

AND THORNS WILL GROW THERE: A CREATIVE DISSERTATION

by

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(Under the Direction of Reginald McKnight)

ABSTRACT

Fairy tales and trauma are closely related as a result of the long history of violence in fairytale variants. From Charles Perrault's seventeenth-century *Tales of Mother Goose* to Kelly Link's twenty-first-century retellings, violence and abuse are prominent themes. This story cycle explores that connection through a collection of original works of fiction.

INDEX WORDS:     trauma, fairy tale, fiction

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## DEDICATION

To Judith Ortiz Cofer: thank you for believing in this project and the power of fairy tales.

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Many thanks to my committee for your invaluable feedback and to my family for your patience and encouragement over the past seven years.

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## Critical Introduction

In Cathy Caruth's foundational work on trauma theory, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, she argues that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature - the way it was precisely not known in the first instance - returns to haunt the survivor later on." Twenty-three years after its publication, Caruth's description of trauma still captures the conundrum at its core. As Caruth so astutely points out, the traumatic event defies understanding at the time of its occurrence yet is re-experienced by the survivor, in an attempt to understand a horror that defies comprehension. In other words, trauma is both inaccessible and inescapable. The paradoxical nature of trauma is the driving force behind the collection of fiction in this dissertation. This collection of short stories explores how characters experience trauma in the moment of sudden and unexpected horror and also how characters experience traumatic events that are ongoing and continuous, such as childhood sexual abuse. Of particular interest to this collection are the ongoing ramifications of trauma, after the violent event or events have passed.

This collection is structured as a story cycle, a form that allows me to follow one character in various stages of her recovery process, as well as include stand-alone stories whose protagonists exist within the same world: a realistic setting that fairy tale elements have seeped into. Including multiple protagonists casts the central storyline in context: the central protagonist is a survivor of trauma who inhabits a world filled with survivors of trauma, and one survivor's experience may look very different from another's. In the core storyline, a young girl named Laura is first sexually assaulted as an adolescent, abuse that continues for several years. Her storyline follows her through high school, ending only after she has graduated from college. The segments that follow Laura are interrupted by short stories that explore trauma from other

viewpoints. In some of the stories the moment of trauma stems from a singular event, such as the accidental death of a child, while other characters experience ongoing violence before escaping. In each case the protagonist is a woman (or a group of women), who seeks to make sense of the new world created by her traumatic experience.

### The Link Between Fairy Tales and Trauma

Fairy tales are a robust form for exploring violence, especially violence as experienced by women. In one of the earliest publications of fairy tales in Europe, Charles Perrault's seventeenth-century *Tales of Mother Goose*, seven of the eight stories include abuse. In six of those seven stories, the victims are women, and Perrault included abusive relationships in all three of the additional fairy tales he published separately. Among those three tales, "Donkeyskin" is notable for its treatment incest, a subject that remains taboo today. Violence is also a prevalent feature in each edition of the Grimms' nineteenth-century collection, and contemporary authors such as Angela Carter have mined those collections while composing gritty retellings. Hints of violence also persist in twentieth- and twenty-first-century children's entertainment. Cinderella is a victim of abuse even in popular animated children's movies, and the villains - who are more often than not women - frequently suffer gruesome fates.

The violence in each fairy tale retelling has roots in the culture that developed and transmitted the story, revealing the values and fears of its time and region. In *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, Jack Zipes makes a compelling case that Little Red Riding Hood tales are a direct reflection of a culture's political and social concerns. That much is readily apparent in Perrault's "Little Red Riding Hood," which ends with a moral, warning young girls not to speak to strangers. Perrault goes so far as to add that there are wolves "who are

charming, quiet, polite, unassuming, complacent, and sweet, who pursue young women at home and in the streets. And unfortunately, it is these gentle wolves who are the most dangerous ones of all.” Perrault’s advice to young women reflects a culture deeply concerned with women’s sexual behavior, a culture that seems to lay blame at a woman’s door if she is sexually assaulted. Zipes makes a strong case that in addition to reflecting a patriarchal culture’s obsession with women’s sexual decorum, the popularity of Little Red Riding Hood tales reveals political tensions. Building on the work of Marianne Rumpf, Zipes contends that the antagonist was likely a werewolf before Perrault changed him into a mere wolf and connects the popularity of the tale to a surge in werewolf trials in the European countries where the story was popular (19). Zipes points to other research as evidence that the Grimms’ version of the story may have been shaped in reaction to a French military invasion (35). Werewolf trials and military invasions both brought violence and left communities to sort through the aftermath, making Little Red Riding Hood a product of trauma. Given this violent legacy, the exploration of trauma inherently invites fairy tale motifs.

In “Ten Fool-Proof Ways to Snag a Fairytale Romance,” I use parody to draw attention to the prevalence of violence in the fairytale tradition. Satirizing the voice from how-to and self-help articles that offer love advice, a narrator suggests ways to recreate classic fairy tales without the use of magic. The advice ranges from emotional abuse and manipulation to murder and cannibalism, but each recommendation is grounded in a specific fairy tale, primarily the Grimms’ collection, but also Perrault’s and Anderson’s. For instance the “Silent Damsel in Distress” method references multiple tales from the Grimms’ collection where women lose the ability to speak such as “Our Lady’s Child,” a tale in which the Virgin Mary punishes an unrepentant woman by stealing both her voice and her children, a punishment that leads the

woman's suspicious husband to attempt burning her at the stake. The gruesome "Cannibal in Law" section is based on a well-known tale, Perrault's "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood," where the rescued princess and her children are nearly eaten by her husband's ogre mother. Violence is an inseparable aspect of fairy tales.

The link between trauma and fairy tales is further strengthened by a concept the psychiatrist and trauma expert Judith Herman describes in *Trauma and Recover: The Aftermath of Violence*. Herman argues that "To study psychological trauma is to come face to face both with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature" (7). In other words, studying trauma requires recognizing that neither nature nor civilization are truly safe. Few statements grasp the fear at the heart of fairy tales so well as Herman's words. In fairy tales characters must face their own vulnerability in a world where the forces of nature are often indifferent or even hostile to their survival, as well as face the aggression of other humans. Little Red Riding Hood has no chance of evading the wolf, who encounters her alone in the woods, and Cinderella's circumstances place her at the mercy of her abusers. Cinderella's decision to remain in an environment where she is abused only seems irrational to readers unfamiliar with the social structure of Perrault's time. As a young girl she would place herself at even higher risk by fleeing her home. Wild animals might attack her, and if she were spared that fate, she would still need to find a way to earn enough money for food. The search for food would put her at the mercy of whatever individuals were willing to give food to beggars or hire a young girl. Cinderella is forced to face the dangers of both nature and humanity.

Cinderella's vulnerability echoes the feeling of helplessness evoked by trauma in general, a helplessness compounded by gender for the women in Perrault's and the Grimms' publications. Perrault's Little Red Riding Hood is devoured by the wolf, while in the Grimms' collections she

survives only after a male adult intervenes on her behalf. Her survival is dependent on the good will of nearby men. Similarly, in Perrault's "Blue Beard," the protagonist is rescued by her brothers just moments before Blue Beard intends to murder her. Perrault's Cinderella and Donkeyskin are rescued through marriage to a prince, and in each case they are only able to attract the prince's attention after a fairy intervenes. The Grimms' Cinderella is more resourceful, with an unexplained ability to control birds, but she still relies on aid from a tree with magical powers. Attending a royal ball requires wearing a gown, an economic reality that nothing short of magic can overcome for an impoverished young woman. In each of these Cinderella variants, the protagonist is vulnerable both to domestic abuse and also to an economic system that renders her powerless. Her fate depends on the good nature of the adults in her life, particularly the men. While Cinderella's abusers are women, they are enabled by an absentee father who declines to protect his daughter. Perrault emphasizes the father's role when the narrator remarks that "The poor girl bore it all patiently, and dared not tell her father, who would have scolded her; for his wife governed him entirely." While Perrault's wording lays more blame on the step-mother, the father's unwillingness to intervene on Cinderella's behalf points to the child's dependence on a flawed system. With no social safety net for abused children, they have only as much safety as their closest male relative is able and willing to provide.

The stories in my collection take place in a contemporary world where more safety networks are in place to protect victims of abuse, and yet those safety networks often fail, evoking scenarios where protagonists feel just as defenseless as fairy tale victims. Herman describes this emotional state, which she calls "dysphoria," as "a state of confusion, agitation, emptiness, and utter aloneness" (108). Confronted by the evidence of their inability to protect themselves and the seeming indifference of others who have the power to help, trauma survivors

face obstacles as insurmountable as the villain in a fairy tale. That similarity drives the central protagonist of my collection, Laura, to conclude that she must in fact be living through either a fairy tale or a series of fairy tales. The violence of fairy tales resonates so strongly with her own experiences that seeing herself as a fairy tale character becomes a reasonable conclusion in a world that has lost all sense of security. After she has endured years of abuse, without receiving assistance from the adults in her life who are responsible for her well being, it is more logical for her to believe in a magical or supernatural explanation for her plight than for her to continue placing her faith in the institutions that have failed her.

### Fragmentation

One of the core elements of trauma that my work explores is the confusion that victims and survivors experience as they attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible horror that has taken place in their lives. In her discussion of Freud's interpretation of the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt, Caruth describes the Israelites' escape as "not so much the return to freedom of the past as a departure into a newly established future," concluding that "the future is no longer continuous with the past but is united with it through a profound discontinuity" (246). Here Caruth points to another paradox of trauma: it leads to a world view where past and future are connected, but not in a traditional linear sense. The very force that unites past and future is what breaks it apart. The violence creates a rift in the world as the survivor experienced it before trauma and the world as they experience it after, and that rift shifts a survivor's very sense of the nature of time.

Some of the authors who have most influenced my work explore that rift through fragmentation, a technique that disrupts the continuity in a narrative arc. Kurt Vonnegut first

disrupts the expected chronology of a story by treating the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* like an author's introduction and then opens the second chapter by announcing, "Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time," adding that "Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren't necessarily fun" (29). The movement through time is thus outside Billy's control and frequently leads him to disturbing memories. The structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five* maintains Billy's confused sense of time with scenes that are interrupted frequently, often running for only a page or less before the interruption. Vonnegut's protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, experiences these disruptions not simply when he remembers the war that traumatized him, but also during his life following the war. Like Freud's reading of the Ancient Isrealites, Billy cannot return to safety because the past and future are linked as a result of his trauma.

Ironically, in shattering the continuity of time, the trauma allows Billy moments of temporary escape - he can flee a violent scene and go to a different place in time - but the shattered timeline also prevents him from ever truly escaping the violence. In a linear chronology, he would escape from the war the moment it ended. Instead, no amount of time will free him, since he has no control over the order in which he jumps between memories. Worse, Billy is preserved in a never-ending loop as he jumps through time. Vonnegut indicates that Billy re-lives some moments over and over, suggesting that without a linear timeline, there is no finite number of times he will experience the most traumatic memories. His torment is without end. Vonnegut's structural use of fragmentation allows readers to grasp the psychological state that trauma experts like Herman study in actual patients. Billy's plight is a symbolic enactment of trauma's link between past and present, but it points to a very real experience.

In my work, fragmentation is frequently a tool that demonstrates a character's confusion as they re-experience traumatic events and attempt to piece together a coherent narrative of their own experience. In "Water Marks," fragmentation expresses the protagonist's uncertainty about her own timeline. The story opens with a scene that takes place after the abuse has been ongoing and then dives back into previous events, but without ever indicating a clear order. The second scene refers to an event that took place "One day, so long ago Laura couldn't remember how long" (4). In the scene her teacher separates her from the other students in order to sexually abuse her. It may be the first time he assaults her, but it also may be yet another occasion. Fragmentation allows the story to leave the chronology unclear, as a representation of the uncertainty that ongoing trauma produces. In "Lest Thou Be Consumed," the storyline uses fragmentation to lay out a narrative arc that is mostly linear but with disruptions. Key information appears out of order, and the narrator leaps forward, skipping years of events, to highlight just the memories that are most pertinent to her loss. The conversation she overhears between her uncle and father occurs before the fire, but she only reveals it later in the story. In this narrator's case, delaying the revelation about the argument she overheard expresses her struggle to find meaning in the wake of her parents' deaths and her own survival. At the time of trauma, she is incapable of recognizing the uncle's role in the fire, and that knowledge only comes later as she relives the events in a traumatic loop.

In "Lest Thou Be Consumed," fragmentation and a nonlinear plotline also express the protagonist's own guilt about the events that transpired. Margaret Atwood uses a similar technique in *The Blind Assassin*, a novel that uses a collage-like structure to relate events that Atwood's protagonist and narrator is reticent to share with her intended audience (an estranged granddaughter). Atwood's protagonist, Iris Chase, writes her family history and her own story in



a letter intended for her granddaughter to read after Iris's death. Atwood interrupts the narrative in the letter with newspaper clippings Iris has collected over time and excerpts from a novel Iris published in her sister's name decades earlier. With the fragmentation in *Blind Assassin*, Atwood both expresses Iris's confusion about her own traumatic experiences and delays Iris's revelation of a terrible mistake: she told her sister something extremely upsetting shortly before her sister died by suicide. Delaying the information about what led to her sister's death both increases suspense for readers by leaving mysterious gaps in the narrative and also emphasizes the guilt Iris has lived with for decades.

In addition to demonstrating Iris's guilt, Atwood's delayed revelation about Iris's role in her sister's death points to Iris's inability to understand her own story the first time she experiences it. Lacking important information about her husband's abuse, Iris is unable to prevent her sister's death and so re-experiences the trauma as she seeks information that will explain Laura's decision to drive off a bridge. Caruth discusses this aspect of trauma as the pain that results when "the threat is recognized as such by the mind one moment too late." Like Iris in *The Blind Assassin*, my protagonist in "Lest Thou Be Consumed" replays fragmented events in part due to her recognition of danger just barely too late. If she had recognized her uncle's role in the fire that destroyed her family's side of the valley, she would not have broken her sister's trust by telling their uncle about the boy her sister was meeting with. However, after being raised to see her uncle as a prophet, she is ill equipped to recognize his true motivations. Fragmentation in these cases expresses characters' guilt but also highlights an important facet of the helplessness that trauma evokes: even if a victim has the physical ability to prevent tragedy, they may lack the required knowledge.

Like Atwood, Michael Ondaatje uses fragmentation to depict events that characters relive as they struggle to understand them, but Ondaatje also frequently uses fragmentation in a way that elides a clear picture of the violence at the heart of trauma. While trauma survivors re-experience violent memories as their mind attempts to make sense of a situation it did not understand the first time, survivors also frequently attempt to avoid thinking about their traumatic experience on a conscious level. Other times core information is missing, and a survivor may never gain enough information to replay events in their mind. Ondaatje uses fragmentation to develop both scenarios in *Anil's Ghost*. Anil, the titular character, appears in short scenes, generally only a few pages long. The brevity of her scenes allows Ondaatje to delay revealing important information about Anil's backstory in a way that feels organic to the character: the narrator is close to Anil's perspective, and the narrator simply ends a scene any time that Anil is unwilling to face a painful memory. Ondaatje simultaneously portrays fragmentation as an integral aspect of the world Anil inhabits. In one scene, a list of names, dates, and locations appears first, followed by a scene where Anil is in a Civil Rights office, reading a long list of names that contain no information about a specific violent outcome: just where the individual was last seen. Ondaatje describes the list with a telling phrase: "fragments of collected information" (42). Here Ondaatje's fragmentation reflects the inherent fragmentation of a community in the midst of trauma. Information cannot come together clearly not only because the truth is too horrible to comprehend but also because relevant facts are missing. That uncertainty underlines the sense of helplessness experienced by trauma victims and survivors.

## Dissociation and Creativity

Ondaatje's use of fragmented information in *Anil's Ghost* also reveals how trauma leaves gaps in a character's knowledge that can give rise to creativity. One character, when faced with the loss of his vision, fills the gaping hole left by his missing sense by surpassing the scientific method required in his field. Ondaatje says of the newly-blind character, "And he began to see as truth things that could only be guessed at. In no way did this feel to him like forgery or falsification." The character's theories "allowed walking across water, they allowed a leap from treetop to treetop...And so the unprovable truth emerged" (83). Ondaatje's play on the classic trope of blind men seeing more clearly subverts the trope by providing no evidence that the blind character's theories are accurate. The trauma of losing his vision opens his mind to new creative heights, but his creativity does not necessarily reflect reality in any factual way. At the same time, his newfound creativity becomes his own reality; even without proof, he experiences his theories as truth.

The connection between trauma and creativity is supported by research in the social sciences. According to Herman:

The pathological environment of childhood abuse forces the development of extraordinary capacities, both creative and destructive. It fosters the development of abnormal states of consciousness in which the ordinary relationships of body and mind, reality and imagination, knowledge and memory, no longer hold. (96)

In other words, survivors of ongoing childhood trauma develop a capacity to experience the world in a way that defies reality. Perhaps the best known example of this ability is dissociation, a state of consciousness in which a victim or survivor learns how to mentally detach in order to numb their emotional and physical sensations.

Many authors have explored dissociation, with a variety of methods for portraying it. Margaret Atwood evokes dissociation in *Edible Woman* by shifting the narrative point of view when the protagonist stops distancing herself from her own life. While dissociating, the protagonist has narrated her own story but in the third person, and she begins narrating in the first person as she dissociation ends. In another work of realistic fiction, Tim O'Brien's "The Man I Killed" from *The Things I Carried*, the narrator is noticeably absent in his own story. O'Brien describes the dead soldier's remains in detail, revealing the narrator's physical presence in the scene only in the descriptive details he chooses to focus on and the way his fellow soldiers react to his behavior. The narrator is so removed from his own story that the word "I" only shows up a few times in the piece, despite the fact that the story is narrated from a first person point of view. The narrator's blocking in the scene is revealed largely by his friend Kiowa's dialogue. For instance, at one point Kiowa tells him to "'Stop staring'" (128), and later he gives the narrator time limits for when they will need to move away from the corpse, making it clear that the narrator has remained still for a long time. With this technique, O'Brien reveals the narrator's dissociation through negative space. O'Brien never *states* that the protagonist is dissociating or directly describes his mental state; he simply fills in the details surrounding the protagonist and allows readers to infer the rest.

Fabulists such as Kelly Link often portray dissociation through literal changes to a character's reality. Link explores dissociation through several stories in her collection *Stranger Things Happen*. In "Vanishing Act," a girl learns how to control her surroundings with her mind. Jenny Rose, a homesick girl who has been sent to live with her aunt's family after enduring a traumatic imprisonment, practices disappearing in an effort to return to her parents. As her ability to control her environment grows, the people around her gradually cease to see her, until

eventually her cousin is the only person who remembers the months Jenny Rose stayed with their family. While Link uses a supernatural form of dissociation to achieve a desired outcome in “Vanishing Act,” she portrays dissociation as a defense mechanism gone awry in “Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose.” In this story a man finds himself trapped in an afterlife that defies all expectations of reality, struggling to remember key details from his life, such as the name of his partner. Link distorts reality with a sea that is furry, revealing in the third person narration that nothing is as it seems. The very bed he sleeps on may not be a bed, and even the floor is uncertain. The narrative that eventually emerges reveals a death that has left the protagonist both traumatized and guilt ridden, caught in a new reality that is filled with clues about his death but without the information he yearns for. If dissociation is a method of escape for Jenny Rose, for the dead man it is a cage.

Link’s work also demonstrates that dissociation can damage a survivor’s sense of self. In “Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose,” she demonstrates this problem by showing the gap between what the dead man wants to do and what he is capable of. The narrator states: “The dead man is trying to act as if he is really here, in this place. He is trying to act in a normal and appropriate fashion” (2). The yearning to behave in a way that feels normal strikes at both the intention behind dissociation and the risk trauma survivors face when engaging in it. Dissociation can provide a temporary ability to behave as if the trauma is not taking place and enjoy the illusion of a world that is safe, but it is a powerful tool that survivors may be unable to stop, even in contexts where dissociation makes it *more* difficult to behave normally or feel safe. Herman warns of this potential for dissociation to overwhelm survivors, especially survivors of childhood abuse, who experience negative symptoms into adult. She states that “The extensive recourse to dissociative defenses may end up aggravating the abused child’s dysphoric emotional state, for the

dissociative process sometimes goes too far. Instead of producing a protective feeling of detachment, it may lead to a sense of complete disconnection from others and disintegration of the self” (108). In this light, Link’s “Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose” is an expression of a dissociative process that has left the protagonist with no clear sense of self and no connection to the partner he addresses in his letters. Link demonstrates his disintegration of self through his inability to perceive reality, as well as his attempts to remember his own name and his partner’s. If the potential reward of dissociation is high in Link’s work, the potential risks are just as powerful.

In my work I have employed both realistic and fabulist techniques for evoking dissociation. Point of view is a key area where my collection explores the role of dissociation in a characters’ shifting sense of self. Like Atwood’s protagonist in *Edible Woman*, my central protagonist, Laura, switches from experiencing her story in the third person to narrating it herself in first-person point of view. That change is framed as a conscious choice when the old woman who has taken her in issues the challenge, “Start thinking of yourself in the first person” (35). The challenge follows shortly after a scene where Laura has lost control of her ability to manipulate her reality through dissociation, so her transition into first person is made necessary by her fractured sense of self. For other protagonists in my collection, the narrative point of view reflects dissociation indirectly. The protagonists who use the first person have a clearer sense of self, compared to the protagonists whose stories are narrated in the third person. In “Lest Thou Be Consumed,” the narrator has had years to contemplate the events that led up to her parents’ deaths and her sister’s disappearance. While her uncertainty about reality may have overwhelmed her when she was younger, the adult narrator understands clearly that her uncle is not to be trusted and has a single-minded goal of getting her nephew to safety, where they may

be able to reunite with her sister. Her certainty as an adult shapes her narration and makes the first person an appropriate point of view for her story.

That confident identity does not require an accurate perception of reality. While the first-person plural narrator of “And Thorns Will Grow There” may have a warped self image, the group of women narrating the story are committed to that view of themselves and their community. Their inability to process their friend’s murder and their own complicity manifests instead through the rose bushes that menace their congregation. Their dissociation does not involve numbing themselves to all sensation but rather is a process of pushing away disturbing memories and pretending that all is well in their community. That denial comes across primarily in their actions. Only eleven members of their congregation attend Alice’s funeral, and the narrator reveals in passing that the congregation actively removed pictures of the deceased woman shortly after her death, explaining, “after her funeral we didn’t want her dark eyes springing out of a scrapbook and startling us, so we trimmed or cropped or hid the pictures” (91). The women take ownership of their decision to remove all traces of Alice, never acknowledging that their attempts to create an illusion of peace are backfiring. Even when the rose bushes cover the chapel and place their lives at risk, they remain so committed to their image of the community that they are willing to enter the building in a show of solidarity.

In “The True Daughter,” the protagonist’s efforts to create an illusion also result in a reshaping of reality that she is unable to contain; however, the story is narrated in third person because the protagonist, Jessica, has less confidence in the illusion she creates. While she consistently refers to her second daughter as “Charlotte” when speaking to her husband, the close third person narrator reveals that Jessica continues to think of the daughter by her real name, Olive. Forgetting the truth is impossible for Jessica because her illusion requires maintenance.

Where the women in “And Thorns Will Grow There” can clear out images of Alice and then attempt to move on with their lives, Olive’s growth provides constant clues that she is not, in fact, Charlotte. To maintain the illusion that her daughter never died, Jessica must constantly face the reality of Charlotte’s death. As a result, Jessica simultaneously lives two contradictory lives, a bifurcation that destroys her connection with her husband and both daughters, as well as her sense of self. Her inability to process the complicated reality she has created both requires a third-person narrator to relate her story and results in a new reality where dead children can return to life and humans can transform into birds.

#### Creation of a New Self

Like psychologists and psychiatrists, Caruth acknowledges the creative power that stems from trauma. She argues that “trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival,” a concept she describes as “a paradoxical relationship between destructiveness and survival.” In the example of Freud’s reading of the Israelites’ departure from Egypt, Caruth perceives the creation of a monotheistic religion as a direct outgrowth of trauma. In this view, the destruction of the life they left in Egypt and the trauma they experience in slavery give rise to the creation of a new identity and a religion that restores to their lives meaning and a sense of safety. In essence, they create a new world and a new deity. This connection between destruction and creation appears frequently in literature, especially in fairy tales. Little Red Riding Hood must be swallowed in order to be reborn (with the exception of Perrault’s “Little Red Riding Hood,” which allows the wolf to digest his dinner), and her grandmother must die to make way for a new generation. Cinderella’s mother must die young so that a tree will be planted on her grave and watered with Cinderella’s tears, eventually gaining



magical powers that propel the girl to princesshood. In each of these scenarios, a new world is created for the heroine as a happy ending.

Unfortunately, even the newly created worlds that provide happy endings come at the cost of a traumatic event that first creates a harrowing, grim world. Cinderella loses her identity as a beloved daughter first, before losing her identity as an abused stepchild. In her 2015 short story collection, *Get in Trouble*, Kelly Link complicates the expectation of a cheerful new world by lingering on the the moments where a relatively happy world intersects with a horrifying new one. In “I Can See Right Through You,” a washed up, aging actor reminisces about his younger days when he starred in a blockbuster movie as a demon lover, with a costar he eventually married and then divorced. Link layers potential alternate realities into the story, as the boundaries between the demon lover’s films and his life blur in his memories. A similar blurring of boundaries occurs in two other stories from the same collection: “Valley of the Girls” and “Two Houses.” In both stories, doppelgangers create a new world and also a rift in the characters’ identities, but neither protagonist is able to escape from the horror created by the doubling of their world. In “Two Houses,” members of a spaceship crew share ghost stories about eerie replications, gradually losing sight of their own identities. In “Valley of the Girls,” a wealthy brother and sister are recast by image-obsessed parents, a doubling that complicates their perception of ethics. When the protagonist sleeps with his sister’s replacement, his sister is horrified by what she perceives as incest. The doubling of self both liberates the wealthy young people to do as they please without repercussions and makes them vulnerable due to their invisibility. While Link ends “Valley of the Girls” with a scenario that is clearly going to result in the protagonist’s death, in “Two Houses,” she leaves the characters in an ambiguous state,

incapable of returning to reality because both reality and fantasy have become impossible to tell apart.

In my work, Laura experiences a doubling by choice, as she attempts to separate herself into two separate beings: the person she was before escaping her teacher's abuse and the person she becomes after leaving. In becoming Laidea, she imagines that she can leave Laura's pain behind, but that expectation is immediately upended. In "Water Globe," the first story where she goes by her new name, Laidea, she discovers how easily something she associates with her abuser can trigger her PTSD. Something as simple as where and how a lover's fingers touch her is capable of altering the experience in a way that brings the old world crashing down on her:

Sam doesn't hear her silence, doesn't hesitate.

And it's not that she doesn't like Sam. But the fingers.

Fingers and shadows, and how it moves, a kaleidoscope of tastes and textures, colors sharp as vomit. His hands press the line between thigh and hip, his mouth on her shoulders. And nothing enters her lungs, just the scratch of shadows down her back, just the tightening coil of night and his mouth. (29)

Reminded of her teacher's abuse, Laidea temporarily returns to Laura's world. For Laidea/Laura, a consensual sexual encounter with her college boyfriend transforms into her teacher's sexual abuse on a visceral level. The blurring of her sensory experience reveals that the new world she has created and the old world are connected by the very act of destruction that makes the new world possible. Laura creates her own doppelganger when she decides to become Laidea, a decision that nevertheless leaves her connected to the person she is trying to leave behind.

Doppelgangers are a prominent theme in the Grimms' fairy tales, especially for heroines. In "The True Bride," a Cinderella-like character escapes her stepmother's cruelty and marries a

prince, only for her stepmother to follow behind and replace the princess with the stepmother's own daughter. The phrase "true bride" also appears in the Grimms' "Cinderella," when the stepsisters mutate their feet in an attempt to take Cinderella's place. As the unwitting prince rides away with the wrong woman, Cinderella's loyal birds descend and peck out each sister's eyes, while proclaiming:

Turn and peep, turn and peep,  
 There's blood within the shoe,  
 The shoe it is too small for her,  
 The true bride waits for you. (63)

This fear of doppelgangers and imposters is so strong that it takes the forces of nature to reveal the truth and undo the imposter's work. In nearly all Little Red Riding Hood tales the wolf disguises himself as the grandmother, a trope that also appears in the Grimms' "The Wolf and the Seven Little Goats," a tale where a wolf puts flour on his paws to trick goat kids into believe he is their mother. Even the role of a stepmother is a form of doppelganger in the Grimm's tales. Multiple tales pit a young girl against her stepmother and stepsisters, eerie shadows of her mother and herself. In a time period where mothers frequently died young, the Grimms' tales reflect a community terrified that wives and daughters will be replaced by a widower's new family.

Doppelgangers and imposters appear in Anderson's and Perrault's collections as well. In Anderson's "The Little Mermaid," the prince mistakes the princess who finds him on the beach for his true savior, unaware that a mermaid first saved him from the ocean. The human princess herself is in disguise, which fools the prince into thinking she is a commoner, a doppelganger of herself. In Perrault's "Donkeyskin," the doubles are nearly limitless. First the princess is a copy

of her mother, and to escape her fate the princess demands new dresses, which she uses to create two new identities: Donkeyskin, a servant who is safe from the king in obscurity, and a mysterious princess beautiful enough to capture the attention and protection of a prince in a neighboring kingdom. When the prince offers to marry whatever woman the ring fits, even more doubles appear as other women remove flesh in an attempt to make their fingers thin enough. If a heroine's own disguise risks eroding her sense of self, others' disguises carry an even more terrifying possibility of being replaced.

This fear of imposters is a theme I explore in "The True Daughter." Jessica's attempt to replace her first daughter, while motivated by a yearning to have Charlotte back again, results in a frightening outcome. When Charlotte begins reappearing, first as a bird and then as a little girl in the woods, Jessica responds by trying to keep Olive away from her. Even when Jessica sees Charlotte for herself, she refuses both Charlotte's and Olive's invitations to join them, only regretting that decision after her family leaves without her. While Jessica's reaction stems in part from fear of the dead, the fear of the dead is ultimately grounded in the fear of doppelgangers. How can one know whether the loved one returning from the grave is truly the loved one, and not an imposter? Similarly, the fractured sense of self in a survivor may be mistaken for a doppelganger, which older civilizations frequently attempted to explain through supernatural manifestations such as demonic possessions or fairy changelings.

Doubles are also a prominent theme in many of the contemporary works that influence my collection. In Alejandro Morales's novel *Ragdoll Plagues*, doubling goes hand in hand with a disrupted timeline. The story takes place in three separate timelines, but in each a man faces a similar obstacle, connected to the other protagonists through a blurring of boundaries between time periods. This blurring of boundaries suggests a generational heritage of trauma that ties

descendants to ancestors. Some of my other influences explore doubles as part of a fairy tale retelling. In “The Glass Bottle Trick,” a “Blue Beard” retelling by Nalo Hopkinson, a protagonist slowly discovers her husband’s dark history of murdering his wives as soon as they become pregnant. Hopkinson links the protagonist to her predecessor with the physical traits that the husband seeks out in each bride, and their pregnancies act as a doubling within a doubling. The doubled identities, she discovers, possess even greater power than the murderous husband.

Angela Carter’s retelling of “Blue Beard,” “The Bloody Chamber,” also points to doubling: the new bride finds herself in the same circumstances as the previous brides, doomed to experience their fate. Stepping into the role of the previous brides is itself what places her in danger, a connection Carter makes clear when the narrator describes her nurse’s reaction to her engagement ring. The nurse warns that “Opals are bad luck,” to which the narrator responds, “But this opal had been his own mother’s ring, and his grandmother’s and her mother’s before that... every bride that came to the castle wore it, time out of mind.” In response to the protagonist’s defense of the ring, her nurse asks, “And did he give it to his other wives and have it back from them?” (9). Through the nurse’s objections, Carter directly connects a symbol of bad luck with the doomed role that awaits a woman marrying into this family. While Carter disrupts the pattern of murdered brides, it takes the protagonist’s mother to slay the Marquis, an asset none of the previous brides possessed. Without an interruption to change her fate, Blue Beard’s bride is doomed to die by virtue of becoming his bride. However, in Hopkinson’s retelling, like Carter’s, the protagonist’s ability to escape depends on other women. In murdering his wives, the husband has unintentionally enabled them to gain the power necessary to destroy him. The very doubling that connects women to violence is also capable of connecting women to each other as a form of protection.

## Broken Trust in Community

A trauma survivor's fractured sense of self stems in part from broken trust in a broader community. The community either failed to protect the survivor from harm or actively aided the perpetrator. Especially in cases of abuse, communities often compound that broken trust by blaming the survivor for the actions of the abuser. According to Herman, perpetrators are often adept at hiding abuse and shifting blame when it does come to light. Herman states that "In order to escape accountability for his crimes, the perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting. Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator's first line of defense" (8). This push to remain silent about trauma often creates a scenario where it is dangerous for a victim or survivor to even give voice to their experience. If they speak, their abuser may retaliate, and the community may even turn on the victim and accuse them of lying or distorting the truth. Part of the problem, as Herman explains, is that for members of a community "It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing... The victim, on the other hand, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering" (7). It is no surprise then, that Herman noted in 1996 how many obstacles survivors of abuse still faced when trying to convince researchers to take their claims seriously.

As I have explored the connection between community and abuse, Toni Morrison has influenced my work. Rather than treating violence as an individual problem, her novels show the role that family communities and larger systems play in perpetuating abuse. In *Paradise*, Morrison contrasts two communities formed by groups who are fleeing violence and persecution elsewhere. Revealing early in the story that the patriarchal town of Ruby murders the nine women living in a house they call "The Convent," Morrison's nonlinear timeline shifts the focus away from suspense and instead highlights the systemic problems that repeatedly lead to

violence. In *A Mercy*, a work of historical fiction, Morrison explores the dynamics of an America that was still developing the framework that would later be used to justify the institutionalized enslavement of a race. While the story focuses on several characters in one household, the transformations within the household are shaped by the power balance between characters, a balance determined by a larger community. By exploring the role of systems in individuals' lives, Morrison suggests that the solution to interpersonal violence requires institutional changes.

Octavia Butler also explores the role of institutions in creating and shaping individual acts of violence, but Butler uses science fiction and fabulism to cast institutions in a new light. In *Kindred*, Butler uses time travel to cover two different timelines and contrast how the Antebellum South shaped individual enslaved people and slaveholders. As the protagonist meets two of her ancestors, a white slaveholder and a black freewoman who is eventually enslaved, she witnesses them at various ages, an unnatural span of time that allows her to witness the changes that a racist and dehumanizing system creates in both ancestors. The relationship of her ancestors is ultimately set in contrast with the protagonist's 20th-century marriage to a white man, a relationship that would have followed a different path if the contemporary couple had been raised in the same environment as her ancestors. While *Kindred* examines a system that distorts relationships in human history, in other work Butler creates new, futuristic systems, a move that allows her to examine the role of patriarchy and institutional racism in an unfamiliar setting. Butler's "Blood Child" recasts refugees as humans seeking safety on another planet, where an insect-like alien species forces humans into an arrangement that includes volunteering adolescent boys to be impregnated by alien larva capable of eating their host alive. Butler's use of science fiction is especially adept at examining the institutional role in either creating or

preventing violence because her stories take institutional practices readers may take for granted and reframe them as strange and unfamiliar.

