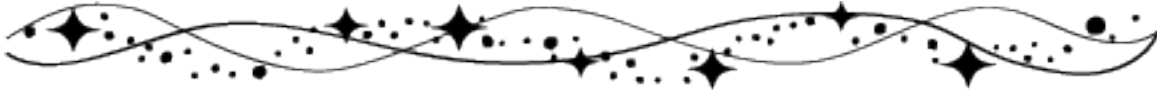


Tick-Tock



Rebecca Archer was an artist going through the longest creative dry spell in her life, literally, a creative drought. She sat at the picnic table outside of the t-shirt print shop she worked at in Pittsburgh, PA as she ate her sandwich and vaped before going back in after her half-hour lunch break. As she sat there, she was lost in thought. Her work buddy, a grizzled guy named Artie Mackiewicz who was ‘pushing fifty downhill fast’ and reminded her of an unmade bed had given her advice before she went on her break.

“You seem kind of down today, kiddo.” Artie said, as he mixed the particular shade of ink a customer required for their logo. “What’s up?”

“I’m frazzled.” She looked up at him, after pulling a t-shirt off of a press, and reached for another shirt. “I think I’d rather have someone else’s life.”

“What? You’re not enjoying this paradise?” He chuckled, and then sighed, turning more serious. “You might say that, but you don’t *really* want that. You wouldn’t only get the good stuff; you’d get all the problems of someone else’s life, too. And for all you know, those problems might be worse than yours.” He prepped the screen in front of him. He made a noise that was half of a snort, part chuckle. “The grass isn’t always greener, and if it is, it’s because it’s over the septic tank. They’re different problems, that’s all.”

Becky gave Artie a sideways glance, and sighed. “Well, maybe. I could use ‘different’ right about now, though.”

“Now different? Different’s do-able. Change something up a bit. Take a vacation, or a trip somewhere fun.”

“By myself? No significant other, no siblings, not much in the way of family

anymore. Pass.”

“What’s something you always wanted to do for fun, but never did?”

She gazed off into the distance. Becky didn’t have to think hard to know what the answer to that question was. She’d had the trip planned once before... and then her mom and aunt died, and she cancelled it to help her Dad pick up the pieces. It never got re-scheduled. “Go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC, and take one of their adult art classes. They pick a famous painting by a famous artist, and they teach you the techniques used to paint it, and you actually get to paint along in a studio there for a few hours.”

“See?” Artie gestured, as he squeegeed ink through the screen. “Why don’t you do that? Artie asked her. “You’ve got the time. You get a little bit of change, plus you get to learn something new. Do something nice for yourself.” He gestured around them. “Get away from the crazy for a while. This place isn’t going anywhere.”

As Becky sat at the picnic table contemplating Artie’s words, she wavered back and forth. She wanted to go; she always had, from the first time she read someone’s post on Reddit talking about the class they took, and how much fun they had. Her problem was that every time she tried to create a piece of artwork since her mom, aunt and father had all died, she was unable to. Becky’s creative block was complete. Nothing would come out. It was frustrating, annoying, and more than a little sad. “When is an artist not an artist? When they can’t create artwork.” Maybe she should go, even if she chickened out and didn’t take the class. She’d always wanted to see the Met. Even if she couldn’t create her own, she could enjoy the creations of others.



Becky Archer made her way down to the platform at Pittsburgh’s Union

Station, to catch her train to Penn Station in New York. It was a Wednesday morning, and she would be returning home on Sunday. She would have four nights, and three full days in Manhattan. Her itinerary was simple. She scheduled one full day - in fact, tomorrow - at the Met; she would tour the galleries in the morning, and then was scheduled to take one of the classes at the Met that afternoon. Even if everything she did sucked, Becky figured it wouldn't matter. She wasn't creating original artwork; it was a class. "Monkey see, monkey do..." She looked closely through the FAQ sheet about their program and individual classes. It didn't specify 'artists only.' Simply 'adults,' meaning that some of the people in the class likely didn't know which end was up on a brush, and were there to spend a fun afternoon with others while learning something. Her ace in the hole was that she would tell no one she was an artist, removing the pressure to create something. On Friday, she would be headed for a couple of art galleries in SoHo, followed by a trip to the Empire State Building. On Saturday, she was going to a couple of other museums. Becky boarded her train, and nine hours later, found herself in a throng of people at Penn Station, heading upstairs away from the trains and the platforms, and onward to taxis and the city itself.

