

Standing with Alyosha

by [Mark Hiskes](#) in the [March 22, 2011](#) issue

"Alyosha stood at the crossroads under the streetlamp."
Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

It's a place of darkness where
a human will might do its best work,
where kindness becomes flesh
or deflates like a blow-up Santa
come New Year's. It might be
the snug, well-insulated house,
green lawn groomed, minivan shining
bright in the garage, abuse lurking
in some airless bedroom corner. Or
it might be the stinking deathbed,
the anguished, desperate jail cell,
where Alyosha blesses this
brother's innocence or that
one's best intentions, absorbing
the worst the world wills him. Still
he chooses to kiss the tortured Ivan and,
if stories had a doorway, Ivan's
Grand Inquisitor, too, for,
in the end, it's freely given love
the withered, aging lips
long for. At this crossroads
Jesus kneels before a cowering
prostitute, her breasts bare. He
sticks his finger in the dirt,
sketches what shames them all
but not her, no, judges not
to shame her, says instead,
"Go ahead, throw a stone,

you men who have no sin."

It's the place of darkness
at crossroads everywhere,
offering bewildered travelers
light enough to glimpse
the willing figure love makes or
the long, shivering shadow of its retreat.