Fairy tales are also useful in taking the familiar and making it seem strange, a technique I employ in “And Thorns Will Grow There,” which explores the role of a religious community in an act of intimate partner violence. In this story, Herman’s observation that it is tempting for bystanders to remain silent and support the perpetrator carries deadly consequences for Alice, a victim of abuse. The initial scenario that leads to Alice’s murder takes place in a realistic setting, but the religious community’s unwillingness to break their silence and openly discuss their role in her death manifests in the uncontrollable rose bushes which grow at an impossible rate. This story literally blends reality with fairy tale; its inspiration was a murder that took place near Athens, Georgia in the early 2000’s and which involved a married couple who attended church in the same congregation I would later join. When a woman who belonged to the congregation at the time of the murder told me about it, she described a strange silence that overcame the community. The fact that a woman they knew well had been murdered by a man they also knew well was never acknowledged publicly. Blending this event with elements of “Sleeping Beauty” allows me to recreate the silent horror and guilt that a community would likely feel in the wake of such a murder. The characters may refuse to give voice to what has happened, but there is a natural consequence they cannot contain, which manifests in the form of the rose bushes. Transforming the community’s ongoing silence into an enchanted sleep takes a community’s willingness to remain silent about abuse and makes it at once strange and familiar. Readers are likely to recognize the community’s slumber as part of a Sleeping Beauty tale, but the circumstances leading up to their sleep deviate from the expected storyline in ways that highlight the violence committed against a victim of domestic violence.



The fact that communities so readily fail victims and survivors of trauma makes it especially challenging for a survivor to rebuild that trust, in turn making it difficult to portray a survivor's healing process. When a community has added to their abuse, it is logical for a trauma survivor to refuse to trust that community again. To rebuild that trust in fiction, a character must either act irrationally or seek an entirely new community that is willing to support them. In the central storyline of my collection, Laidea must enter a new community in order to begin that process, but she must also act irrationally, since years of abuse have taught her that communities will fail to protect her. In the second section of her story, a Donkeyskin retelling where each part is named after one of the three dresses from the tale, the risk Laidea fears proves accurate. Having learned that her instincts will lead her astray and warp her perception of others, Laidea cannot form new friendships without ignoring her own instincts, but ignoring those instincts makes her vulnerable to a sociopathic young woman who is searching for entertainment. At the same time, interacting with the large groups at Riah's gatherings provides Laidea with low-risk opportunities to interact in social settings. Ignoring the instincts that have been shaped by trauma is only as safe for Laidea as whatever setting she happens to be in, making her recovery dependent on social systems.

My collection also explores how social structures shape the actions of abusers, especially the role of patriarchal forces in creating and enabling domestic abuse. In "Lest Thou Be Consumed," a patriarchal culture is directly tied to a religious structure that treats one man as an infallible mouthpiece for God. As a prophet, Uncle has the right to demand his niece as a third wife or to sacrifice his son as proof of his fidelity to God. As a father and husband, he has the right to make these decisions without the consent of his children or the women he is already married to. Uncle's actions escalate while he lives off the grid in seclusion because the system

that grants him this power also reshapes him, making Uncle capable of unexpected behavior. That system also shapes the narrator, who as a child and adolescent is unable to perceive Uncle through any other lens. The narrator repeats the refrain “they say,” indicating how pervasive this worldview has been in her upbringing. Patriarchal structures are confining due to their prevalence. When a person has known nothing but patriarchy, it becomes difficult to see its influence.

Patriarchal forces also shape maternal abuse in a few stories in the collection. In “All Things that Creep and Glitter,” Anna’s mother reveals repeatedly through her dialogue that there is an imbalance of domestic labor in her marriage. The narrator echoes that imbalance, but without laying blame on the father because the narrator is close to Anna’s point of view, and Anna does not recognize her father’s role in their family dynamics. For instance, the narrator points out that her mother cooks dinner on weeknights, her father on the weekend, a ratio that leaves her mother preparing more than half of their meals, despite also working full time. While Anna’s mother is the verbal proponent of patriarchal values, constantly telling Anna to be more ladylike, her father’s negligence supports the same values. Both parents are ultimately culpable in Anna’s fate, even if her mother is the one who gives her the potion. Similarly, the narrator’s aunts in “Lest Thou Be Consumed” engage in violence, but only after their relative powerlessness in a patriarchal and fundamentalist community has left them desperate. Meanwhile, the narrator’s kindly father is the exception who proves the rule: his daughters are only safe in this community as long as he is alive to protect them from other men. In each of these stories, the domestic abuse is a direct outgrowth of a system that enables it.

## Faith Crisis and Faith Creation

When trauma damages a survivor's ability to trust their community, that broken trust often coincides with broken trust in their faith tradition. Paradoxically, the crisis of faith also makes way for a new faith. Caruth makes this link in her discussion of Freud's ideas about Moses and the creation of Judaism: "It is the trauma, the forgetting (and return) of the deeds of Moses, that constitutes the link uniting the old with the new god, the people that leave Egypt with the people that ultimately make up the nation of the Jews." Just as a new, post-trauma world is possible for survivors only because the old, pre-trauma world has been destroyed, faith too is reshaped by trauma. The destruction of the old belief system makes way for the new. This connection is clear in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, a novel set in a dystopia in the near future. Butler opens the novel with epigraphs from the religious text the protagonist eventually creates, and then just a few pages in contrasts the protagonist's developing beliefs with a scene where her family takes significant risks to participate in a Christian ritual the narrator no longer believes in. The narrator leaves no doubt that she lacks faith in Christianity, stating at the start of the scene, "At least three years ago, my father's God stopped being my God. His church stopped being my church... My God has another name" (7). By contrasting the protagonist's belief in a new faith with her loss of belief in her father's, Butler also emphasizes that the two are connected. The loss of faith in Christianity is a necessary step in the spiritual awakening that guides the development of a new religion.

Butler's technique of including excerpts from a sacred text is one that several of the authors who influence my work also use. In *Year of the Flood*, Margaret Atwood includes teachings from the religious group God's Gardeners, a group that both of the novel's protagonists participate in. Since God's Gardeners are opposed to writing anything down, most

of the excerpts are attributed to an oral hymnbook. Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, the novel that preceded *Year of the Flood*, also includes material that is sacred in the development of a new faith, layered into the story by Jimmy, a protagonist who unwittingly helps his friend kill most of humanity. As the Crakers, a human-like species his friend created to repopulate the world, ask Jimmy to explain their origins, Jimmy tells them stories that the Crakers adopt as sacred tradition. In *Oryx and Crake*, the sacred origin stories begin as simplified explanations of what a brilliant but genocidal young man did, giving readers clues that only make sense as the narrator reveals more about Jimmy's past. In *Year of the Flood*, the passages reveal the faith tradition that the protagonists were taught, in the process revealing important context for each protagonist's world view.

Rather than including snippets from fictional sacred texts, Larissa Lai reclaims a forgotten belief system by taking a powerful being from a faith tradition and creating a fictional version. In *Salt Fish Girl*, Lai opens with Nu Wa, a Chinese creation deity, whose loneliness leads her to join the humans she created by going through a process similar to the Little Mermaid's transformation. Lai also includes a mythical creature as a protagonist in *When Fox is a Thousand*. The titular Fox comes from a long line of intelligent foxes who possess powerful abilities. Fox interacts with the human protagonist, shaping her life in ways the human is ignorant of, having been cut off from her ancestors' teachings about the mythical foxes. In Lai's work, the inclusion of mythical beings infuses the stories with forces capable of shaping the world in a way a realistic setting is incapable of doing.

Religious myths and fairytales have a close connection in older fairy tales as well, and that connection is a strong influence on my collection. Hans Christian Anderson regularly included religious morals in his stories, even going so far as to threaten misbehaving children

that their actions would delay the Little Mermaid's ability to enter Heaven. The Grimms also included overtly religious tales, many of which fuse Christian myths with fairies. In "Our Lady's Child," the Virgin Mary intervenes in a little girl's life and takes on a role similar to Blue Beard when the girl opens a forbidden door. Even the inclusion of fairy godmothers in Perrault's collection points to a blending of two belief systems. In my collection, the blend between fairy tales and Judeo-Christian myth is most prominent in "Lest Thou Be Consumed," which is primarily a retelling of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorah from *The Old Testament*, but with hints of "Blue Beard" and "Donkeyskin" as well. While The Old Testament lays the blame for the city's destruction on the city's inhabitants and blames Lot's daughters for incest, this retelling calls those explanations into question. The narrator repeats what people she refers to as They are saying, referring to rumors that spread in a developing religious tradition as oral scripture. However, as the story progresses, many of the things They say are contradicted. For example, the narrator states early in the story, "They say Daddy swallowed half a valley" (171), but later reveals that the valley burned in a fire. This juxtaposition suggests that They are unreliable narrators and that the sacred teachings developing from Their rumors are not to be taken at face value.

What They and Uncle teach is also complicated by the narrator's inclusion of Sister's stories, which to the narrator sound just as mythical as Uncle's belief that God will burn all of humanity. To demonstrate how unbelievable the narrator finds Sister's stories about civilization, I describe everyday items in language that makes them sound strange but which would make sense to a girl who has lived without indoor electricity for her entire life. Coming from this perspective, a freezer becomes "a box of winter" (175), and Cinderella's glass slippers seem just as believable as air-conditioning. The narrator's loss of faith in Uncle's teachings is directly tied

to her burgeoning belief in something else. Wandering into the cabin in the woods and finding that it is freshly stocked with food provides evidence that what Uncle and his followers have been telling her is false, while at the same time providing evidence that there are other teachings worth believing in. Combining a biblical account with magical descriptions of kitchen appliances simultaneously calls the biblical account into question, while also suggesting there is figurative truth in the myth.

In Laura's story, the faith journey chronicles a character's shifting belief system, but unlike in "Lest Thou Be Consumed," her beliefs are ultimately personal and not part of an organized religion. Laura's faith in the trees is a direct outgrowth of a traumatic experience. After she is sexually assaulted in the woods at a young age, the trees become an intermediary in her mind, beings onto which she can project her own emotions and pain. Having lost faith in the humans in her life, Laura transfers that faith to entities who are incapable of hurting her. Laura's beliefs about the trees fit into Herman's explanation of childhood abuse. In her explanation of the "extraordinary capacities" that survivors of childhood abuse often develop, Herman adds "These altered states of consciousness permit the elaboration of a prodigious array of symptoms... And these symptoms simultaneously conceal and reveal their origins; they speak in a disguised language of secrets too terrible for words" (96). Herman further elaborates that trauma survivors, especially survivors of childhood abuse, are often misdiagnosed with other disorders (117). Laura's beliefs may seem like delusions, but her faith in the trees stems from a personal religion she develops to process something, as Herman phrased it, "too terrible for words." When the truth is too horrifying to communicate with regular language, fairy tales fill the gap, providing that disguised language.

### The Condensation

How long you have waited by the fire. You clutch your fingers together, certain that if you only squeeze hard enough the heat will not escape. So you have always been. If I squint, it is easy to imagine your grandparents' grandparents' grandparents in your place. Their fires were more desperate. One to cook the food and save the toes. Another to purify the dead. And still another to ransack the enemy's village. No tears for the enemy's wailing infants.

Now you are sad. You did not think of your parents' parents when you lit a bundle of wood and lay back to watch a star-speckled sky?

Ah! Tonight's fire is a mere lark. A group of you watch the ocean waves through the haze that surrounds the flames. You think you have no need for fairy stories, no need for tales that explain the twinkling light that glimmers just at the edge of your sight. You know the one. The light you have never seen straight on, never grasped it in your fingertips, but in the twilight hours it flashes for a split second. A tiny ball of the whitest light. But you don't think about that light. Not tonight, when metal contraptions wait at the edge of the sand, engines cooling, ready to roar to life at the touch of a magic key.

My darlings, why the rush? Don't leave so soon. I only ask one favor, one favor for the lovely lady, for the myth you left behind in the box of storybooks, discarded at the thrift store. Just this one, small, favor: don't mistake a few decades of comfort for a never-ending era. All golden ages draw to an end, my dears.

But fear not!

Forget how to shudder.

Gather close, and I will guide you as I guided your grandparents' grandparents' grandparents when their fires shrank to embers. Gather closer, and I will whisper a tale in your ears, a tale that

will leave you quivering in your bed, till dawn blanches the sky and illuminates your suburban kingdom.

A tale to keep you safe.



## Water Marks

Floss seemed to dangle from the trees. Or not floss exactly, perhaps fishing line. This was how it always looked when the leaves were white, when they had faded to a calligraphy of veins. Sometimes Laura lay down on the leaves, on top of the freshly fallen ones, the sweet scent of disintegration seeping up from the deepest layers. There was a kind of beauty in decay, in the transparency it left in its wake, the heavy odors and airy mysteries that swirled in each tuft of wind as it tore dandelions apart and twirled dust into ribbons.

Laura usually came to the woods alone, though he called it their special place. Today she stayed even after he rose. *Once more*, was what he meant when he patted her thigh. *Don't leave*, he was saying, so she'd know it was only the itch for tobacco, for that scent to cover him. He never indulged those needs when he was with her. But she wouldn't have left. She learned peculiar things from the trees, the things they hid beneath their bark.

The patterns of light that trickled through the branches were what fascinated her most. She always noticed light in strange places. The circle on Mr. Devans's forehead during first period, the glint off Jake's hair when he played soccer. The way one edge of a corner in a room was always brighter than the other. Dark and light brushed against one another and then lapped apart. They met on television screens and glass doors, in fragments and reflections. Mirrors echoed each other and jumbled into a kaleidoscope of cut-up legs and broken pottery.

But shadows were predictable in nature. Darkness beckoned from Mr. Devans as soon as he stepped outdoors, tendrils tangling above his head like a carnivorous plant. Indoors the tendrils coyly hid their fangs. At first she thought they were harmless. Vestigial organs that could only groan and sway in the artificial light so unfit for their ancestral roots. But the trees knew something more, and

they whispered it to her when she touched their bark. They shivered when he stepped too close. But they only screamed once.

One day, so long ago Laura couldn't remember how long, Mr. Devans brought Laura's English class outside, into the woods surrounding the school. "This is the most important classroom in the school," he said, oblivious to the students nearby who muttered that all they needed to know out here they learned from Mary Jane.

Mr. Devans's smile was fatherly as he divided the class in pairs. One-two, one-two, one-two, until only Laura stood alone. All the other children laughed when he said he'd form a couple with her; he seemed a great joke of a middle-aged man, unfamiliar with his own *faux pas*.

It was only when they were alone, deep in the woods, that Laura wondered if she should have said no, should have risked the confused moment among her classmates. But already Mr. Devans was saying his peculiar things. Already he was holding out a pile of papers and asking her to read them in her angel-poet voice.

"This is my soul," he said. And though the stack of wilting papers struck her as an unusual soul, and though his clumsy handwritten words were even clumsier in her mouth, Mr. Devans sighed. He said his life became pure poetry in her mouth, that her lips held the key to the mysteries of heaven and hell.

He swore he'd never compromise his art, that the publishers were wrong to spurn handwritten copies. As she read, he wrote more and more with his black fountain pen, the ink pooling across the pages.

"Never trust your soul to electricity," he told her.

But Laura wasn't listening. The trees' mutterings had drowned out both their voices, until even her breath drifted silently over his written words.

Peculiarities were easy to dismiss in someone like Mr. Devans. It wasn't that she didn't notice — it was just that he was always saying strange things. He said artists grew up faster than everyone else but then stayed young forever, that numbers meant nothing, and thirteen? Less than nothing.

He said everything was autobiography, carved from flesh and written in blood. That manuscripts were like limbs, that there could only be one. It was a prostitution to spread it around, he said. Electronic copies and paper copies, distorted and stapled in multiple boxes like aborted babies.

*But accidents can happen to a limb, she'd say.*

*I always keep mine close to my heart, he'd say.*

So she kept careful track of his heart.

Most of the time, she remembered that trees didn't really whisper, but it was hard to forget how they screamed. As a little girl she had lamented the way a tree must cry when rust and metal bit into its flesh, or when its skin was peeled slowly away by dirt-smudged boys.

But she understood now how insensible to its own pain a tree truly was. Even its seedlings were nothing to it, or less than nothing—antagonists straining toward the same sun. Maples felt nothing when the sharp spout was jammed into their sides, or when they bled, sweet and sugary, into tin pails. Oaks welcomed the squirrels who ravaged their branches; they cradled them in their arms and in hollow nooks.

She tried to think about Jake most of the time. His hair was light where Devans's was dark. His frame was light where Devans's sagged and swayed. And his smile contained so many shards of sunlight his skin was almost translucent. Mr. Devans was nothing if not opaque.

Airy landscapes and floating heads of hair felt much safer. They could change at any moment. And there was always something glinting at the edge of her mind, a vision of a different world. It involved Jake and the unfathomable way boys were involved with girls. How each group remained with its own kind. Loyal but distant when there were disparities in age. But she knew she was only romanticizing a natural world that was filled with paternal rapists, and matriarchs who consumed their husbands.

She worried sometimes that fairy tales were what led her to imagine arboreal voices. Sages dressed in leaves and branches appealed to something innately whimsical. But the leaves and branches were only the finishings—there was something deeper in the trees, something that responded whenever she reached out.

It wasn't Jake's fault that he was as oblivious to the trees' whisperings as Mr. Devans was. Or that blades of grass trembled and lay flat as he kicked the soccer ball across the field. At least they sprang joyfully back up in his wake. And the trees never worried about Jake, who knew how to dangle from their branches while Laura watched him from afar.

"Does Mr. Devans ever get off your back?" Jake asked her one day, and she shyly told him she liked the way he played soccer. That even the field grew still beneath his feet.

He was always balancing or bouncing something around, and he laughed as he grabbed her shoulder and kissed the side of her face, before bounding off again. The ball bounded ahead of him, contained chaos in his every move.

The next time she watched him from the stands, he was winking in her direction. All the girls tittered softly around her. They didn't know the wink had fluttered into her heart or that its wings were now folded, a butterfly that intended to stay.

"No" was the word that made the trees scream. She only said it once. She learned quickly that "no" only led to greater pain and deeper violations. Agreement (silence) could only ever make the trees whimper or shake. The wind would moan softly, but there was never rain.

Once upon a time, she had thought the rain could wash away filthy things. She thought it brought new beginnings and transience. But now it only smeared mud on her bare back.

"Know" wasn't much help either. What the trees didn't know wouldn't make them scream, and if she agreed, if she said nothing, if she didn't have to scream because it didn't hurt when she said nothing, then nothing had ever happened. Not really.

"If a man stabs a woman in the forest and nobody hears her scream, did it really hurt?" she asked Mr. Devans once. He ran his fingers along her cheek and mumbled something about his little sophist.

Affirmative silence had replaced her vocabulary long before Jake asked, and asking was new, so new to her that she wished he would just take something from her. She didn't want to think anymore.

"If a tree falls, nobody ever hears it," she told Jake, which he must have mistaken for a metaphor about tumbling violently into love. And he had to be in love to do what he did. Just as Mr. Devans had to be in love, just as she must have been loved to *know* so much pain, just as she must be in love to never know how to say *no*.

“Is there anyone else?” Mr. Devans asked, and even then she couldn’t speak. He said he liked the tilt of her neck, the way she didn’t look him in the eye when she shook her head.

“Do you think you’ll disappoint me?” he asked, casually, his hand still in her hair, and she shook her head again. She told herself there were some countries where a shake of the head meant *yes*, and imagined herself saying new things all the time.

“Do you want more cake?” someone would ask, and she would shake her head. *Yes*. “Should I stop?” *Yes, yes, yes*.

Even simple questions, like, “Does my hair look good?” could be inverted. *No*, she would nod her head. *No*.

“I think we should see other people,” Jake said one day, and she nodded frantically. *No, no, no, no, no*. By “see others” he meant “not see each other,” but she’d been mixing up opposites so long the point seemed moot. And at least he never asked if she was already seeing someone else, because she wouldn’t have known the lie from the truth and might have hidden the wrong thing.

Without Jake, she found new things to think about, new places to go in her mind, when the tumble of animal flesh grew too heavy to process. Some days she floated to the tippy-tops of the branches and watched her animal self, limp and empty. Other days she felt too dense to float, so dense she sank into the moss and mud. She reached deep into the earth, her fingers stretched like roots, and clung, though claws and teeth dragged her up, up, and out of the soil. But she was a tree, and trees knew better than to voice their own pain.

Then that day, that day while Mr. Devans was away smearing himself with smoke, she saw the manuscript, peeking out of the corner of his bag. The manuscript, tree flesh and ink. It had to be

a thing unto itself, of course. No aborted babies, copied and stapled in cardboard boxes, for Mr. Devans.

The paper looked thick and heavy, the cover grease-worn from Mr. Devans's fingers and thumbs. Jake always cradled books between his fingertips, the pages curled slightly outward and his face bent forward. It was how he used to cup her chin in his fingers.

The trees only murmured when she reached for the manuscript, but there was something in their mutterings that reminded her of clean things. It had been so long since rain had felt like her friend.

The leaves stirred and trembled, and when they dripped and shook and shivered, she lay the pages open. Thin purple ink fanned between her fingers, bleeding into her skin as she rubbed it free from the paper.

Soggy and fragmented bits of paper were layered in Laura's hair and on her face when Mr. Devans's feet returned, his body lurching above them.

He asked something about the book, his book, his voice fluttering over her like a flurry of leaves. He wanted to know what she had done, what she was thinking, what he was supposed to do now. He didn't ask *why*, just, "Did you? Did you? Did you?" His face was turned toward the empty bag he'd laid beside her earlier.

"Yes," she said, and this time her head nodded in unison with her voice. Her eyes were turned directly toward his face.

Then his hands caressed her throat, untangling the shredded manuscript from her hair. Ever so tenderly, his mouth smeared ink down her skin, his fingers tight on the unseen places of her back.

His face was horrible with middle-aged beauty, but when he hurt her it felt true. It had to be true this time.

From above it must have looked like two lovers, oblivious with passion. The forest crumbled upon them like confetti.



## Dust to Water

After school Laura finds her way to mud. Always mud, though she never touches it. Red with clay, it frames the pond, deep through the tangle of beech trees and hemlocks. Hemlocks. The very name sounds like poison tree, but they aren't poison.

Needles and frogs only frighten the small. Once she found a bird in the pond, a baby duck with no mother, covered in rusty mud, thick as blood. And she was a child then – so she saw blood. What child doesn't see carnage in wet dust?

Scratches on a back, thorns in a hand. They tear at tender child flesh. But age has taught her complacency. The value of waiting just one more year, of slipping away unseen, without the struggle of disentanglement.

But Devans is the romantic type. So romantic he followed her from middle school to high school. So romantic she worries he will scorch her skin with each fumbling touch. But Devans is steady, a mountain peering over her shoulders.

And mountains can't be moved, but shoulders can. All she has to do is pry off his shadow and slip away. Into the mud if necessary.

A seventeen-year-old woman is capable of saying no. A seventeen-year-old woman can choose to say nothing or do nothing when a man invites her into the woods. A seventeen-year-old woman can cancel demands with inaction. And Laura is a seventeen-year-old woman. But she always does what Mr. Devans says, like a marionette with threads on her wrists and ankles.

She sits in his English class, discussing the sock puppet women of literature. The characters who awaken to their own needs as to a feast, crowding abortion clinics with ruddy faces. Trying to forget some lover.

The other students wear their hair long and straight. They paint shiny lips on their smooth faces and lean forward when they speak. But Laura leans back.

“We shouldn’t think of ourselves as victims,” one student says, and Laura tries not to smirk.

“Yeah,” another says. “We have choices.”

Laura leans back in her seat and says nothing, just thinks of liberated women, beaten for trying to vote. Ostracized for divorce, killed for leaving a lover. When she does speak, she says, “Choice is the luxury of the Oppressor.”

The others shift uneasily, but Laura’s mind has already left the classroom. Has already wandered across the field she watches through the window. Has wound past rivers and through towns.

Has simply found its way away.

Escape came in an envelope, just longer than a sheet of paper and smooth as cream. She traced her finger along the edge, and it was just sharp enough to sting. She didn’t have to open it or read it. One look at the crest on the top left corner and she could feel the next four years unfurling before her. A carpet leading away, away from this spongy field of trees. Out of their branches, curled so tight around her.

She waits by the lockers, always the locker, her fingers curled white against the dents. Silver-gray peeks through torn paint.

Devans doesn’t smile when he sees her, just nods with the distance he usually shows when other teachers pass. His eyes only slightly too bright. She breathes slowly, evenly. The less she shows, the rougher he moves, the truer it feels.

“Your body is the truest truth,” he says when they are alone, and she turns her face.

It’s hard to mind the open violence, bruises on her thighs and scratches down her back. But the violence that lurks beneath his caress - that bothers her. The violence he hides even from himself. She wonders what he tells himself now. If he still thinks she’s his greatest love story, the child prodigy and the middle-aged tuft of hair. It’s been so long since she tried to tell him ‘no,’ perhaps he forgets the truth. But it’s hardly worth asking.

Instead she counts. Backwards, until the numbers disappear.

The counting started with leaves on the trees. It started in the forest four years ago, with Devans heavy on her almost-chest, dirt and leaves caking her back. The longer the trees stared, the deeper her mind dove into foliage, into leaves that layered like feathers on a bird. But these days she counts indoors. Creates leaves in her mind, and sorts them. Red leaves, green leaves, orange and yellow. China maples, dark as cranberries. Leaves tumble into piles, into order. Order among the beautiful chaos of decay.

When she feels his hand on her throat she tells herself this isn’t real, that this would never happen to anyone. That someone would notice, that someone would stop it. And she can’t say which is worse: the reality of violence or the surrealism of living.

Sitting in a class is like wandering into a dream, one where smiles reveal teeth and eyes flash across the room. And it’s so hard to say if the others are real, if what students and teachers say is real. Because doesn’t Devans teach women’s lit? And it’s hard to say if what they see when they see her is what she wants them to see. Hard to say what she wants them to see at all.

And the trees – she thought she knew them. The cadence of their leaves in the wind, the tint and underside of each leaf. They hissed and shuddered at Devans’s touch. But these days the trees don’t speak. These days the trees don’t whisper or murmur. They stand mute as hollow logs. And she wonders if she’s too old. If a seventeen-year-old woman can’t be protected like a thirteen-year-old girl. Other times she doubts there’s any difference.

The other students – the students in Devans’s class - they think there is. That it’s only violation if someone is young, that someone her age – their age – should know how to say no. That she should have learned, by now. That, or she should be as flimsy as a leaf.

“Victims always blame themselves,” another student says one day, and Laura knows she should say nothing.

But she asks, “Is that how you know they’re telling the truth?” though she hasn’t told anyone anyhow. Devans turns the pages of his book when she asks, but the other students only blink at her.

She feels like she’s trapped in a cocoon, trapped in the very center. And it’s supposed to keep her safe, supposed to protect her while she grows her wings. But the wings don’t come, and the cocoon grows tight, and there is Pennywhicker, with his hands around her throat. And she can’t mention the envelope or the years as they unravel before her, because then his hands would only grow tighter; then her lungs would grow taught with stale breath, and nothing new would reach her. Nothing but Pennywhicker would hold her.

Pennywhicker is what Devans calls himself. In all the manuscripts he writes, every story every poem. He tells her there’s a newness in the name, that this is the distance, the beauty of fiction. He tells her there’s power in a name, in calling someone by the precise name. That’s why he calls her Beauty.

But she doesn't want to be Beauty – beauty is a trap. And if she called herself anything, anything at all, it would be ugly. Because no one tells stories about ugly women. No one snaps their photographs or arranges their arms and legs in poses like clay. And if she were ugly she could haunt another woman's story, the angry sister in the background. A deformed specter. So she imagines herself in the mud. Imagines it layered across her face – would she be ugly then?

It wasn't that she thought Devans was stupid, that she could fade into the trees like a ghost and he wouldn't follow. Or that his brittle heart would burst at the news. But if she left – if she left and didn't tell him. If she hid where she was going – from him, from her parents, from everyone who even knew her name. Then, maybe – maybe, just maybe – if she changed her name and dyed her hair. She could hide. A fugitive.

And how could anyone know? Not when she had been so clear, so specific, so firm in her requests. *Discretion*. A hand veiled over her name, mail sent to a P.O. Box. No letters or phone calls to her teachers. No contact but through her.

One day he catches her arm, in the middle of the hall where anyone could see. Anyone could speak. But no one does. He doesn't turn away when he whispers, doesn't hint that she should meet him outside like usual. No, he tells her to come with him. To come with him *now*, no matter what else. That it's urgent, that he must see her now.

And he doesn't take her to the woods. No, he takes her to the classroom, with its open-legged desks and cold floor, and he sits at his desk so she has to move her chair forward in small, biting movements. He holds up a letter.

Holding up letters or pieces of paper is nothing new. He's always waving poems in the wind and tossing his arms in the air. But this time his face moves heavily, and his steps sound like stone on concrete. He is up from his chair, he is turned with one arm on the window sill, he holds the other arm dramatically behind him.

"Your future," he says.

Her eyes move to the window, where the trees sway tiredly.

"There *is* nothing – never *was* anything – never *will be* anything else," he says.

Red leaves cluster in one patch of the trees, before scattering in green foliage. They shimmer in the wind, but the red is like a fire, and doesn't the wind know – doesn't it know that it's only fanning the flames?

If she looks back at Devans, she will see the crest on the letter. And if she sees the crest she will know, and he will know what she knows, and that she knows he knows she knows, until there is nothing but knowing in her blood. Nothing but knowing until knowing has consumed her.

"It's not too late," he is saying. "Not too late, too late, too late," and it's only as the voice comes close that she wonders about locks. And if she screamed – if she screamed at this moment, in this place, in this position – but it's hard to say what would happen. And her mind is too deep in the circles of simmering leaves.

Dandelions in her hair, yellow dust on her chin. She envies dandelions and their milk white seeds, scattered and reborn through death. Nothing follows a dandelion seed. No one traces its outline as it rises in the night; no one pulls it back to rocky earth. Perhaps the seeds never return. Perhaps they rest in the sky, suspended midair. Delicate as paused snowflakes.

Escape. It comes to her at night. When the sky slides upon her, heavy on her arms and legs like a lead apron and Novocain. It comes to her at night, while she sorts the leaves in her mind. The yellow, and the brown. And the red, oh red, so red, cutting like a raspberry bush, staining her fingertips. Redness that creeps like veins across skin. So deep she has never seen it, never felt it. Only glimpsed it on the backs of her eyelids.

And she knows, eyes half open, the trees are not dead, not asleep. The trees are not ignoring her. The trees are not the trees at all, not cognizant in branch and leaf. No, the trees hide. Beneath soil, encased in water and dirt. And the trunks stand upright like a hair, like a fingernail. No wonder they never cried for their own pains.

But the roots have been whispering for her, murmuring, and all she has to do is find a way below.

And then, then she'll be encased in leaves and decay.

The next day Laura walks to the trees, to the deepest part of the woods where nobody comes, nobody sees, nobody hears. Her hand traces the bark, but it doesn't breathe into her skin. Just bark, deaf as a wooden bench, unfeeling as a scratching post. Once upon a time, the trees spoke to her, and though she told herself, back in those days, that they weren't really speaking, that it was a childish fantasy – now she knows better. The trees spoke, they warned her, they splintered where Devans touched. They shuddered and coated her with rain.

The trees saw.

But the trees receded. And now they only watch, shadows creaking in the wind.

The pond water is warm below but cold at the surface, where it laps her skin and breathes into the air. One step. It starts with one step, and then her toes, ankles, calves, and thighs are submerged in the murky water, as if hidden by a veil. She lies back, arms open, and the water rolls across her skin so smooth. The water is translucent, pungent with filth.

As she lies back, she closes her eyes and imagines herself from above. Imagines how it would look if she were perched in the uppermost branches of the not-tree, dead leaves rustling against her skin as she peered down, the girl below sliding backwards into the muck.

*The girl below has closed her eyes, and her hair lies flat and dusty brown against her cheeks. Her arms fold across her chest, and she falls back, as if the water is a hammock. Leaves rise to the surface, red as ruby-red cheeks, swirling in her wake. And she is just barely visible, her skin still, as the water's filth clears above her. Then she is lost. The sludge that embraces her.*

*She will awaken, but only below, only when the trees, the living trees, have reached their arms through the muck and the slick layer of leaves and yanked her down.*

But then Laura is no longer in that not-tree, but tumbling, almost fluttering through the leaves, branches snapping, as if the tree were dropping her. And the water isn't gentle or comforting and the mud isn't welcoming. The trees can't be reaching for her, their arms don't feel right. This tugging, this prickling and burning at her skin and on her hair – something isn't right, and where are the trees? There's a scraping, a sighing, a heaving, and fingers she doesn't know are all over her skin, fingernails piercing.

Laura rises from the water like a wet leaf, her arms and legs dangling while something pulls at her waist. It's like a swoon but backwards. She hangs in the air like a ragdoll. Something moves



against her mouth, pushing air inside her like a balloon. And if only she could float – if she could rise and drift, and nobody would follow –

But her head rolls backwards. She sees the forest, nothing as before. The colors too bright, like fresh paint on a canvas; tree branches criss-cross, rich and brown; leaves stretch out from buds, streaked with yellow and blue. And even the sky is blue, as blue as a crayon, so much bluer than it's ever been before.

The colors are disconcerting, like warm broth in a parched mouth – too thick to swallow. And closing her eyes is worse, because then the image lingers in her mind, and the colors sway, brightening and brightening. Cyan and magenta and yellow and white. So bright and clean she can feel them bursting in her mouth.

When she looks up, there is a woman's face. A face she has never seen. A face so wrinkled she could slide into those creases. And the eyes – how to describe the eyes before her? It's not a color for which she has even one word.

*Old woman, old woman*

*Who lives by the sea,*

*Did you find a girl drowning*

*Beneath the great tree?*

### Old Woman Old Woman

It is strange, to live a folktale and not know the words. Laura senses that something is coming – everything from before suggests it: a girl in the woods, a wolfish figure lurking behind trees. Even the old woman swooping in at the last moment and pulling Laura's soggy body from the pond. Everything points to lore. Any number of stories could explain it, but none of them do, and how will she act the right part if she doesn't know the words? Instead of knowing, Laura lies on the sand, t-shirt plastered to her back with sunscreen, and waits.

They tell her good things are happening. People who sit in air conditioned offices and type briskly are arranging ink on thick paper. Pennywhicker – Devans, they remind her, his name is Devans – Pennywhicker will be bound. Words will tangle around his wrists like ropes, so tight, so strong, he will never come near her again. They think proximity is the beginning and the end, that distance will solve anything.

The Old Woman seems to know better; she cackles over her tea when Laura asks if spaces define everything.