The next morning, Becky got a cab to the Met and spent it mostly between the Egyptian Art exhibits, which she'd always loved and now got to see in person. She was particularly looking forward to seeing the Egyptian temple that was rescued from inundation when the Aswan High Dam was built. The temple was packed up block by block and reassembled in a huge gallery, called the Hypostyle hall. The hall is drenched in light because one full wall facing Central Park is made from glass. She also wanted to make time before her class to visit the French impressionist paintings, because her class was on impressionist techniques used by Claude Monet. As concerned as Becky had been about her lack of creativity, she had fun, even if she felt like what she created was crap. It was one of the highlights of her trip.

The other highlight was one she didn't expect nor plan for; not at all. There she was, minding her own business, walking from one gallery in SoHo to the next. They were only five blocks from one another. It was a pretty day, breezy even if it was a little chilly, and she was in a good mood. Becky saw a coffee shop called "Cuppa Love" and decided to stop in for a latte. She ended up

stopping in there, and enjoying an insanely wonderful cup of coffee called “Chocolate Bliss,” which brought her Mom to mind. She would’ve laughed at what she was drinking and called it ‘dessert.’ Becky laughed in spite of herself. Sitting there drinking her coffee and a matching chocolate raspberry croissant, she noticed there was a door leading into another shop. Every time the door opened and closed, she smelled a fragrant mishmash of incense.

Once finished her croissant, she did as others did, and took her coffee with her into the store on the other side of the door, which was...different. Good...interesting...but unusual. It was definitely witchy or New Age-y, which warmed the cockles of her heart, particularly as it seemed like it accommodated any number of religions, paths and gods. There were also Tarot decks, incense, books, and a variety of rocks, along with a display of jewelry and valuables behind glass. Beyond that, it looked a bit like a junk shop. It had an overall good vibe.

Becky wandered the aisles, looking at what caught her eye. As she was perusing the section where they had statues of deities, she found the selection to be quite eclectic. There were statues from many different pantheons; some that were clearly new. Some statues looked as if they might have been owned by someone else; others may have been made or carved by artisans. And then, there was this one statue she noticed. It stood out. It was Egyptian, though she didn’t know what Goddess it was. All Becky knew was that it had a sweet face, but had seen better days. The statue had faded, chipping paint, and looked to be made of plaster. There was a chip missing at the bottom near her foot. It had a serenity about it despite its rough looks, and had once been beautiful. Becky started to put it back, but as she looked at it again, she thought she’d buy it and try to fix it up. She could see it going on her own altar. She went up to the front with her selections: the statue, and a carved fluorite candle holder which was heavy on purple hues. Once she reached the front counter, there were two women sitting there. One of them was an elderly lady with white hair perched on a stool, with a pencil skewered through her messy bun, and the other was a pretty black lady with an infectious laugh.

Sitting her selections on the counter, Becky asked them “Do you know what Goddess the statue’s of?”

"I don't know, Helena. Who do you think it is?" The white haired lady picked up the statue, holding it up, and looked at it closely. "I'm not sure on this one. I know it's an Egyptian deity; I'm fairly certain the woman I bought it from told me she'd bought it in Egypt years before." Helena shrugged, and began wrapping it up. "The woman was in the middle of some rough times, and was forced to downsize, and move away, so I bought a bunch of her things to help her out." Helena chuckled. "I bought it more because she was desperate and needed the money, not because I thought it would sell. She's a little...uh...worse for the wear." Helena chuckled as she put it in the bag.

"I plan on restoring it when I get it home to Pittsburgh," Becky said confidently. "I'm an artist." Why she tacked on that last bit, she had no clue. She hadn't felt like an artist for a long time.

"Then I'm glad whoever she is in the Egyptian pantheon, she'll be getting a new lease on life."

