

# A Study of Ambition

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Fiction

Undergraduate First Place Fiction Prize Award Winner

Jana Fontaire breathes like a dying star, alone on her threadbare sofa. Sunlight streams in through a dirty and barred window, casting parallel shadowed lines across her motionless body. A spider crawls across one of the barren walls, the only ornamentation to the room. Outside, a mugger pushes a gun to a man's temple and screams, "You better get on the fucking ground before..." The sound floats up to Jana, easy as the breeze, and dissipates just the same.

She figures the mugger's got the right idea. In a world that's kill or be killed, such gumption is admirable in a man. Such initiative speaks volumes of one's character, and Jana can't help but feel cowed in its presence. She was like that once, but something caused a leak in her reserves, her can-do attitude dripping from the cracks. We all start out with such hopes. Morose Maudlin tale, oft repeated.

The spider makes its way across the window, and she feels its shadow, a slight change in temperature, as it meanders across her face. She waits, listening for the telltale pop. One will lose for another's gain. What's that saying? 'So it goes.'

Seconds tick past with the sound of a rolling bingo cage. Judgement thrown in with the B9s and I75s. A cloud rolls over, and the silence says it all. She stands, the floor creaking as she makes her way to the window, her entire apartment now cast in shadow, and she imagines her face like a smudged thumbprint, unidentifiable.

The spider scuttles on the frame, and she slaps it, bare-handed, as she peers into the alley a few stories down. A solitary man, well-attired, leans against a brick wall. He pulls himself to his feet, arm wrapped around his midsection, crimson seeping from between his clenched fingers.

There was a knife. This is why seeing is believing.

The man, as if bothered, weighed down, by Jana's gaze, scans the windows of her building until his eyes land on hers. They narrow, and he rotates a shoulder, turning his head to the side and spitting before limping back into the light.

Her heart leaps and burns as a tremor racks her spine. The bottom of the food chain is only fun for those on top. She watches the man until the tail end of his Burberry topcoat vanishes down the lane. Something inside her twitches, its tendrils unfurl and wind around her nerves. It drives her forward, this nameless abyss of need. Her face is disappearing, surely as the day will end. The Lord helps those who help themselves—what a load of crap. Those who

help themselves help themselves.

A small buzz of panic sets in, allies and laces with whatever seeks to control her now. She's got to help herself, it tells her. She's got to help herself. She abandons her apartment, stumbles down the stairs, hits the street and walks. There is no clear destination in her mind, yet no doubt about where she's going. She coughs down smoke, generated from whatever machine has grown inside her.

The decrepit redbrick tenements and run-down shops turn brighter, glass and stone, tidy sidewalks and fresh greenery take the place of cigarette butts and broken glass. Foot traffic increases as does the wealth. It's of little consequence as she walks through the masses like a blue-lipped phantom, unnoticed. The sun shines whiter as the buildings get taller. Jana's skin, pallid and cool to the touch, remains in shadow, that black smoke which devours her making her little more than a smudge of dark against the clean perfection of those around her.

She used to spend a lot of time here, in the central city. Cafés and high-end boutiques, clubs and red-rope lines—places to get noticed, she figured. A herculean task she just didn't have the chops for.

Everything glitters, but behind it, there is the ache of a million failures. Jana'd like to say the place no longer holds any appeal to her, and she does, though the lie sticks in her heart like a shard of glass. She turns down an alley— between buildings— that harbors loading docks, dumpsters, and an assortment of vagrants. This isn't the first time she's been here. Ages ago a man she thought she knew coerced her from one of the bars and back here. They met up with some other guys, who leaned against the concrete walls, waiting. She fought when she realized what was happening, but that was her first lesson in uselessness. They pushed her down, hot breath in her face, and all she could do was cry. At least they noticed her back then. At least she was worth something.