Her parents think even a little space will do. Her mother's face is like a wilted petal when she visits. Laura doesn't speak to her mother with the wilted face, or her father with the eyes that drag, heavy as bruises. Her parents tell the Old Woman it's not as if they could have known, not as if they would ever – well, Laura's teacher seemed so supportive, and she was always so introverted, it seemed a help. That's what they say, so Laura chooses not to listen.

Mostly, Laura lies on the shore and lets the waves suck sand from beneath her calves. Seaweed, knobbly as witch fingers, washes up beside her. Sea leaves. In the ocean, trees blossom safely beneath miles of water, guarded by prehistoric creatures with gaping jaws. When she

wades into the water it's so cold it stings, but then nothing. Nothing but water. On the beach, colors and shapes are simple. Gray hues seep into the sand and water.

The ocean doesn't hide its violence – waves churn over rock, scrape sand across toes. Even the minnows that flit around her feet are carnivorous. Stand still and they will nibble. Tickling nudges at first, and then, that space between pressure and pain. But Laura doesn't move. Let them devour, let them dream their sharky aspirations, let them consume a giant, if only for a moment. Always the wave crests, the minnows scatter, the feet are as before.

The Old Woman asks if this is her first time, by the sea. The Old Woman can't imagine how it would be, for a girl who grew up so near.

*Old Woman, Old Woman* – that is part of the riddle, part of the story. But what comes next?

A name – even the Old Woman agrees, a name is everything. Oh name, oh ink, be free. Laura is no more. Laura has been swept aside, rearranged. New inky pictures, new symbols and sounds.

“What will it be?” The Old Woman asks. The Old Woman says Ugly isn't a choice – it will draw too much notice.

“It will hide in romance,” she tells the Old Woman, replacing just the last three letters, sketching the truth as she speaks.

“Laide.”

The Old Woman cackles, unfurling her gnarled fingers on the table and thumping.

“Better keep the a, she says. Leave a little guesswork.”

## Water Globe

She sits against concrete, waiting for the cold to seep through her skin, books balanced on her knees. Her fingers spread flat against stone, and her breath scatters into mist. But mist is only a cloud, only a heavy, sunken cloud.

When she was just a child, Laidea had blue sheets with clouds on them, and one morning she stretched her arms in a rectangle over her face. Sunlight streamed through the pattern and painted her limbs. Today she wishes she could be in the sky, all on her own, nothing but blue light.

She thinks about blue these days - it's stained her like clotted blueberries, ever since the day she slid under the water. The blue was always there, a pattern of branches blooming beneath her skin. But now she is all skin.

She knows she should be better now. But it isn't like she expected – this newness and life, warm like syrup on her tongue, cold like pine needles on her fingertips. Each sensation amplified, her body stretched taut like butterfly wings.

And maybe she is a butterfly. Maybe she has finally escaped from the cocoon of Pennywhicker's fingers and is merely perched at this campus, sunning herself, new wings eager to burst open like a parachute. And then she will taste the sky between her fingers.

She didn't try to find numbness, not from the start. But numbness is all she knows. Her world, cocoons and ice. And she didn't ask for a *new* world. A new name, a new location, yes. But the colors, the colors? It's not even the warmth, it's the colors. Purple that lands like plum on her tongue. Red like skittles when she moves her hand over a scarf. Popsicle blue sky, melting onto her forehead, smudging on her lips. Even in darkness, she can taste. Licorice night and banana moon.

It's not that she thinks all men are Pennywhickers, slick with cigarette smoke, sticky fingers crawling down her back. But there are times – moments when a sagging belly brushes too close, when dirty fingernails graze her palm at the grocery store. Moments when the elevator door shuts and the space shrinks, next to a hulking rectangle of a man.

There is nowhere to escape in those moments. No patch of soil to crawl into, no furniture thick enough to lie curled beneath. No soap or showerhead astringent enough to sterilize her skin, not when the memory of fingernails trickles down her spine.

But this boy – Sam – he isn't a boy like the others, those composites of body parts, some sharp some soft. He doesn't wear shaggy, dirt-filled hair, or curl a Frisbee against his chest. And his jaw lacks that square obtuseness of men. His face is a triangle, acute angle in the place of a chin, circles for eyes. Arms like a tree bough in the wind.

And Laidea knows she is stupid. Stupid for lingering on the shape of one boy's mouth, the indentation of his cheek against the grass, the whisper of his fingertips on her wrist.

But it didn't start there. These things never start with skin against skin. Laidea can't say when it started. With the concrete so cool so numb, her mind distracting her eyes, perhaps she didn't see, didn't notice his shadow the first time he walked by. Perhaps she didn't feel the warmth that floated with him, the breeze that brushed her knuckles.

If he had stood first –

If he had mounted her block of cement and reached across the space –

She could have slid back, back and back until she found her back against the wall. She could have slithered across the grass, into the darkness of the trees, black and damp and vibrous.

But instead she finds herself leaning toward him, barely standing. He sitting on the grass and only occasionally looking up. His textbooks thick, dull covers decorated in straight lines. His fingers smudged from smoothing over the words, as he rests his forehead in the crook of his hand. Delicate in gesture.

She watches him. His hair so blond it's white as clover, stuck out in wisps around his face. And he doesn't reach toward her, doesn't call out. But one day, one day his face turns, hair round as a wish flower, and he's waving to her with a smile like a crease in a peach. She's drawn as if to nectar.

And though her legs only tumble over concrete and step on the grass, she remembers it as her first flight. She remembers running to the edge of the concrete ledge, bare feet curled with the jump, body suspended, halfway between falling and flying.

But then her arms curve out, the wings burst open, and the air catches in them, lowers her softly by his side. A butterfly, poised for flight.

Her hands flutter like wings.

With Pennywhicker, there was only waiting. By lockers, behind trees, at the corner of his desk, ankles turned inward. She waited like a plant, roots sunk into whatever pot he gave her. Cloudy eyes, foggy breath, squinting into his beard and watching the sky. Waiting for an opening, an escape. Limp and wilting into his wrinkled arms.

But with Sam, there is no waiting, no lingering in the shadow of a bush. She sees him, she traipses over the grass, she is in his arms, sunlight melted on her back.

Baggy with youth, he rubs his knuckles against his eyebrows even when they're entwined, even with his arms crooked over her torso, his face dangling just above her lips.

He says her hair is angular, that he's never seen so many perfect triangles on one head. And he says nothing about age. Never questions, never wonders if she's older than she looks, never has to justify a hand over her hip. Everything is legal. So nothing can be wrong.

With Sam, days move fingertip on fingertip – moments she can curl her face into and suck. Sam's eyes deep as bruises, wandering down her neck, his palm on her shoulder. Sam is sunlight, Sam is clear as amber, Sam is a thumb tracing a scratch on her back. *Who?*

Sam is questions, all the right questions.

Questions she closes her eyes and pretends – to answer.

Open the mouth, release a sound.

Will it ever be answer enough?

That's the problem with shadows. They tangle in your hair like Spanish moss and cling like leeches. They stain your skin even after you pull them away. And it isn't long before she can see the shadows on Sam, slipping from her skin to his. They whisper in her ear when he kisses her, they trail their twiggy fingers down her cheeks.

Sam doesn't press purple like blackberries on her thighs. He doesn't hold her closer in the dark or bend her fingers in the wrong direction. He doesn't reach into the depths of her, doesn't pluck her clothing even when she expects him to. But still the darkness lingers, mud between her teeth. Still the shadows whisper in her ear.

No man is sun-dappled.



Sam tells her they can be in the sky, that she can be in the sky - she can call the ground cloud, they can call it anything they want, that there's no need to worry, no need to panic, no need to argue over 'walk' and 'flutter,' 'sprint' and 'soar.' Isn't it all a reflection anyway? Sam asks. Isn't it the same above and below, so why can't she just be, just be with him, wherever this is and just call it whatever the Hell she wants?

She's been with Sam three months, but his hands hesitate. No matter the writhing, the steamy eyes, his hands still hesitate. She tells him zippers are meant to be undone, and he turns his face, refastens his belt. His zipper never opens.

She asks him what is wrong, something has to be wrong, something must be wrong.

Sam's eyes sag, baggy cheeks. "Do you ever slow down?" he asks her.

She leans close and tells him he can come as slow as he wants, so long as he comes.

She has an itch to touch, to connect, to hold.

"Can't you ever wait?" he asks.

And she knows that hesitation means no, and that the first time should only be yes, that every time should only be yes. But the itch is there, and the heat, and the yearning, and oh. She thinks – just this, just now, just this and the shadows might leave.

And only his hesitant hands can hold her. Only his hesitant hands hold her away.

Then one night, one night he leads her to a party. Bodies meshed against the wall like weeds. Hands smothered in hair, fingers thrumming, breath like over-risen dough.

And Sam holds her against the wall too. Cradles her like other men and other women, thighs soft with familiar pressure. Her chin in the crook of thumb and forefinger. Her neck bent, throat taut as a cow in a slaughterhouse.

And they run stumbling up the stairs to his dorm room, giggling into each other's necks, heavy eyes and short breaths. Falling, skin against skin.

Sam's fingers, pressing. And the shaking, the shaking.

Limbs twitch like a science fair project, her throat too tight to speak.

Sam doesn't hear her silence, doesn't hesitate.

And it's not that she doesn't like Sam. But the fingers.

Fingers and shadows, and how it moves, a kaleidoscope of tastes and textures, colors sharp as vomit. His hands press the line between thigh and hip, his mouth on her shoulders. And nothing enters her lungs, just the scratch of shadows down her back, just the tightening coil of night and his mouth.

The gasp of consciousness is like rising from water.

After, he wants to know what's wrong, why she's shaking, what just happened. He touches her elbow when she stands, fingernails scraping like aluminum on teeth.

The hallway is soggy with couples, bloated mouths and squinting eyes. In every corner, palms stroke red and bumpy necks, cheeks angry and pulsing. And all around, the stink of flesh.

She knows he is young and yellow and willowy as a sapling. She knows he is not Pennywhicker. And she thought it would feel different. But vibrations and stroking, it's all the same.

She is across the field, hands in her hair. Sam trails behind, a hornet of questions. He wants to know what she's doing, where she's going, what she isn't saying. What is going through her mind that she would do this. What he's supposed to think when it was his first – she was his first, doesn't that mean anything, doesn't she care, won't she even look at his face?

And she knows the shadows aren't real, that nothing is there, nothing is beckoning. That a tree is a tree and a boy is a boy. But still, everything is tainted. And she can barely breathe, just needs to curl into herself like the frond of a fern.

And Sam, for all his sunlight, is as man as a man, square and hard and soft in all the wrong places. Breath like meat and elbows that stab. And if she gave him one more touch, one more moment, one more fumbling stretch and sigh and grunt – one more, one more – but the ground is so far so low so hard.

And Sam is behind, too far behind to touch, his face smudged like charcoal.

And his hand reaches, fingers skeletal, flesh fading with the wind.

*Old Woman, Old Woman,*

*Who blinded the prince,*

*My riddle unravels –*

*What use are your hints?*

## Storm

The night that Sam transformed, he burned hot as iron and seared her palm like a fisted icicle. That is the danger of men. Their shapes shift. They glitter like mica, but pull back the layers and you will find dull, unrelenting granite. And so Sam shifted. Wilted and bloomed, scorched and melted until the final moment when he unraveled in a thread of ash.

And yet, remarkably, the dust that was Sam performed one last feat as he drifted on the wind. At least that is how Laidea understands the Old Woman's unexpected visit, the only way to understand the wrinkled face that peaks at her in this moment, in this now, of the morning light.

"Is that tree your new home?" the Old Woman asks, and she squats before Laidea in a mass of twitching cotton. The fabric's movement feels like danger, and Laidea breathes in pulses like steps on a staircase.

"The branches," Laidea tells the Old Woman, "and fingers" – and what more can she say, when already the sky closes above her. The clouds are gray and dense, filled with a liquid she knows too well.

"Don't let it rain," she says. "I'll turn red." Already the tree branches churn with the same storm that scattered Sam and which ripples the Old Woman's clothing. And if the branches don't stop, don't stay still, don't pause and hush –

"The branches are too sharp," she says, and the Old Woman nods. Shivers. Presses the back of her hand to Laidea's forehead.

"You're freezing," the Old Woman says. "We'll have to hurry."

Half-rotten leaves hurl themselves at the sky like a flock of birds. Laidea steps and steps

until there is warmth in the passenger seat of a car.

“We’ll get you an Incomplete,” the Old Woman says. “It won’t be a problem, not given the way —”

Laidea covers her ears.

In the weeks that follow, Laidea imagines herself in that flock of leaves, twisting through gray wisps, hurtling toward the crimson center of a cloud.

In the weeks that follow, the Old Woman mutters that she should have taken closer stock of the situation, and eases the kettle onto the burner too softly.

The kettle’s quiet movement has congealed into a routine, but today Laidea tells the Old Woman that she is not a china doll, and that even porcelain won’t shatter from the sound of metal on metal.

On the table is a letter from the school, urging – no, threatening – her to return and finish her work over the summer. “It’s unreasonable,” the Old Woman says. “They’d give you at least a year if they cared for an instant about your long-term success.”

But if she doesn’t return the scholarships will evaporate, and then what will follow? The Old Woman has enough to house her during vacation but no more. The Old Woman is an old woman, half retired already.

“I won’t send you back to the environment that triggered you in the first place,” the Old Woman says. “Not until you’re ready.”

But Sam won’t be there during the summer, and the weeks from winter to spring have already crumbled around Laidea like discarded drawings. Branch and bud, waves that crest and recede, frozen bits of sea foam carried in the wind. Moments accumulate in a hurried succession

of images.

Even the Old Woman won't understand how those moments build until she is submerged, choking on fragments of memory. So Laidea tells her, "Work is necessary in rebuilding a life."

The Old Woman purses her lips and shakes her head. When she shoves the kettle to a different burner, it screeches, and Laidea knows the days of silence are ending. Perhaps what she told the Old Woman is true. Already hope swells in her stomach and rises like a bubble toward her throat.

"I have two requirements," the Old Woman says the next morning, as Laidea stirs thawed blueberries into her oatmeal. "Call me every single day."

"And the second?"

"Start thinking of yourself in the first person."

## The Girl and the Wolf

At night I walk through trees, place my palm against bark. Trace a thumb across lichen. Perhaps I am not so far from Laura, the Laura that could have been.

The other girls in my dorm say it's dangerous to spend my evenings among trees. That it's better to go in the afternoon, or bring someone with me at least. They say it's only good sense when the newspapers tell stories of women raped and mutilated in broad daylight.

But why show caution when even caution ends in violence?

The problem – the problem that I tell the trees tonight, when the wind hushes and they seem almost to listen – is that this story is wrong, all wrong, and if I cannot figure out the story, how will I play the part?

I can trace events back to the earlier stories of my life, to the little girl and the wolf, the ogre and the maiden. But there is no telling what story will come next, and if I don't know there is nothing for me to change.

And if I had known with Sam, if I had recognized the turn in our path, if I'd known how to stop the shadows, then maybe – maybes are tricksters, slipping through my fingers like an eel in water. And yet, maybe Sam would have been a hero that night, sunlight glinting off his metal shirt, and I would be – what?

But something is coming, something that has the trees humming tonight. When I climb their branches, they sway in the breeze, and I feel light as a maple seed. The wind moves up, up, pushing me to the spindly tips of the highest branches, stretching my hands like wings.

Air nudges my toes. And only my limbs, my scratched up legs and arms, hold me down, wrapped tight around the trunk. My clothing creases and clings to itself, soaks in sweat and sap.



During the day, I read. The university calls it field research even though I am never in a field or even outdoors. Field research sounds closer to what Laura would do if she had survived – counting blades of grass, grains on a stalk. If I studied nature I would follow a tree from twig to root. I would lift soil in a backward avalanche and bare the structure, wander among each woody tendril and sink beneath root. Watch the tree from a worm’s view.

According to the project description, I am “tracing strands of feminine power in the records closest to the oral traditions,” but the deadline is drawing near and I am no closer to my true aim. I haven’t found my own folktale yet.

Many come close. Children with feathers pinned to their arms, a cloak the color of thorns. And wolves with smiles wide as ovens. All stories that could fit, but the endings never fit.

A witch roasted like pie, birds that sip eyes from women with shorn feet, one eye at a time. Shoes that dance and dangle from a corpse. In these tales, dismemberment comes last. And it comes to the villain.

If only my tale were the most obvious one, a wolf and a girl in the woods. Even the Old Woman appeared like the grandmother, but with legal action instead of a handful of stones and a sewing kit. *Let’s see if he can follow you now.* And it’s true that Devans hasn’t dared to follow, not with a restraining order heavy as rocks in his belly.

Sometimes I wish I were Little Red Riding Hood, swallowed but not bitten. Whether consumed or saved, she is always whole.

When a wolf sinks his teeth in a beating heart, can pain move deeper?

The only answer I have found is that ribs mark my weakest places. Trace the bone, and you will find the opening.

If I could, I would snap my ribs together like pages in a heavy book. Fuse bone, petrify

tendons. But magic eludes me, so I spend days in the library. Nothing but paper on my fingers, no spine but leather and glue, tugging my arms, pulling me down, filling my empty places.

It is two years since I last spoke to Sam, though he's likely still on campus. I see tufts of white-blond hair in every crowd, but never his face. As if an enchantment guides him gently from my path but leaves an imprint in his wake.

Even physically absent, Sam crouches at the center of my story. Two years, and I can see neither of his shapes - the steady body or the one that shifts.

That's why I must find my story. Then I will understand that night. Why Sam's fingers ran like spider legs.

*Sam, Sam,*

*Tainted man*

*Cooked my heart*

*In an iron pan*

Sometimes my story seems to move through me, steam in my lungs. Like a hot air balloon, I stretch and rise. Only a little, enough that my toes drag, curled beneath me like naked root at the base of a plant.

Most of the tales I read are about men, the woman an afterthought, an unwilling prize in a tournament. For a happy ending, a woman must remain silent and faithful, even as her husband ties her to a stake and lays kindling at her feet.

Beautiful girls saw off their feet for a night with the prince, only to teeter through their sister's wedding with bloody eye sockets. In a remote village, a woman trades her daughter for plums. What would I trade to find my story?

In one story, a mermaid splits her tail and walks on land, each step like broken glass. Perhaps this *could* be my story, identity dropped like scales in the water, pain in every step. But the ending –

To float through the air as sea foam, while another woman fills my lover's arms?

Still, there is a lesson here: if a woman loves a man, she will dissolve.

If I read the stories enough times, the details overlap like double vision. A mother goat sews stones into the wolf's belly, and then a little girl and her grandmother do the same. Two sisters step into the woods, and one returns with a mouthful of diamonds, the other toads. The diamond-spewing sister steals Cinderella's prince, stranding Cinderella with the hobbling, blinded step-sisters.

Unless princes are as plentiful as deer, hiding in the shadow of a tree.

But none of these tales will tell me what happened with Sam, why he transformed. Why I touched a hero and he turned to ash. And if I find the reason, if I break the spell – where will I awake?

The day I see Sam, I still haven't found my story. It is the first time I have seen him in two years. Sam, but with darkened hair, cut in jagged edges like a dried leaf. And when he sees me his head tilts back, sunlight on the tips of his eyelashes. And he smiles a lumpish smile, his face uneven as a rotting gourd.

I am walking across a field when I see him, on my way to a meeting with my advisor. When he smiles, that field shrinks; the border of trees huddle close to me like bars.

And in that moment, Sam is every shape he ever took when I knew him, and every shape

I've envisioned for the past two years. He is sunlight, he is warmth – and the skitter of needles down my back.

So I stand there with frozen lungs, while my hands fan out like wings, poised for flight.

But then Sam turns, and I realize someone is tugging on his arm. A woman with shiny hair who doesn't look at me, doesn't seem to worry about me or even know that I was once Sam's false bride, that I was driven into the trees as he shifted into sharp and glinting shapes. Because Sam is the other end of her arm, and she smiles as she pulls him into the curve of her hair.

So my wings retract, and my spindly legs hurry to a meeting that feels more desperate now that I have nothing to flee.

For the next few days I search the volumes in the library more frantically, ignoring classes and even meal times, until the words spin on the pages and my body forces me to seek food. While I eat, I read over my notes in the dining hall. My body is folding in on itself, and the Old Woman suspects, but over the phone she can only scold.

I tell her about my research and listen to the click of her nails against the kitchen table. The Old Woman asks if I've spoken to other women my age, and I tell her there's no time for friendship, not until I understand what happened with Sam. Because if Sam is not a villain, if another woman is his hero's prize, then the story makes even less sense.

Before she hangs up, the Old Woman says, "There are more options than villain or hero." She's right, and I can't deny that interplay of light and shadow when he was with me. Sam may be a trickster who inhabited the shape I desired but sprouted teeth when I drew close.

No, it still doesn't fit. I drew close long before the night of his transformation. Begged him to remove his belt and unzip his pants, my palm on his thigh, his mouth against my temple. And still, even then, he didn't transform. His transformation took weeks, and tricksters transform before dawn. Just a night – tricksters offer a night and lure you over the edge of a cliff.

In the library, I search for different variants of "Bluebeard." Bluebeard marries more than one woman, so perhaps the story holds a clue. Will Sam dismember the girl with the shiny hair? Perhaps he'll take her eyes and lock them in the cabinet with whatever he took from me.

I am standing in a grocery store when it happens. Such a simple place, a grocery store. If I want to live I must eat, but I only have a partial food plan, the bare minimum I was required to purchase. The dorm has a shared kitchen, which is the reason I stand in the store, the only real store in this town, the closest one to this campus, and still it is two miles away. Two miles. 10,560 feet, which is 10,060 more than 500, and why did I think 500 would protect me?

There is nothing magical about a five and two zeros.

It has been two years and six months since I graduated from high school, two years and six months since I set foot at that school, imagining I could shed that life like a brittle snake skin. That even the memory of that time would turn hollow as a curl of fallen bark. Laura with the rosy cheeks fell into the sky, and Laura with the muddy back tumbled into the slick earth. Soil covered her mouth and eyes, soft as a lullaby.

But I am Laidea, and Laidea lives. Laidea who fills notebooks with lists, Laidea who entombs herself in a room of shiny preserved animal skin and the dull remains of tree flesh. Laidea of the sky blue arms who can leap, can fly. And the wind tugs on my hair.

I am standing in a grocery store when I unravel.

Beside a display of dead chickens that have been packed in aluminum cylinders and smooth labels. I am considering the merits of consuming a dead bird, comparing this display to a generic brand two feet to my right. And when I turn -

His body cuts through air like a dropped mill stone, hurtles forward like a phantom, with no hesitation for the shoppers who move to either side. There was no reason to turn, but I turned. And his body enters the store through the front door and hurtles toward me as if nothing could stop him. He moves through the store like a rock through mist.

A middle-aged woman with taught lines across her forehead walks between us, just an instant, not even one second, and yet in that moment he slides across ten seconds of space, moves forward like a rolling boulder.

Devans.

Devans walks toward me, no hair on the top of his head. A white horseshoe of hair hangs over his lip and meets his jaw.

And I run. Drop the basket of vegetables. There will be no eating can be no eating no digestion until there is distance. Five hundred feet, at least five hundred feet are to be there, always. Down the aisle, past cans of ham and boxes lined close and tight as a brick wall, and the floor expands before me, square tiles stretch into rectangles then lines. Behind me, everything contracts. I can feel it though I won't look. The aisle contracts so fast he will slingshot into me.

But then the deli is before me, I am out of the aisle, and a man and woman step aside, spin their baskets from my path.

The door is before me. It screeches open while a bagger gapes and follows me with a turn of his jaw. And I am running, I am running, I am running.

The Old Woman makes sounds like the creak of a rocking chair when I call. The Old Woman tells me this is unacceptable, that numbers exist for a reason, that there are implications, good faith implications, in this kind of number. That it doesn't matter if it started as coincidence - he kept walking toward me even after he saw me and knew he was breaking the legal radius.

The Old Woman makes phone call after phone call, filing paperwork, and I tell her to slow down that it doesn't (and can't and won't) matter. I will tan my skin like leather. Make it thick and strong until nothing leaks, nothing seeps, and my skin will hold me.

But still she dials and redials. She shouts when the people tell her it was an accident unplanned that Devans is sorry never meant to couldn't help it will never again. The Old Woman tells me to come home, and when she says home she means her home by the water and salt. Her home where waves beat rocks smooth.

There's no point. I tell her I am a bottle unstoppered, a top spinning as it falls. Because my roots no longer cling to soil but rise and shake off dirt like a snow flurry. Click, and her voice stops.

The Old Woman calls again, tells me she will come for me, will give me that time only to pack.

But my story rises in me again, a funnel of wind behind my collar bone, and the thought of leaving even this compromised radius fills me with bubbles of air until I will starve with the fullness. And my story tells me the Old Woman cannot save me this time.

So I tell her there is more than one place to buy food.

She says she is coming, that I can't be alone.

I tell her I won't, that I am surrounded by other students, more than half of them women. What I don't tell her is that I am already flying. That Devans is lead on Laura's smashed skull,

and I am high above the trees where his granite belly cannot rise.

At last, Sam's story makes sense. I know now the cost of flight. I am not a sun-dappled girl laughing into cotton candy clouds. There is a price for running fingertips across treetops, for feeling leaves press together like a bird's plumage. Those who slip through a dolphin's leaping arc must first touch shark fins.

Because I see now. I see Sam, and what I did to him.

I thought Sam was a shadow, slithering down my back. But with me he was a bruised peach, a torn doll. Sam was a shy face, turned away, his hand covering his belt buckle.

*No*, he said. *No* and *No* and *No* until it was *Yes*.

And then I flew. A dark shape in the trees.

I left him a charcoal smudge, left him to fade in the wind.

And me - a witch in the night, arms raised to the sky, invoking the storm.



*Once upon a time I was. Laura.*

*Stir of a ladle, hush beneath covers.*

*Laidea believes I wore fairy wings and teetered through meadows. But the story tugs deeper.*

*You want to live within root, my dear?*

*She never will, not when she's so quick to cut. Root needs trunk needs leaf and flower. She'll leave me tangled below the soil, suck water through me and never look below.*

*But Laidea, I love you I am you. Root will reach, deeper deeper. Branch stretches higher.*

*Laidea, I love you will I see you will you know me?*

My darlings, my darlings, your bonfire still roars. Why the drooping eyes? The hushed voices. Are you not pleased with my fairy stories? I tried ever so hard to entertain you. See how my long hairs have turned silver with the effort. You have a heroine, a villain, a little violence before the escape.

The beast swallows the girl alive, true, but how else could she be whole for the escape? Would you prefer the wolf chewed her up, one tiny baby bite at a time?

It's no use.

I can see your displeasure in those creases between the eyes. Every one of you, identical as a witch's doppelganger spell. Very well. If you insist, we will proceed with more caution. I will give you laughter. Ease into the acid of the monster's stomach, like a woman eases into an icy pool.

But remember: the middle is always the most difficult part.

## Ten Fool-Proof Ways to Snag a Fairytale Romance

*Why should princesses and girls with fairy godmothers hog all the romance? With this list of sure-fire methods for snagging a hunk, every woman can have her very own fairytale romance. No magic required!*

### The Perfect Fit

Let's face it: escaping the friend zone is harder than breaking an evil fairy's curse. So if your best friend can't figure out that you're his one and only, here's how you can get a second shot at the perfect first impression.

#### *Stage One:*

First, talk your bestie into throwing a huge 3-day party where he's guaranteed to meet the love of his life. Make sure it's a costume ball, so there will be plenty of intrigue. Once the invitations are in the mail, regretfully break the news that you won't be able to attend. When you show up in a dress that shows off every curve and a mask that hides your identity, he's sure to fall for this mysterious hottie. It'll be like meeting him for the first time, but this time around you'll know exactly what to say. What's that? The obscure film you just mentioned is his favorite?

Won't he be surprised that this foxy stranger is so easy to talk to. Then, when he's about to lock lips, tell him you just remembered that you left a gingerbread man in the oven, and run out the door. If you want him to hang on your every word *without* casting a spell, be sure to always end the conversation while he still wants more.

The next day, slip back in as his bestie. When he confides about his new love and asks your advice, urge a little caution. Tell him she's probably wearing a mask to hide the fact that a

magic fish turned her nose into a sausage, and he'll be that much more determined to get that mask off and prove you wrong.

When you return for the second party, keep that mask on, no matter how much he begs for a kiss. Then make a new excuse to leave early, and run out that door!

*Stage Two:*

Now that he's eating out of your hand, it's time to reveal your identity. But if there's one thing even a liberated modern man wants, it's a challenge. You've got to trick him into thinking *he* pursued *you*.

On the third night, while he's begging for your digits, pull another disappearing act. But this time lose an accessory on the way out. A custom-made shoe works best, though a ring is also classic. Like any man, he'll try to track down his lady love by searching for the woman the lost shoe fits. When he runs out of other options, it'll finally dawn on the dummy that you're a girl too. And when it fits like a glove, he'll gaze into your eyes and realize what you've known for years.

Tip: if you want to make sure the shoe won't fit any of those other damsels eyeing your man, grab an axe and chop off your toes. Now you're the only grown woman with four-inch shoes! Just make sure that wound heals before the party. Blood in the shoe is a fashion faux paux that can get a girl's eyes pecked out.

### The Silent Damsel in Distress

Unfortunately, nothing - and I do mean nothing - turns a man off like a chatterbox. So once you've found a loaded, hunky catch, zip those lips and shove that key where the sun don't shine - buried in the backyard, silly! Get your mind out of that filthy gutter. Try getting filthy rich instead.

For this plan to work, all you'll need is a whole lot of willpower or a quick surgery to sever your vocal cords. Just put on your rattiest tattered old clothes, smear some mud and leaves in your hair, and sit in a tree. If you've chosen your spot well, it won't be long before a kindly billionaire drives past, is struck by your innocent beauty, and stops to offer help. But - and this is the most important part - NOT. A. WORD. Just nod and smile, and he'll be so charmed by your mysterious allure that he'll scoop you up and carry you off without even *waiting* for a nod of consent.

Optional: to sweeten the deal, fill your mouth with jewels ahead of time, and let one slip out each time you open your mouth.

### Brother to Bird Magic Act

This next ploy builds on the Silent Damsel. If your soon-to-be-BAE isn't going for the bait, try adding a little intrigue by inventing a motive for your vow of silence. That's where your brothers come in - and they have to be brothers. *Never* trust a sister near your man. It helps if you have brothers who've been transformed into animals, but witches are hard to find these days, so you can always fake it till you make it.

To get started, buy seven ravens at a pet store (crows will do in a pinch) and store them in a large bird cage, with all the essentials for a first world pet life. Put up a photo of your seven brothers (or a photo of actors). When your man is around, let him catch you staring sadly at your pets or tracing the outlines of your brothers in the photo. When he asks what's wrong, not a peep! Keep shaking your head sadly, till he agrees to let it go. Meanwhile, spend every waking minute knitting tiny little shirts, just the right size for your birdy bros. When the last shirt is finished, rig miniature explosives, slip them over those birds of yours, and detonate at the precise moment your brothers step through hidden panels in the wall. If the timing is just so, Hubs will think your brothers have burst free from their bird bodies.

Congrats! You're finally allowed to speak again, assuming you didn't snip those pesky vocal cords.

Pro Tip: if your love's a little too dim to connect the brother-to-bird dots, you can always *spell* things out by leaving one shirt tragically unfinished. When one brother walks out with a giant wing in place of his left arm, your sweetie will have no doubt that a spell was just lifted. Just make sure your brother wears that costume up until the wedding.

### The True Bride

Once you've found your true love, you owe it yourself to make sure he's loyal. You know you're smokin' hot (or at least you will be once you finish the fashion questionnaire on page 24), so is he in it for the bod or the personality? The only way to know for sure is to see how he acts around your look alike.

Traditionally, your evil stepmother should slip her daughter into bed with your groom during the honeymoon, but if you don't have any stepsisters, you can look elsewhere. For the identical twins out there, just sub in your sister for a romantic date. Don't have a twin? No problem! Hold a contest for a look-alike. With a little plastic surgery, that girl will be your spitting image.

Now that your doppelganger is out with your man, sit back and see how long it takes Prince Charming to catch on. With luck he'll be quick on the uptake, and you'll spend the rest of the evening laughing about all the shenanigans that ensue each time you test his love.

If Lover Boy doesn't notice he's slurping soup with another dame, it's time to up the ante. Rush into the restaurant and accuse him of cheating on you with your twin. Your doppelganger should keep insisting she's you, forcing him to listen to his heart and recognize the true bride. If you want to be sure Twinsy plays along, trick her into drinking poison at the same time as you, and give your groom-to-be just enough antidote for one of you. Once she figures out her life is on the line, she'll pull all the stops trying to convince him she's the real you.

Just to be safe, keep the true antidote in your pocket. Either way, that hussy will be out of the way for good! You know she was a little *too* eager when you suggested this switcheroo.

### The Doppelganger

They say the best men are already taken, but why should that stand in the way of your happily ever after? Here's the perfect plan for the wicked stepsisters out there (and anyone who's a wicked stepsister at heart).

If you've found the perfect man but he already has his True Bride, you'll need to find a gentle way to tug him loose. Divorce can be hard on a man, so don't try to talk your prince into leaving his princess - just change the package and he'll think *you're* the beauty who saved his life and serenaded him by the sea.

To make a smooth transition, start out by kidnapping your lover's wife. If you want to be convincing when you take her place, don't kill her until after you've forced her to share all her secrets - especially her Venmo password! It helps if you stalk her for weeks beforehand so that you can study her habits and mannerisms when she's not under pressure (or, you know, being held underwater).

Once you've learned everything you can, take her remains to a discrete plastic surgeon, along with some photos of what she looked like before your interrogation. When you exit the surgeon's office, looking just like your true love's missing wife, you're ready for a lifetime at his side.

Bonus points if you can dig up a poison that will turn the first wife into seafoam.

### The Captive Beauty

What woman doesn't love a stormy, brooding man? I'm talking about the kind of man who lurks in the shadows at the bar, undressing you with sultry eyes. The only problem is, it's all about the pursuit for these elusive bad boys. Offer him your number, and he'll move onto another town where he'll stalk some princess in a coma who'll never make him as happy as you could.

But fear not! Here's a fool-proof way for the doe to snag the hunter: arrange your own abduction. If you're truly lucky, this plan will take hardly any work at all. If your lurker is as



obsessed as you think, he'll do all the work - and what's more fun than a man who does all the work, amiright?

To get started, have a friend call you at the bar. Then, speaking loudly, say that you'll be waiting in the dark, secluded alley out back. Go outside, and you'll be nabbed quicker than you can say, "Stockholme Syndrome." If you want the authentic experience of panicked friends and family, keep your friend in the dark about your true plans - imagine her surprise when you're not at the designated pick up spot!

If you know your man, he'll be the one snatch you, but there's always a chance some overlooked bad boy will swoop in first and close the deal. Can you say, "Love triangle?" Trick question! You can't say anything through a gag.

After passing out, you'll wake up in a dark cell, where your captor will threaten the life of your dearest friends and family members, should you attempt to leave. Pay close attention, because the more people he threatens, the deeper his love.

The accommodations will probably be sparse at first, but don't worry. A little good behavior will earn you luxuries like gourmet dinners and designer shoes, or at least some toilet paper.