"Me, too. She's pretty." Standing there, she noticed an 'Eye of Horus' pendant inside the case she stood in front of. "Can I see that?" Becky pointed it out.

"Sure." As the older lady was wrapping the hunk of fluorite, she asked "Hope, can you get that necklace out of the case?" Hope retrieved it out, and handed it to Becky, who looked at the silver pendant, the matching chain, and the small price tag attached to the chain. "Can you add this in, too?" Helena rang it up, and Becky took the bag that Helena handed her. "Thanks."

"Thanks for stopping in." Helena told Becky as she turned from the counter. As she made her way to the door, it chimed, and she passed another person coming in. The lady named Hope called out before she walked out on the sidewalk. "Have a safe trip home!"



Becky felt like her trip had been a total success. She got to paint, to see amazing artworks and artifacts in person, and now had in her possession a statue that she had a creative urge to restore. She didn't get home until late on Sunday evening, so it wasn't until Monday evening when she got home from work that Becky was able to start researching her statue. It was nearly 16 inches tall; it wasn't tiny. It took several days, but she finally learned that the statue was of the goddess Shait, who ruled over fate and fortune. Becky thought it was unusual; she didn't realize there was such a thing, but the statuette represented a dual deity: whether she appeared in her female form, or in his male form as the God Shai depended solely on which face they chose to show you, what they determined you needed, or the face you would be most receptive to. The article said that together, Shait and Shai, regardless of the form they took, ruled over your fate, your length of days, and your fortunes, along with being present with you at your end when your soul faced Ma'at and the weighing of your heart against a feather. It gave Becky a bit of a laugh when she read it. She had assumed that fate didn't like her very much, and suddenly, she now found herself about to restore an Egyptian deity of fate. How ironic.

She had something to look forward to now. Every day after Becky got home, she went to her small studio and worked on restoring the statue, fixing not only the break on the foot, but fixing a hairline crack she'd found on the back. After the 'bodywork' was complete, she began repainting it. Becky took her time, and focused on detail work, particularly on the face. The serenity she felt when she looked at Shait's face initially, seeped into her restoration work, and was beginning to permeate her life. She was enjoying it, and almost felt sad as she finished up on that last day.

Becky stood there, admiring her handiwork. She couldn't possibly be any more pleased with how the restoration of Shait came out, and how much the time she'd spent on all the details she'd added made a difference in the finished statue. The last of the paint she'd applied yesterday had completed drying overnight. All she had left to do to finish her restoration was to spray a protective clear coat sealer over it, and allow that to dry. Becky carefully sprayed on the sealer, holding it from the bottom as she started spraying at the top. Once she came close to her fingers, she sat the statue carefully on a piece of newspaper while trying to avoid getting fingerprints on what she'd sprayed. She then

sprayed where she had been holding the statue, leaning across the table as she critically viewed it to ensure she didn't miss any spots. Once she was satisfied, she put her supplies away, and picked up her now lukewarm tea from her desk. Becky turned to leave her studio, and go cook dinner. Something caused her to turn back and look at the statue, and she would never forget the moment. The light streaming in through the window cast a honeyed, warm golden glow that passed right across the statue of Shait. The restored statue as it sat drying, with light streaming across it was beautiful, and she felt a surge of pride at what she'd done, and happiness that she didn't put the statue back on the shelf when she was in New York.

"Now, isn't that so much better?" Becky asked the statue, much in the same way she talked to herself.

Suddenly, all the color drained out of the room, and a wave of nausea passed over her, and she momentarily felt lightheaded, dropping her mug full of tea, spilling it all over the floor. She reached out to the table to support herself, and moments later the nausea passed. Sighing, Becky looked down at the mess on her floor, which in addition to tea everywhere, included a shattered mug. She cleaned up her spilled tea and the bits of broken mug and went on with her day. Once she got her dinner cooking, she sat down to play a game on her phone, like she usually did. It gave her a welcome break from the normal busyness of her day. Or that's what Becky thought she was going to do. Her mind wasn't letting her. It was like her brain was tap dancing, and couldn't settle down. She shut down her game, and moved on to Facebook, and she felt the same way. Becky felt strange, and wondered if it had something to do with when she felt lightheaded and dropped her tea earlier. "Maybe I'm getting sick? I hope not." she thought to herself.

