, won't you?"

She nodded slowly. He smiled.

"Good! I believe you. I didn't mean to sound all superior. Now you are here, you are here now, and we have just what you need, Miss Concordia. Please follow me."

There followed puff-in-the-eye, which-one-is-in-3D, flash-that-shows-you-your-own-veins, and dotty-color-what's-the-number.

"The bad news is albinism," Doctor said. "Not new news, so to speak. The good news is you can see pretty well. For somebody with almost no pigmentation. We need shaded contact lenses, which, wouldn't you know, we've sure got quite a few of right here. Let's talk about color."

Nyssa didn't know what to say. She'd never even thought of that before, hadn't realized such a thing existed. And there was that feeling again, that I'm-being-pitied, but he'd apologized, and she knew he couldn't help that *she* was the one with a mother who didn't know to bring her daughter in to be looked at—

"Green might be a bit much," Doctor said, and Nyssa realized they were sitting in a bright room surrounded by plastic drawer units, each meticulously marked off with numbers. In his hand was a small chart, laminated, with a pretty woman's face reproduced several times, the eyes a different color on each. The effect was bizarre and at once unbelievable, but Nyssa didn't have time to process what was so off about it.

"Yes, green is too, too much," Doctor continued, one finger to his lips. His lip stretched taut and he made that same, single *tsk* noise. "But. *But*. Yes."

"I can't—"

"Just try them. These. You need to see before you decide. Please."

He seemed genuinely to be pleading with her. Nyssa again felt the lump of money jutting up into her butt, the knowledge that now there were no carefully stacked tens or fifties or hundreds inside the empty VHS case tucked behind the others on the shelf beneath the small TV in her room. But even more keenly, she felt that she was so very close to leaving some unwanted part of herself behind, hopefully to be forgotten, along with why a girl had pulled her hair, or how she'd come to learn to drive stick, or why there were found CDs nailed to her wall instead of family portraits.

She looked at the containers with the contacts in them. The color was listed as “Warm Honey.”

“I know a thing or two,” Doctor assured her with a smile that was at once timid and hopeful and completely childlike.

“I don't know how to put them in,” Nyssa said.

“We can fix that, too.”

Her nose ran, strangely, or perhaps not, it all being connected. It wasn't too hard, since she'd put on eye makeup before. The feeling of her own finger touching her eyeball. The material alien, unwelcome, and then, in a blink, resolving itself into part of her. When her vision came back to her, everything was in the sharpest relief, but there was something else.

The light wasn't so harsh. She felt her eye stretching about, adjusting to the uncertain light. Then her eyes settled on her image in the mirror.

There was a girl with pale skin, but it wasn't so bad. She had black hair that, in this light, did look like it had just a touch of purple. None of that mattered, because of the eyes. The bloodshot blue was gone. In its place was a deep, vulpine amber. They were strong and wise and intense and otherworldly.

Nyssa simultaneously shed a tear and a ropey strand of snot from her nose. She turned away, and found Doctor handing her a tissue.

“What was that?” he asked after she'd blown her nose.

The question sounded so ~timid, she hated herself.

“How much, please?”