### The Cannibal in Law

Don't want to compete with a mother for your man's love? You are not alone! Unfortunately, the miracle of modern medicine has made orphaned princes a scarce breed. But don't toss the prince out with his ogre of a mother: find a hunk whose mom eats human flesh, and you'll have the perfect excuse to pitch Mommy Dearest out a window, and out of your lives.

Not for the faint of heart (or stomach), this method involves tracking down the nearest cannibal convention and cozying up to a middle-aged lady with an eligible son. She won't be hard to find. Just mention you're a single woman who loves kids and watch her whip out that smartphone photo album! Before you know it, you'll be set up on more dates than you can fit in a week. But once you've found your match, put a ring on it fast. Break the heart of Mama's baby boy, and you might just wind up in next week's pot.

The next part is trickier - after the wedding bells have pealed, Mama Cannibal won't like sharing her little boy after all. So hurry up and pop out a few babies of your own. Before long, Mama's yearning for baby broulee will kick in, and your hidden cameras will catch her in the act. Bye-bye Mama! Even her baby boy can't forgive her for feasting on *his* baby's liver.

#### Optional: Frame Mama Cannibal

Even the most devout cannibals have been known to balk at the thought of eating blood relatives. If Mama won't seize the bait, you may need to broil baby on your own (see "How to Host a Cannibal Dinner Party" on page 39 for recipes that'll have her drooling). Slip a few chunks into her quinoa chicken salad for good measure, just in case she offers to get her stomach contents tested. This method is also ideal if you're down on your luck and already married to a boy whose mother *doesn't* eat human flesh. Just make sure hubby doesn't show up till *after* you've hidden the remains under her mattress!

One word of caution: this method carries a slight risk of accidental burning at the stake, should Mama manage to pin the infanticide on you.

## Maiden in the Tower

For the lady with too many beaux, this next strategy will help you narrow down the competition. Just find a tower in a secluded location and set up a room at the top, fit for a princess (not sure how to decorate? Find out your Personal Style Profile on page 11). Once you're done decorating, seal off the doors, and all but one window. I recommend a bay window with a window seat so you can spend your days serenading the forest.

When your suitors track down your new location, they'll swarm that tower faster than stepsisters who've spotted an eligible prince. To make it a truly sporting competition, set up a few obstacles. Deadly plants are a classic, so see if you can find some man-eating GMO roses. Dragons add a nice medieval touch, but they're about as easy to track down as a phoenix, so I recommend a moat full of crocodiles - is anything more romantic than a man who will outswim a prehistoric killer for a glimpse of your face?

Once Lover Boy has braved the hazards guarding your tower, he'll have to get inside. You could always leave him to his own devices and wait for a suitor who *remembers* his grappling hooks before wading into croc-infested waters, but let's be honest: with today's men, you'd be waiting at least a hundred years. Besides, a bachelorette has gotta help her favorites along, right? To maintain the illusion that you're trapped, avoid anything too obvious. If you whip out a ladder, even Prince Charming might start asking questions. So keep it simple! With some 30-foot hair extensions and superior braiding skills, you've got the one rope you can't climb down! And sure, *I* know any girl with a 30-foot braid would just chop it off and use it to escape, but I won't tell.

Optional: If you want to draw out the rescue even longer, pretend you're in a deep sleep, and only true love's kiss can wake you. How can he not put a ring on it after that? Just don't be surprised if your true love decides to cop a feel before waking you. He's still a man, after all.

## The Transformation

### *Option I*

Some men yearn to be rescued from their bestial natures, so if you're trying to nab one of these soulful hunks, you'll need something extra special up your sleeve. I recommend giving interspecies transformation a try. If you don't have a witch handy for casting or lifting curses, not a problem! You don't have to really fall in love with an animal - just make Honey Buns think he's been turned into one. A little hypnosis, some gaslighting, lock him in an aquarium, and next thing you know, he'll be going "ribbit" like a frog. Convince him your kiss is the one thing that'll turn him back into a man, and he'll lavish you with gratitude and a diamond ring.

Bonus: some readers say a man's tongue is extra talented after he's lived like a frog.

### *Option II*

If it turns out your man prefers to *do* the rescuing, just use a little hypnosis to convince him you're a swan, or maybe a deer. When he hunts you down, tell him you've been enchanted by an evil sorcerer, and the only thing that can save you is his kiss. Just make sure that shotgun is filled with blanks, in case he decides to shoot first and break evil spells later.

### All Things That Creep and Glitter

The shoes were a mistake. Anna had known they were a mistake the instant her mother handed them to her. The silhouette on the box was clue enough. Strappy and wispy with a too-tall heel, the shoes simply begged a girl to humiliate herself with a twisted ankle. Walking in high heels was something her mother made look effortless and sophisticated, but so far Anna's attempts looked more like a baby just learning to stand.

But there was nothing she could say to change her mother's mind, try as she might. And in her defense, she did try. The shoes had been on sale, and they were "exquisite" (her mother's word), a perfect choice for the sophomore social.

So nobody could reasonably blame Anna when she did, indeed, twist her ankle at the dance. And if they dared to blame her for that, they certainly shouldn't have blamed her when the too-thin heel snapped off one shoe and somehow became lodged in John Warner's thigh. Okay, it was more that it scratched his thigh just enough to draw blood and then got stuck in the fabric. If anything was exquisite, it was the way John's khaki pants turned red and blotchy while one of the chaperones tugged the heel loose.

Unfortunately, nobody had seen John Warner pinch her butt as she toddled past on the awkward shoes. They just saw her pick up the broken heel and lunge at him. And it didn't help Anna's case that she followed up on John's humiliation by calling him every name she could think of, including plenty of words that were banned on school property. John just cried through all of it, too busy clutching at his leg to even wipe at his eyes.

So while no *reasonable* person could have blamed Anna for the night's events, it turned out that every adult present was quite *unreasonable*.

Anna was too quick to speak. That had always been her problem, according to her mother, who insisted that maybe if Anna had learned how to hold her tongue they could have written the whole thing off as an accident. But no, Anna had to shout obscenities at the victim, and this time they would be lucky if the poor boy's family didn't sue them and take their house and both cars and put their whole family on the street.

Needless to say, her mother had a flare for drama.

As usual, her father stood by the window and stared into the night, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with his wife. His white button-up shirt had come untucked, and Anna noted that the cuffs didn't quite cover his wrists. Somehow that detail seemed fitting for a man who worked in a government job with a title she could never remember when her friends asked what her parents did for a living.

"You need to learn self-control," her mother said, rapping her knuckles on the coffee table.

The family had gathered in the living room, after her father had fetched her from the dance. If Anna hadn't already grasped the magnitude of the situation, it would have become clear the instant she saw her mother waiting in there, seated regally on one of the French-style armchairs they usually reserved for guests. The family room was more casual, with a plump blue sectional. The living room was only for extreme circumstances. Privately, Anna suspected that her mother felt queenly in there - with the curly wooden arm rests, her armchair wasn't far off from a throne.

"You should be flirting with boys," her mother continued, "not assaulting them."

"Maybe I would," Anna said, "if they kept their hands to themselves."

"Hands?" her father said. "What's this about boys' hands?"

Her mother rapped on the coffee table again. “Don’t you take her side!”

“But the boys have hands!” He held his own hands up in the air, shaking them for emphasis.

“And so does your little girl. Only she used hers to injure a classmate.”

This would have probably been a wise moment to remain silent and allow her father to argue her case, but instead Anna said, “Actually, I used the shoes you bought me. Turns out those heels are good for something.”

When her father turned back to staring out the window, she suspected he was hiding a laugh. Not that he would do anything to calm her mother, who managed to sit up even straighter and look even more queenly and outraged. Her ultra light natural blond hair (at least, that’s what the box called it) was even pinned up in braids like a crown. “Those shoes were intended as a gift to a young lady on an important night.”

“Too bad you gave them to me instead.”

Her mother slammed both hands on the coffee table and stood. Still seated, Anna had to crane her neck looking up. From below she could see into her mother’s flared nostrils. “This is your last warning,” her mother said. “One more incident, and I will find a way to make you a polite young lady, by any means necessary.”

This was hardly the first time her mother had issued a final warning. The only difference was that the so-called warning was usually followed by a punishment. The last time, Anna had said, “A punishment is the exact opposite of a warning, so you must be a liar,” following which her mother had increased the length of her grounding.

While Anna awaited sentencing, her mother studied her own nails. “I’m done with you,” she finally said and waved Anna away without looking up.

Being sent away without getting grounded or losing her phone was a lucky break, though Anna couldn't help wondering if getting an actual warning meant the rest of the statement was true this time. Maybe this really was the last warning before her mother did something drastic, like take away her phone.

Even her friends were split on whether John had really deserved a stiletto to the thigh. Jill, who'd been her best friend since second grade, asked, "Why didn't you just knee him in the nuts and walk away?"

It wasn't like Anna intended to lose her temper, and it wasn't even like violence was her go-to reaction. Most of the time it was her words that got her in trouble. The problem wasn't so much her snarky one-liners. Those seemed to amuse everyone except her mother. Even her teachers couldn't help but chuckle, including the ones who sent her to the office.

The real problem came when she blew up and lost all sense of what she was even saying. Afterwards, she would feel dazed, her memory fuzzy.

For instance, the very day after the John incident, did she really drop the F-bomb in her chemistry lab? All because Chuck Jones added the citric acid to their beaker five steps too early? According to witnesses, it had happened, but all Anna remembered was the smell of white board cleaner as Mr. Rayner wiped away the first two steps in the instructions. Then the sensation of pressure bubbling up into her chest and the pinch of her nails as she made fists and told herself to hold it in for once.

The next thing she knew, a hush had overtaken the room.



The only sound she heard was the scratch of Maddie Birkner's pencil, two tables over. Everyone knew Maddie was on track to be valedictorian, and apparently nothing could shake her focus, not even one of Anna's tirades.

Chuck stared at Anna with his mouth open, which she couldn't help but think made him look even stupider than his buzzed hair. Unfortunately, she also said it out loud, and that was what broke the spell she'd apparently cast over the room.

"Anna," Mr. Rayner finally said, "I've got a pass straight to the office with your name on it." He looked proud of himself, like he'd been saving that line all semester long.

"Fine," Anna snapped back. "You can try being Chuck's lab partner and see how long you last."

When Anna brought the detention slip home after the incident with Chuck, her mother just shook her head and signed it. Then, without so much as issuing a warning, she turned back to the pot of soup she was cooking for dinner. In a black skirt suit, she looked for a moment like a twenty-first-century witch standing over her cauldron.

Granted, later Anna couldn't determine whether she'd really had that impression in that very moment, or if it was something she'd added after the fact.

What she recalled for sure was waking in the middle of the night, a few days later. She lay still at first, confused to wake up in a dark room. While she tried to remember whether it was morning or evening, a school day or the weekend, there was a scratching sound at her window.

Though it would have mortified her to admit it, those little noises still spooked her when it was dark. It was only a year since her older sister, Megan, had moved out of their shared room and gone to college, and Anna had yet to adjust to the strange stillness of her bedroom at night,

or the way the house creaked more noticeably when nobody was snoring nearby. It felt eerie, somehow, each time she woke up in the dark and stared across the room at the unslept-on bed, still made perfectly and decorated with at least 6 pillows.

It was just like Megan to leave a bed pretty and neat, even knowing it would be dusty from disuse when she returned four months later. Megan also made a habit of leaving her favorite porcelain doll atop the pillows, like a prize on display. Anna couldn't make it through one night with those creepy unmoving eyes staring at her. Now she stashed it in the attic every time Megan left.

The scratching sound came again, and a low-pitched creaking moved through the house like a moan. Instead of checking the window, she checked the time on her phone. two am. The witching hour.

That was what her mother always called the time between 2 and 4 in the morning. Too late to still be awake, too early to get up, it was a time fit for nothing but witches. As in, "Go back to bed. It's still the witching hour." The phrase had spooked Anna to no end as a child. In retrospect, she supposed her mother had said it good-naturedly, but it hadn't exactly been a helpful way to calm a five year old who was certain there was a monster under her bed.

When the creaking sound came again, she decided this was an excellent time for a glass of water. She was halfway down the stairs when she heard her mother's voice.

"Really, I don't know what to do with her." The voice came from inside the kitchen.

There was a pause. Her mother had to be on the phone.

"No, it's not the same at all - Megan was so easy. I thought I was doing something right, but maybe I was just lucky."

Another pause, but this time her mother's shadow peeked through the doorway to the kitchen. Anna crouched low on the stairs and breathed quietly.

"Therapists are no use. We've tried three. No change. I don't know why I'm even saying 'we' - it's not like her father does anything about it."

Yes, her mother was definitely discussing her. Anna remembered all too well the most recent therapist, the one who had told her to picture her anger in a box, then close the box and put it under her bed. In this soft sing-song voice, he'd said, "Leave it for another time." That strategy of bottling things up was probably what had led to her infamous chemistry lab blow up at poor Chuck, who normally wouldn't have made her so mad. Sure, he was incompetent, but it wasn't willful.

"I don't know about that New Age, alternative stuff," her mother's voice continued. "They all sound like snake oil salesmen." Was the friend recommending essential oils or something? Because according to Anna's health teacher that stuff was just hyped up perfume.

"Who?" her mother asked. Then, "What kind of results?"

For a few minutes the loudest sound was the ticking of the grandfather clock at the base of the stairs. The friend must have been offering a lengthy explanation because all she heard from her mother was the occasional "hmm" and "really?"

As Anna waited, her knees stiffened, and she stretched her legs as slowly as possible, hoping her ankles wouldn't making a popping noise like they sometimes did in church during a prayer. This time they were silent.

"Maybe..." her mother said. "I'll have to think on it, but at this point I might just try anything. Even a snake oil salesman. Well, saleswoman." There was the sound of shuffling feet, and a shadow stretched through the kitchen doorway, elongated and skinny. "Might as well.

What's her name again? You know what, just text it to me. I'll probably write it down wrong this time of the night. It's the witching hour here. Fitting, right?"

About a week later, a box arrived in the mail. Anna wouldn't have thought anything of it, if her mother hadn't texted and told her she was expecting an important package for work and not to open it under any circumstances.

*But what if I really want to?* she texted back.

*Just leave it on the table.*

*But it's calling to me. Just begging me to open it.*

*DON'T*

*What if a robber puts a gun to my head and says to open it or he'll shoot?*

*Not funny. Just leave it on the table.*

Anna had only been joking, but after that reaction she was all but obligated to pry. Opening the package would be easy. The tricky part was to reseal it without her mother knowing, and after her string of snarky texts, her mother was guaranteed to suspect.

In the end she decided the best method would be to yank the tape off the bottom in one strip and then place a new strip of packing tape along the same line. It wasn't a perfect method, and a bit of the cardboard's smooth surface tore off, but with an extra strip of tape she could fix that.

As the flaps opened, a pungent odor escaped, like cat piss mixed with the sting of vomit. Layered inside the box were delicate sheets of tissue paper, an odd contrast to the stench. Since she was going through the bottom of the box, she couldn't simply peel back the tissue paper -

someone had carefully arranged the bundle so that it joined together at the top. Instead she lifted the whole thing out, careful not to tear it.

The cat piss smell was even stronger now, but she also detected something else, a sickly sweet scent, like the berries she'd found once at the back of the fridge, fermented and liquidy. There was also an undertone of cinnamon.

The bundle was tied with twine, and when she pulled the knot loose the first thing she saw were dried flowers - some looked like the potpourri her mother bought. Tiny stalks of purple blossoms, whole rose buds, and she definitely recognized those dried little star-shaped pods from the potpourri bowls. It was hard to imagine how the box could have anything to do with her, and she suddenly hoped it wasn't some kind of aphrodisiac her parents wanted to use on a romantic getaway.

With newfound trepidation, she brushed the rose buds aside. Underneath sat a white flower, the size of her palm. Five small petals met in the center, but brittle tendrils pooled around them, giving the entire flower the appearance of a star surrounded by lace. A few of the tendrils had already snapped off in the box, so she set it down gently on the carpet.

The next flower was even bigger, deep purple, with two petals the size and shape of bat wings. This flower also had stringy petals that had apparently become tangled during the drying process. The large, wing-shaped petals would easily break, so she only dared lift the edge.

Beneath, she found two more dried flowers like flattened bells. The worst of the stench radiated from them, so she said a silent prayer not to pick up their odor and nudged them aside.

A shriveled toad stared back.

The eyes were dried up and reminded her of the horrible time she'd found the neighbor's dead cat, after it had crawled into someone's car and been burned by the engine, before escaping, just to die on her family's lawn.

She tilted the bundle just a little, and something beneath the toad glimmered.

The toad lay on a bed of rice, only this rice shimmered. Silver. Not an opaque silver like painted rice, but slightly translucent, like a thin layer of mica or a sliver of gemstone.

When she plucked a single grain and held it to the sunlight, it sparkled like a diamond. She had never seen anything so beautiful or curious. And though she knew it had to be entirely in her head, the little grain felt warm.

Very gently, she repackaged the bundle, returning all the strange flowers in the correct order, and she even arranged the top layer of potpourri as close as she could remember to the way she'd found it.

The grain of rice she pocketed.

There was a good chance her mother had an itemized list of everything in the box, but a single grain of rice wouldn't be missed.

Her mother returned from work earlier than usual. Though both of her parents worked, her mother was usually the one to cook dinner on weekdays, her father weekends. There had been a brief phase where cooking dinner was Anna's responsibility on school days, since it had been Megan's before she left for college. It had only taken a week of charred vegetables and pancakes-for-dinner before her mother changed her mind and returned to the old system.

When her mother walked in, Anna was slouched on the sectional, simultaneously reading for class and streaming a show. Normally her mother would have lectured her on the proper way

to sit or scolded her for watching TV before her homework was done. This time she walked straight into the kitchen.

Anna knew the smart thing would have been to accept her luck, but something inside propelled her to say, “A masked bandit tried to steal the package!”

“Very funny!” her mother called back.

Anna pulled out her phone and texted:

*He didn't take it.*

Her mom's phone pinged in the other room. When there was no reply, Anna texted:

*Because I promised him my virginity if he left the box.*

Another ping. This time her mother shouted, “Leave me alone while I'm cooking dinner!”

Normally if Anna wandered into the kitchen for a glass of water or a snack, she'd be roped into setting the table or chopping vegetables, so she usually went upstairs or even outside, where she'd be safe beyond calling range. Tonight her mother seemed to want time to herself. While that left Anna uneasy about the aphrodisiac theory, it was also a welcome gift. She unpaused her show and returned to reading bits and pieces of *The Red Badge of Courage* during commercials.

She hadn't quite made it through a chapter, when the first tell-tale smells of dinner wafted from the kitchen. Onions and garlic, ground hamburger and tomatoes, all the aromas she would expect if her mother were making spaghetti. But there was something else. It was hard to say, when it mixed with the hearty scent of marinara, but she could swear she smelled the odor from the box. Cat piss, throw up, and potpourri.

If the box was already open, maybe it wasn't for anything gross, and she could ask about it without admitting that she'd already peaked. As she walked down the hall, the air turned thick and murky. Smoke streamed slowly through the cracks around the sliding door. The smell was so strong that she gagged and had to cover her mouth with her sleeve.

But the kitchen door wouldn't budge. It had apparently been latched from the inside.

The latch on the door had technically been there as long as Anna could remember. According to her dad they'd first put the latch on the door when she was a toddler learning to walk. After one unfortunate slip and a broken baby tooth, they'd realized the tile floor was less forgiving than the carpet throughout the rest of the house.

While the latch had been there for years, it wasn't something her parents often used, so at first she second-guessed herself. Maybe the door had come off the tracks or was stuck on something. She pulled at the handle, then again, harder.

"Not now!" her mother said from the other side of the door.

"But that smell -- "

"I'll call you when dinner is ready."

As she trudged back to the living room, she tried to imagine what her mother could be doing with the strange flowers and - creepiest of all - that dried toad. If not for the toad, she'd think it really was just some weird new-age potpourri. Some holistic medicine nonsense would have made at least a little sense after the strange conversation she'd heard in the middle of the night, and surely there were suckers out there gullible enough to think a funky potpourri would get their teenager to turn into some kind of Stepford Daughter. Granted, her mother had never been one of those suckers, but maybe she was desperate to try something new.



So the flowers could have made sense. Even the sparkly rice - maybe it was some kind of crystal that people who believed in Nessie and Big Foot thought had calming properties. But a dried toad? It was something she'd expect in a witch's cupboard or at one of those cults that supposedly abducted black cats every Halloween.

The fact that she'd seen something that spooky and hadn't even gotten after her mother for being so creepy and weird - well, she wondered for a split second if maybe it really was having an effect on her. Then again, she wasn't angry at the moment. Given the opportunity, she was sure to lose her temper again and let it all slip out.

It was another hour (two episodes of her show) before her mother opened the door and grandly called that dinner was ready.

Either the cat-piss-potpourri smell had dissipated, or she'd grown accustomed enough that it just lingered faintly in the background, the way she could barely taste the residue of her parents' coffee when she made cocoa in the Keurig.

The table was set with the dishes they saved for guests, and her mother had already dished spaghetti and sauce onto both of their plates.

Anna sat, eyeing her mother, who was busy pulling a tray of garlic bread from the oven. "Don't wait for me," her mother said. "Go ahead and get started."

Her mother's back was still turned, so Anna leaned down and sniffed.

It wasn't that she thought her mother would drug her. It was more that she didn't know for sure that her mother wouldn't. And after the bizarre smells and the witchy box, she had to wonder. She sniffed again. Nothing but basil and garlic. Still, she switched their plates to be on the safe side. The new plate smelled no different than the first.

“Oh, so my cooking’s not good enough for you tonight?” Her mother stood at the table now, tray of garlic bread in tow.

Anna tried to make her eyes look wide and innocent, certain she’d been caught switching the plates.

“You don’t have to sniff your food,” her mother said and dropped a slice of garlic toast onto her own plate. “You’re not a dog.”

“Whatever. You made the whole kitchen smell like cat piss and vomit.”

“Eat your food.” Her mother snagged another slice of garlic toast with the tongs and dropped it into Anna’s plate.

Even after switching the plates, Anna stuck to the garlic toast, just moving the pasta around with her fork. When she scraped her uneaten dinner into the garbage can, her mother glared and told her to wash the dishes.

That night, Anna once again woke at 2 am. The witching hour. Again. Soaked in sweat, she shivered, and it seemed that every muscle in her body had cramped. There was a thick feeling at the back of her throat. She coughed into her blanket until her chest ached but only succeeded in triggering her gag reflex. A watery substance soaked into the comforter.

She stood, and her knees gave on the first step. Sprawled across the carpet, she managed to rise to her hands and knees and crawled down the hall toward the bathroom.

In the hallway there was a faint glow near the baseboard. It came from the mini light bulb attached to a scented oil warmer, which currently gave off a too-sweet floral smell. Her mother always bought the same scent, something with pink and purple flowers on the package, but Anna had never been this close to it, never realized how nauseous it was.

The bathroom door was only a few feet away, then inches, and finally she pushed up the lid of the toilet seat and leaned forward. In the dim light, the bowl was all shadow.

Crouching before it, her hands on the toilet seat, made that tight, nauseous sensation in her throat worse, as if every time she'd been here before had layered together to produce this moment.

She coughed again, and the cocoa she'd had before bedtime poured into the water. An acidic, curdled-milk aftertaste coated her swollen tongue. If anything, though, the lump at the back of her throat felt thicker.

She coughed again, and something slimy came loose.

Behind her, a light flicked on, and she could see that the slime in the toilet bowl was a deep, rich green.

Anna glanced back. Her mother stood in the doorway, dyed-blond hair and white bathrobe lit up by the light like an angel standing in judgment. There was something off about the look on her face - too dull, like a child's attempt to use a peach crayon on gray paper. There was a stillness to her, as if she were either too calm or too anxious.

Anna opened her mouth to ask why her mother was just standing there uselessly. Instead she coughed again, and the sound was like the croak of a frog.

"Just think carefully," her mother said. Her voice lacked its usual scratchiness - there was something melodic about it. "Just think before you speak, and everything will be alright."

Anna tried to say that it was the stupidest thing you could say to someone who was vomiting slime.

Instead she coughed again, and her rib cage spasmed. Bile rushed up from her stomach and flowed out of her mouth.

As Anna sagged over the toilet, a fist-sized ball of slime floated to the surface. Then the ball began to sway. No: swim. It made its way to the edge and climbed up the toilet bowl till it was above the water line.

Slime slipped away. Anna was staring at a toad. The toad croaked and jumped onto her shoulder. From there it hopped to the floor and made its way across the hallway, before disappearing down the stairs.

She tried to say, “What the hell was that?” Instead she vomited a baby snake on the bathroom linoleum.

“What did I say?” her mother asked in the too-melodic voice.

All Anna could think to say was that she hated her mother for acting crazy when she was literally vomiting animals. This time she didn’t even try to speak, just opened her mouth - a snake slithered out at the corner of her lips.

Her mother side-stepped the snake and crouched in front her, grasping Anna by the shoulder. “If you just say nice things, that won’t happen anymore.”

Anna looked at the snakes, and the slime coating her nightgown, then back at her mother’s intense, calm stare. The truth was obvious, and yet her mind staggered - it was the sort of thing that was supposed to be impossible in every way. It defied every natural law - a girl couldn’t vomit snakes and toads, and even if she could, for it to be her mother’s doing?

“Where’s Dad?” she tried to ask. Instead something choked at the back of her throat, and after another round of coughing, a bulbous snail rolled across the floor.

“Anna.” Her mother’s voice was stern, and Anna smelled roses as she leaned close. “Are you trying to say nice things?”

There was no way that “Where’s Dad” could count as rude, but she frantically tried to think of something truly kind. At the moment it would have to be a lie, so she settled on, “I love you.” Once again, she coughed.

A tarantula skittered to the floor.

This time her mother shrieked and stomped. Anna had never been bothered by spiders, but her mother was a diagnosable arachnophobe. Despite her aching rib cage and raw, scratchy throat, Anna felt a satisfying burn in her sternum when the tarantula crumpled under her mother’s slippers and sent a few hairs flying into her mother’s shins.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen,” her mother said.

There was no use asking whether she was such a terrible mother that she thought the rest of it was supposed to happen, but Anna tried anyway and retched a toad onto her mother’s clean slipper.

“Wait here,” her mother said, and ran out of the room, trailing hairy spider legs behind her. When she returned a few minutes later, she carried a pen and a pad of light blue paper.

“Here - try writing something.”

Anna shook her head.

“No, no. Writing is safe. I asked ahead of time. Go ahead.” Her mother shoved the pad at her again.

Cautiously, Anna wrote one letter: W. When her nausea didn’t worsen, she wrote the rest:

*Water*

Her mother nodded and ran from the room again. This time there was the faint sound of hurried footsteps on the stairs. A toad hopped lazily behind her.

A few minutes later, her mother returned with a glass of water. A bright wedge of lemon floated near the top, a few seeds at the bottom.

Her mother held the glass to Anna's lips while she took a sip. "I thought the lemon might help with any- " She eyed the green streaks on the floor. "Any taste." While Anna swallowed, her mother asked, "Now what did you try to say earlier, right before the tarantula?"

On her pad of paper, Anna wrote:

*Tried to say I love you.*

"That doesn't make sense." Her mother put down the glass a little too firmly, and it sloshed water and lemon pulp onto the slime. "It's not at all what she described."

*Where's Dad?*

"A business trip. He'll be back at the end of the week - you know that."

It sounded familiar, but it wasn't like she could remember anything in between vomiting animals.

*Does he know?*

Feeling a little stronger, Anna reached for the glass, and her mother sat on the edge of the tub. "Of course not," she said. Without the glow from the hallway light, her bathrobe didn't look white, so much as a pale, dingy gray. "He gets to be the fun parent - you think you hate me now, that I'm some nasty witch -"

All Anna thought was, "After tonight, I know that's what you are," but she coughed, and another snake landed on the floor. So she wrote it on the pad of paper - if she had to pay for even thinking something, she might as well get to share it.

"It wasn't supposed to happen like this!"

*What? I was just supposed to vomit snakes?*

“I’ll take you to real witch. She’ll know what to do.”

The witch’s office was a dimly lit trailer, hidden behind an old pizza parlor. Most of the pizza parlor’s windows had been boarded up, but through one Anna could make out a round lamp shade. It was the kind made from multiple sections of stained glass, arranged in the shape of a half-globe, but more angular. Probably had been there since the 60’s or 70’s, whatever decade those lamps had been popular. The booth beneath it looked like maroon velvet. How long had it stayed open after people gained a little taste in interior decorating?

It still seemed odd for a witch to have an office, but if the best she could afford was this tiny white building, hidden behind a pizza place that had been vacant for a few decades, then no wonder something had gone wrong. If not for the slimy menagerie in the bathroom back home, Anna would have assumed this witch was no more authentic than those psychics who promised to predict when your boyfriend would propose, all for a steal at five bucks a minute.

Her mother rapped on the door, and an old woman waved them inside. Thanks to thick brown curtains, the building was as dim inside as it looked from the outside, despite the bright morning. They had come straight over as soon as the sun rose, with a vomit bucket that Anna still clutched. The hard part had been stopping fast enough to dump frogs and toads and snakes on the side of the road. At least one toad was still hiding somewhere in the car.

“So this is the rude girl,” the old woman said.

Anna glared, but she knew better than to open her mouth. As far as she had pieced together, even the tiniest opening was enough for something to slither out. Maybe oxygen plus a

rude thought summoned them? Assuming science even factored into this strange new reality her mother had created.

“It’s like I said on the phone,” her mother said. “Something went wrong.”

“Yes, yes. The toads are working, but the niceness isn’t.”

“I followed your directions exactly,” her mother said. “I boiled all the ingredients for five minutes, then strained the water and boiled it another hour. Then I mixed a few drops into the garlic butter and served her those slices. She ate every bite.”

So it hadn’t been in the pasta in the first place.

“Yes, yes,” the witch said. “You know how to follow instructions.” She gestured them into an even darker, murkier room. This one smelled strongly of incense and something Anna could only describe as burnt licorice. She’d always hated that candy.

The walls were lined with shelves and cabinets, all filled with jars of various sizes and colors. Most held powders and liquids, though one jar the size of an old-fashioned milk jug contained what looked distinctly like dried lizards. The ceiling was barely visible between tufts of drying herbs, which hung in varying shades of green and brown.

“Now tell me,” the witch said. “What was she trying to say, right before the spider?”

Anna glowered and wrote on her notepad:

*“She” was trying to say, “I love you.”*

“How curious.” The witch snagged the pad and studied it with narrowed eyes.

“Apparently your daughter vomits spiders when she tries to lie.”

Anna grabbed it back and wrote, *And apparently she’s deaf too*, careful to keep her mouth sealed. The witch didn’t bother looking at the pad.



Her mother faced the witch, who was rummaging through a dusty cabinet. “Why didn’t you tell me that could happen?” she asked.

Anna noted that her mother hadn’t objected to the revelation that her daughter didn’t love her after all. Instead of responding, the witch opened another cabinet, mumbling to herself. Anna distinctly heard her say “eye of newt” at one point and thought she might just be messing with them, until the witch stepped back with a tiny jar filled with eyes the size of frog eggs.

After arranging the jars on a surprisingly clean counter, the witch faced them again. “The potion couldn’t have done that, unless part of it was missing.” She pointed a bony finger at Anna. “Rude Girl, did you open the box I sent to your mother and take something?”

Anna reached into her pocket and pulled out the sparkling grain of rice she’d swiped the day before. Even through the haze of slime, it had occurred to her that it might be important. This time the warmth was undeniable.

“Ah, such a simple solution. This won’t even take any newt eyes.” The witch spooned yellow powder into a coffee mug and sprinkled dried lavender over it. Then she opened a door and led them back into the room they’d initially entered.

Now that her eyes had adjusted to the dim light, Anna could see that the room looked like any standard lobby. In one corner there was even a water dispenser. The witch pressed the red button for hot water and filled the mug. When prompted, Anna dropped in the grain of rice.

The witch measured a generous amount of honey and swished the liquid around a few times, then added some cold water. “We don’t want to burn your tongue before you’ve had a chance to use it. Now then.” The witch whirled around and nudged the mug into Anna’s hand. “Swallow the whole thing, flowers and rice and all.”

After smelling her mother's concoction the night before, she expected the brew to taste like sewage or at least a dead toad. But as she swished it around in her mouth, it had a light flowery taste and something else that seemed familiar. Maybe a gingersnap. The dried lavender stuck in her teeth, but if not for that, the tea would even have tasted pleasant.

When Anna had downed the whole cup, plus some more water so she could swallow the lavender flowers, the witch stood back and surveyed her up and down. "I think we've fixed you after all. Go ahead, then. Say something nice."

"This had better work," her mother said, though it was unclear which of them she was warning. She was perched on the edge of a gray sofa, hands clasped in front of her mouth.

Anna took a few breaths to calm herself, before she decided to return to the original lie. If it didn't work, at least she'd get to see her mother shriek and hide from a spider. She opened her mouth and said, "I love you." Audibly.

So why did her mother still watch her with a look of trepidation? Why did her mother dig her white knuckles into her even paler hair?

Before Anna could ask, another coughing fit hit her. Her ribs ached, and there was a scraping sensation deep in her throat. A glob of slime flew loose and landed on the witch's shoe. This one was just the size of a grape, and it didn't wriggle or hop. The witch rinsed it off in the cool water and held it up to the ceiling lamp.

In the light, a clear stone sparkled. Anna knew hardly anything about gemstones, but it looked like her mother's diamond bracelet did when it caught the light.

"It's just what you promised," her mother said, eyes fixed on the diamond. She stepped around Anna and took it from the witch's hand. "It shines so brightly."

*That's the last time I'll say anything nice,* Anna wrote. She opened her mouth and vomited a bullfrog.

“Now then,” her mother said, patting her on the head. “It’s much easier on you when you say nice things. A diamond is smaller than a frog.”

There were many things that Anna had yearned to say, for so long. Things too horrible for even her to put to words. She opened her mouth and began.

### And Thorns Will Grow There

That was the year our gardens wilted in July. Petals tumbled into mulch; squash oozed, frothy and orange, across sagging leaves and brittle stems. Ruth's marigolds drooped with milky seeds while Gayle's peaches fell from the tree, still green and hard. Even the deer ignored them. Barbara's okra succumbed to a soil-born disease we hadn't seen in years. Even our cucumbers rotted. All this despite the fact that the summer had been acknowledged across the state as the best growing season in at least two decades.

It was also the summer after Ronnie Jones stabbed his wife, Alice, eighteen times with a kitchen knife.

Ruth was at the checkout counter buying tomato seedlings from Glen's Greenhouse when the news broke. Glen kept a television on a table behind the counter next to some potted hydrangeas. The sound was too low to hear, but the moment the photo flashed onto the screen, Ruth heard Alice's name, as loud and clear as if someone had spoken it into the store's speakers.

The fact that we went to church with Alice and her husband made us minor celebrities for a week afterward. If one of us walked outdoors, a neighbor who usually spoke of the weather or the next PTA meeting suddenly wanted to know what it was like to shake hands with a murderer. The mailman might lean against the mailbox and say, with a pitying expression, "That's a real sad business." And none of us could help wondering if the murder weapon was from a set of knives the ward had given Alice for a housewarming gift.