Later when she went to bed, as she lay there halfway between awake and asleep, an odd thing happened. Becky thought she was dreaming. Whether she was or wasn't, it hardly mattered. It was impactful. Her every moment, every breath, every heartbeat suddenly felt like they had their own gravity. More than that, they were connected. Each moment felt separate, yet connected to each other...but more than that they felt connected to everyone, and everything, and every other moment in her life, simultaneously stretching back to her birth. As

she was beginning to feel overwhelmed by the connections of the past, multiple futures reached out to her, waiting for her action (or inaction) to make them solid...to make them her reality. They stretched off to infinity. The moment that she was in felt...sticky. It was the only way she could describe it. The odd way it felt made her focus on each single moment whether she wanted to or not, and it reminded her a little bit of what it felt like to try to run in water, such resistance she felt in each moment, willing her to **see**. It was the same strange feeling she'd felt earlier, but crystallized. Condensed. Every moment, every breath, every second had a cascade of possibility and direction attached to it, to the point it made her fearful of moving. It was as if she was standing on a precipice, whirling with vertigo. Everything - literally every tiny choice or decision she made, or worse yet...DIDN'T make...had so much possibility attached to them it was dizzying. It was then that her dream - if it was that - ended. The dizziness she felt carried on briefly into her next waking moments, and subsided gradually as the room stopped whirling.

As Becky sat up in bed, now wide awake, she pondered what she'd just seen and felt. "Was the paint or the sealer toxic? Am I having a hallucination in reaction to it?" She got up carefully, ready to grab onto something in case the room started whirling again, and cautiously padded off to the kitchen and made a cup of chamomile lavender tea, and sat down at the table.

Something was definitely — different. Something happened, but Becky still wasn't exactly sure what. In the dream, every moment seemed...sticky. If it were a dream, she would've expected that to subside as well — but it hadn't. In fact, it felt even more sticky if that was possible. As Becky pondered it, she realized that what was different — what felt different, and foreign to her — is that normally you don't notice every moment individually; you merely live them. Becky was wondering why she was suddenly noticing them now. Most of the time, she did what she felt like she had to, and hoped for the best, like everyone else. What changed?

Even now, sitting at her kitchen table, she could feel things as clearly as she did in her dream. Mentally, she was taking apart what she dreamed, and what she was feeling now, and trying to figure out the differences. The biggest difference, she realized, was how every moment connected to every other

moment. Becky was able to apply what she was feeling to various choices she made in her past. “Whoa.” Mentally, her mind was blown.

“Every time I chose to do nothing at all, or decided to ‘let it ride, and see where it goes’ made a difference. ‘No choice’ is still a choice. Each and every time I made ‘no choice’ it made a difference regardless, and led to different futures, actions and consequences.” Becky sat there at the table, one hand holding her tea, anchoring her to the moment, as her elbow rested on the table and her forehead was in her other hand. She couldn’t help but think back to when she was reading ‘The Kybalion,’ an esoteric book she learned something new from every time she read it. Mentally, she was recalling the ‘law of cause and effect,’ that there are no coincidences; merely causes that weren’t visible.

“I always thought it was the big choices I made that made the difference. There aren’t really any inconsequential moments, or choices. Taken all together, it’s the action or inaction of those million tiny choices I made that created the moment I’m in now.” She sighed, seeing her life from a completely different point of view.

Some doors, with a single choice, closed forever. Others, with a single choice opened. What came starkly into view, however, were whole stretches of her life that were more or less determined by what amounted to...auto-pilot! It was frightening - but also very enlightening to see her life from this new perspective. “Holy shit. How long have I been on auto-pilot?”

As frightening as it was to see and feel how sticky all those moments were, Becky recognized the significance of what she was seeing. When you can see the ramifications of your actions or inactions *before* you choose them, and can see the outcome and any possible consequences *before* you make the million tiny choices that set them in stone...it changes how you respond to all of it, including jettisoning the notion of ‘auto-pilot.’

