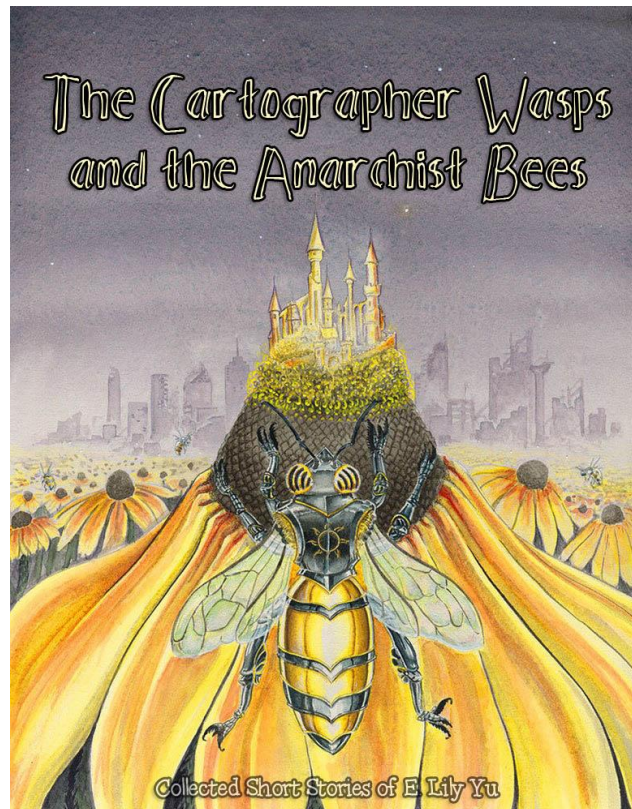


# The Cartographer Wasps & The Anarchist Bees

Collected Short Stories of E. Lily Yu



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# The Transfiguration of María Luisa Ortega

The first time María Luisa Ortega cursed, after stabbing herself with a pair of steel tweezers, she turned into a sea urchin. Two weeks passed before a peripatetic priest found her lying in the sand and uncursed her. It was a frequent occurrence, he explained, and for this reason he always carried a squirt bottle of holy water in his bag, to bless the poor souls he found in the shapes of dolphins, fish, lobsters, or, in less fortunate cases, mollusks. “You were there only two weeks,” he said as she wrung water from her clothes. “I once found a fisherman turned into a mussel for six months, during which time his wife presumed him drowned and married another. It was only by the grace of Christ that no murder was done, for when he found them together in bed he swore the most horrible oath that had ever been heard in that town and in that instant became a starfish. His wife keeps him in a bowl of water with their wedding ring and kisses him every morning. I thought this for the best, because there is no sin in being married to both a man and a starfish. Our Lord has been gracious to you.”

“I have lost my tweezers,” she sighed, “as well as the specimens I was collecting for the university. They will think I have walked away from my job.”

“But are you not now more valuable to them than any heap of kelp could be? You know exactly how *Arbacia punctulata* masticates its crumbs of algae and compounds its poisons and ambulates with dreadful slowness across the tidal pool. You could write reams of papers on the details that you researched so closely these last two weeks, and perhaps they will give you a lectureship. But you must be careful not to swear.”

He smiled at her, a beautiful strong smile like the sun on the sea, and because she could not bear that smile she looked at his straw sandals and his leather bag, which was glassy and soft with use.

And María Luisa Ortega said, “No, I will not go back to the laboratory and the students dissecting their oysters, not even for a professorship. I will take holy orders, and then I shall wander the sands and collect lost souls, even as you do.”

“It is a hard and lonely life I lead,” the priest said. “I live on periwinkles and sleep on the sand, and I speak to no one but the birds and those I recover to human form.”

“I am prepared for such a life, Father,” she said.

“Then take my bag and my sandals,” he said, “and may God walk with you always.”

And smiling a beatific smile, he uttered a profanity so terrible that the seagulls dropped out of the sky.

Even as a sea lion he was handsome, with skin like silk and caramel and sweet black eyes. María Luisa kissed him on one whiskered cheek, because that was now permitted, and watched him swim into the sea, waves breaking over his golden head, until she saw him no more. Then she put on his sandals and slung his bag over her shoulder and set off across the sand.