Alice Jones had been a quiet woman. Pretty, but with a braid that did nothing for her facial structure, and with mascara so thick it hid her eyes. Most weeks during Sunday School she sat toward the back of the room and smiled without comment. In the portrait by her casket she

looked livelier than anyone could remember. At least that was the consensus from the eleven ward members who attended the service.

In the weeks following Alice's death, we told ourselves that only God could have known the truth about her and Ronnie. None of us were her neighbors in the literal sense, since the ward members' houses were scattered across town. We saw her and Ronnie only on Sunday, sitting together for the service, Alice's hands folded in her lap.

She always dressed properly: blouses buttoned up to her throat, ankle-length skirts and sleeves down to the wrist, even in the summer heat. We didn't worry if our husbands glanced at her, even though she was pretty. We suggested to our teenage girls that hers was an example to follow: married in the faith and modestly dressed. Not that it was wrong to wear short-sleeved blouses or knee-length skirts – we certainly did – but if she sacrificed a little extra comfort in the name of virtue, she deserved added respect.

She came to the women's book club, where every week we vented our frustration toward our husbands—the flawed men we loved. Gayle's husband hounded her for drinking undiluted lemonade, asking how she expected to lose weight if she drank a week's worth of calories every day. Ruth was certain the children were no better off with Frank than they would be on their own. She had returned home once to find Tommy dancing naked on the lawn while Frank slept in front of the television. But if there was ever an edge in our tone, it revealed only the minutiae of contention in homes otherwise filled with home-cooked meals and quilting projects.

Usually Alice smiled while we laughed at the foibles of our men or shook her head when we groaned about their moments of insensitivity. "I thought I was the only one," she said once.

“You have no idea,” Barbara said. “We’re not all lucky enough to find someone like Ronnie.”

Alice was holding a glass of punch that sloshed as she set it down, and we realized her hand was shaking.

Ruth observed that she’d been just as wobbly during her pregnancies, and we exchanged winks. But Alice shook her head and blushed. “I’m sure I’m just tired,” she said.

Weeks passed with no signs of a baby, and the moment slipped from our memory.

At the same time that our gardens wilted, the rose bushes outside the chapel began creeping over the wooden barrier that surrounded the flowerbeds, all without producing actual roses. They stretched their shoots across the church lawn, and the grass grew inches overnight, obscuring the thorns. We might have been more aware of the infestation if the summer picnic hadn’t been behind us. But only the youth group used the lawn on a regular basis, and, to teenagers, hidden spikes in the grass were amusing. Most wore clunky sneakers with thick soles, and if someone slid while catching a Frisbee and pricked a finger, you would find them on Sunday, waving the bandaged appendage proudly through the halls. “Another casualty,” they might say, with a hand to the forehead in a false swoon. “No one’s safe out there.”

It was nearly August before we took real notice of the rose bushes as we ferried casseroles and toddlers between minivans and the chapel door. Though the sidewalk was straight and short, children had a way of wriggling out of their parents’ grasp and launching into the grass. Usually the worst damage was dirt-encrusted knees and ripped Sunday clothes. But as the thorns spread they also thickened and grew sharper.

So it happened that Ruth's little boy Tommy summoned up his full squirming strength and broke loose from his sister's grip. Within seconds his shrieks could be heard all the way into the kitchen, where many of us were shifting plates around, searching for a place to rest our potluck offering.

With the oven door half open, Becky Glendew was the first to worry. She was new to the ward and unfamiliar with the noise Tommy made on a regular basis—born of his habit of rocking backward in his chair during Primary until it tipped over.

It was Gayle and Barbara who finally left the kitchen, but with shaking heads, as if they could already see Tommy wailing on the floor in the Primary room. But as they followed the noise through the halls, it led them outdoors, where a small group huddled around the boy. Blood was smeared across his face and on his fists, making it difficult to see where he was actually hurt.

One emergency room visit later, a doctor extracted a thorn embedded in Tommy's upper lip. The blood had spread when the little boy scratched at his face in a panic.

Tommy brought the thorn home where he displayed it in an empty baby food jar. The next Sunday, he snuck the jar into Primary and the children took turns peeking at it under his chair. After hearing his screams the week before, most were disappointed by how small the thorn was. His lip had mostly healed; only a red dot was visible when he pulled back the Band-Aid; but he was still hoping for a scar.

It was funny, really. That's what we said to each other between sips of lemonade at our next book club. So much noise and blood, and in the end it was just a small thing. Even Tommy would forget soon, and in the meantime, did anyone want another raspberry cupcake? There were more in the kitchen.

We first met Ronnie and Alice while helping them move in. With his average height and light brown hair, Ronnie blended in with our husbands from the start. He was a bit pudgy, but with strength that showed each time he hefted a box, like a teddy bear with shoots of muscle woven into the stuffing.

That first day, Alice moved with energy – bouncing between stacks of boxes and directing us to the rooms where things belonged. Each time she knelt down to lift something heavy, Ronnie would rush to help her.

Barbara said she wished her Bruce had done that for her, and Gayle said she just hoped Alice knew how good she had it.

Over the next five years, Ronnie played basketball with our husbands every week. He was popular among the children for welcoming them into the game when their fathers normally shooed them away. Tommy probably remembered Ronnie only as the kind man who had lifted him up so that he could dunk the basketball in the hoop. If our husbands saw signs that something was off in Ronnie they didn't tell us. But then, we didn't ask.

Tommy was the one who saw the ghost gliding between the pews.

It was a Saturday and people were setting up for the Primary's parent-child mingler: men unfolded the tables before finding excuses to disappear, while women tiptoed precariously on chairs, taping streamers and balloons to the wall. When Tommy barreled shrieking through the doors, more than one woman had to step quickly off her chair to avoid being toppled.

Though everyone knew that Tommy catastrophized the tiniest nicks—the thorn in his lip confirming that—the story spread so quickly that the bishop had to clear his throat during Sacrament Meeting the next day and remind the congregation that angels in heaven were silent



notes taking. Soon all the adults were laughingly wondering whether Tommy's ghost had been carrying a notebook and pen.

According to Tommy, the ghost wore a long, white gown with a train that stretched out behind her. He didn't call it a train at first – he said it was like a tail. To make matters worse, the woman had white flowers in her hair. “The kind that used to grow at the church,” Tommy said, “on the pricker bushes.”

We teased Ruth, saying she was letting Tommy watch too many scary movies, but when we filed from the building, Ruth stopped and insisted that the tallest bush had come to just below her hip that morning, though it was plain to see it now reached higher than her waistline. Surely they couldn't grow a foot in just three hours' time, not even in this heat and humidity. Maybe kudzu, but not roses. It was a trick of the eye, we told her, or – and to our credit we still smiled and laughed – maybe Tommy's ghost had been growing them.

Perhaps things would have stayed mild—devolving into the type of event we could laugh about later – if Ruth hadn't left a photo of Alice Jones out in the open. She would never say why she had left it somewhere Tommy could find it. There were few photos of Alice to begin with: mostly in group shots from ward activities. But after her funeral we didn't want her dark eyes springing out of a scrapbook and startling us, so we trimmed or cropped or hid the pictures.

But Tommy found one, Alice smiling – no, beaming – holding her secret so tightly that we might be excused for missing it. Only her eyes might have given it away, and even then only if we had looked closely and long enough: they might have wavered, and we might have noticed something about the corners, how they creased up just a tad too much.

Tommy recognized his ghost, and nothing Ruth said to him would shake his conviction or stop him from telling the other children.

The next day when the teenage boys showed up to play basketball in the outdoor court, the bushes along the building reached their shoulders. The tendrils in the lawn had spread as well, creating a knee-high maze that the boys made a game of hopping through.

Two hours later, a vine was inching up the basketball hoop. The maze on the lawn tightened, and the boys' huge sneakers wouldn't fit between the walls of thorn. They tried stomping out, but after a thorn pierced someone's shoe and stabbed his big toe, the boys called their fathers and waited for them to arrive with pruning shears to carve an escape.

Ruth and Gayle never said much about it, but there was one, single hint about Alice: the last book club before her death, too close for us to have done anything differently. It was a good showing that night, fifteen of us, so it was easy to overlook something so small.

It was already nine, and the conversation had long since drifted from the book none of us had read anyway to Tommy's latest antics.

"I tell you," Ruth said, "I don't know what to do with him."

Gayle patted her on the knee. "You'll survive it, just like I survived my Joey. I'll never forget the time he took off his diaper in the middle of the service and ran between the pews."

Barbara snickered around her fist. "How long did it take you to catch him?"

"As I recall, Barbara," Sharon said from across the room, "you deliberately stepped out of the way to let him run past you."

“All I know,” Barbara said, “is that it’s time for another tray of Ruth’s lemon bars.” Alice volunteered to fetch it from the kitchen.

When Gayle and Ruth followed a moment later to refill the punchbowl, Alice was on her knees, arms buried deep in the refrigerator, apparently pulling the tray from the back of the shelf. Her blouse and undershirt had ridden up, revealing several inches of blue and yellow lower back. At Ruth’s gasp, Alice sat up and tugged the fabric down.

Ruth turned to Gayle, but Gayle only shook her head uncertainly. There was no point in stirring up trouble over nothing, and even if it *was* a bruise – who was to say Alice hadn’t slipped? They left the room without a word.

While she dressed for Alice’s funeral two weeks later, Gayle reminded herself that one of the lights in the kitchen had been burnt out, making it too dim for her to see clearly anyway.

After the incident with the basketball game, we organized a pruning committee. Armed with boots and thick gloves, we chopped and slashed, till we had filled the beds of two pickup trucks. But by the end of the week, the growth was worse than before. We organized another pruning and this time chopped the rose bushes down to the ground. Two days later they were taller than anyone in the congregation.

When word about the roses spread through town, our neighbors joked about our gardening problem and asked when we would call the professionals in. But nobody, not even Becky who was still new and might have been excused, dared suggest we actually call in a landscaping crew. The rose bushes were our responsibility.

We organized daily rotations, each family taking a turn chopping at the vines and digging up roots. We poured weed killer on the lawn and in the gardens, until there was no trace of

dandelions or violets. But every day we returned to find more vines. They crawled up the storm drains and wrapped around trees till they left marks in the bark.

On her first rotation, Becky pulled a vine off a window and saw streaks of red embedded in the windowsill and wall. “They look like scratches from someone’s nails,” Becky said as she scrubbed away the stains. But we soon decided that they looked no redder than the mud on the ground.

A few days later, we heard a scream in the chapel and found Gayle, who had been following a vine of thorns that had pushed through the weather-stripping between the doors and wound its way to the foot of a pew in the back of the chapel. As she bent over to cut the vine, a long thorn pierced her ankle.

“I must have leaned against it without looking,” she said.

By the last week of summer, the roses covered every inch of lawn. The bishop talked about cancelling the next service, but we persuaded him to proceed. Nothing would scare the darkness from our midst like the Word of God. A few families whispered that they expected to be ill that morning, but we put that disunity to rest with a few phone calls.

It’s true that we balked when we saw the chapel the next morning. The thorns had not only reached the top of the roof but had piled and twisted in on each other like barbed wire until not even a shingle was visible. On every inch of property surrounding the building, nothing could be seen but thorn bushes. Not an inch of bark, not a leaf on a tree, not a blade of grass. Nothing but thorns inches—and even feet—deep. Only the parking lot and the sidewalk leading

to the front door remained clear, and even that space was flanked by a border of thorn bushes that reached above the men's heads.

We huddled together at the edge of the sidewalk and stared. The bishop eventually walked up to the front door and started reading passages from Isaiah and Revelation—anything that mentioned thorns. He didn't interpret the verses or provide any reasons for the order he read them in—just verse after verse about thorns. We suspected he had run a search on his phone and was reading the passages as they appeared.

It was Barbara who finally interrupted him. “Nothing is going to scare me away from my own chapel,” she said, and the bishop stepped aside as she marched past him and through the doors. As soon as the door swung shut, a red bud the size of a fist unfolded above the door frame.

“Do you smell that?” we murmured, because already the fragrance was wafting through the crowd. Sweet and perfect.

The bishop was the next to walk into the building. His gaze remained on the rose until the door closed behind him.

“Look!” we said. “Another one!” For already another bud was opening, this one along the wall of thorns that bordered the sidewalk. This time it was Becky who walked through, then Ruth and Tommy.

One by one, each member of the congregation stepped through the doors, and the roses bloomed until they covered the building. From the outside you could see nothing but red.

Gayle was the last to step through the doors, and for her the air was filled with not just the scent of roses, but of lemon bars and raspberry cupcakes.

In the chapel, every pew was full of slumbering heads: the bishop bent over the podium, whole families slumped on each other's shoulders. Tommy, contrary as ever, was sprawled in the middle of the aisle.

One seat was empty, and Gayle knew that they were waiting for her.

As a blanket of petals fell from the ceiling, she looked back at the door toward the outside world. But already the pathway had closed. Not even sunlight could make its way through.

The chapel stood like a hill of poppies, already fading from the town's memory.

Why do you grow impatient, my doves, my dearest most darling dandelions?

I weave tales light as spider silk for your pleasure, and yet you huddle together, murmuring. If no mere story will please you, I have better ways to entertain. Methods more direct, visceral.

Ah, now your faces form those peculiar shapes again. You clench your jaws charmingly, as your grandparents' grandparents always did just moments before the wolf leapt. Perhaps you are anxious for Laura, curious what befalls her in the beast's slow-churning intestines.

Fear not, my honeycombed hares. You have only to ask, and your patroness will provide. Behold Laura - or Laidea, as she calls herself.

*The fairy wore white*  
*When she told me her price*  
*And cut out my tongue –*  
*But he danced with me thrice.*



### A Dress Like the Sun

She found me in the fog. It was lucky, really. I woke suddenly in the darkest hour, the hour when trees take the shape of a man's silhouette on the horizon. Leaves stuck to my face with pitch and dirt, while ghostly ribbons of lichen loomed on the tree trunks surrounding me. Books were spread across the grass, open to whatever page the wind had chosen. Through the trees the dorm windows glowed, yellow and distant. It was just the type of situation the Old Woman always warns me to avoid. Even the other girls on my dorm floor have warned me.

Above me, leaves rustled.

I scrambled back, away from the tree. Beneath my fingers, the dirt was cool and slightly damp. It was still too dark to see clearly, but as my eyes adjusted I made out a ghostly face in the branches, just above where I had been sleeping. Next a hand emerged. And a moment later, a woman unraveled her body from the tree branches and fell to the ground with spectral elegance, leaning toward me with her fists to the ground like a predator.

The woman's pale hair dangled on either side of her face, long enough to drag on the grass. "What are you doing out here?" she said, and in that moment I thought she must have risen from one of the books still spread before me.

"Which story are you from?" I asked.

She let her head tilt to the side and forward, while shadows crowded into the downturned side of her face and left the upright eye socket illuminated in contrast. Perhaps she was too grand for one story, so I added, "Or, which myth?"

"I wonder," she said, and hurtled herself backward, cackling and writhing. In the process, she displaced and crumbed dark piles of pine needles into rifts like a miniature canyon. The pine needles were tangible and a part of the quotidien world. The world the Old Woman wanted me to

focus on. That was how I knew she was a real person, from a world I wasn't just imagining in my research. A real person who fell from a tree like a newly-ripened nymph. "Oh, but you're too much," the real-person woman said and then doubled over on her side, giggling like a wobbling bell.

A sensible person would have run from the apparition, as much witch as fairy, but like the boy in the folktale I had forgotten how to tremble. So I moved on my hands and knees until I peered down at this new woman's face, which was crumpled. Her skin was streaked with pine needles like unraveled stitches.

"You really thought I was a – " She stopped herself and shrieked again, her shadows dancing with each contortion of muscle.

"What is your name?" I asked, which seemed like the expected question to ask a person on a first encounter, assuming she was a person.

Stretching her arms, she rose to a half-sitting, half-reclining L, reminding me of a warped tree I once used as a bench. "Riah - like Mariah with no ma, but don't you dare try to make it rhyme with Maria."

Perhaps Riah was an inversion of the Virgin Mary. Given how the Virgin's compassion played out each time she appeared in folktales, I decided that I preferred the inversion. Riah seemed unlikely to steal babies from a new mother, or punish mortals for the sin of curiosity. At the moment she stared at me without blinking, and I realized I was drifting again, letting myself sift into the part of my mind that doesn't differentiate between story and fact.

Riah was not the Virgin Mary, inverted or otherwise. She was a person. Above us a cloud moved, and ripples of moonlight striped the trees and slithered across her face.

“The other girls tell me not to come here alone,” I said. “They say it’s dangerous.”

Riah nodded her head and gradually looked up at the sky. “I know.”

“Are you dangerous?” I asked. It was the type of question that should have made me breathe in frantic bursts or forced my legs to scramble back and away, but I merely sat there and watched her blink at me once more, her head lolling like a soft doll.

“I know you,” she said with a drowsy smile. “You’re that girl they whisper about. What’s her name, Fallopia or Labia or something.”

“Laidea,” I said, and my throat felt tight. Three years I’d had this name, and it had never occurred to me how easily a person could swap the ‘d’ for a ‘b.’ There was even a symmetry in it, a reversal that could return me to where I started, with a name someone else gave me.

But already Riah was standing, extending her hand toward me. “Congratulations, Laidea,” she said. “You are my new best friend.” And with agility entirely at odds with her stupor, she climbed back into the tree and disappeared, probably jumping between branches like a squirrel.

Fear is what protects a sensible person from the forest’s larks, from man-eating ants who tunnel below tropical ground and wolves that ripple in packs and tear through a knight’s leather. Fear encloses the familiar road and circles the patio’s edge. So when the familiar holds more violence than the unknown, only the fool survives.

And with Riah, I am foolish as foolish can be. Barely a day has passed since I met her, and already she is at my door, in a shirt that sparkles even in the hallway’s fluorescent lights. She wears yellow sunglasses that stretch at least two inches past the side of her face.

“Isn’t it night time?” I ask. Sometimes I lose track of the line between day and night, but when I glance at the window behind me, the lines between the blinds are dark.

“Don’t you worry your little head, Laidea-friend,” she says, looping one arm around my neck. “I bought a pair for you too, but let’s agree now that green is more your thing.” Plastic edges scratch at my cheeks as she shoves the sunglasses into place, and I can’t imagine that they fit into the silvery bag over her shoulder, which seems barely large enough to hold a wallet.

“You’re definitely not the Virgin Mary,” I say. It’s the sort of thing I’m not supposed to say out loud, but she only cackles like she did the other night.

“My dear, my dear, whatever would I do without you,” she says, and then yanks at my wrist. “Come on, I want to show off my new pet.”

Down the winding staircase and out the door we go, slipping in and out of shadows that glide over faces like masks. “Why are we wearing sunglasses?” I ask, searching for the ground in front of me, which the twice-darkened night obscures into a tunnel of unknowable steps.

“We can’t exactly wear sunglasses when the sun is out,” she says. “We only need one sun at a time.” It’s possible I’m following Riah into madness, but the Old Woman has been begging me for weeks to spend time with people, especially other female people.

So I stumble along, held upright mostly by Riah’s arm which is stiff as a branch. More shapes pass that could be people, but not knowing leaves me oddly calm, perhaps fueled by a primordial illusion that whatever I don’t see can’t see me.

Without sight, I feel the wind on my arms, liquid and smooth, so thick it filters between my fingers like a stream. There’s a scent of crushed leaves after rain. And a subtle smell that is hard to place, but it reminds me of the jagged-leaved ferns that smell like potpourri.

“You’re welcome,” Riah says and nudges my arm so I stop, still uncertain and blind as an earthworm above ground.

Before me, a door swings open, unleashing a rectangle of light and noise, so many voices there’s no keeping them straight. I am tugged inside by the wrist, and it is like I have come apart. Surrounded by lights and shimmering clothing. Sparkling sheets of wrapping paper are taped to the ceiling and floor in all colors: red and silver and gold.

And mirrors.

Pocket-sized mirrors nestle in guests’ hands; ornate mirrors with carved frames hang from the walls and stand against bookcases. Slim full-length mirrors with cardboard backing and plastic edges dangle from hooks screwed into the ceiling, bobbing and swaying as guests move throughout the room.

Some of the mirrors appear to be nothing more than glass, perhaps removed from sliding doors in a medicine cabinet, taped to the walls in an erratic checkerboard pattern. Most disturbing are the shards of broken glass, which fill the gaps between larger mirrors. Triangles and diamonds no larger than a fingernail, they’ve been glued to glittery paper that must have been placed on the wall before anyone attached the mirrors.

“Why are we inside a disco ball?” I shout to Riah, who is still only a foot away. At least the sunglasses make sense now, but I’m ready to leave all the same, before the voices in the room blur into one scream.

With a half-curtsey, Riah repeats, “You’re welcome.” And surely it can’t be deliberate when Riah’s stiff arm hurtles me toward the center of the crowd and then releases, leaving me to stumble and spin in this crush of shimmering bodies.

Regardless of Riah's intentions, I am stuck now, swayed by the crowd of jostled bodies, and the music is nothing but bass, smashing over my head like choppy water. No time to gasp, diaphragm clutched between ribs and back muscles. My body moves back then forward, feet stuck to the ground like roots.

Mouth opens, but the air lies still, no pathway down, no room to inhale. Around me, all sparkles in fragments. A man's shoulder, coated in glitter which comes loose on my cheek when he shoves past and knocks the sunglasses from my face, where they rest in front of me. Too far to reach with my teeth, and my arms are still jammed at my side.

A girl in a metallic leotard lifts her arms, clears just enough space for one breath, and in that time the glasses fall through the bodies, past bare arms and slivers of darkness, millimeter-thick wedges between flesh. I would hear them crunch if the music didn't stampede my ears.

Out.

Out is where I need to be, in a space where lamps and flashlights don't ricochet between reflections. The crowd stutters, clearing a small space, and I rush forward, twist my shoulders into a shape small enough to unwedge. Right now my shoulder could come loose from its socket, and I wouldn't mind, would even consider the price necessary to escape.

Barely a foot forward, and a man in a dull black tee-shirt shoves against my shoulder, sends me back, deeper toward the center of the crowd. The music's beat quickens, so loud now that I actually hear nothing, just feel a pulse in my feet, and maybe it's the frantic pace that has me shoving forward again, toward an enormous mirror that I only hope is a door.

Blond hair fills my face, and again I am propelled back, this time shoved against one of the swinging mirrors, then pushed in the opposite direction from an unseen presence on the other

side. Wetness spreads across my arm, but no stinging, and I can't figure out why, when the mirror hasn't broken, just presses against me, cool.

Though it blinded from a distance, the mirror gains enough shade up close that I can see my face, pale skin and scattered eyes. Behind me, plastic cups bob at the height of shoulders and add a sour smell to the salt and mildew of bodies crushed together. Of course – a cup must have sloshed on my arm when I was shoved.

My reflection watches me, confused as I am, or maybe more, I realize, as I lift my eyes. Reflections from across the room echo on the glass, in every space my body leaves open. Body parts broken like smashed statues and rearranged into a new monstrosity, then shattered and reassembled. Every skin tone, every fabric.

"There's no escape," I say out loud, or at least my mouth moves. With the music so loud, how can I know what vibrations leave my lips and find other ears? Around me, the bodies ripple again, and I fall back through the crowd. The large mirror is still visible, but the bobbing crowd tugs me back like a gentle undertow.

"Just lean," a voice says near my ear, and I try to swivel my head but still can't seem to move. "Don't push," the voice says. The voice is loud enough for me to hear but hides whether it's a man or woman. "Just lean against them, and keep leaning, till you're out."

It sounds too simple to be true or possible, but I can't stay here forever, dizzy for lack of oxygen, the air rancid and muggy with stale breath. So I keep my face toward the mirror-door and gradually shift until my body faces it too.

With closed eyes, I lean. Brace feet. Lean again. Brace, lean, brace, lean, and I can feel flesh releasing around me, as if I move through the intestines of a monster.

Brace. Lean.

And then glass against my open palms. I nudge them over the cool surface, eyes still closed, till I feel a knob. Turn it and fall forward into emptiness. Released, covered in the beast's saliva and slime.

"Quick," a woman's voice is saying, "hurry, hurry, close the goddamn door and lock it."

But I'm on my hands and knees, and the sound carries through the doorway with me, and I won't open my eyes for anything, won't let the light get in.

"Fine," the voice says, and behind my red eyelids the world goes black, as the sounds muffle. The woman must have closed the door. "Shit – you aren't Charlie."

"I couldn't breathe," I say, though I don't know who I'm talking to or why, and still refuse to open my eyes.

"Well if you can't stand the heat..." The fact that the voice is a woman would ordinarily leave me feeling safer, but I still don't know where Riah is or why she thinks this noise and chaos is what it means to be a friend. Darkness is lovely and quiet. Why does anyone bother with sight at all?

Then the air rustles at my side, and I remember the danger of closed eyes: at night, the hunted never see the hunter. But when I open my eyes nothing changes. Only dark surrounds me, and it isn't lovely anymore - it's dense, clogging my nostrils like tar. Air bursts through my mouth, my breaths small and rapid as falling pebbles.

"Whoa, what's wrong, what's wrong? I told them that party was a stupid idea," the woman says.



“Can’t see,” I say between breaths. There’s a sound of objects clattering to the floor, and then a light flicks on, revealing a rumpled woman, her body curved over a table and a desk lamp. “I’m not blind,” I say.

The woman scrambles back from the table, craning her neck around as if she’s cramped into a too-small space. Glancing around, I realize that the small end table is the only thing holding the bed away from the wall it parallels, and the woman is wedged into that space.

“How did you get here?” I ask, because her clothing is dull as mine. She hasn’t come from the party, but seems to have sprouted in here, like an old onion in a root cellar.

Before answering, she swivels her whole body to face me and pulls herself onto the bed with both arms. “Through the looking glass, apparently,” she says, and scrapes strands of hair off her neck and into a ponytail. “But I’m demanding a house transfer after this. I’m done living with erratic nutcases.”

Ordinarily I might worry about that kind of statement. It’s what the other girls whisper about me when I come back from a night at the top of a pine tree and lock myself in the bathroom to remove ticks. But the light and noise outside this room must surpass even the unexpected in me since she hasn’t asked me to leave.

“My name is Laidea,” I say, because I am the interloper, the refugee here.

The woman nods. “Yeah, I know. You’re the tree girl. I’m Brooke, unwitting roommate and domestic hostage to the ball of chaos who’s hosting this thing.”

“But you stayed, even for the party.”

“They descended en masse, didn’t even give me a chance to get out, which means Riah just broke the agreement that brought a slim veneer of order to this arrangement.” Brooke twists over the side of her bed, calves standing upside down while her head tumbles out of sight. “Want

a popsicle?” she asks. She shimmies back across the bed with two popsicles in her hand, so I don’t bother responding.

On her stomach, with her elbows against the mattress, she twists to the edge and extends her arm. The popsicle isn’t what I expected, not a paper wrapper ballooned around a slim red shape – instead it is crude and short, the color of custard but with green specks. A wooden dowel protrudes like a lollipop stick.

But I accept the gift and bring it to my mouth. Lemon and an herb I can’t place. “This is a popsicle?” I ask. It could be a spell for all I know.

“Okay, it’s more pudding than juice, but it helps distract me from that noise.” Brooke shrugs and takes a bite from her own popsicle, which has even more green streaks than mine. “And the fact that I’m trapped.”

I look down at the floor, where the music still vibrates into my knees. It is very unlikely for the popsicle to be a spell, so I take another bite, let it crumble on my tongue where it dissolves into a creamy after-film and bits of mint leaf. “And you keep popsicles next to your bed,” I say.

She bats her hand like she’s brushing away the question. “Where is that lazy ass brother of mine?” she says, and a blue glow ignites in her palm as her fingers twitch across her phone’s screen. “He’s supposed to spring me, you know. I unlocked my bedroom door and everything.”

Most likely her brother is as lost in the crowd as I was, maybe even thinks the door is a real mirror, one without a doorknob. But if he hadn’t become lost the door wouldn’t have opened for me, so maybe I should take his place in finding an escape for Brooke. If I can find an escape for myself.

“He has this way of swimming through crowds,” she adds. “Like an eel.”

On the other side of the room, curtains hang over the shape of a window. “We’re on the first floor,” I say, “aren’t we?” Given how this building seems to twist the very laws of physics, I wouldn’t be surprised to peek through the window and see clouds stretch out like a lawn.

Brooke’s head still bends over the phone, and she nods. “See?” she says, “Charlie has no excuse – he doesn’t even have to walk up the stairs to get to me.”

To walk willingly back into the glinting, blinding crush of light makes no sense when the window stands nearby, so I finish the last bite of popsicle and twist my fist around the stick. Then crawl on hands and knees, ignoring the way the ground hums in my palms and kneecaps. But when I reach the window and push at the curtains, the other side of glass is full of dark green, the pattern angular as frost on a window pane.

“There really is no escape,” I hear myself say.

“The window?” Brooke’s voice says from behind. “Be my guest, but I’ve seen the spiders that live in that bush.”

Spiders don’t live high in the trees, because no spider will be neighbor to birds. But a spider craves nothing more than flight, weaves low nets and catches a hundred pairs of wings, and each day drinks insects who waste a lifetime of flight to hover mere feet above ground. And if I crawl through that window, what will I be but a creature in flight? Much too large for a garden spider to eat, but there is more than one type of spider. Some walk on two legs.

Brooke still taps at the glowing phone, and I wonder why we’re waiting for a savior, when the crowd is heavy and dense, flesh against flesh. Each body curved and bent into the nooks of the nearest person. Fish in a net. “Your brother won’t come unstuck,” I say, and imagine the fish in the center, no room to breathe or flail.

“Nah, Charlie has a way of slipping through the cracks. The only reason he’s not here is because he’s a selfish bastard who’d rather grind against men and women he can’t even see.”

With all the mirrors in that room, he’ll likely see the other guests from one thousand angles if he squints into that brightness. “Seeing is what will make him blind,” I say, and sit against the door, let the music’s vibrations move through my back and shoulder blades.

“That’s it,” Brooke says. She shoves the phone into her pocket and grabs my arm. “We’re leaving now, before my brother shows up and hears your riddle-speech. He’d probably propose to you after one sentence.”

It may be a joke, but in fairy tales it takes much less for a man to propose. And I’ve had enough of men in the last decade.

I’m already on my feet before it occurs to me that I should try to stop her from unlocking the door. One click at the doorknob and the hinges will swing inward, unleashing the flood. “Our bones can’t fold small enough for the gaps,” I say, because I remember how my body wedged into the others, how even my ribcage seemed to fold in upon itself.

“That’s exactly the kind of thing you can’t say in front of Charlie,” she says and drops my arm long enough to slash both hands into the air above her head. “Now drop the popsicle stick and move away from the door.”

I step back, and Brooke holds out her hand. “Ready?” she asks, and I wonder if the spiders and dense bushes would be better. But I’ve spent too long in this alcove, too long at the border of madness.

So I take her hand.

Finger bones interlock, and we fall through the light like shadows. Two dark beetles in a room of fireflies. Tell me this is friendship.

*The fairy wore red*  
*When she told me the cost*  
*She plucked out my eyes*  
*And now I am lost*

And the Stars and the Moon

The next morning I wonder if Riah is a dream, just a shell of birch-pale skin and eyes like cracked chestnuts. Her eyes frighten me when I picture them. In my memory they spin like a wheel, and the thread they leave is transparent as spider silk. It wraps my fingers to each other, imprisons them together, uncomfortably close.

The Old Woman says it's time to let go of control.

Just a little – I'm not saying to throw yourself at a stranger's mercy.

Friendship lacks control?

It's like holding a hummingbird.

Then I will watch for cats.

Nights pass, shadow over shadow, rose-gray edges and midnight center. Each day I sit beneath my tree and read, searching for the story that will finally explain my strange journey. A girl with a wolf. A witch in the storm. There must be a story that will show where the two sides meet. The story that will show me what path to take, or at least which to avoid. Each night, as darkness falls, I turn back to the dorms. Leaves shudder through the air and scuttle beneath my feet.

No signs, no communication from Riah. Perhaps she doesn't live in these trees after all.

And then one afternoon, a jar of beetles waits by my tree. The skinny beetles crawl in spirals inside the glass, showing the outside world their dark bellies and light abdomens. I lift the jar and find a note taped to the bottom:

*Tonight by the lake at nine. Bring the fireflies.*

The jar's opening is covered in plastic with tiny holes, one small mercy. Still, it seems cruel to cage them, and I don't know what fireflies eat or if they're thirsty. I tear apart the plastic. As I tilt the jar to its side and place it in the bushes, one beetle plods toward the opening, while the others continue circling each other. The beetles will leave gradually, and tonight, if any remain, I will take them with me to the lake.

If I go to the lake.

Night covers me when I leave my dorm and step into the path that will lead to Riah. I shine my flashlight at the bushes where I left the jar. It's empty. By now the fireflies are alight with lust, pulsing toward one another and the promised posterity. Leaving the jar behind, I move toward the trees. Branches weave and echo each other, the color of dusty bone in moonlight.

The darkest space is the path before me.

The lake is half a mile away, or at least the main dock is, and the air frosts against my cheeks. Creatures rustle through leaves above me, and pinpricks of light flash, from fireflies hovering several feet above ground. As I move, the flashlight fills the trail with a beam of gleaming insects.

But no trail is straight in the forest. Streams scratch crevices in boulders, and trees curl under years of snow.

I know I'm near when lights shine through the highest branches like a carnivore's eyes, and there's a fluttering in my stomach, tightness in my throat. For a moment, I consider fleeing. Whatever game Riah has concocted, it's sure to involve people, which means a field of faces. Faces that will be blank and indistinguishable as fresh eggs because they're all new - rearrange them, and I wouldn't know the difference.

But the Old Woman's words repeat in my mind. Friendship means losing control, if just for a moment. True, Riah is an unpredictable force, an unopened door. And if I turn the key, I might just fall. Then again, what is a fall but the moment before flight?

When the trees end, I turn off the flashlight and step out into a patch of crabgrass. Even in the dark the thick blades are unmistakable. Beyond the grass there's a sandy strip of beach, no more than ten yards long. The lake is mostly used by the crew team right now, but during the summer the university scoops students from most of the dorms like seeds from a jack-o-lantern and fills their spots with high school campers. This little beach must be for their enjoyment.

Tonight candles float - on the lake and above. It's difficult to describe, even in my mind, but there are also dots of light that float on the water, only clumped together like miniature swarms.

And in the air, larger shapes glide, their light softened like the moon. As I move closer, I see people, their eyes and teeth reflecting, the edges of hands glowing red around cupped candles.

"My new friend!" a voice calls, and Riah's arms are around my shoulder. She steps back, and half her face is illuminated, the other half in shadow. "Where are the fireflies?" she asks.

"They didn't like the jar," I say and lean forward to see past her.

Human shapes move around the lake, more than I realized, silhouettes that spark light in a shadowy palm and then release it onto wind or water.

"Who are these people?" I ask. There must be fifty or sixty of them, all moving around this bend in the lake.