“Wow.” Becky shifted in her chair, and took a long drink of her tea, as thoughts gelled in her brain, and little dots connected. “If I could see in my past what I see now — knowing how everything is all connected — how many things would I have chosen differently?”

Becky sighed, and finished up her tea. Back to bed.



The next morning, her alarm went off, and Becky rolled over and hit snooze, which was normal for her. She wasn't a morning person, and never was. Nine minutes later, the alarm went off again and when she leaned over to hit snooze again, her brain wouldn't let her, as she was feeling that sticky gravity of her choices, and remembered the night before. She sat up, now wide awake, with a realization: on an average morning, she could hit snooze six to ten times. That meant she was wasting fifty-four to ninety minutes...every single morning... each moment pregnant with possibility and choice. How much time was wasted on snooze in her twenty-eight years? It was overwhelming for a 'first thought of the day.' Becky did something she rarely did: She called out from work. Becky was seeing her life in an entirely different way, from a different perspective, and it didn't seem to be letting up. Somehow, everything changed, and she needed to figure out where to go from here.

Becky got up, got dressed, and went to the kitchen. She popped an everything bagel in the toaster as she made coffee. Her life was in a tizzy at the moment, for sure...but it wasn't a bad thing. The biggest spotlight was on the past two years, and everything that happened around it. The tragedies that happened in her life made those moments and their actions and inactions that much sharper. Not a single day passed that she didn't think of all of them, and wondered how her life would've been different if they hadn't died.

Her mother and her Aunt Greta died together a year and a half earlier, in a multi-car accident, where low-visibility combined with icy conditions lead to many deaths that day north of Warrendale, where the Pennsylvania Turnpike and I-79 interchange is located. Having a dual funeral was every bit as horrible as it sounded. She remembered vividly cancelling her trip to New York to help her father with all the details. They both were on auto-pilot, then, trying to make sense of their loss, while tending to the matters at hand that always follow a

death.

As things seemed to get back to stable footing, and 'normal,' her father became quite ill a year later with stage-four small-cell lung cancer. Dad had never been a smoker, though her mother had been for years. At first, Dad spent lots of time back and forth to specialists, and was receiving first chemo, and then radiation treatments. Then, he began having all-too frequent stays in the hospital as his body grew weaker and had little immunity; The doctors treating him finally held out no more hope, and he was put on hospice care where he lingered for three months in a rehab/long care facility before finally succumbing to his illness.

By the time he started spending more time in and out of the hospital, she had to drop out of school. Dad needed her; she was there for him. When Dad went into hospice, she visited him daily after work, but it colored her perspective of her life, and looking back at it now, she realized it changed everything. The overwhelm of losing Dad was too much to bear and scary; she couldn't focus either. Though it might sound insensitive, those three months while her dad transitioned out of his life proved to be the longest three months of Becky's life. Becky was so frozen, depressed and anguished that it served to immobilize her, and life would never, ever be the same again.

At the end, by the time he died, Dad had run through his savings; for the grand finale to her dad's untimely demise, Becky found she needed to sell his house in Stanton Heights to settle debts incurred by all the time he spent in the hospital. It was a hot, steaming bowl of suck, and Becky felt like she had no options in any of it. Life seemed horribly unfair. Her mom, her aunt, and her dad all had things they wanted to do in their lives. Her mom wanted to write, but never found the time. Her Aunt wanted to become a professional photographer, but she always said she needed more time and money to do it than she had. Her father wanted to travel, but wanted to wait until he retired; instead, Mom died, and he couldn't imagine going without her.

Becky thought fate had been cruel to her and her family, but with the new perspective she had, she realized that different choices would've made a huge difference. She could practically hear their voices:

"I'll take that trip once I retire." Never taken.

"I'll write that book when I have more time." Never written.

"I'll buy that bathing suit after I lose more weight." Never bought, didn't go to the pool.

"I'll take more time for myself when I have a chance." Never taken or enjoyed.

Or the infamous - "I'll get more sleep when I'm dead..." Sigh.