# The Cartographer Wasps and the Anarchist Bees

For longer than anyone could remember, the village of Yiwei had worn, in its orchards and under its eaves, clay-colored globes of paper that hissed and fizzed with wasps. The villagers maintained an uneasy peace with their neighbors for many years, exercising inimitable tact and circumspection. But it all ended the day a boy, digging in the riverbed, found a stone whose balance and weight pleased him. With this, he thought, he could hit a sparrow in flight. There were no sparrows to be seen, but a paper ball hung low and inviting nearby. He considered it for a moment, head cocked, then aimed and threw.

Much later, after he had been plastered and soothed, his mother scalded the fallen nest until the wasps seething in the paper were dead. In this way it was discovered that the wasp nests of Yiwei, dipped in hot water, unfurled into beautifully accurate maps of provinces near and far, inked in vegetable pigments and labeled in careful Mandarin that could be distinguished beneath a microscope.

The villagers' subsequent incursions with bee veils and kettles of boiling water soon diminished the prosperous population to a handful. Commanded by a single stubborn foundress, the survivors folded a new nest in the shape of a paper boat, provisioned it with fallen apricots and squash blossoms, and launched themselves onto the river. Browsing cows and children fled the riverbanks as they drifted downstream, piping sea chanteys.

At last, forty miles south from where they had begun, their craft snagged on an upthrust stick and sank. Only one drowned in the evacuation, weighed down with the remains of an apricot. They reconvened upon a stump and looked about themselves.

"It's a good place to land," the foundress said in her sweet soprano, examining the first rough maps that the scouts brought back. There were plenty of caterpillars, oaks for ink galls, fruiting brambles, and no signs of other wasps. A colony of bees had hived in a split oak two miles away. "Once we are established we will, of course, send a delegation to collect tribute.

"We will not make the same mistakes as before. Ours is a race of explorers and scientists, cartographers and philosophers, and to rest and grow slothful is to die. Once we are established here, we will expand."

It took two weeks to complete the nurseries with their paper mobiles, and then another month to reconstruct the Great Library and fill the pigeonholes with what the oldest cartographers could remember of their lost maps. Their comings and goings did

not go unnoticed. An ambassador from the beehive arrived with an ultimatum and was promptly executed; her wings were made into stained-glass windows for the council chamber, and her stinger was returned to the hive in a paper envelope. The second ambassador came with altered attitude and a proposal to divide the bees' kingdom evenly between the two governments, retaining pollen and water rights for the bees — “as an acknowledgment of the preexisting claims of a free people to the natural resources of a common territory,” she hummed.

The wasps of the council were gracious and only divested the envoy of her sting. She survived just long enough to deliver her account to the hive.

The third ambassador arrived with a ball of wax on the tip of her stinger and was better received.

“You understand, we are not refugees applying for recognition of a token territorial sovereignty,” the foundress said, as attendants served them nectars in paper horns, “nor are we negotiating with you as equal states. Those were the assumptions of your late predecessors. They were mistaken.”

“I trust I will do better,” the diplomat said stiffly. She was older than the others, and the hairs of her thorax were sparse and faded.

“I do hope so.”

“Unlike them, I have complete authority to speak for the hive. You have propositions for us; that is clear enough. We are prepared to listen.”

“Oh, good.” The foundress drained her horn and took another. “Yours is an old and highly cultured society, despite the indolence of your ruler, which we understand to be a racial rather than personal proclivity. You have laws, and traditional dances, and mathematicians, and principles, which of course we do respect.”

“Your terms, please.”

She smiled. “Since there is a local population of tussah moths, which we prefer for incubation, there is no need for anything so unrepublican as slavery. If you refrain from insurrection, you may keep your self-rule. But we will take a fifth of your stores in an ordinary year, and a tenth in drought years, and one of every hundred larvae.”

“To eat?” Her antennae trembled with revulsion.

“Only if food is scarce. No, they will be raised among us and learn our ways and our arts, and then they will serve as officials and bureaucrats among you. It will be to your advantage, you see.”

The diplomat paused for a moment, looking at nothing at all. Finally she said, “A tenth, in a good year — ”

“Our terms,” the foundress said, “are not negotiable.”

The guards shifted among themselves, clinking the plates of their armor and shifting the gleaming points of their stings.

“I don't have a choice, do I?”