She's not here for the magical mystery tour, however. She came to be on top for once in her damn life. She came to win. The alley is sepia-tinted and shadowed by neighboring buildings, and the lights are either off or broken. Eyes, glinting and hollow, rest upon her, reflecting what little light there is. This is where the vagrants come when not on their corners, rattling their cups. She starts toward one, insides coiling, ready for any outcome. The eyes do not change, and are the only feature to the huddled masses she means to lay into.

Inside, the thing controlling her pulls the breaks and plunges a tentacle into her brain.

What's the point in beating the broken?

Jana must admit, the logic is sound.

It pumps something new across.

If you can't join 'em, beat 'em.

She smiles, but her mouth is halfway gone.

The true urgency of the situation hits her, and she glares at the eyes, flipping her hair over her shoulder. There's that food chain again, she's not quite

hit bottom-rung yet. She retreats from the alley, falling back into paradise. Phones ding and cars rush by. One, slick and black—an SUV— pulls to the curb, and a girl steps out. She can't be any older than Jana, but she sparkles. Solitary, unless one were to count the phone tilted against her head, she turns, beach-babe hair swishing against her back. Diamond studs glint in her ears and wink at Jana, a joke for them to share. The girl's voice, like champagne bubbles, tinkles pretty nothings into the phone.

She laughs, flooding Jana's gut with fear and wrath. This is the one. It dawns on her, like a mission from God—this is the one.

A Mini Lady Dior bag hangs from the girl's bent arm, the one holding up the phone. She exhales gold and something like a moan nearly escapes Jana's lips.

Rage bubbles and the black smoke pours from every pore, engine overloaded. Feeling herself as a nightmare thing, Jana's fists burn at her sides as she nears the girl. Five feet away, and closing the gap fast, she tenses. She is a cobra with no charmer. A dancer with no audience.

Her decomposition pauses, hanging in suspense as her right shoulder cocks back, and her leg muscles contract. Everything inside her screams for destruction, fury, and feelings of ineffectiveness beg for release. This is the way to do it.

So close, the girl looks up and meets Jana's eyes.

Jana, shocked, stutters and pauses.

Something flashes behind the girl's crystalline face, rapid comprehension sets off a sort of malignant light. Her lip curls, before a derisive half-smile takes its place.

Jana stares as the girl gives her a once-over, then turns her shoulder and flicks up her chin, just so.

Jan- watches once again, rooted to the spot, as another victim walks away.

The world stops turning, but nobody seems to notice, snapping pictures and jostling through crowds. Swiping credit cards and hailing cabs.

Someone, going somewhere, knocks into Ja-, throwing the switch to some animalistic survival instinct.

The thing inside her shakes its head. Some people just can't be helped. You just can't be helped, it whispers, then begins to devour her whole.

Ja-'s fleshless legs begin moving on their own accord. Flee. Flee. Flee.

As she makes her way back, the shadows grow longer, and the smoke, thicker, finishing her off. By the time she's back in front of the building, J- is almost pure bone, pearly white covered only by the jet-blackness of the smoke.

She takes the stairs like a drunk, unsteady and falling. Her floor comes faster than she expects, and she tumbles onto the landing, frightening a rat.

Her floor only has three doors. The one that once belonged to Her is chipping blue. She advances toward it, but it doesn't recognize Her. It won't let Her in.

She pounds against it, soundless, breathless sobs tearing Her non-

lungs apart.

Failure. Failure. Failure. You are nothing, and the world's moved on.

She breaks it down and collapses into the room. The remnants of the spider still stains the window frame. A memory, black and white and fading fast, flashes through Her brain, almost too fast to catch.

It tries to smile and drags itself forward like an infant learning to crawl. To the sofa that it used to own, it pulls itself upright and leans against the side. A skeletal hand slides beneath the cushions, searching, and lands on something solid, cool.

It pulls out a bottle, a memory, and a few words associate before crumbling apart. Ex. Forgotten. Lost.

It twists the thing open as darkness swallows the room.