Becky saw all the desires that went unfulfilled because the conditions they thought they needed to do them were never met. Seeing their dreams, goals and desires get quashed because they ran out of life and time was disheartening. More disheartening, now that Becky was seeing her moments and choices differently, she realized the same thing was happening in her own life.

"I'll go back to school and finish my degree eventually..." Eventually.

"I'll support myself with my art work and creativity sooner or later." It's always later.

"I'll find love someday." Someday.

Her brain screamed at her. "When exactly were 'eventually,' 'later' and 'someday?'"

Seeing her life and her loved ones' lives through this lens was momentous, and an awakening. Becky saw that her *tiniest* choices had the potential to make huge differences. There are only so many seconds, minutes, hours and days allotted to each of us, and each one of them has choices attached, and all of our power lies

in those choices. They were like seeds planted in the present, waiting to sprout, grow and mature in the future, as a result of cause and effect. Sitting at her table, Becky realized that for whatever reason — time felt different to her now. She couldn't imagine spending two hours cruising posts on Facebook today; it seemed less than useless. She would do it regularly before without a second thought, and sometimes all night long, even after being tired after work. An hour or two of solitaire? Same thing. Hit the snooze button nine, ten times? Ditto. All she could do was sigh, and say, "Enough."

Becky could now see all the possibilities and outcomes she hadn't before, and how many of those precious moments she outright wasted. "I spent too much time doing things that didn't matter, and not enough time doing things that actually did or could." More importantly, she could see all the actions that she could take right now that would have ramifications on the rest of her life. Her job at the t-shirt show was okay, but it wasn't her dream job. It paid the bills, and more often than not, left her tired and unfulfilled. She could have more. She deserved more.

Becky was an excellent painter and photographer, but sitting at her table drinking coffee, she realized she'd never believed in herself or her talent enough to pursue it fully, and she had an abject fear of not having money for rent. As a result, all of her attempts at 'getting something going' with her artwork was half-hearted. She wasn't fully bought in, and the grief she legitimately felt, and the subsequent creative dry spell following only played in to that fear. Becky had let fear and inaction make her choices, and she could see that. Seeing so many choices and options left her momentarily overwhelmed.

Becky got up, and pulled a notepad out of her junk drawer in the kitchen, normally reserved for grocery lists. Once she got past the overwhelm she felt from seeing so many options attached to each moment and how *all* of it - her past, future and particularly, her current moment connected, and realizing that each and every moment represented a *choice*...Becky could see, suddenly. She could see *clearly*. Her life up to this point had been a long sequence of what at the time seemed like mostly inconsequential little decisions. She had been taught to think the it was those big decisions that defined the life she lead. Instead, it's the littlest ones. Her current perspective showed her that all those

inconsequential little decisions were responsible for the life he had in this moment - not the life she really wanted. By this time, Becky was scribbling notes to herself furiously on the notepad, as fast as she could, not wanting to leave anything out. It left her breathless with both fear of change, and longing for what she could now see as a possibility. This time, she resolved to not let her fear have the final say. "No more," she said aloud. "No more."

She could see how her life was connected to that of her family, and where it diverged. Becky could see that even as her own inconsequential decisions left her with her current life, the same could be said for her Mom, Dad and Aunt Greta. Becky never stopped missing them, or thinking of them every single day.

"This day, this moment..." she thought, "I only wish I could tell them what I know now." There were so many things all of them never did. Simultaneously, though, there was promise. Not for her immediate family. The past is done. It happened, and the only thing about it you can change is how you both view and understand it, and allow how you react to it going forward. Seeing those connections, she had another revelation: Becky could see how her moments and her family's moments often ran together, and often intertwined....and not always for the best outcome, but instead for the 'default' version that lead to 'mostly okay.' The revelation was that those connections between herself and others didn't only define the negatives. They also highlighted a future and a way ahead. She realized that taking action and making a change in her own life could cause others in her life to possibly make a change theirs, too - if they chose to. Oftentimes, the changes you make are a little like a game of chess: your move causes another to move. Sometimes they like it, and other times, they can't, don't...or won't.

