

# 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.