

## Freckle

By: Camilla Moyer

It was her job to take care of him. With an alcoholic joke of a father and a mother who fell apart at the seams and left bits of herself unraveled on the kitchen floor, it was all up to her. She worked at that dark, damp Thai restaurant at night and during the day she worked at the supermarket down the street with the manager with the prying eyes and the ever-moving hands. She kept him and their siblings in a home, she kept them fed and warm, and she tried her best to keep them happy. She rubbed his back with soothing palms when their father threw the sharp edges of words at them, more cutting than the glass of all those broken beer bottles. She loved him enough for her and for their father and their mother and for anyone else who didn't have sense enough to love the sunshine smile that melted his freckled face every time he'd smile. Or at least she tried her best. She kissed his flaming cheek when he admitted with downcast eyes that the boy in the house across the way with the foul mouth and bloodied knuckles was actually very loving and would meet him under the subway rails and hold his hand in the blistering Chicago wind, trying his best to soak up the warmth that poured out of her baby brother's laughter. When the army gave him a deployment date during the end of his hell of a senior year, she tucked her head under his chin and squeezed him so tight he could've burst. And when he came home six months later on that rickety subway line, mumbling about a failed psych examination, she felt her stomach drop. That month when he'd bustle through the back door at 4:30 am every morning, sweat-soaked and wild eyed, she worried, and when he had hijacked neighborhood cars and swiped bottles of Everclear from the shelves of liquor stores, she panicked. And the next month, when laid in bed for days on end without getting up to shower or eat and would ignore the brown baby hands trying to pat his pale face, she'd cry because she knew.

And yet, when he slumped against her in that indifferent taupe office downtown, holding onto her sleeve with white knuckles and child-like fear as they said the words "Bipolar Disorder," she somehow still felt sound shock settling in her bones. She didn't want this for him. She didn't want this label slapped on his head like the bottle of pills he'd have to take every morning and night. She didn't want those words to cling to him with sticky resilience like an expiration date. When he looked up at her with wet, desperate eyes, she knew he was thinking of their mother and how now this disease was one of the only things linking him to that woman with the crazed eyes and the blood-coated arms who had left in a flurry of dyed cabinets and muted apologies. And as she scooped this six foot boy up into her lap and thumbed hot tears off of his ruddy cheeks, she thought with single-minded determination that she was going to love him so much and so hard that those dirty words that marred him would float up and away like a half-deflated balloon in the thick heat of summer, spiraling higher and higher until it was forgotten entirely.