

## **Dark and Stony Places**

"Why are people so mean?"

"Because they feel unloved and alone."

"I'm not."

"That's because you are neither, my sweet."

The little girl squeezes her mother's hand, swinging the arm it is attached to with relish. They are shopping for shoes, then ice cream. A scrap of newspaper skitters by, ephemeral and aimless, and for some reason it reminds the girl of that most unwelcome fact she'd acquired at some point from somewhere: her mother and father are going to die some day, and she will never see them again. She does not consider her own mortality, its possibility.

"What's the matter, baby?"

Emily tells.

"But not for a very long time. And then one day we'll all see each other again in heaven, where we will live happily together forever."

So the girl feels good again. Reassured. The confidence her mother exudes is sufficient, for now--Emily too young to doubt, or consider with maturity life's bitter vicissitudes.

Emily's mother had long ago negotiated with the knowledge of her own mortality--has responded by trying to stave it off.

A young woman still, she has not the solace of a child's credulity, does not believe in the fairy tales they tell in churches, mosques, and synagogues. And so she does what people do, living for the things the world tells her she desires, pursuing an endless quest for the next anodyne.

By the time they get the shoes and Emily's chocolate ice cream has stained her dress, the wind assumes the brisk bite of late autumn. People scurry on sidewalk and crosswalk, pulling scarves and mufflers closer. The grey sky, a shroud over the tomb of the world, promises a flurry of snow. The mother hurries toward the parking garage, Emily in tow, the clip of their shoes on cement a nervous staccato.