There's a tinkle to her voice when she responds. "My followers, of course." The way she tilts her head to the side puts even more of her face in shadow.



We've been moving down the sand, toward a tight clump of people, each laboring over their own light, but I stop and stand rigid for a moment. "What are they following?"

Riah laughs and tugs at me, her elbow crooked around my neck. "Little lamb, little lamb, aren't you glad you joined a party in progress?"

The tightness spreads from my throat into my chest, and down to my stomach. What would the Old Woman say? *Yes, I imagine in her voice, Riah's strange, but so am I. So are you. Not all that is strange is Evans.*

We walk alongside the lake's edge, to a circle where men and women crouch. Scattered amongst them, there are stacks of paper and tealight candles. On the sand behind them, a dozen fully-formed paper lanterns make their movements visible.

Fire in paper, like the Chinese tale of a girl who outwits a cruel mother in law. My goal was to find friendship tonight, but maybe there's a clue here. Maybe tonight my search for my own fairytale will cease spinning and click into place. Am I the girl from that story? Will I need to deliver wind in paper as well, before I can return home?

"Be nice to Laidea while I'm gone," Riah says to the circle, and pushes at the small of my back, so my legs jerk forward. "Show her the magic ways of paper."

I turn to ask her where she's going, but not fast enough. Already Riah is cloaked in darkness, just her white scarf visible, trailing in the wind.

Night always swallows a lone traveler.

Company keeps the carnivore at bay, and I am here to embrace the ways of people.

When I was a little girl, I went camping once. It was just my family and a few others. But I remember the bonfire that night, the smell of bug spray that was somehow stronger than the

smoke. I'd forgotten, until this moment, what it feels like to sit in a circle of warm bodies. Fire in the center, cold at my back.

"It's not hard," a girl says, her head turned down to a creased shape in her lap. Her hair is pulled back into a dark bun, but the hairs that sprout from the bun are red. "It's just tedious. Here – I'll show you with a new one."

She spreads a fresh sheet of paper across her leg, and in the candlelight, gray flickers across the white page. The woman's hands move, and a rectangle becomes a square, then a triangle, then a malformed polygon with neglected flaps. She pulls, simultaneously blowing into the shape, and it opens.

"Add the candle like this," the girl says. "Careful it doesn't burn."

"Are they all this small?" I ask. Several large shapes drift in the sky, shrunken moons.

"We made those last week," the girl says.

"When we should have made these," a boy says, his face hidden in the dark.

The lantern-makers seem more interested in working than talking. But I crouch to the task and mould paper in the pattern the girls' hands showed. Fold by fold, flatness swells, and when I add the candle it glows. When I release, it rises tilt by tilt, lopsided on the breeze.

On the other shore, more lights appear, first at ground level, like a ring of pebbles touched by the hand of God. Or fairy. One more reason to be cautious about Riah.

More shapes rise and fill the sky. Around me, bodies stretch back across sand, as the lantern makers lie down and watch the sky.

I lie back as well, careful to leave space between my limbs and the limbs around me, curving my spine when necessary. It is comforting, surprisingly comforting, to feel the nearness of people without touch.

Night is indigo-black with patches of lavender cloud. With lanterns in the sky and also the water, my body unhinges. It's a welcome sensation. If I close my eyes, I might float into the sky like a bird on the ocean, fall and rise with each wave.

Minutes slip into hours, the ground hardening beneath me. The wind has settled, but leaves still patter across me in curls. Bodies rustle then still, rustle and still.

The sky swallows lanterns, then licks them to the candle pit. Douses the flame and spits them back to earth.

Perhaps it's my habit of sleeping under the trees by the dorms, but even with the bodies surrounding me, even when so many of those bodies are men, I close my eyes and welcome the heavy tug of sleep.

When I open my eyes, all is dark.

At first I think I must have fallen asleep beneath the trees while reading. Too many times I've done that. The Old Woman always says I'm lucky only inexpensive books have been ruined that way, that I won't always be so fortunate.

But there's a sound like lapping water, and as my eyes adjust, the lake stretches out before me. A lighter dark than the trees on the other shore. As I sit up, something hard juts against my leg, and I reach for it.

My flashlight.

I turn away from the lake, swinging the flashlight in an arc, but it reveals only the brightest edge of young trees before snuffing into black forest. Even the lantern makers have left me. And if Riah is still here she's too far, hidden behind bushes or in a different bend of the lake.

Without a reason to linger, my path is clear. I retrace my earlier journey, moving toward the main dock where I left the forest and met Riah. The night has turned quiet. Nothing scurries above me or near me on the ground. No predator eyes shine. All is hushed except the lake's lapping surface.

At the dock, there is a flash. I see it from the corner of my eye, so brief it could be imagined, a trick of my own biology. But I turn and stretch my light across the water. The light catches on glass and shines back at me. Something floats on the surface, too deep to reach from land.

Curious, I step onto the dock and walk to the edge. Lie on my stomach and reach. My fingers graze the floating glass and nudge it inward. When it's close to the dock, I reach down with both hands and lift it.

It's a jar like the one Riah left at my door, sealed with plastic. But it's been attached to an empty pie tin like a boat. Inside, fireflies crawl, dull as ordinary beetles. Either they have mated with neighbors in the jar or have surrendered hope for a night. I tear away the plastic and leave the jar on the dock. Soon they will fly away.

Now what? I should leave this odd night behind and trust that the other fireflies were released. Even if they weren't. There's little I can do. The boathouse is locked at night, and few jars will have drifted to the edge of the lake where I can reach them on my own. Besides, the fireflies may last the night and be discovered in a few hours by early morning rowers.

But if they don't survive – if the jars tip and fill with water, or Riah has misjudged how long they can last without food – their deaths will be my fault. I will be the person who turned

away and neglected the trapped life. And they will not die in the mouth of a bird or newt, won't feed new life.

By the boathouse, my flashlight reveals a thick padlock. I push through the bushes that grow alongside the building and feel for an opening or loose board. There are two windows, and I pry the screens loose. My nails jam, but a torn nail won't drown me. The problem is, the windows are locked from the inside.

Leaving the fireflies should mean nothing to me. I don't know their habits or where Riah found them, or even which kind these are. Some fireflies emit a false signal then devour the lovesick prey. A brutal valentine. Insects kill as easily as people. But if they share our sins, maybe they share our fear – and the pain of inhaled water.

So I leave the boathouse. If I can't find a boat, I will circle the lake, use a long branch to retrieve what I can. As I part branches and slap vines from my face, searching for the water's edge, I feel nothing but heroic. I will free the captive insects. I will bring oxygen to the imprisoned.

When I shine the flashlight, it reveals nothing but the water's surface nearby.

And then a flash, a tiny red flash from the center of the lake. Then another. A pattern of flickers, fisted together. Trapped in glass or plastic. But it's too far out for me to do anything.

I push through more branches, swing the flashlight over the water's edge – there must be another jar nearby, another jar that I can save without actually wading into the water. Only water and curves of submerged rock answer.

The flickers in the middle of the lake blink out all at once.

Even though I should leave, even though they're nothing but insects and likely lack the ability to even experience pain, for some reason, I can't leave them.

I run back to the boathouse and bang at the door. Banging won't help; no one will answer, but my arm hits again and again, takes the impact. When my forearm numbs with bruises that are sure to show tomorrow, I sit against the boathouse and stare into the night.

My flashlight rolls to the ground, swinging its arc of light, and it is only now that I see what was beneath me earlier. A kayak floats below the dock, a rope attached to it and tangled around the posts.

In the middle of the lake, there is another flicker.

On the water I move slowly, with only my hands as paddles. If the lake moved with any more force, I wouldn't try this, at least not without a life vest. But I move toward the spot where I last saw a flicker, flashlight between my knees. Paddling with one hand at a time isn't working, so I switch to two. Dip to the right and push against water with both hands, then back to the left. The kayak tilts with me, but only a little, and I move faster this way.

The flickers come intermittently, just often enough that I can adjust my path. And as I draw near, the jar shines and reflects the flashlight back at me. I relax my arms and glide alongside the jar-boat, too far to touch it without knocking it over. But shapes move within, and I see no sign that water has seeped through the plastic.

Once I've drifted far enough to turn without knocking into the jar, I lean down and paddle just on the right side. The kayak turns. I stretch my left arm toward the jar, while my right arm reaches out for balance. This time I grasp at the lip of the jar, and it glides alongside me. As I bring my arms in, it floats closer, until it rubs against the kayak.

Impatient, I tear into the plastic without first lifting the jar. With one finger, I tether the pie tin in place and search the glass with my flashlight. There are at least twenty in here, and I wonder where Riah found them all. One glows dimly against the flashlight, but the others crawl in circles. There was no mass drowning.

The fireflies will discover freedom and fly into the night.

Several yards away, I spy another floating jar.

After I release those fireflies, there's another flicker to my right.

Each time I empty a jar, another appears. Nature's own will o' wisps. So it's fitting that they lead me to the center of a dark lake. The time has come for returning to shore. But which direction?

On the surface of water, all paths lead to shore. But the kayak has turned too many times, and it's still dark. I rotate the flashlight, waiting for its beam to reflect off something, but the shore is too far. The beam dies in the air, and I am surrounded by a ring of blindness.

Any shore is more secure than water, so I dip my hands to the water on my right and push. Dip my hands to the left and push again, ignore the burn between my shoulders. The flashlight rests between my knees again and reflects off water several yards away, creating a straight line that I will follow.

The burn between my shoulder blades branches down my back and climbs into my neck. But there is nowhere to rest, not when the night is already late and dense. Not when I may have chosen the longest path to land.

Night slides past me, cool to the cheek. Plant tendrils grasp at my fingers like a fishing net, but their grip is slack. The flashlight still reveals no shoreline.

The problem with water is that it bends and sways. And the sailor bobs in oblivion. Without a lighthouse, you may circle yourself for hours. Even if you swim in a straight line, the current will spin you like a top.

Only grounded light can guide me. So I cease paddling and pant instead. My back is a tangle of bunched muscles; my shoulders ache at the joint. The flashlight sits useless between my legs, and since it's done so little tonight I switch it off, let the darkness engulf me.

If I'm wise I will wait through the night-blindness, till dawn reaches her rose petal fingers through the sky and plucks me loose. Instead I lean to the side, prepared to row my body raw. And that is my mistake. That is the moment when the world tilts.

Water.

Pummels up my nose and slams through my mouth, to the back of my throat. Legs shake loose of the kayak, and I am a swirl of sightless flesh. Grasping the overturned kayak is what saves me. The kayak guides me to air, to the breaths that stab. And I am heavy, without a life vest to fight the pull of wet denim.

In water, the only path is land. Shore of forest, or slick lake bed. I'm too weak to climb back into the kayak, even if I could empty it of all water so it would float above the surface like before. The flashlight has fallen to the lake bed.

There's no use wondering what moves below, what else disappears beneath me. When I was young and tried to swim through mud, I thought only of root. I thought nothing of what inhabited the space between, didn't wonder where I would find oxygen if I lived beneath soil.

For the second time tonight, light flashes from the corner of my eye. I turn my neck and see a light that sweeps back and forth. Far, but maybe not too far. Maybe I can swim to it. Maybe



I'm not in the center of this lake, not halfway across but only a fifth or a sixth. Maybe I will find dry land before the mud finds me.

With one arm still wrapped around the kayak, I move the other arm and kick, move toward the light which still sweeps from side to side.

No sensation is as beautiful as knees on mud, while the nose inhales air.

In this last stretch of water, still deep enough that a person would drown if she fell face-forward, I crawl with hands that no longer feel. On shore, two silhouettes move, shake arms at each other. Shouting?

On the ground there is a lantern, and that is the focal point I will crawl toward. When I reach the lamp I look back toward the silhouettes, and now there is only one. It runs toward me and shifts in the lantern light, from shadow to Riah.

"Laidea?" Riah says, and crouches beside me. "Charlie wasn't crazy - I thought he was crazy."

My throat moves but only wheezes.

"I didn't think there was a *person* out there," she says.

"The fireflies," I say, and then my voice sputters into a cough.

"You went out there to save fireflies? But you're a *person*, Laidea. They are insects."

Years of talking with the Old Woman have taught me about moments when there is no use in arguing, so I only nod.

Riah leads me through the woods and back to the dorm, where a university-employed EMT already waits, alerted by the second silhouette I never met. I wonder if the fireflies will glow for me tomorrow.

*The fairy wore eels*  
*When she told me her fee*  
*And cut off my legs*  
*Now I dance in the sea*

## Bluer than the Sky

Riah

Here's how it started: I was sitting in class, a 200-level humanities course, the kind everyone has to take just to graduate. It's not like naming some obscure 17th-century Dutch painter will help me get on the fast track to becoming a CEO of a Fortune 500, but it's what the university demands. So I took notes on Frans Hals, while the professor droned on about the glory days when he lived in Holland for one blissful year, running a semester abroad program.

It was still the first week of class, and believe me I was tempted to drop, but that would have upset my entire schedule. Besides, Dr. Jansen (yes, Jansen - no doubt that study abroad was an attempt to reconnect with his roots) had a superb rating online. Not only a chili pepper, but known for an easy A. The downside was showing up for his lectures, the only thing he tested on. *Don't bother buying the textbook*, according to review after review.

So there I was, sitting in one of those enormous lecture halls, but not as fancy as the ones you see in movies. More like a junior high auditorium that's long overdue for a renovation, with lots of black padded chairs and even a faded purple curtain up on the stage. The projector screen blocked most of the curtain from view, and in turn an image of one of Frans Hals's paintings covered the screen. Lots of men in black outfits and Shakespeare-style collars, all looking in different directions, while one brightly-dressed man gave the viewer a sassy glare.

There's no other word for it: whatever king or lord commissioned that painting was practically pouting at the viewer. The slide before this one was a self-portrait of the artist, but it looked more like a boiled ham, so I guarantee that sassy pout had nothing to do with Fransy-boy himself.

I looked down just long enough to jot some dates and names, and when I looked up again, the image had warped. A girl stood in front of the screen, half covered in the pouting man's pink and orange suit; half murky brown like the rest of the painting. Dr. Jansen continued reading verbatim from the notes on his computer screen, either oblivious or indifferent to the intrusion. Around me there were some whispers and snickers.

"Not *again*," said a girl to my right. "Why hasn't she been expelled already?" She leaned back in her chair and groaned.

"You know her?" I asked, adding a perky smile because nothing invites confidences like the illusion of cheer.

The girl leaned toward me, close enough I could see the muddy-brown roots beneath her red bangs. "That -" She pointed to the girl up front, who was wandering across the stage, probably searching for a way down. "That was my roommate last year."

"Sheesh! That bad? What'd she do, add food coloring to your shampoo?"

The girl squinted and cocked her head a little to the side, likely wondering if that was an insult, but I just smiled brightly. It's amazing what you can get away with saying, if you just smile.

"I'm Riah, by the way," I added.

"Ashley," the bottle-redhead replied.

"You and half the student body, huh?"

Ashley shrugged. "My mom swears it wasn't popular when I was born."

Up front, the wandering girl had found her way off the stage and into an empty seat in the front row. Jansen kept reading from his notes, something about Rembrandt.

The stuff about Rembrandt was sure to be on the final, so it was a pity to miss it, but I could always sweet talk notes from some nerdy boy if I had to. It wasn't my favorite solution, since there was always the chance Nerd Boy had missed something important, but it was a good backup. Bat those lashes, and your problems fade.

Besides, things had felt too expected recently, and there was something intriguing about that lost soul up front. "So that girl," I prompted. "She make a habit of interrupting her classes?"

In response, Ashley's fist tightened on her pencil. I had to wonder if she realized how much she gave away. "Worse," Ashley said. "She basically lives in the trees near my dorm. Sometimes she sleeps in them - I don't know how she hasn't broken her neck."

"She doesn't sleep in her bed? That doesn't sound so bad in a roommate." Lucky me, my parents pay for a private room in a house. Truth be told, I've always considered sharing beneath me.

"You think?" Ashley asked. "Just wait till you're walking beneath a tree, and that face shows up out of nowhere."

I pictured the woods at night, but the way it looks in horror flicks. Black with glints of gray leaves and branches, shimmering in the moonlight. And then, a pale, disembodied head coming out of nowhere. "I don't know," I said. "Sounds like more fun than I've had in ages."

Ashley smoothed out her notes and turned back to the front of the room, where Jansen was going on about Rembrandt's etching process.

Maybe I'd been too flippant, if she was starting to check out. With me, too flippant usually means too honest, too sincere. So I did another bright smile, the kind of smile people give you when they're really curious and they admire you a little. "Hey," I said, tapping her arm. "I love that shade of red. Is it natural?"

She turned back to me, beaming now, so she either thought I was dumb enough not to notice the roots or that they weren't too obvious in the dim light. "I wish!" she said.

"Where do you go?" I asked. "I've been thinking about getting my hair colored, but I'm scared of going to the wrong stylist, you know?"

"The salon on Main Street - right next to the grocery co-op. Ask for Rhoda. She is *the* best." She turned back to the lecture, but she was smiling now, and I could tell I'd made a new friend, one who would be boring and predictable but could help me tap into whatever was going on with that odd girl at the front of the classroom.

Laidea

Tell me about this party.

There were two of them.

People?

No, parties. More people than I could count.

But you spoke to them?

Shouting over noise isn't a conversation.

But you spoke, all the same?

To a few.

Well, it's a start. No journey starts at the end.

I don't tell the Old Woman about saving the fireflies, or the girl on the other side of the mirror who waited for a brother to rescue her. The Old Woman might think I'm drifting even

further from the world of people and senses, or drive here herself to keep me from the dangerous hordes.

Only when I am sitting on my own in the dining hall, a bit of food suspended at my mouth, do I recognize an odd feeling, settled at the base of my sternum. Comfortable, almost like pride, and it comes to me when I think of the Old Woman and the new tone to her voice. She sounds less worried, but I never considered how worried she must have been over the past few years. She wore that worry each day until I forgot it was there.

Returning to a party with Riah seems unwise, but I want to do something to keep that feeling in my sternum, to keep that feeling of peace in the Old Woman.

Riah

So here's the thing: I don't do baggage. Not like other people. They scroll through their phones and moon over their ex-boyfriend's lips, or the way their ex-girlfriend jumped into the air a moment before the click. Just wet sand and her levitating image, shadow below, but she makes it her profile pic for weeks, like she's the first person to think of it.

Then there are the girls who get sorry about every little thing. Cheat on a test or a lover, and they're fit to throw up with guilt. Someone calls them out on a rude comment, tells them they're racist or some brand of -phobic and it's not just their image that leaves them all misty-eyed and dry-throated. It's something deeper, something I've never cared to tap into. I'll sail through a social faux pas with an even keel, thank you very much.

People want to see my guilt from time to time, so I indulge them and practice the face of regret in front of the bathroom mirror. Tense the brows a little, tremble the chin and lower lip so



your mouth curves down and your cheeks look heavy. Make eye contact until their face softens, and then look down.

As a kid I practiced that one so long I could summon it from muscle memory alone. It came in handy with parents and teachers too. Even the other little girls wanted to see it. Steal their jump rope, push them too hard in a game of tag, and all I had to do was bust out one of those looks. Then it was all, “It’s okay, you can still come to my birthday party.”

That’s what makes it so easy: people want to forgive, lighten the emotional load. The burden gets unbearable for them over time. Every slight, every lie, every time a parent misses their soccer game, they tenderly wrap that memory in paper, tie it up with red ribbon like a silver box under the Christmas tree. And then they dangle it from the yoke on their shoulders.

Lovely at first, but one by one those boxes combine, till a person is lousy with them, like chiggers in Spanish moss. So it’s a pleasure to drop one, especially if you can drop it early on, while the ribbon is still bright as a cherry.

But I don’t do baggage. Someone stabs me, I find a way to stab them back. Like Jenny Young in the 7th grade. I was one of those kids everyone called “nice” and “sweet.” While other girls pulled tactics straight out of *Mean Girls* and got caught, I played a higher game, the kind nobody ever catches. It helps when you’ve got no tell-tale-heart guilt compelling you to confess. So I was the picture of innocence, down to shoulder length blond hair and a darling little headband.

At lunch each day, a few loyal followers could call themselves my best friends, and every once in awhile I’d see some wide-eyed, scared girl sitting all by herself and invite her over. And I wasn’t mean - I didn’t flip it around and twist her words or spend the whole time mocking her. I’d include her, give her compliments. My loyal followers were always nice too. They knew it

was just temporary, no risk of her replacing one of them, and they benefited from the teachers' benevolent eyes just as much as I did. But I never invited the same girl over too often.

And if it seemed like one was getting attached, I'd find a way to pawn her off on another group. Like a politician, I maintained connections, even among the rival camps. Those connections especially came in handy any time a new girl moved in. Teachers would steer her directly to my table, and I'd only have a small window - three days tops - to stow her with some other group, or the poor thing would be trailing behind me like one of Bo Peep's lost lambs.

As far as I know, every one of them was grateful. Sure, I'd see the yearning eyes on occasion. The hopeful looks straight girls give each other, looks that surpass even the calf eyes they throw at boys. But they sensed that they shouldn't demand too much, so they admired from a distance, and I was smart enough to make the rounds when I needed to. Visit their table for five minutes at lunch, toss some compliments to the crowd like a mayor throwing candy from a parade float. If I was a dictator, I was a benevolent one, beloved by all.

Except for Jenny Young.

Why she disliked me was never clear. It's possible I did something that upset her and missed the nonverbal cues that usually alerted me when an apology was needed. It's possible she nursed that anger long after I'd forgotten what happened, like an oyster spinning its grain of sand into a sizeable pearl.

Whatever the reason, she refused to admire me. When I passed her in the hall, she glared. When I spoke in class, she rolled her eyes. At first, I tried the nice approach, bestowing favors. Compliments, an invitation to join a conversation. And I was patient. Weeks - I gave that girl weeks to fall in line. She refused.

So I changed tactics. I'd run up to her with my eyes big and round, gushing friendship from my smile, but when I got close I'd whisper in her ear. Little things at first: "You're ugly," or "Your parents hate you." Eventually I worked up to threatening her dog.

She told a teacher, but who would believe rude Jenny over me?

You probably think you're better than me. The thought of stealing your neighbor's puppy and skinning it alive makes you clutch your stomach. But that doesn't make you a good person - it was programmed into your genes the same way a laptop is programmed to turn on when you press the right button.

If you could escape that genetic coding, there's no predicting what you might do. Steal a candy bar because the checkout line is too long, drown a child just to see the bubbles - there's no moral difference between the two, when you approach it logically. Both are illegal but contribute to your enjoyment.

Even without your limiting genes, I've never tortured a human or animal. In fact, I've never even killed one. Murder is unoriginal, and torture would just put me on the level of some low life the military shunts off to be a guard at Guantanamo Bay. If you're smart enough and creative enough, you get all the entertainment you need without breaking international law.

So yes, I eventually stole her golden retriever puppy, the one she'd stupidly named Rex.

I called him Sampson and fed him steak and used my allowance to buy a pink collar. As far as my parents knew, the puppy was a gift from a friend, and it was just too bad that the poor Youngs lost a puppy at the same time. And Jenny was the little girl who'd cried wolf so many times that she didn't bother accusing me, not even when I brought pictures of Sampson to school.

Besides, she had no idea what I might do to Sampson if she crossed me again. So she surrendered him to his new life as my pampered pet.

Laidea

Several days pass with no word from Riah.

And then she is there in one of my classes. Beside her is a girl with red hair and a pointy face, who feels familiar. The girl with red hair looks at me, and I wave - that is what I'm supposed to do, I think - but the girl rolls her eyes and leans toward Riah, saying something I can't hear.

Riah whispers back and then gestures at an empty chair on her other side. "Laidea-friend!" she calls. She points at the chair again, more emphatically.

I have to walk past the girl with the too-red hair, and her lips pinch. "Do you know me?" I ask.

The girl throws up her hands and turns to Riah again. "Do you see now why I stopped trying?" she says.

Riah only titters and leans back in her chair. "A good shepherd leaves the many to find the one."

The other girl makes a strange noise and shuffles her papers into a messy stack. "You might be a saint," she says, "but I am moving to another row."

Sunlight paints strands of Riah's hair with little white flicks. "Little Lamb," she says. "We need to get you sleeping in your room again."

Riah

Some roles require research. You want people to think you can play tennis? You learn the rules, the lingo, maybe drop a few names of famous athletes. Your heroes. Want people to think you have a genius-level emotional IQ? Study facial expressions - make flashcards if you have to.

But there's one role that comes naturally to me. Call it a kingdom or a boardroom, a cult or a religion. The semantics are insignificant. All that matters are the followers, the adherents, the masses who will stir arsenic into their lemonade if I give the word. Not that I would.

Now, you may dream of fame and wealth, but the worshipping gaze of a stranger is too terrifying for your simple little brain. It would give you a seizure to see the way a follower's eyes shine just a little too much. True worship requires nothing less than the stamina of Hercules.

But I am a benevolent dictator. Follow me, and your nights will glitter brightly as sunshine on snow.

You think me cruel. A spider squatting low in its web, laying a sack of squirming eggs, ravenous to murder the little butterfly. My ways are strange, so you align me with the devil. But is the devil so different from God?

When your best friend dies of breast cancer, who do you think gave her that tumor? You really think there's some all-powerful, loving entity that runs around stamping out his no-good little brother's fires, but that all-powerful entity just barely missed that one match in the hay?

Here's the thing about Laidea: she is stagnant. A rotting pond lily in a patch of mud. Oh, it's entertaining when someone sleeps in a tree, but all it takes is one baby bird fall, and she winds up dead or paralyzed or in a psych ward where they fatten her up with the pills that make a girl boring and predictable.

So yes, I'm looking for something new, but what have you ever done to help the stranger who can't sleep in a bed?

Let me tell you show you what I do for Laidea, the lost lamb you wring your hands over but leave to its own fate. While you're too busy shearing the wool from the plump ninety-nine, soft as kittens, the wolf suckles that lamb like one of her own pups.

Two nights I have prepared Laidea, gifted her with the fairytale she fears as much as she craves it. Because of course I did my research. In between midterms, I read the Grimms, and not that cowardly bourgeoisie stuff Jake and Will pedaled to the pearl-clutching middle classes. I'm talking the first publication, where children slit their friends' throats like pigs at the butcher shop.

Where birds peck out the eyes of the princess's enemies, and lovers fry stepmothers in oil. I'm a fairy mother fucking godmother if there ever was one. And it didn't take much digging to figure out what tale my little lamb is trapped in. Poor Donkeyskin - a forgotten Cinderella, but with a little rape to spice things up.

We've had two balls already. For the first, I wrapped her in sunlight. The second night, I draped her with the moon and the stars. But the third ball - that one is all blue skies.

"Just a picnic," I assure her. "Me, you, and a couple of my dearest friends. You already know one of them, my housemate?" As if I didn't know about her escape.

"The girl in the mirror?" Laidea's eyes are round like a rabbit destined for stew. "There are spiders in the bushes," she adds.

That's why I love my little lamb - she can still surprise me.

"Are you afraid the spiders will gobble you up?" I ask.

"I'll go," she says, but her shoulders are rigid, and she leans away from me ever so slightly.

*Laidea*

Surely a picnic is safe, even with a friend unwieldy as Riah. The picnic will take place in broad daylight, in my little copse of trees. I tell the Old Woman about the picnic, and when she

tells me that's a relief to hear, that parties are only as useful as the smaller gatherings they produce, warmth blooms in my chest. Pride is red as a rose.

When I walk to my trees, blue billows around trunks and warps the scene before me. Sheets hang from branches in every hue and shade of blue. Blue fabric bright as a crayon swirls with baby pastel and sea green.

Despite the cold that skitters along my neck, I circle the sea of cloth. The sheets form a ring. Perhaps Riah thought I would feel safe in a tent of blue. It requires me to ignore my most basic instincts, like a cat that reveals its belly. But I pull an indigo sheet of fabric to the side and step forward.

Instead of an open circle, I find more blue. Strips dangle before me: silver and turquoise, navy blue and cyan.

"Riah?" I say. Another step. Fabric flutters along my arms and slides down my neck.

"Yes, my lamb?" Her voice carries from every direction.

"Where are you?" I ask.

"Just a few more steps, my dear." Again, the voice seems to come from everywhere, like my reflection did at the first party.

Spinning around only makes things worse. I am cocooned in blue. The fabric forms a canopy overhead, a patchwork of blue beneath my feet. And now I can't remember which way I entered.

"Beauty," says a man.

Before I can process who just spoke, I am on my hands and knees. There is nothing elegant in my escape. I don't think to ask the trees for help or dig my way to their safety. Not that they would help me, indifferent gods.

“My sweet Beauty,” Evans says, and I still can’t see him or guess where he even is, the way his voice comes from every direction at once. All I can think is that the blue fabric must end at some point. It cannot stretch past the horizon.

And then I am back in the sun, fingers digging into orange-brown leaves, gasping worse than I did after rescuing the fireflies.

A hand touches my ankle and I kick, dig my fingernails into the dirt. Nothing will drag me back there. Someone makes a sound at once a cough and a grunt.

“Hey, it’s okay! Sorry!” a female voice says behind me.

I scramble back like a crab and spin to face her. Brooke, the girl from the mirror, kneels in front of a cornflower blue sheet, palms facing me. Is this my executioner, sent to lure me to my fate?

“How did you find him?” I ask.

Brooke looks over her shoulder and then back at me.

“Beauty.” This time the voice is quieter, and it only comes from the tent. But it seems to echo within that space, and when I look up I can see the edge of speakers, duct-taped to tree branches.

“Brooke? Riah?” another voice calls from inside the tent. Male, but younger than Devans.

“This way!” Brooke calls into the tent.

“My sweet Beauty,” Devans’s voice repeats. My fingers are numb, and my lungs seem frozen. If my body ever knew how to scream, it has forgotten.

Brooke stands and shakes dirt off her skirt. “I don’t know what Riah has done this time, but I promise, Tree Girl, I had nothing to do with it.” Over her shoulder, she adds, “Hurry! The damn thing is probably motion activated.”



Behind her, blue sways, and a boy crawls out on his knees and one hand. The other arm is bent at a peculiar angle.

“Did you get lost in the 10 feet it took to get across?” Brooke grabs his wrist and helps him stand. “This poor girl was about to have a seizure.”

The boy shrugs and holds up his other wrist, a splotchy red stump.

“Yeah, yeah, get the new girl’s sympathy. You know that act doesn’t work on me.”

“I’m Charlie,” the boy says, facing me now. “You alright?” He holds out his one hand, but I’m not sure whether he’s trying to shake or help me stand up. His hair is dark and a little loose around his face. Now that I look more closely, I’m not sure whether to call him a boy or a man. He seems to fall into that liminal space that so many of the male students here do. Friend or foe?

Brooke snorts. “Sorry, Chuck, I don’t think this one’s taken in.”

He pulls his hand back and lets it hang limply at his side. There’s a slight pinkish tinge to his face. Still chuckling, Brooke crouches and offers both her hands. I let her pull me to my feet.

“By the way,” Brooke says, “you probably shouldn’t call him Chuck. I mean, it’d be hilarious - he hates it - but a sister gets dibs on obnoxious nicknames.”

The blue sheets ripple behind Brooke and Charlie. “Riah sent you,” I say. She had mentioned a housemate, so I was expecting Brooke, but I’m not sure where Charlie fits in her strange plan or why there’s a speaker with a recording from Devans.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Brooke says. “Let’s just say she invited me under false pretenses.”

I look at Charlie, and he holds up both arms, the hand and the stub. “Brooke asked me to come along for moral support. We know Riah can be —”

“Erratic,” Brooke says. “That doesn’t stop Charlie from going to her weird-ass parties, but it’s not like he hangs out with her or anything.”

Charlie nods. “I thought she was a performance artist or something. I liked how she got so many people involved. But this-” He runs his hand down the blue sheet. “I’d get it, if not for that recording.”

“Creepy,” Brooke says.

“There must be a speaker in the tree,” I say.

“There’s no way that manicured nutcase climbed a tree,” Brooke says. “How much you want to bet she got some lovesick boy to do it.”

“Maybe I could get it down,” Charlie says. He takes slow steps until he stands beneath the branch where it’s attached.

“There’s got to be a stick around here somewhere,” Brooke says. “Maybe if we knock down these ridiculous blue sheets we can actually see something.”

The wind has picked up, and the sheets surge like a wave. My heart has settled into a slower, steadier rhythm. As the initial alarm washes away, I imagine myself falling into the ocean with its greens and navy blues. In the real ocean, the water is so cold it hurts, until my legs turn numb. That’s how cold I make myself now.

While Charlie and Brooke are out of sight, searching for a stick on the other side of the tent, I climb the tree. The branch with the speaker is thick enough to hold my weight, if barely, and I shimmy forward. Duct tape covers the speaker.

From this height, I can see Charlie’s head on the opposite side of the blue tent. “Do you have a knife?” I call.

He turns his head a few times before coming back around. When he cranes his neck and peers at me, I remind myself that I am cold as the ocean, that a boy's smile cannot warm an Arctic channel.

"Believe it or not," he says. With his good hand, he reaches into a jacket and then holds up a pocket knife with a wooden handle.

I wrap my legs around the branch for more stability before reaching down. The blade is sharp, and soon I have loosened the speaker enough to remove the batteries.

"I saw five more," Charlie says. "They're all around that blue tent."

One at a time, I climb the trees and cut them down.

In the last tree, I notice something odd about the woven canopy draped over the tent. Amidst the varying tones and hues of blue, a message is camouflaged in blue letters: *Well done, little lamb.*

Riah

Now I'll tell you the depths of my generosity. "Donkeyskin" recreated, one ball at a time. Sure, she gets a crippled art student instead of a prince, but it's not like a palace and a crown would even interest Laidea. They almost met on the lake, but I withheld the best for the third day.

It meant the return of the rapey king as well, even if it was just his voice. I'm nothing if not thorough. She wanted a fairytale, and now she has it. Charlie is an easy choice. An artist fascinated by peculiar people, with a ghost hand that my little lamb is sure to find charming.

Pity her if you want, but I'm the one who has to find a new toy. A lamb falling into clumsy, blushing love is just tiring. I'm tempted to play with her some more, like a cat with a blind mole, but Laidea has offered me awe and reverence, and I reward my little followers.

Disappointed again? Careful, my darlings, or I may weary of trying to please you. This story is too hot, that story is too cold: remember what happened to little Goldilocks.

Whatever do you want?

Is it a love story? Humans are always whinging about love - begging for it to kiss their eyelids at night, to swoop them up and dangle them from the edge of a cliff while their heart beats like a hummingbird poised over a rose. It hardly seems wise, my treacle tartlettes, but tonight your wish is my command.

You shall hear the greatest love story of all: death.

Why do you shake your heads now? Love is what you want to hear, and no child is loved like the child in the grave. Grocery store temper tantrums are forgotten, or remembered through a gauzy haze, the parents' grief sprinkled over a photograph like confectioner's sugar on a pastry. When one child is lost, no child that follows will ever smell as sweet or be so quick to learn the alphabet.