Becky looked at the notes she'd taken, and made some decisions. "Some changes are in order, I believe," she laughed. "This might be the most productive day of hooky I've ever played from work." And with a single thought/decision - just that fast, Becky decided that she would change jobs. "Tomorrow, I'll give my two weeks' notice." Thinking about it made her happy. The best case scenario was finding a job that paid equivalent to the one she had, while allowing for more schedule flexibility. Even if it paid less, but left her more time to create artwork, it would work. The Etsy store she started three years before and never

totally bought into? It was sitting there waiting for her to put attention and intention into it.

Becky pulled out another piece of paper; a blank piece, pregnant with promise. It really was. She could see threads of fate and purpose stretching out from this moment. At the top of the page, she wrote:

"I promise myself that I'll devote that extra time in creating art pieces, photography and creativity. I won't let fear dictate my choices."

"I promise myself that I'll sell the originals for what they're actually worth, and sell copies for a lesser price, not my originals."

"I promise myself that I'll start keeping a creativity journal that I track ideas for projects and creative ideas in, and if I find myself feeling no creativity, I will turn to that for inspiration."

"Our time here is finite. Don't forget it, and don't let it slip by."

Defining herself in the way she just did felt awesome.



"I don't know why I'm able to see things through this lens, instead of the way I normally do...but I'm so glad I am" What an opportunity she'd been given, to see how she ended up in the place she was, and to be shown a way to the place she longed to be. She got up, and went to her studio area, to check on her statue, and see if it dried correctly, with no runs or air bubbles or anything she would need to fix. The statue of Shait sat there on the table as she left it. Becky tentatively touched the tip of her finger to the statue, to see if the clear coat had dried, and it had. Gently, she touched other places, checking for tacky spots. It was dry. She picked the statue up. It was beautiful, and definitely worth all the effort restoring it had taken. The hues of blue, gold and white in her sheath dress

turned out lovely, including the geometric designs she'd painstakingly added to the top. The detail on her face, particularly her eyes made a huge difference in the statue overall. Taken together, it was stunning. "I'm so glad I rescued you," Becky commented as she sat the statue back on the table. She'd move it to her altar later that day.

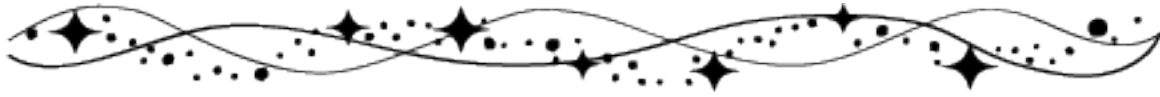
Becky walked over to her window, opening the curtains wide, letting the afternoon light stream in. She stood there, and looked out at the sea of buildings around her, knowing that each and every one of the people living and working in them were given the same opportunities each and every day, whether they saw it as that or not. "Thank you, my Lady for letting me really see. Thank you for letting me recognize how I got where I am. I promise I won't waste what you showed me." Becky prayed to the Lady that all the people that were in the sea of buildings around her would see it for themselves, and live the lives they really wanted to, instead of letting time just tick away. Tick tock....

This time, at least, Becky's mug wasn't in her hand, but as she moved to turn away from the window after praying for the people all those buildings represented, she again felt lightheaded, and grabbed the windowsill, anchoring herself. She felt a strong wave of déjà-vu, even as the colors drained out of the room again, and then came back as the lightheadedness passed. She looked around her. Her studio looked exactly the same way it had yesterday. Yesterday. "Wow," Becky thought. "It's only been twenty-four hours." In that short time, nothing changed — and everything changed. Becky walked past the table, and picked up the statue of Shait to place it on her altar in her bedroom. As she left her studio, Becky looked up and caught sight of herself in the mirror, and a watery figure reminiscent of the statue could be seen clearly in the mirror, standing behind her, albeit mostly transparent. She caught Shait's eyes and looked at one another.

"Now, isn't that better?" Shait said, as she smiled at Becky through the mirror. Becky's jaw dropped. She looked beside her and saw nothing, and then back into the mirror. The figure was gone.

"Don't forget what you learned...the details matter." she heard faintly.

