“All These Countless Breaths”  
by Joseph Dorren  
1st Place, Short Story 16-18
All These Countless Breaths

Pleasure wound through his body, sinuous and smoky, a living thing that asked - no, begged - for more. His eyes shuttered closed as he inhaled deeply through his nose, tasting the copper in the air as he slowly let it drift from his slightly parted lips to swell in a swirling cloud and disappear into the crisp night, joining the remnants of countless other breaths in a race to the stars. His breath came in soft pants, slowing as his heart began to calm.

He drew in another breath, his every sense on fire as though lit from within. He felt the caress of the breeze on bare skin where his hood had fallen away; the scraping of the cold across his cheeks. The way the soaked fabric of his dark jeans clung to his legs, already stiffening in that characteristic way of bloodied cloth. That magnificent crimson tang flooded his nostrils, erasing any other smell as a secret smile spilled onto the cold lines of his lips.

There were no lights on the street on which he stood, the only source of illumination the barest sliver of moon. Yet it was enough to see the glory of what lay before him; what he had done. Enough to see the reflection of the stars in the dark, impossibly large pool that stood in stark contrast to the white, drained thing it surrounded.

Squatting over the body - for that is what it was - the man ran his gaze over the bloody and broken form already beginning to cool in the freezing air. She was pretty enough, he supposed. But baser, carnal desires had never been a motive as it was for... others. His teeth flashed as he snarled distastefully. He paid no attention to those things; he did what he did because he could. He loved death, and death loved him.

Sighing happily, the man drew up his hood and walked away, a satisfied smile playing about the hard white line of his mouth.
Vincent grinned savagely and playfully at his audience of one. A wide-eyed 13-year-old, hanging on his every word, her hands curled in terror.

“Did they ever catch him?!” Ria asked. She was pale, her normally golden skin a sallow gray.

He waited a long moment before he responded, pretending to think about it. “No. No, I don't think they did.” Ria’s dark hair framed her face in shining ringlets as she listened to his words with utter belief and certainty glowing in her eyes. It made him uneasy, how she refused to believe that his story was, well, just a story.

His gaze drifted from her delicate features to the chipped fingernails on the hand that Ria raised in the air. He sighed. Always with the questions. “Yes?”

“Does anyone know what he looks like?” The slight tremor in her voice belied the stoic expression she planted on her face.

Wariness swept through Vincent. It was unwarranted, he knew that. It was simply an innocent question. But still... “Of course not, he always hid his face.”

She paused a moment, her brow furrowed as she thought. It worried him whenever she got that expression. It usually meant she was trying to figure out something he'd really rather she didn’t.

Vincent racked his brain for something to derail the wheels spinning in her mind, his blood pounding. Not because he was afraid of what she would do if she truly did figure it out, but what he might be forced to do in order to protect what he had built for himself here.

“Where did he live?” She gulped audibly. “Where did he...?” he read the unfinished question in the lines of fear etched across her face.
Careful, Vincent. “Mmm. No one is completely sure, but he did most of his killing...” he hesitated, knowing he could never lie to her. “Near here.” he murmured.

Fresh fear bloomed on Ria’s face, even as her hands stopped shaking and she tilted her head to the side, curls swaying with the motion. “Weren’t you afraid?” She asked softly. “You know, to live here?”

Vincent smiled slowly. “I have nothing to fear from him.” Perhaps it was the wry humor in Vincent’s eyes, or perhaps it was the utter certainty in his voice as he said it. He wasn’t sure, but he knew what it meant when the concentration cleared from her face and that light bloomed in her eyes. The light that meant she had figured it out.

The smile fell from her face as she stood suddenly, casually. Her face blank. So smart. She had always been so goddamn smart. “Ria-” He began.

“I’m going to go hang out with Alex, I promised her I would, yesterday.” She spoke blandly, disinterested, even as real, unchained terror pooled in her beautiful almond eyes.

He knew what was running through her mind. How it all fit. The location of the deaths. The build and height of the man described by witnesses. The fact that he knew more details about the actual killings than anyone should. The way the murders had stopped twelve years ago; almost exactly on the day she knew as her “birthday.” He knew she saw the truth in his gaze, in his silence. The way he didn’t even try to deny it.

Perhaps it had been a mistake to raise her to know right from wrong, good from evil. To recognize monsters. Ironic, considering he was the worst of them. If an evil man teaches good, is he still evil? Vincent wondered. He supposed it didn’t matter. If she walked out of that room, everything he had worked for, sacrificed for, killed for, was shattered. She would go to the
authorities because that’s how she had been raised since the day he had taken her -still a baby-
from where she thrashed, wailing in a pool of her mother’s blood. The blood he had spilt; blood 
he had tasted.

“Ria, I-” Countless thoughts spun through his mind, all the things he wished he could say 
twisting and running together in an unending cacophony.

_I knowyouknowIshouldhavetoldyouYoudon’tunderstandIcouldn’ttellyou I... I... love you._

Her eyes softened as she read in his eyes all the things he could never have said. A battle 
of loyalty and inherent good roared and raged inside of her; good won. Tears tracked down her 
face as she turned her face away, shaking her head. “You’re a monster.” She backed away from 
him slowly, mature beyond her years. And beautiful. Oh so beautiful. “I have to tell them, Dad, 
I-”

That was when he struck, leaping from the chair. Tears blurred his vision even as his 
hands closed about her slim neck, cutting off her choking cry. He held her tight as she kicked and 
struggled, battering at his face and chest with her slim hands and chipped nails.

After what seemed like years and years and years, she quieted. He lay her down on the 
floor. He was gentle. Calm. Even as guilt and regret and sorrow and all of the emotions he had 
ever felt before tore his heart asunder. He knelt by her warm body, hands clenched so tightly 
they left bloodied crescents in his palms.

It was two minutes before the shock of what he had done washed over him. Two hours 
before he could bring himself to look at her, cold and broken, her glazed eyes and blue lips the 
only signs of color in her empty, bleached face. Two days before he mustered the strength to stir
from his vigil. He was just… so… tired. Of fighting and raging and killing. He had killed children before, but she… she was different. Killing her had broken him.

His hands were fumbling as he groped for the phone and dialed three digits. Raising the phone to his ear, he choked out what had happened; what he had done. Once he started, it was hard to stop, his incalculable sins spilling out of him in a torrent. With a wrenching effort, he stilled his tongue; there would be plenty of time for that later.

Lifting Ria’s cold body, her limbs discolored from the uncirculated blood pooled within, her father wrapped her in a sheet and carried her out the back door. Vincent lay his daughter to rest beneath the sparse foliage of the forest that hunched behind the chipped and flaking farmhouse he had raised her in. He placed Ria in the dark. Beneath sighing leaves far too thick for any light from the splinter of the moon to pierce, as approaching police sirens wailed their lonely cries, howling in tandem with his own tortured wails of sorrow until he could scream no more. He knelt, the soft earth staining his knees, watching the air from his lungs swirl and dance in billowing clouds as it joined the remnants of all those other countless breaths in their race to the stars.