### The True Daughter

There was once a perfect family. Or so it seemed to Jessica. She and her husband, Ben, had a daughter named Charlotte, a precocious five year old with chestnut curls. Charlotte spent weekdays in kindergarten, then a few hours after school at daycare, where Jessica and Ben took turns picking her up when they got out of work.

And yes, it was usually Jessica who picked up Charlotte, always her to cancel meetings and leave work early when their daughter was sick. But it wasn't something she could resent in the months that followed the accident, that twilight period when even the biting smell of toddler vomit turned sweet in her memories.

The accident was nobody's fault. No citation, no points added to anyone's license, no charge for manslaughter. Ben had been driving, yes, but he had been following the traffic laws when he took that turn, had even slowed a little. Perhaps it never would have happened if he'd slowed down a bit more, but there was no way to know for sure.

If anything was to blame, it was the black ice, but frozen water knew nothing of ethics or what blood looked like on a father's lips after failed attempts to resuscitate. Frozen water also knew nothing of a pregnant woman's desperation, sucking ice cubes in a hospital bed while doctors reviewed her chart in hushed tones, weeks before the baby was due, just hours after her five-year-old daughter had been zipped into a bag.

It was a miracle that the baby survived the accident. That's what the doctor called it: a miracle. And yet the baby did survive, without brain damage, and at a surprising five pounds, eleven ounces. The OB GYN described the risks a preemie would face in words like a spell: pulmonary hypertension, transient tachypnea, hypoglycemia.

One nurse joked that the car crash had been a blessing in disguise: “Can you imagine how big this little porker would be five weeks from now?”

The nurse was a cheerful woman who looked just a few years younger than Jessica herself. And of course the nurse didn’t know. That much was clear from the look on her face when an older nurse grabbed her arm and whispered something in her ear. And anyway, Jessica was still in a daze from the drugs they’d pumped into her veins. The drugs seemed to slow her blood, bring her heartbeat down to a steady hush. It was pleasant, this numbness, this tingling in her hands that made it seem as if nothing mattered but the next ice cube, that nothing would ever exist or matter after this moment.

The only problem was Ben. Throughout the labor she’d had no idea where he was, but now he was here, appearing from behind a curtain like an angel parting the clouds. He’d needed treatment for some cuts and bruises, but ultimately she’d already known he would be okay. The back seat had taken the brunt of the force after the car fishtailed into that tree. It was amazing how something so close could also be so far. A few inches further back in the car, and it might have been her, or simply the baby, and really what was an unknown baby compared to a living, breathing girl?

No mother was supposed to think it, but that didn’t make it any less true. The baby would be a stranger, a usurper in Charlotte’s room and Charlotte’s old baby clothes. But there was Ben, holding it like it was someone he knew, the blue tones in Ben’s skin receding as pink rushed to his face and restored color.

The baby was wrapped in a pale pink blanket, the hospital’s signal that they had a daughter, yet again. Like a jar of pennies at the convenience store. Take a daughter; leave a

daughter. Hours before the accident, Jessica had looked over old photographs of Charlotte's birth. It wasn't a birth she remembered outside of photos.

But today she could have sworn, just for a moment, that Ben held the new baby at the exact angle that he had held Charlotte five years earlier. Perhaps that was why, when the nurse asked, "And what is your daughter's name?" Jessica watched Ben and waited to hear what he would say.

"Charlotte," he said, and held the baby just a little closer. He may, of course, have misunderstood the question. May have forgotten for a moment that Charlotte lived only in the past tense. But his eyes never left his new daughter's face, so Jessica merely nodded when the nurse told her she could take home a folder where they could fill out the paperwork later.

"You'll have months to mail it in," the nurse said. The nurse had a soft look to her. Soft hair, soft cheeks, soft hand that patted Jessica's shoulder. "There's no rush. You can sleep on it a little."

The baby had a real name, of course. The name they had picked out months earlier, long before the accident. Olivia, Olive for short. Most of the time they called her "the baby" or "she" or "her." On the occasions where a name was necessary, like the first follow-up visit with the premie specialist, she was Olivia. But even medical professionals usually went with Baby, perhaps too overworked to keep track of the patients who came through like an assembly line at a doll factory.

If Ben remembered his momentary lapse from the hospital, he never mentioned it. For her part, Jessica watched Ben while he cradled Olive and listened for the moment when he would slip up again.



Each time he held the baby, he seemed like the real Ben. Not quite Ben from before, but a new Ben she hadn't known was lurking beneath his skin. With Charlotte he had been a gentle father, but also one who came home late from work, complaining that he couldn't get anything done at the house. It had to be easier, she'd often thought - easier to be gentle and patient if you swooped in for the last five minutes of bath time, after dinner had long since cooled, the dishwasher already run. Easier to shush a baby to sleep in the middle of the night if you were rarely the one to wake up first.

But their first night home with Olive, Jessica woke as Ben climbed back into bed. The lamp on his nightstand was on, casting a pallor over his face and jagged shadows across the walls. Sometimes it seemed that a young, golden Ben was trapped in an old man's body. Only the baby could pull him to the surface, in that tight little fist, but the spell was fleeting. Already the skin around his eyes was fading to its new, habitual gray, his cheeks hanging limp like rounded triangles.

"It's okay," he said. "She was just hungry."

That was one of the perks of Jessica's inability to lactate this time. It was fairly normal, the lactation specialist had explained. An early birth, combined with grief. But it gave her some respite. No need to pump in advance if she wanted a 5-hour break to sleep; Ben could warm formula as well as her. Perhaps better. He seemed to know how to shake it just right to dissolve any powdery clumps.

During a postpartum check up, the doctor had assured her that formula was nearly as good for a baby as breast milk anyway. "But don't let that cat out of the bag!" he added. His

mustache curled and stuck out like wisps of cotton. “If women found that out, they’d all switch to formula.”

Whatever slight advantage breastfeeding had given Charlotte hadn’t been enough to overcome the laws of physics. Velocity equaled one girl plus a car, over a half-inch of ice.

“Would any baby on the planet breastfeed,” she asked the doctor, “if men were the ones who had to deal with chapped, bloody nipples?”

The doctor blinked and placed the stethoscope against her back. “Take a nice, deep breath.”

Before the accident, Jessica had never been a morning person. Now she lived for dawn. That brief minute between sleep and wakefulness, when she stared at the lace curtains and allowed the morning sun to fool her. That liminal space between night and day was like any morning from before, back when nightmares faded with the shadows.

One morning she opened her eyes and truly believed that all was well, that it had all been a terrible dream and Charlotte would pad into the room any moment now, a brush caught inextricably in her curly hair.

Instead of Charlotte’s footsteps, she heard a baby scream: an intruder in her home.

Changing Olive’s name was Ben’s idea. Even if he never stated it outright.

They had three months to complete the paperwork and mail it to the social security office. Three months to settle on a first and middle name. Every day for a month, Jessica sat down with the packet of papers from the hospital, prepared to fill them out. Each day she put the pen down

and closed the folder without writing so much as a letter. Once, the pen touched the paper and left a tiny black dot.

During that month Jessica watched Ben's body droop each time he sat down on the couch, in the sagging spot where Charlotte had usually cuddled if she wanted a bedtime story. It now felt foolish, of course, that they had ever said 'no,' even if Jessica knew it wasn't normal or even healthy to say 'yes' to every request a five year old made. But it was hard to remember those rational facts when her fingers traced the purple smudge in the carpet where Charlotte once dropped a popsicle. Surely she hadn't yelled about that.

But Jessica didn't change the name for herself. It was Ben who needed it. Ben who used all three of his vacation weeks when he didn't qualify for paternity leave. Ben who rushed home from work after those three weeks ended, and shrugged when she asked about his day, apparently enraptured by the baby's gurgles and lashful smiles. Ben who posted a chart to track how much formula the baby drank throughout the day, reminding Jessica to fill it out.

The first night Ben posted the chart, she asked if he had remembered to eat lunch. He tilted his head like a puzzled dog, so she heated the frozen casserole some relative had slipped into their freezer. Within a week it had become their routine. Most days, he seemed to have no recollection of food or anything else from work, but he chewed whatever gooey lentil concoction she forked between his lips.

One night she woke to Ben thrashing. An elbow jabbed into her back, a leg flailed and kicked her calf. The blanket and sheets were twisted together, balled up against the footboard.

"Stop!" she said, and he sat up, head turning back and forth in the darkened room.

“Charlotte,” he said, already swinging his feet to the ground, clawing at the mattress as he struggled to right himself.

It was only then that Jessica heard the faint wail. There was no telling which had come first: Ben’s thrashing or Olive crying, but it was no surprise at this point that he was the first to hear it.

Ben was at the door before he turned back and looked at her, his eyes wide and his mouth slightly agape, like a little boy waking from a nightmare, unsure of reality.

“Charlotte’s crying,” Jessica prompted, and the confusion seemed to clear. He nodded and padded down the hall.

Once Jessica made the decision, it was easy to carry out.

Even before the accident, they had moved Charlotte’s things out of the tiny room next to theirs and into the guest room. More experienced parents had told them it would be miserable if the baby kept Charlotte awake, that the last thing they needed was a cranky, sleep-deprived kindergartener on top of a newborn. Especially since Charlotte would already be feeling displaced - that was worse, apparently, if there was anything more than a two- or three-year gap.

Most of the items in the baby’s room were Charlotte’s, unpacked after several years in storage. So it was easy, really, once Jessica decided to make the transition. They’d documented every day of Charlotte’s early life and stored those photos on the cloud. She could lay various pictures across each other for comparison, remind herself which wall the hand-sewn teddy bear quilt should hang from.

Even convincing Ben to call Olive by her sister's name proved easier than she imagined, so easy that Jessica sometimes wondered if he were a fully aware participant, willingly donning the rose-tinted glasses each day.

It helped, of course, that all the official paperwork had the right name. Jessica made sure that even the middle name matched. She switched to a new pediatrician, one who had no reason to ask how they were holding up or reminisce about the time Charlotte had bitten her lip until it bled a little, determined not to cry during a shot. And if Ben sometimes muttered the wrong birth date while talking with the new doctor, it was something she could laugh off as new-parent brain.

If not for the extended family, they could have stayed in the same house.

There were only a few incidents - most of their relatives called Olive "Baby" or "Sweetie" or "Where's my granddaughter?" But there was always the risk of a slip up, of someone asking to hold "Olivia." As much as she could, Jessica set up visits while Ben was gone, especially with her mother, who once referred to Ben as, "The monster who was driving that night." Her mother had apologized the next day in a tearful phone call, but any time her son-in-law walked into the room, her mouth still pulled taut at the corners.

And there was no keeping Ben's parents away, no matter how many times she deleted their texts and voicemails from his phone. It wasn't as if Ben was interested in seeing them - he only listened to his voicemail in the first place when she reminded him that clients from work expected to hear back within 24 hours. Nothing interested him but holding Olive while her vomit ran down his shirt like seagull poop. When Jessica's maternity leave ended, he even volunteered to do both the drop off and pick up at their new daycare. The problem was that Ben's parents insisted on flying in from Kansas after a few months.

The week following their visit was worse than the visit itself. Each morning Ben lay in bed and watched the ceiling fan turn while his alarm screeched in Jessica's ears. Even when the sound woke the baby, he rose sluggishly, the movement of a geriatric who felt pain with every step. So when he woke one morning, mumbling for Charlotte, Jessica did what any wife would do. She fetched the baby.

"She's here," she told Ben as she laid Olive's too-loose body across his chest. It was still early enough that she had to be careful to support the head. "Charlotte's here."

Ben blinked at the ceiling fan.

"Charlotte needs her bottle," Jessica said.

Olive shrieked.

Ben looked down.

His faced curled into a smile.

It was clear they couldn't risk any more visitors. Not while Ben was home, and not once Olive was old enough to know the significance of a name and tell Ben if someone called her by anything other than Charlotte.

Convincing Ben to work from home was easy. If he'd been thinking more clearly, surely it would have occurred to him first. He rarely met with clients in person as it was, and those few old-fashioned men and women who insisted on sitting in the same room could be shifted into someone else's pile. It meant switching to part time, but Jessica could still work full-time and just fly into town once a month, so they wouldn't lose their health insurance.

The plot of land was a bargain, located out in the sticks where the cable companies had only set up service recently, and only after the state bribed them with a grant, apparently hoping WiFi would lure the millennial droves.

The worst part was waiting for the custom house, a replica of where they'd raised Charlotte. Some features would be difficult to get right, like the exact shade of blue in the bathroom counters, but the old house needed to be remodeled anyway before they put it on the market. Jessica stored the old cabinets and countertops in the garage and insisted on taking the fridge and freezer when they left, no matter how many times the realtor repeated that it was highly unusual. As far as expenses went, they'd probably break even on the move. In the long run, yes, they'd lose tens of thousands, since the new house would never sell for as much money as they were sinking into it. But they could deal with that problem when they retired, forty or fifty years from now.

The first night in the new, too-familiar house, Jessica lay on her side and watched the curtains flutter. It was the same cream lace from the old house, which Charlotte had sometimes hid behind, pretending to be a bride. It was the same iron curtain rod with the curled edges. But this house was surrounded by trees. The branches wove together to block the moonlight, and no street lamps softened the long darkness. Only the glow of her phone illuminated the curtains, little pricks of blue each time a fold of lace shifted just so.

From outside, a bird sang. Faintly, what she would imagine the ghost of a bird to sound like.

Beside her Ben snored with his mouth agape, a musty sulfur on his breath. When she lifted her phone above his face, his eyelids twitched, a blue pallor on his skin. She kept the phone

pointed toward his face as she climbed out of bed and opened the door. His eyes twitched again but remained closed.

The kitchen was still. The counters were the same muddy red color as the counters in the old house. Charlotte had once called them “poopy” in front of guests. Had she felt embarrassed at the time? They had meant to replace them soon, sometime after the baby was born. Now the counters would have to remain at least for the next five years, until Olive outgrew Charlotte’s photos.

Jessica made a cup of ginger tea to calm her stomach, which had been cramping all night, and sat at the table while the tea steeped. Enough boxes lined the room to build furniture out of them. That was what she and Ben had done when they first moved into the old house, before even Charlotte had been born. It was funny how something like a wooden table came to feel necessary, something to protect like a living creature. Coasters to keep water off its skin, pot holders to protect it from burns.

There was a sound from across the house, like a bird trilling or a little girl giggling. Jessica stirred her tea and breathed in the steam. There had been few birds at the old house, most of them hunted by neighborhood cats or displaced by construction.

A bird chirped again, this time as ordinary as a finch or a sparrow. Not that she knew what either sounded like. The only birds she ever recognized were chickadees and only because they were so easy to remember. There was no mistaking a chickadee, no renaming them.

The sun was beginning to rise, and through the gaps in the blinds she could see the sky, with that creamy color it seemed to have in the morning.

“My father,” said a voice from outside the window.



It was the same girl-bird voice from before. Nothing like a parrot or the other raspy birds that could be trained to mimic human voices. It was an unreal voice, as impossible as a mermaid.

She had read once that it was common, following a loss, to hallucinate that a loved one had returned. But she had assumed they would occur in the immediate aftermath, not months later.

“My father, he killed me,” the impossible voice sang. “My mother erased me. My sister will find me by the juniper tree. Tu a la, Tu a la. What a beautiful bird am I.”

Something crashed into the window.

The tea sloshed onto Jessica’s fingers, and she dropped the mug. Down the hall, Olive wailed. And already Jessica could hear the creaking floor in the master bedroom as Ben woke up to tend to the baby.

It was only later, in the security of afternoon light, that Jessica checked to see what had hit the window. A blue egg lay shattered on the ground. From the pieces, it looked the size of a hen’s egg, but it was clean as if it had never held any yoke. One tuft of red down clung to a jagged edge.

She touched her finger to the down, expecting to find it wet with blood. But the down was fluffy as a duckling.

The egg shell had fallen beside a tree. It was a type of tree she had seen for years, with short blue-green needles. Loaded with berries, which had always confused her, though she’d never taken the time to figure out how a pine tree could grow berries instead of cones. Something about this one unsettled her.

On her laptop, she searched for images of pine trees with berries. A few of the photos showed berries like tiny red olives, but most were a dusty blue. She clicked on one.

Common juniper.

Jessica tracked down a saw from one of the boxes in the garage. They'd bought it in preparation for the move, planning to cut down their own Christmas tree from one of the young conifers in the woods.

They'd bought thick gloves as well, but she hadn't found those in the labyrinth of unpacked boxes, so she reached into the branches and grasped the trunk in one hand. It was narrow enough that her fingers almost touched. To get the saw in the right position, Jessica had to lie flat on her stomach and reach under the lowest branches.

When the blade hit wood, the voice sounded again.

"My father, he killed me."

It was just a grief-induced hallucination. There was nothing else it could be. Jessica continued sawing, the smell of pine sharp in her nose.

"My mother erased me."

The saw was more than halfway through.

"My sister will find me in the juniper tree."

Near her face, thin branches swayed.

"Tu a la, tu a la. What a beautiful -"

The small tree tipped over, cracking as it fell.

For five years, they lived peacefully in the secluded house. She changed both of their phone numbers, so calls from family members were never a problem. They both worked online and traveled back to their old town a few times each year for meetings. There was a country doctor in a small town forty minutes away, and the post office delivered everything else they needed. Olive had no children as playmates, but she had a doting father and a mother. Jessica knew better than to think of herself as affectionate.

Weekly, Jessica compared photos of Charlotte at the same age to Olive's progress. When Olive failed to develop a birthmark on her forehead, Jessica ordered a small henna kit. She applied it every few weeks while Ben was out, often enough that the old mark never had a chance to fade without the new mark to replace it. Sometimes she adjusted the brown and red hues in Olive's curls with hair mascara. It never seemed like quite enough, but Ben called their daughter "Charlotte" without fail.

When Olive turned three, Ben ordered a program for teaching preschool from home. Some of the activities were online, so he also bought a children's tablet in a clunky plastic case. Olive spent her mornings coloring in the packet and cutting out shapes. In the afternoon Ben let her run around in the backyard.

If not for Jessica's intervention, he would have likely allowed her to roam the woods as well, where anything might have gone wrong. Children could fall from branches and break their limbs or necks. They could encounter a bear or a coyote. Even a rabid squirrel could be deadly. Or a rabid bird. Just because something was rare didn't mean it was impossible.

One day when Olive was five, close to what would have been Charlotte's tenth birthday, she disappeared from the yard. Ben was running an errand in a nearby town, so it was just the

two of them. Jessica was working on her laptop, glancing out the window every few minutes. Olive was drawing in the dirt with a stick.

Until she wasn't.

Jessica glanced back up from her work, and the yard was empty.

At first, of course, she didn't know the yard was empty. She thought Olive had wandered from view. When standing and craning her neck to see further failed, she went to the door. The well-trimmed lawn stretched out before her, banked by a line of blackberry bushes, the only border between their home and the woods.

"Charlotte!" Jessica called. Olive didn't answer. "Charlotte!" she repeated. "This isn't a joke - come here now."

Birds chittered. One made a whooping sound.

"Charlotte!" she called again.

"My father, he killed me," a voice sang. It was like Olive's voice, but not quite. If anything, it was closer to Charlotte's voice, at least what she remembered of it. The slightly higher pitch.

"This isn't a game," Jessica said. She noticed that her hands were both clenched in her hair, as if they'd gone there of their own volition.

"My mother erased me," the voice continued.

Jessica knelt in the grass. Her throat felt dry, and it was difficult to say anything, but she heard herself whine.

"My sister, she found me, singing in the juniper tree." The voice seemed to be coming from just beyond the blackberries.

"Please," Jessica said. "Stop hiding."

“Tu a la, Tu a la. What a beautiful bird am I.”

Olive crawled out from the line of blackberry bushes. There was a gap between branches so small that it had never occurred to Jessica that a child could fit between them. Clumps of mud clung to Olive’s hands and knees.

“Where did you learn that song?” Jessica asked. The difference in the voice must have been something she imagined, a trick of the ear.

“From the girl.”

“What girl?” Jessica took Olive’s hands and started scraping the dried mud away.

“The girl in the woods.”

“You’re not allowed in the woods,” Jessica said.

“Did you know there’s more than one Charlotte?” Olive asked. In the distance, a cicada buzzed.

“Well, there’s only one of you,” Jessica said.

Olive giggled. “What a beautiful bird am I.”

The next week, Olive went missing again. Again it happened while Ben was out, but this time Olive was inside too. Olive was supposed to be in her bed taking a nap, and Jessica was in the bathroom, grateful that for once no child was there banging at the door.

As she washed and dried her hands, she glanced out the window and saw a flash of red at the edge of the woods.

It was Olive in a bright red dress, emerging from the blackberry bushes.

When Jessica ran outside, she found Olive kneeling in the dirt, drawing with her stick.

“Charlotte,” she said. “You know you’re not allowed in the woods.”

“The girl said it was okay,” Olive said.

“It doesn’t matter what the girl tells you,” Jessica said. The nearest neighbors were an elderly couple who lived a mile away.

“She taught me a new song. Listen!”

Jessica grabbed Olive’s arm. “No,” she said. “This is not singing time. This is nap time.” But when she looked at the drawing in the dirt, she paused. There was nothing truly unusual, just a bird. Every child drew them. Charlotte had drawn plenty at this age.

Olive pulled her arm loose and ran toward the house, singing.

*My mother, she killed me*

*My father forgot me*

*My sister replaced me*

*But we met at the juniper tree*

*Tu a la, tu a la*

*What a beautiful bird am I*

Jessica banned the song, of course, but that didn’t stop Olive from singing it or from telling Ben about Other Charlotte, as she had dubbed the girl in the woods. Ben just laughed and told Jessica to stop worrying about the grim lyrics.

“We both sang worse at her age,” he said. “Did you know ‘Eeny, Meany, Miny, Moe’ used to be racist?”

No matter how often Jessica broached the subject, he didn't worry about Other Charlotte's influence, just suggested they visit the elderly neighbors.

"It's probably one of their grandkids," he said one night in between washing dishes. "Maybe she and Charlotte can have an official play date. Just think - two Charlottes! Maybe they'll be in the same kindergarten class next year."

"I thought we agreed to homeschool her," Jessica said. Putting Olive in the school system would mean scrutiny, meeting other parents, planning playdates and inviting other families for dinner. Having to constantly answer questions about how long they'd been married, how they had met, why they had moved to this house in the woods.

Ben placed a clean pan on the stack of dishes she was drying. "For preschool, sure. But kindergarten? Kids need other kids. Remember how excited Charlotte was on her first day?" The pot he was washing slid back into the sink.

Jessica turned away so he wouldn't see her face. "You mean how excited she will be?" she asked. This was exactly why they couldn't put Olive in school. There hadn't been any slip ups, not since moving to this house. She wiped at a pocket of moisture in a groove on the pan's handle.

When she looked up, Ben was staring out the window.

"Ben?" she prompted. "How excited Charlotte will be?"

"I've never seen a bird like that," he said. "Is that a cardinal?"

A red bird the size of a blue-jay perched on one of the blackberry bushes. It took off, and for a moment Jessica thought it was holding a red handkerchief with its feet. Something billowed behind as it flew. When the bird landed again, its long tail feathers fanned out.

The third time Olive went missing, it happened before Jessica's eyes. They were all asleep - her and Ben in their own room, and Olive in Charlotte's room, snuggled beneath the pink quilt Charlotte had once tried to bring to school in her backpack. At least, that was where Jessica and Ben had tucked her in.

Jessica was dreaming, a dream so lovely that waking was like leaving a beach on a July day and walking straight into a meat locker. She couldn't remember much from the dream, beyond a light, weightless feeling. And the sensation of sun on her outstretched arms.

But now she was opening her eyes and something was making a high-pitched, keening sound. Not quite laughter, not quite sobbing. Somehow both. Outside, the sky was red with morning light, and there on the lawn stood Olive. Except it wasn't Olive at all. The girl had her hair, the same facial structure. The birthmark on her forehead that Jessica applied with henna every few weeks. But the girl wasn't Olive.

The girl looked at the window, and Jessica didn't dare hope, didn't dare say the name that she had been using as a lie for five years. The girl beckoned, and Jessica shook her head.

There was a flurry of little girl feet, and Olive ran into view. Jessica knew her immediately, in the little details she could never explain but which had always been wrong. The wrong curl, the extra bit of reddish highlights that shouldn't be in her hair.

Beside her sister, Olive wore the same lilac nightgown, frilly and ridiculous in just the way little girls adored. A little too faded, but that was only obvious now that she saw the girls beside each other. Like a newly-developed photo next to a copy that had sat in a drawer for five years.

Olive beckoned. What was she even asking?

Jessica shook her head.



And then Ben was there, running across the grass in just a pair of boxers, pulling both girls into his arms. When Ben turned and looked at Jessica, he didn't beckon.

Then, her husband and daughters were gone. Where they had stood were three brilliant red birds rising through the air.

"My wife, she deceived me," one sang.

"My mother, she killed me," sang another.

"My mother erased me," the third sang.

Three flashes of red, they flew into the woods.

And now, she is running through the trees. A forest of trees with blue cones shaped like berries. Always, there is a flash of red just out of reach. Three voices call "Tu a la, tu a la. What beautiful birds are we."

If she runs fast enough, her skin will either catch fire or sprout wings.

### Lest Thou Be Consumed

There are two things you need to know about Uncle.

One: Uncle will do anything for the Lord.

Two: Uncle will do anything to save our souls.

They say Daddy swallowed half a valley. Would've swallowed the whole thing if Uncle hadn't made him choose.

"You got a hunger, nephew," he said. "So pick what side you want. We'll draw a line right down the middle. You and your kin on one side, me and mine on the other."

They say Daddy chose the green half, with brooks that babbled like a baby angel fallen fresh from Heaven. When we first set up our tents, they say the grass was soft as down, and pink flowers bloomed beneath your feet. They say Uncle took the stony, barren half. That he started with two sickly calves and was blessed by the Lord until it was a herd.

So our families went separate ways, all because Uncle didn't approve of the way we lived. It's like Uncle always says: "Off the grid don't mean a thing if you got all that fancy camping gear."

Truth be told, there was a lot Uncle wouldn't have approved of. They say Uncle called Daddy to repentance when they first moved to the valley and he saw Daddy unload it all from the van. "Can't leave the city behind," Uncle said, "if you're carrying the whole thing on your back."

You wouldn't believe the luxury we started out with. A little stove - so small you could carry it, not like the big stone one Uncle's got. And you didn't have to burn wood. Used something called propane that came in a metal can. And flexible bowls and cups that folded up

so you could take them with you, nice and light. Daddy loved the finer things, but the only city finery Uncle believed in was an automatic rifle.

But that's the whole reason we had to live on the other side of the valley, now isn't it? Thanks to that nice, big fence, Uncle didn't have to look at our battery-powered flashlights or smell our insect repellent. Can't imagine it was what he'd envisioned when he talked Daddy into moving to the valley with him. Probably thought we'd eat at the same fire every night and huddle together in the winter in one big tent.

Even though we didn't grow up with Uncle, Daddy told us tales about his teachings. How the World would soon be set aflame, and only the righteous would survive. That the Lord had declared Uncle the man who would lead us to salvation.

"Then how come we're here, and Uncle's on the other side of the wall?" I asked one time.

Daddy was teaching me different ways to build a fire, and tonight it was a teepee fire, with the sticks all piled high so they came to a point. "Uncle don't like looking at all our modern contraptions," he said. "But a box of matches sure makes life warmer, don't it?"

"So Uncle's wrong?" I asked.

"I believe Uncle." Daddy took a match from the little plastic container he kept in his pocket and handed it to me. "The Lord speaks through him. But sometimes Uncle adds his own flavor to it - sometimes Uncle don't know the difference between God's commandments and stuff that only bugs Uncle."

“So the World really is gonna burn?” I asked, and Daddy nodded somberly.

I dropped the match into the dried up leaves and pine needles inside the little teepee. As the needles turned red and glowed, the flame spread to the twigs and then the kindling. Was this what the World would look like when the Lord fulfilled His promise?

I was fifteen the first time I met anyone from the World. Daddy and Uncle worked hard to keep the World out of our home. There were signs all along the perimeter, warning campers and hikers off our private property. According to Daddy, private property meant land no one could take from you, land you could defend with a knife or a gun if someone tried to walk on it uninvited.

Mama said the land had been cheap by the acre but expensive when you added all those acres together. To buy it, she and Daddy had sold everything from when they lived in the World. A big house, bigger than all our tents put together, even bigger than the cabin she and Daddy built while me and Sister were little. “So there’s no going back,” sMama would always say. “Even if we wanted to.”

That’s how Mama was if she was mad about something but didn’t want to murmur: “That’s all we’ve got for dinner, even if we wish we could eat something our daughter hadn’t burned.” Or “Even if we wish Daddy had caught more than one fish.”

I never asked if she regretted leaving the World or why she followed Daddy into the wilderness. But one day, when we were out digging for roots, I asked about her kin. Why they weren’t here with us too.

“My kin didn’t approve of your Daddy,” she said and shoved her trowel into the dirt at the base of a wild onion. “They liked nice things.”

“But what will happen to them,” I asked, “when the World burns?”

Mama yanked the onion out of the ground and shook the dirt loose. “You can’t save the folks who won’t be saved. Even if we wish they’d listen.”

When the coyotes howled at night, and I couldn’t sleep because I thought they were going to gobble me up like Little Red Riding Hood, Sister told me tales of the World same way the cousins tell you tales from the Bible. Same way Mama used to tell me and Sister stories about fairies and princesses.

I was too young to remember the World, but Sister spun tales so magic-like, I figured they had to be make believe. Sister said Daddy and Mama had a big house in the old life, with white walls like a field of newly fallen snow. She said it was like spring inside that house all year round. There were tunnels in the walls that filled with cool air in the summer, warm in the winter.

Sister said there was a big stove that cooked food without wood, without even using propane like Daddy’s little city stove. And there was a box of winter next to the stove, where they kept foods you can’t imagine. Foods someone else cooked and then wrapped up, so all you had to do was heat them. But you didn’t even have to heat them in a stove - there was another box, where you could heat stuff in seconds, and the box didn’t even get warm. You could lay your hand against it while your food cooked and never get a burn.

One thing I’m sure she made up. She said the big white house had its own rain machine. You’d stand in a smooth white stall and fiddle with metal knobs, and then warm water would rain over you from your own personal cloud.

The most magical part of all: the stall was in the same room as a latrine, but the latrine didn't even stink. The house had a river that swished all the waste away, clean as Noah's day, after the Lord rid the Earth of sin.

On cold winter nights I still lie awake and imagine myself standing in the magical stall, summer rain pouring over me. But you could empty ten clouds and never remove some stains.

Every summer the telltale signs of campers appeared. People from the World who escaped their dingy lives for a few days or maybe weeks and tried to live like we did, deep in the woods. Most carried so much stuff on their backs they might as well be turtles, carting their home wherever they went. Daddy was always grabbing trash from the camp sites just outside our land.

Campers left all sorts of useful things - jugs made from a thin plastic you could cut in half if you needed a bowl or basket more than a pitcher. Pads of paper for practicing our letters, and folded stacks of thin gray paper that we used as firestarter. Daddy called them newspapers. Said the World believed in them same as we believed the Bible and Uncle. Uncle wouldn't have approved, but Daddy thought they taught us good lessons - he'd point out a story about a shooting or a rape and remind us that was regular life out in the World.

"That's why we left," he'd say. "Wasn't safe to raise my daughters."

One summer the newspapers followed the same little girl who'd been missing for months already. Her name was Lyla. Each time Daddy returned from the campsites he dropped a stack of papers in front of me and Sister, and we pored through, searching for her picture. Had Lyla been found? Was she still alive? Each week her picture stared at us, big eyes and dimpled cheeks, smiling like nothing bad could ever happen to her.

Lyla was only six when she went missing, plucked from the grass in front of her own daddy's house. It was August before they found her, skinny as a pole bean, locked in someone's basement. The man who locked her up still went to work every day and waved at his neighbors when he passed them in the street. "He seemed so nice," one of the neighbors said.

Daddy said that was the way of the World. Evil marched from house to house, calling itself Good.

Daddy was right about that: evil loves calling itself good.

A few months after I turned fifteen we found the campers. It was just me and Sister, out foraging on our own. I remember it was Fall because the last of the blackberries were ripe. I also remember being grateful to find the blackberries because the fresh currants had all passed, and we were saving the dried currants for winter. Our baskets hung from our necks, made from old plastic jugs.

The blackberries weren't easy to find. Our usual spots had been picked clean by birds - or us. And if it wasn't birds, sometimes a black bear would get to the berries first.

We were at the edge of our property line when I spotted telltale dots of red and black in the bushes. Most of our blackberries grew along the edge of the valley, where the sun ripened them by late summer, but these grew near a stream, big enough to thin the trees and let in a little sun. Narrow enough that the berries had ripened late.

Crossing the property line was against Daddy and Mama's rules, but Sister grabbed my hand and tugged me over it. "No way I'm leaving ripe berries for the birds," she said.

My basket was nearly full, when I heard crunching steps. Sister just shook her head and placed one finger in front of her lips, so I held my body as still as I could, still and clear as a thin sheet of ice over a rock.

The crunching grew louder, and then I heard boys' voices.

"Dude, do you even know how to read a map?" one of them said.

"At least I know to take it out of my ass first," another answered.

I'd met boys before. Uncle had married off some of his older daughters before settling in the wilderness, and those daughters had followed him with their husbands. Those couples had babies right away, and now there were at least 10 or 12 boys close to our age. Uncle never crossed the boundary between his side of the valley and Daddy's, but he'd send some of the boys if they had news.

So I'd met boys, but our cousins were quiet when they approached. They walked softly and acted somber, staring straight ahead at Daddy like they were afraid our modern contraptions would get them banished from Uncle too. Or maybe they were afraid of me and Sister, that they'd be tempted into sin by two strange girls.

Unlike the cousins, these boys in the woods were loud. They laughed and stomped. Even though they were still out of sight, hemlock branches swished as they moved. When the noise came close I held my breath, even knowing they'd never hear me over all their stomping.

"Seriously," the first boy said. "Where are we? I don't have even have a signal."

Sister touched her finger to her lips again and then walked toward the noise.

"Hello!" she called. "Are you lost?"



I had to cover my mouth to stop myself from screaming. What was she doing? She'd read the stories about the World just like I had. She knew the World's boys and men were rapists who would gladly drag a stranger into the woods and steal her virtue.

"Who's there?" one of the boys called back.

"Just a friendly camper," Sister said.

"Where are you?" asked the boy.

Sister looked back at me, but I was still too scared to move.

"I'll come find you," Sister said and ducked between yellow trees and vines.

All the voices quieted, so I couldn't tell what they were saying, just that Sister was leading them away from me.

After all three voices faded, I kept picking berries and waited for Sister to come back. But I kept picturing her face on one of those stories about women raped and murdered and then left in the forest. Not that the World would even know or care about one of us.

Probably I should have run straight to Mama and Daddy, but how would I admit my cowardice, that I let her walk off without me?

When my basket was full of blackberries, I picked up Sister's and filled it too. She still hadn't returned, so I made my way home, both baskets hanging from my neck while my hands supported them. I tried not to think about the murdered women from the World's papers or what Daddy and Mama would say, but the blackberries seemed to taunt me. They shifted as I walked, smearing red juices against the plastic.