Dedications and Acknowledgements



As always, to my husband, my beloved, my twin flame, Schoen. Thank you for always supporting me, and for believing in me. I'm lucky, and I know it.

To my sister Missy, you're the 'she' to my 'nanigans.' If something smart-ass comes out of my mouth, (or from my pen) there's a good half-chance it came out of yours first. And that was *before* I started writing books. Now I get "That's gonna end up in a book, isn't it?" The answer? Probably.

To my sister Amelia, may we share many more witchy times, and I can't wait until we start working and writing together. It will be an adventure, I'm sure!

Thank you all for being there, for being sounding boards...and for simply loving me, as goofy and nerdy as I am. We're working on a vampire book series together. "Not Quite Human." Look for it. It'll happen eventually. We're about 35K words in. We only need to finish!

To Jimmy: You're not here; but you're never forgotten. I will never, ever *not* say your name. May your memory live forever, your name be like honey on all of the tongues of those who knew and loved you, and may your memory always be a blessing. We all miss you daily and we probably always will. Men: for goodness' sakes, get an annual physical...please? Your loved ones will always love you, but it's WAY better if they're loving you here in the physical realm, and not from beyond the veil. As ghosts, you can parade your ghost junk all over the place as often as you want HERE, and *most* of your loved ones will never notice you doing it! It's sad, but true. It isn't worth the frustration you'll feel about not being noticed in the afterlife, and the heartache your loved ones will feel because you aren't here. Just go to the doctor, 'K? Lecture over.

To Cyndy Collins, who has long been a part of the family I got to pick, along with her sister, Christine Collins Shelley. I love you both dearly. Cyndy's an amazing artist, and long ago, convinced me I could be one too - which changed my career trajectory literally forever. Cyndy told me something once that I never, ever forgot: "I paint with pastels and paints. You paint with words." (It's hard to believe that was 35 years ago.) I needed to remember that in places in this book. You'll know them when you run across them. Thanks again for the encouragement so long ago that was still relevant in the here and now.

To my family...all of them...the one I was born into, and the one I married into. I went from being a daughter, a sister, a niece and a cousin to also being a wife, a mom, an aunt, and gaining another sister, and another set of parents that love me. When your in-laws call your sisters/besties their "bonus daughters," it speaks volumes about the family you married into. I love all of you!

To Trish, my lifelong friend. You always knew I would be a writer - even when I doubted it myself. Thanks for always believing.

To Stacey, thanks for letting me share my dream that you were in all the way back in 2020 within the pages of this book, the story "Tick Tock." It looks **considerably** different now than the dream originally did, but the main elements remain within. It still holds the message that time here on Earth as well as the choices we make are both precious. That's why I'm also dedicating this book to your brother, Max, as well as your sister Alexis. Those we love live on when we remember them, and say their names - and now lots of others know their names, too. Never forget: love never dies. It's energy - it only changes forms. Ma and Pop (who always loved you SO very much, and I'm sure still do!) are looking down and smiling on all of us - as are your sister and brother. May their memories and their love that all of you had one for another be a blessing to all of you, whether you're here, or they're on the other side of the veil.

And last - but by no means least, our good friends, Shareon and Precious Evans, who own Eve's Spiritual and Religious Goods in Baltimore. I love you both...I love your store, I love your Cinnamon Apricot Tisane Tea, and that insanely wonderful moisturizer that Precious whips up...but most particularly - I love, love, LOVE both of you, and the way you love others: unconditionally. I don't have enough hugs for you guys! I wish our mom could've met you both, and I'm so glad you're in our lives!

I need to acknowledge some other folks, too:

The ladies at Papertown Dairy Bar in Spring Grove, PA, for keeping the coffee flowing in the am, and with a smile at that as I took up a booth and wrote! Also, to the ladies at the Valley Tavern in Seven Valleys, PA, for keeping the margaritas flowing in the pm!

I would be remiss if I didn't mention Ghouls and Grinds, in Hanover, PA. Thanks for the awesome coffee! It's a great place - with great people - and equally great coffee (and tea.) If you're ever in York County, PA - Do yourself a favor and stop at Papertown, Valley Tavern or Ghouls and Grinds. You WON'T regret it!