They say what happened next was the boys' fault. And mine and Sister's for bringing them home. Daddy and Mama's fault too for raising us to be harlots who talked to strange boys in the woods.

What I remember is like a pile of snapshots. You've never heard of those, have you? Daddy had a snapshot box, something he saved from the World, and when he pointed that little box and pushed a tiny button, the box would release a piece of paper. At first the paper would look hazy and gray, but if you shook it for a few minutes, you'd get a picture of whatever the box was pointing at. Like a painting made by the tiniest brush.

That's what it's like when I remember the fire. One moment I was walking into our campsite. And then, from around the corner, I saw Mama and Daddy with Sister. Sister and two boys I'd never seen. Their clothes were funny - fabric that looked too smooth, like a plant had produced an orange blossom in the shape of a shirt. From a distance I couldn't see any seams. One boy had yellow hair, but the other had dark skin and black hair. There were dark-skinned people in the World - I knew from the papers Daddy brought back - but none in our camp or in Uncle's as far as I knew.

As I remember it, they were all motioning for me to join them. Daddy was grinning and showing something to the boy with dark skin, while Mama watched Sister and the other boy, her brow crinkled. Sister and the boy were watching each other.

Then, the billow of smoke coming from a tent in the distance. Daddy yelling something about the ammunition and running toward the smoke. Mama pointing at the trees, and everyone running toward me, just as I turned and ran toward the safest place I could think of: the creek.

Behind me a thousand gunshots seemed to go off at once.

The next thing I remember is being curled up at the edge of the creek, my hands over my ears, Sister crouched nearby while the yellow-haired boy held her.

I asked “Where’s Daddy? Where’s Mama?” but Sister shook a hand at me and pressed her face into the boy’s shirt, like he was someone she loved, not a stranger.

Don’t know how long we waited there. Long enough for the sky to turn black as sin. Eventually a group of boy cousins combed through the woods, calling our names. Telling us Uncle was willing to let us come live with him but that the outsiders weren’t welcome. Sister and the boy whispering their goodbyes, before we followed the boy cousins to our new home.

They say the World burned that day, that Daddy was caught up because he loved the World too much - what else would cause a man to run into the flames? They say Mama walked away from the fire but had to stop and look back, that she couldn’t tear her eyes away, so the Lord turned her into a salt lick. That Uncle’s cattle licked her all up.

They say me and Sister were wicked girls, that we did unspeakable things, that Sister’s baby nine months later was proof of all that. They say the baby looked too much like Daddy. But Uncle says the Lord will make it right, that out of muddy water the Lord can bring forth a fountain clean as crystal.

They say the campers tried to rape the Lord’s messengers, that Daddy even tried to appease them by promising they could take me and Sister instead. That the Lord’s messengers saved me and Sister from that fate, and then the Lord saved us from the fire, in spite of our stony hearts.

They won't tell you that the campers came back.

It was only a couple weeks after the fire, and I was still getting used to Uncle's way of doing things. Uncle was as mean then as he is now, and there were so many rules I was scared I'd get in trouble and not even know what I'd done. The girl cousins liked to follow us around and point out all the things we weren't supposed to do.

*Men eat first, then the women.*

*He who don't work don't eat.*

*No murmuring against the servant of the Lord.*

*So says the Lord.*

Me and Sister were out digging roots and picking crab apples, our first respite from the girl cousins. The only reason there was anything left to forage was because the fire hadn't reached Uncle's side of the woods. Nobody could tell us why except to say, "It was the hand of the Lord." The fire had either been put out or moved on, but the smoke hung low and lingered. So the foraging went slow for all the times we had to bend over and cough.

When the yellow-haired boy emerged from the trees, Sister's face was red, her voice a brittle scratch. But he looked at her like she was the first strawberry in spring.

When he opened his arms, Sister pranced to him like she didn't have a mind of her own no more. She was giggling and kissing him all over his face. You'd have thought Daddy and Mama were still alive, that's how happy she acted.

"Thought you were long gone," Sister said.

The boy whispered something in her ear.

Then Sister turned and gave me a pleading look, eyes big. "I'll be back, but don't let Uncle or any of the cousins know I left with him." She didn't wait for an answer, just linked her fingers through his and bounded off into the trees.

To understand this part, I need you to remember what we'd read about Lyla, everything me and Sister knew about the World. The danger Sister might have been in for all I knew, being raised the way I was.

I wondered if Uncle was right about the boys. What if the Lord had cursed Mama and Daddy because Sister talked with strangers? What if Mama and Daddy were dead because I let her go with them and didn't do a thing to stop her?

Uncle promised me he'd save her from the boy. He said Sister was a Lilith, but she could be made into an Eve. Told me I was a good girl for telling him, that the Lord had softened my heart after all.

One time Sister told me a story about a king who tried to marry his daughter. The king's wife was the most beautiful woman in the kingdom, but she was vain. Thought her beauty more glorious than the Lord. So when she took sick, she tricked the king into making a promise. After she was gone, he wouldn't marry till he found another woman just as pretty as her.

Well, it worked out alright for years. But they had a baby girl when the queen died. And once that baby girl was all grown up, she was the spitting image of the queen. So her daddy told her to put on her prettiest dress while he looked for a priest wicked enough to marry them.

The princess didn't know what to do. She had a real conundrum. Her daddy's word was the law of the land, so the Lord would smite her if she disobeyed. Then again, the Lord's law said no daughter should lay with her father. So the Lord would smite her if she married the king.

When I asked Sister what the princess did, Sister smiled and said, “She put on her prettiest dress and sharpened her knife.”

For a long time I wondered what that meant. Did the princess distract herself with chores so she didn’t have to worry about the choice before her? Or maybe she needed a knife so sharp it could cut anything in two, even a conundrum. Eventually I decided that the princess killed herself rather than face the decision.

But when I look back on Sister’s smile, I figure I got it all backwards. If God was gonna smite the princess no matter what she did, she might as well do something real wicked. So the princess murdered the king.

I’ll bet she got the priest too.

It wouldn’t have happened if Sister had just listened and done like she was told. That’s what Uncle said the next morning, when Sister was carrying on. She had a piece of cloth in her hand, and she kept crying into it, her words slamming together till they made no sense. Just sounds like the young’uns make when they’re learning to talk. Only word I could make out good was “Why?” Again and again, a whole string of “why” till you couldn’t tell where one started and the other stopped. Same as you can never tell if a duck is really saying “quack” or just “whack.”

“You think that boy was gonna save you?” Uncle said. His face was all red, and he leaned low over Sister like he was gonna whisper and pat her hair. Only he was yelling instead. “You think that boy was gonna pull you through the veil with his soft hands? You think he was gonna make you a queen and a priestess in the Lord’s kingdom?”

Sister's fingers dug into the dirt, her tears running over them until it all turned to mud. She muttered something about "Why" and "Love" and something else I couldn't make out. But Uncle reared back, his cheeks and forehead still red as clay.

Her hands clawed at Uncle's boots, but he just shook them loose and walked off.

When I came out from behind the tree, Sister was curled up on her side like a baby, that piece of cloth all scrunched up against her nose. Between the dirt and tears, it was mostly brown, but you could see it had been bright orange before.

"The boy cousins got a deer," I said. "We're gonna cook up the meat for supper." With the hem of my skirt, I wiped the mud off Sister's face and she stayed still, eyes staring right through me like I was see-through as a ministering angel straight from the Spirit World.

While she stared through me her stomach went up and down, so I knew she was breathing fine.

"It's not so bad here," I said. "Uncle's strict and all, but he's just trying to serve the Lord. Trying to get us all to Heaven." I didn't add, *With Mama and Daddy*. Uncle said the Lord had sent them somewhere else.

In the distance, one of the girl cousins called my name. Then Sister's.

"We need to go help," I said, and tugged at Sister's arm. Her body was heavy, like when one of the young'uns is throwing a tantrum and just lets their whole self go limp.

The voice yelled for us again, this time louder.

"Come on," I said. "They take chores real serious. You don't help, you don't eat."

Sister looked up at me. "Then I won't eat."

"Come on," I repeated, tugging harder. "One boy ain't worth starving yourself. We got lots of boys to choose from."

“Our cousins?” she said and looked at me the way I’d once seen her look at a bloated tick we pulled off a dead deer. “You think I’m gonna live like some backwards hick?”

Hick. I’d never heard that word before, but it felt ugly, like a slap on my face. “Fine. Starve yourself.”

When someone yelled my name a third time, I took off running. If I got there in time it’d be a rap on the knuckles, but I’d still get to eat. And I wasn’t about to miss the first venison in weeks just because Sister was moping.

I thought Uncle had just scared the boy away. That’s what you’ve got to understand. Thought Uncle was gentle like Daddy. Uncle was always telling us that people mattered more than things, that we’d left behind the wicked World so we could finally see each other the way the Lord meant us to. All that city finery got in the way, he said, same as he says today.

Here’s something else you need to understand. A few days before the fire, I heard Daddy and Uncle arguing. They were in the Far Away tent, where Daddy and Mama went at night sometimes, when they wanted to be one flesh. They weren’t going to do that crowded into the cabin with their daughters. The floor of the Far Away tent was lined with cushions, piled so high that me and Sister were little we used to sneak in there during the day, before we knew what it was for. Thought with all that luxury we’d know what it was like to be a princess.

I was walking home, when I heard Daddy’s voice from the tent, arguing with another man.

“You set up a tent for the whore of Babylon, did you?” the other man said. I was tempted to storm right up and tell whoever it was that nobody called my Mama a whore. But then he



added, "What does your wife think of all this? She was always a woman of the Lord. Wouldn't want you inviting in the Whore like this."

Was he calling Daddy an adulterer? I knelt down and picked up a handful of pine needles, crunching them in my fist.

"It's nothing but an air mattress," Daddy said. "Don't be all dramatic."

"No, it's nothing but temptation from the World," the other man said. "I lived there - I know how it gets you, Nephew."

"Really, Uncle?" Daddy said. "You think we haven't sacrificed enough for you?"

Knowing it was Uncle talking made me even madder. Uncle was talking about whores, when Daddy hadn't even taken a second wife. Daddy said Uncle wanted him to have sons and didn't think Mama was up to the task, thought he needed another woman. If that was Uncle's answer to everything, then what did he know about staying away from temptation?

"You already that far gone, Nephew? Forgot who I speak for?"

"There's no forgetting your crackpot visions."

Did Daddy have secret doubts? I held the broken pine needles close to my face and breathed in the smell.

"Nephew, you done pitched your tent toward the World," Uncle said. "The servant of the Lord is speaking to you tonight, and you won't even listen."

"I followed you out into the wilderness, didn't I?" Daddy said.

"The Lord will destroy the World, and only those who heed His servant's voice will survive."

"I believed you when my own daddy said you was crazy. I stayed out here after you cut me off and built that wall. But I am saying 'no' to you just once. This one time you go too far."

“Then I pray the Lord spares you from destruction,” Uncle said.

As the door to the tent unzipped, Uncle emerged, and I saw him for the first time. He stood a few inches taller than Daddy, and his shoulders were wider than I expected. He turned my way, and my stomach clenched, but the sun was in his eyes, and I was crouched real low in the trees, so I don’t think he saw me. Clearly Uncle didn’t trade with campers for razors like Daddy, because his gray beard came down to his chest. And there was a mean squint to his eyes, but maybe that was just the sun.

After the fire happened, I figured the Lord was punishing me for doubting his Servant. One more sin to add to the kindling.

Not long after the boy disappeared, Sister’s stomach swelled. She threw up at all times of the day. Uncle said she was a harlot but that the Lord would pluck the stones from her heart one at a time. An angel of the Lord had appeared to him and promised that Sister would have a boy, and the boy would be his to claim. He and Aunt would take the baby and raise it on the covenant path, a follower of the Lord.

Sister sulked and glared at Uncle when his back was turned. It didn’t matter that she refused to do chores or listen to Uncle when he read from the Bible. Soon as the girl cousins told him about the baby, Sister had the finest foods.

“Remember the king who tried to marry the princess?” she asked me one day. Her stomach was so big that any time I hugged her my fingers didn’t touch.

I looked up from my knitting. The sunset painted watery red on the sky, like drops of blood in a puddle. “Heard that one more times than I can count,” I said.

“It’s one Mama read to me, back when we lived in the World. It was in a book full of pictures, all colorful and pretty.” Sister’s hand trailed down her stomach. “But it had a happy ending.”

“Then it probably burned up with the rest of the World.”

She snorted. “You don’t really believe all that?”

“Daddy believed in Uncle,” I said.

“Well, Uncle sure didn’t believe in Daddy.”

I craned my neck in case any girl cousins lingered nearby. It seemed there was always at least one at the edge of my vision. Small and silent as a gnat.

I thought of the conversation in Daddy and Mama’s Far Away tent. Uncle hadn’t *wanted* anything bad to happen to Daddy. He’d prayed for the Lord to spare him, hadn’t he? Yet I’d never told Sister about what I’d overheard. Or how my sinful heart had made me mad at Uncle, when he’d only been trying to save us.

She held her belly and shifted into an awkward kneel until we faced each other. “There are two things you need to remember” she said. “One: Uncle will do anything for the Lord. Two: Uncle will do anything for our souls.”

It was the kind of thing Daddy might have said when he was alive, but Sister gave me a hard look, like she’d just handed me a wooden puzzle and dared me to solve it.

“And he’ll do anything for your baby,” I said.

Sister nodded. “Anything the Lord commands. Anything.”

For years I thought all Sister's tales about The World were bedtime stories, something out of her imagination. Then one day, a few years after the fire, the girl cousins and me went out scavenging for herbs and berries.

I saw a flash of yellow and thought it might be a fawn lily. By the time I reached it and figured out it was some other flower, one I didn't know, I was close enough to see a cabin, peeking through some trees a little further down.

The windows were dark, so I decided to check in case there was something in there to forage. The World might have burned, but there were stragglers who showed up in the woods. I never saw them, but it wasn't uncommon to find unopened food at abandoned campsites. Treats made from whole grains, food soft and sweet as cake with sticky fillings that tasted a little like baked fruit. My favorite was something Sister had called "candy bars." She said candy bars were the best thing the World had to offer, better even than the magical house Mama and Daddy had left back in the World.

Up close, I saw a light film of dirt on the windows. Inside the cabin there was furniture made from wood and fabric. Staying low, I crept around to the door. It was already open a little, like someone hadn't closed it properly behind them. I pushed it open.

Inside it smelled musty, which gave me even more reason to move fast. I opened and closed drawers and cabinet doors. Most were empty or filled with strange objects, like a smooth plastic contraption the length of my hand with plastic buttons. One had a little kit with thread and a few needles, so I slipped it into my pocket.

Some of the drawers had glass knobs, and a table in the front room was made of glass. Not the legs, just the table top. I figured maybe Mama's story about the girl with the glass shoe

wasn't make believe after all. Maybe that was what all the girls wore in the World before the Lord's fire burned it up. Maybe they'd all hobbled on cut up feet like the Little Mermaid.

The next room had wooden cabinets and a bigger table. There were also cabinets made of black plastic, and a metal sink built right into the counters. In the wooden cabinets, I found cans of peaches and soup, and a bag of rolls so light they must have been made of air. Cautiously, I opened the black cabinet. It was the middle of summer outside the cabinet but inside - it may as well have been winter. I leaned in and let the cold air wash over me.

The food was packaged in strange ways, unlike anything I'd ever seen a hiker leave behind. But I stuck them in my backpack with the cans. The bottom section of the cabinet wasn't quite as cold, more like a spring morning, but there were a few apples and carrots and a jug of what looked like milk. The jug was too big, so I left the milk but took the rest.

As I snuck back out of the cabin, I wondered if this made me as wicked as Mama and Daddy, always one foot on the Lord's side and one foot back in the World.

It wasn't long after the baby was born that Sister went missing. Uncle sent all the boys and men out to comb through the trees. They walked across all our land in a line, right up to the edge of the private property. Both Uncle's side and Daddy's burned up half. They searched the creek and stuck a long pole down into the well to feel around.

Already there were whispers about the baby. A healthy boy, the baby seemed to remind everyone of Daddy and Uncle. Something about his eyes and his wide forehead. Each time he scrunched his little face, I pictured a teeny version of Uncle shouting about the will of the Lord.

At first, I was sure the men would find Sister near the edge of the property, crawling along with a broken leg. Then I figured she was just past the property line. It didn't occur to me

she was gone for good. Even after Uncle called off the search parties, I knew she'd be back, that she wouldn't have willingly left me or her own baby.

I searched for myself, walking up and down the land North to South, then East to West. If the land was a loom, I wove a tight fabric. Sister wasn't in the creek. She wasn't hiding in the trees. She wasn't at the bottom of a well.

Fortunately a couple of the girl cousins were ready to wean their own young'uns, so the baby had food. Every few months one of his nursemaids would get pregnant and have to take a break, but you know how the girl cousins are always expecting. So there was always someone new to take over. Passed around from cousin to cousin, he didn't know one mother from the next. Maybe that's why he clung to me, even though I couldn't feed him. I was the only consistent mother, with no babies of my own to compete.

No matter what Uncle said about raising the baby like a son, Aunt didn't seem to agree. If someone handed the baby to her, she held him away from her body, even when his diaper didn't stink. She never wiped his spit up or cradled him when he screamed. A few times Uncle handed the baby to her, and she glared at Uncle's back as he walked away.

One day while the baby was napping I walked into the cabin and found Aunt standing over him holding a knitting needle, just staring at his little body. When she heard me, she looked up calmly and walked away.

Next day we found Aunt floating face down in one of the wells.

There are three things, really, that you need to remember:

One: Uncle will do anything for the Lord

Two: Uncle will do anything to save our souls

Three: Uncle don't know the Lord from the Devil

They say Uncle had another son before you were born, and that son had your name. They say that son is the only creature he's ever really loved. Used to carry him around in a sling when he was a baby, same as the women do. Uncle told everyone when you wait that long for a son, you'll do anything for him. You don't want to let him out of your sight.

The son learned to whittle and would give Uncle little presents. A teeny tiny family: Cousin, Uncle, and Aunt. Animals too. He whittled cows and snakes, moose and hawks. Uncle joked he needed an ark to hold them all, so Cousin whittled that too. Aunt doted on the son, knitted a little outfit from soft yarn she'd carried in from the World, and Uncle pretended not to know where it came from. Love can crack the hardest rock and make water pour out.

I never saw them together, but here's what I heard: a few years before Sister and me showed up, Uncle's other wife got jealous. She'd given Uncle eight girls you see, and he didn't love her the way he loved Aunt after just one baby. All because that baby was a boy. The other wife was only Uncle's second wife, the one he'd married after Aunt turned out to be barren. Now Uncle looked back and wondered if he'd ever needed that second wife in the first place. No good for anything but daughters.

The second wife saw what was happening and feared that if hard times struck, she and her eight girls would be cast out in the cold, murderous World. Left to survive on their own in the wild or return to the sinful cities that the Lord was sure to incinerate. But complaining for the

sake of her daughters did nothing to melt Uncle's heart. And she never thought to ask Mama or Daddy for help. Instead she started murmuring, asking Uncle who he loved more, his son or the Lord. Whether he was a man of God or an idol worshipper. What he would do if God asked him to give back the young'un he loved so dear.

It must have got to Uncle's pride, because he woke up Cousin early one morning and told him they were going for a hike. They needed to give the Lord a sacrifice. Cousin was confused alright. His sisters were in the tent next door, and they heard him asking where the animal was, the one for the sacrifice. Uncle just kept saying, "The Lord will provide," real sure, like that took care of it.

When Uncle came back, they say he wasn't smiling no more. Aunt ran up to him asking for her boy, and whatever Uncle said, she started screaming and slapping at him, and Uncle just looked at her all dazed.

Everybody's got a different story on what he said. But this is what one of the cousins swears she heard: "The angel promised to stop my hand. Said Isaac would never feel the knife."

You look real scared, so I know you understand what I'm telling you. I'm sorry you have to stare into the flames. The Lord don't always protect the righteous and smite the wicked. Sometimes He lets the wicked have their way.

Aunt wasn't your mama, no matter what Uncle says. Maybe Uncle was your daddy, or maybe it was Sister's boy in the woods. No real way to know.

What matters is that you're not the first boy that Uncle claimed as a son. After the sacrifice went wrong, everyone wondered how it was possible, why the Lord would promise Uncle a son in his and Aunt's old age and then steal him right back. Eventually Uncle told them



not to worry, that his son was coming back to him. The angel of the Lord had revealed it. Cousin was going to be reborn. His spirit was waiting for a new tabernacle of flesh. Uncle just needed a third wife to do it. Aunt was too old, and the second wife had a womb good for nothing but girls.

All the girl cousins were his own daughters and granddaughters, and no woman from the World would be worthy of carrying Uncle's son.

They say he chose Sister even before the fire, even before the field burned all our cattle to a crisp. They say the fire was sent from God, sure as if God set it himself, that it's the same to the Lord: his hand or Uncle's.

A punishment for Daddy's uncontrollable appetite. For refusing to give Sister to the servant of the Lord.

I can't tell you what happened to your real mama, but I can tell you what I hope.

I hope she's waiting for us in the World, that the fire didn't go as far as they say, and it's all still standing.

I hope this road leads to a city with magic houses like Sister told me about. Houses that take you to a different season, like a cold lake on a summer day. If we're real lucky, Uncle and all the men will be too busy putting out the fire I started to wonder where we got to. When they notice we're gone, they'll think we're holed up on the mountain, drinking from streams and eating roots while we wait for the smoke to clear.

And I hope that when we reach the end of the road, Sister will be waiting for us. She'll tell us she's been waiting seven long years but she always knew we'd find her. That she didn't need to leave a map because sisters are bound too tight for even Uncle to cut them apart.

You see that hill in the distance? We only gotta walk a little more, and she'll be there.

My lovely lilies, my precious peonies, you look at me with such sad eyes. Have I not given you everything you desired? Amusement to keep you safe by the fire, heroes and villains, love stories so sickly sweet they cloy in my mouth.

And yet you sneak glances at the ocean, so displeased that you count the moments till dawn. Fear not, my darlings, we shall simply find a more direct amusement. Perhaps you would enjoy a headless hunt.

No?

Ah, I see what distracts you. You wonder whatever has become of poor little Laura.

One last tale, and then I must leave you to the dawn

Grandmother, Grandmother

Weave a third tale

I'll sleep in the river

While snow turns to hail

### There Was an Old Woman

The blackberries are coming for me. Their vines twist through wood slats and climb rocks jagged as thorns. They squeeze between siding and pry loose the screen's plastic edge like a kidnapper outside a child's bedroom. If they catch me I will dance into their needles until my shirt slithers down my body in shreds, and the music will not cease its thrumming in my palms and the balls of my feet.

When you are caught in the thorns there are only two choices: sleep on a bed of knives or thrash against the blade, and I will not be still, will not hush or wrap an iron band around my heart to slow its beating.

The Old Woman left me her house, her stack of bricks and plaster. And the brambles circle. They open to let me through the gate, snap shut behind me, thorns interlocking like the teeth of a zipper. Her brother says I'm lucky he doesn't fight the will in court, that he was inches from seeking right of attorney and legal guardianship before she passed.

"You got that house by robbery," he said this morning on the phone. "You're a scam artist, but she loved you like a daughter. So what am I supposed to do? Ignore my sister's wishes like she never lived or mattered?" So he leaves me to the vines.

Whether I run or stay, they will wrap around my throat and flex like the muscles on a snake.

The time for breathing has passed.

Now is the slow time when the ocean recedes one lap at a time, too tired to reach. Slumberous, it falls back one millimeter with each arch and collapse. The beach spreads before

me in a white line, seaweed scattered in dark clumps like the dirty socks the traveler can't quite bother to pack at the end of a trip.

Yesterday Charlie told me to be open for once, to tell him what I'm thinking, what I'm feeling, where he's supposed to fit in the plans I can't be bothered to make. If the Old Woman were here she would ask what I wanted and it would start to make sense, like a tide pool a few minutes after a footstep, when the sand has almost settled. If the Old Woman were.

I've been standing in this tide pool long enough that the water is clear. The better to see the crabs that move past my feet, heavy shadows. I reach for one, its surface speckled green and brown. No more than an inch wide. When I turn it in my hands, I find the delicate underbelly with its center of leg joints like spokes in a wheel. I hold him between thumb and forefinger so he cannot move, though the legs spindle and turn.

When I place the crab back in the tidepool, he glides through water and hides in the shadow of a rock.

Charlie told me he wouldn't wait any longer, that a year was more than enough to know something so basic, an inescapable fact. And when he said that his face crinkled like a dried seed. Deprived of water, a seed shrivels into itself to hide from rot. I have no water for him, no rich soil.

That's a problem with seeing the end from the beginning. I see my fall over the wheel. I see the men who writhe in carnivorous vine, lured by the waiting bait inside the castle. And all who are with me will fall, thighs will buckle, the head will suddenly feel heavy as a stone. Eyes will spin down like steel marbles and tug the lids into place.

Charlie wouldn't have said those things if he'd known the Old Woman was in the ground, dropped like a pebble among seeds. Brooke says I should tell him, that he'll find out soon

anyway and the longer I wait the more he'll feel like the insensitive prick he tries not to be. Her words, of course. But I'm tired of being held too gently. I know the violence of softness.

And it's impossible to explain the problem, without mentioning the Old Woman. The wrong words are an incantation, and what will they bring forth?

When I return to the house, a blackberry vine is wrapped around the gate, and I have to twist it back to open the latch. The Old Woman would tell me to prune them and clear a path, but they will only grow faster tomorrow. No woman escapes the thorns. Already a hint of red lurks below the kitchen window, and tomorrow the berries' bruised faces will stare at me. So I will prepare the house, quickly now, before it is entombed in green and maroon.

In the kitchen I have already bared the white and black tile. Scrubbed the walls and ceilings throughout the first floor. There's a fine balance to scrubbing. Too much water over the wallpaper, and its edges fray. Its yellow flowers fade into pastel, the color of sidewalk chalk. But I need to clean this house like brown glass in the sea. It stands as raw as the jagged rocks that line the shore with their precarious shapes, openings jammed with driftwood and net-tangled debris.

Today I will empty the cupboards and lift back the film of old stains. When the blackberries creep inside they will fill this hollow cube, bleed sweet juices into its corners.

In the pantry, a decades-old can of Bakewell Cream hides behind jars of lentils and parsley. The can is the color of a grimy penny, more dust than metal, with a lid that falls into itself like an inverted top hat. I try to pry the lid loose, but years of humidity have rusted it shut. I add the can to the trash and wipe the shelf clean.

When I finish with the cupboards, I move on to the bathroom. Remove cleaning supplies from below the sink, recycle the empty containers that slipped past the Old Woman's notice. There's a large blue stain in the tub. It was there when I first met the Old Woman and she invited me to live with her, but I never asked about the stain. Did she dye her hair blue?

I pull the stopper on the faucet and pour bleach into the tub.

Even when it seems silent, the ocean roars. Gulls will rip bread from your hand and thrash muscular wings against your throat. But in this house only quiet will reign, and tomorrow can wait a century. I will have an ocean of time, and the vines will cover me in small white petals. Berries will ripen and shrivel into dry stalks. And the waves will approach the gate in a whisper, the thin creeping of ocean on land.

The green-headed fly will freeze into the air, still as an insect in the clearest ice cube. Even the bee will sleep, wings folded over wet body. Plants that swallow men have no need for bees.

While the bleach soaks the stain, I walk outside. The blackberry bushes on either side of the garden have sent shoots across the cobblestone path. They clasp each other like new lovers.

My phone makes a sound in my pocket. Charlie. He wants to meet on the beach again, doesn't understand that I have no words to share, that I am hollow as a dead tree.

I walk down to the beach anyway and inhale the smell, the mixture of salt and decay.

Charlie is sitting on a rock, eyes on the ocean. The sandy area of the beach is small, no wider than a house. It's shared between everyone who lives on this street, though none of them are out here tonight.

When he sees me, Charlie jumps down and pads barefoot through the loose sand, his legs clumsy, sinking with each step. I slip off my sandals and leave them at the edge of the grass. Near the water, several seagulls pick at something. Probably the remnants of a child's snack.

Partway across the sand, Charlie motions for me to follow him and moves closer to the water. Charlie never closes the distance between us, always waits for me to meet him. It was accidental at first. Brooke says that's just how he is, slow movements. She says he's patient bordering on lazy. "But I guess that makes him perfect for someone as skittish as you," she said once.

Charlie sits and pats the sand next to him.

Tonight I don't want to be handled like a frightened horse, but my movements are jagged as I walk to him.

"I haven't found any new words," I say. "Not since yesterday."

His hand traces a pattern in the sand. "The summer is ending soon."

It's a question, really. A question about what will happen when he moves to start his new job teaching children how to paint. Charlie wants me to be decisive, to climb a tree or take a kayak onto a dark lake, to be the hero of my own story, the person he met.

"I'm not a heroine," I say. "I thought I could hold onto Sam, that I could hold tight no matter what shape he took, but I was never a Judith. I was always the fairy, the witch who cast the spell."

Charlie runs his palm across the sand, smoothing over his drawing. "How do you think I feel," he says, "when you talk about this ghost?" He is probably angry, and that is the point. He always says I talk about Sam like he's some kind of sun god. "You think I don't know that in your mind, this story you're telling yourself, he's supposed to be my opposite?"



I sit beside him on the wet sand, newly bared and smooth, a dark surface with a glimmering sheen. It hasn't been broken yet by the worm's thin ripples or the sand crab's pockmark breaths.

"You'll grow old if you wait," I tell him. Like the old king who remembers the tales of a hidden palace in the vines and sends his grandson to wake the dream of his own boyhood. "Don't you know the vines are carnivorous?" I say. "The sleeper is only the bait."

"Can you just stop it?" he says. He clenches a fistfull of sand and then smooths it again. "Just for a minute. Just drop the whole fairytale obsession for one God damned second."

A centimeter down, wet sand turns deep and gray and lovely. I dig my fingers into that sand and let the granules rasp the tender skin. The coarse layer of old skin cells has already been chafed away by days scrubbing the Old Woman's house.

"You are not some modern day Sleeping Beauty," he says, "and I'm not going to keep tip-toeing around while you pretend you're stuck in a storybook."

In the distance, waves crash. If I stare at the waves and then close my eyes, I know what it's like to fly. Flying is easy. It's only seeing the world from the above. The shape of the water below, the green hues in each wave, the hints of brown. The colors shift below me as each wave crests then smooths.

"Look, I'm sorry," Charlie says. He reaches toward me with his good hand, and I scuttle back fast, my breaths hard. I don't know if it pulls me back to the present or frees me from it when this happens, my body at once shaking and numb.

"I can't even touch you now?" he says.

When Charlie stands he leaves footprints, but waves crash in, then out, and soon the shore lies before me again, clean as a bone. Inhale. Release – release – release.

Charlie is searching for me. That's what he says later, as he sits beside me again on the sand. I'm not sure how much later. Perhaps only a second passed after he walked away, or perhaps it has been days. Perhaps the tide rose above my head each night and fell back each morning.

I run my fingers along a mussel shell. It's a beautiful shell – scalloped and scuffed so that little hints of pearl gray peak from beneath the dark veneer. And on the inside, every color of the rainbow, swirled together. Even the sand wedged inside is lovely and soft as I push it loose with my fingertip.

“Do *you* even know where you are?” Charlie asks. It's a strange question, even by my standards, which I will admit are unusual.

I push my feet into the sand until they create a ridge. We're sitting in that liminal space where the sand is just damp enough to form solid ground, in between the dry sand that blows away at the slightest breath and the sand so wet your footprints fill with water.

“The Old Woman is dead,” I say. “She has been for five days.”

He makes a quick movement with his arm, then stops so that his stub is just millimeters from my knee. His hand would be on my knee, if only his hand were still alive. A month ago I would have closed my eyes and imagined the sensation of ghost skin moving over living flesh, visualized each wrinkle of skin across nonexistent knuckles.

Instead I move my leg, just an inch away. It's a barrier between me and the stub, not even the hand that would have been there if only something had gone differently in Charlie's life when he was twelve. The hand isn't there, and it can't touch me, so what do I care?

“And you didn't tell me?” Charlie says.

I push the rest of my weight onto my feet, hands braced on my thighs so that I stand without touching the ground. The ocean crouches before me like a living creature. It inhales with each swell of wave and exhales with the crash of water bursting on smooth black rocks. If I were light enough I could ride across those waves without ever touching the seabed. Just up and down, forward and back, like a seed floating through tree branches.

“Laidea,” Charlie says. “Can you tell me what you’re thinking?” In my peripheral vision, he is on his knees, his hand cupped in a pleading gesture.

The wind whips sand against my cheeks. When I close my eyes, I am there, just a drop at the top of the ocean, gliding across the surface. Below me tentacles weave dark patterns, and sunlight ricochets in a blinding glare. Rumors travel between me and each sister drop like heat along a chain in the sun. I hear whispers of animals that bloom like flowers when prey approaches. Plants that tangle unsuspecting minnows in their grip. Wind whistles across me. I fall forward and down, then backward and up to the surface before falling and rising again. A circle of motion.

Miles below, slow shadows slide forward. A whale drinks and expels gallons of water in one gulp. In the distance razor jaws shred a fish, and I continue in my circular rhythm. Forward, down, backward, and up, an unconcerned particle at the tip of a violent tapestry.

Something cold drips on my right foot.

I open my eyes, and Charlie squats in front of me. A handful of mud hovers in his fist. He dribbles the mud in a line down the center of my foot, then back up, until the foot is covered in thin lines of sand. Then he covers the left foot.

“Have you ever made sand castles this way?” he asks. He has dug a hole several inches deep, deep enough to fill with water. He scoops another handful from the hole and holds it on the sand in front of him, where a round base emerges.

I sit and dip my hand into the mud.

Charlie walks back to the Old Woman’s house with me but stops at the gate. I don’t invite him inside, so he only touches my arm before leaving.

Inside, I check the stain in the tub. The bleach has faded it, but the tub is still pastel blue. I pour bleach into an inch of water and leave it overnight.

In the morning, the blue has only faded a little, so I add more bleach to the water.

While the bleach sits, I work on the Old Woman’s room.

This room is the one place I haven’t gone in the past week. It smells like talcum powder and the Old Woman’s favorite incense. The bed is made, the way she left it the day she went to the hospital, a yellow quilt folded neatly at the foot.

It’s too late to begin cleaning this room, so I crawl beneath the covers and breathe in the smell of her pillow.

I wake up just before dawn and sit up. In the dim light, a woman stares back at me from the mirror across the room. The woman has my hair, my eyes. She is me - I know that. But there is something in the way she looks at me that I’ve never seen in the mirror before.

“Laura?” I say.

The woman nods.

We approach the mirror in perfect symmetry. I turn my head, and she does the same. She has deep shadows under her eyes, so deep the skin seems bruised. We both touch the area under our eyes.

Our hands reach toward the mirror. The glass is cold against my fingertips, and when my palm lies flat, the world shudders around me.

Laura stares back.

I lift a jade figurine from the Old Woman's dresser and smash it against the mirror.

Surely she can escape through one of the cracks.

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