“The choice is enslavement or cooperation,” the foundress said. “For your hive, I mean. You might choose something else, certainly, but they have tens of thousands to replace you with.”

The diplomat bent her head. "I am old," she said. "I have served the hive all my life, in every fashion. My loyalty is to my hive and I will do what is best for it."

"I am so very glad."

"I ask you — I beg you — to wait three or four days to impose your terms. I will be dead by then, and will not see my sisters become a servile people."

The foundress clicked her claws together. "Is the delaying of business a custom of yours? We have no such practice. You will have the honor of watching us elevate your sisters to moral and technological heights you could never imagine."

The diplomat shivered.

"Go back to your queen, my dear. Tell them the good news."

It was a crisis for the constitutional monarchy. A riot broke out in District 6, destroying the royal waxworks and toppling the mouse-bone monuments before it was brutally suppressed. The queen had to be calmed with large doses of jelly after she burst into tears on her ministers' shoulders.

"Your Majesty," said one, "it's not a matter for your concern. Be at peace."

"These are my children," she said, sniffing. "You would feel for them too, were you a mother."

"Thankfully, I am not," the minister said briskly, "so to business."

"War is out of the question," another said.

"Their forces are vastly superior."

"We outnumber them three hundred to one!"

"They are experienced fighters. Sixty of us would die for each of theirs. We might drive them away, but it would cost us most of the hive and possibly our queen — "

The queen began weeping noisily again and had to be cleaned and comforted.

"Have we any alternatives?"

There was a small silence.

"Very well, then."

The terms of the relationship were copied out, at the wasps' direction, on small paper plaques embedded in propolis and wax around the hive. As paper and ink were new substances to the bees, they jostled and touched and tasted the bills until the paper fell to pieces. The wasps sent to oversee the installation did not take this kindly. Several civilians died before it was established that the bees could not read the Yiwei dialect.

Thereafter the hive's chemists were charged with compounding pheromones complex enough to encode the terms of the treaty. These were applied to the papers, so that both species could inspect them and comprehend the relationship between the two states.

Whereas the hive before the wasp infestation had been busy but content, the bees now lived in desperation. The natural terms of their lives were cut short by the need to gather enough honey for both the hive and the wasp nest. As they traveled farther and farther afield in search of nectar, they stopped singing. They danced their findings



grimly, without joy. The queen herself grew gaunt and thin from breeding replacements, and certain ministers who understood such matters began feeding royal jelly to the strongest larvae.

Meanwhile, the wasps grew sleek and strong. Cadres of scholars, cartographers, botanists, and soldiers were dispatched on the river in small floating nests caulked with beeswax and loaded with rations of honeycomb to chart the unknown lands to the south. Those who returned bore beautiful maps with towns and farms and alien populations of wasps carefully noted in blue and purple ink, and these, once studied by the foundress and her generals, were carefully filed away in the depths of the Great Library for their southern advance in the new year.

The bees adopted by the wasps were first trained to clerical tasks, but once it was determined that they could be taught to read and write, they were assigned to some of the reconnaissance missions. The brightest students, gifted at trigonometry and angles, were educated beside the cartographers themselves and proved valuable assistants. They learned not to see the thick green caterpillars led on silver chains, or the dead bees fed to the wasp brood. It was easier that way.

When the old queen died, they did not mourn.

By the sheerest of accidents, one of the bees trained as a cartographer's assistant was an anarchist. It might have been the stresses on the hive, or it might have been luck; wherever it came from, the mutation was viable. She tucked a number of her own eggs in beeswax and wasp paper among the pigeonholes of the library and fed the larvae their milk and bread in secret. To her sons in their capped silk cradles — and they were all sons — she whispered the precepts she had developed while calculating flight paths and azimuths, that there should be no queen and no state, and that, as in the wasp nest, the males should labor and profit equally with the females. In their sleep and slow transformation they heard her teachings and instructions, and when they chewed their way out of their cells and out of the wasp nest, they made their way to the hive.

The damage to the nest was discovered, of course, but by then the anarchist was dead of old age. She had done impeccable work, her tutor sighed, looking over the filigree of her inscriptions, but the brilliant were subject to mental aberrations, were they not? He buried beneath grumblings and labors his fondness for her, which had become a grief to him and a political liability, and he never again took on any student from the hive who showed a glint of talent.

Though they had the bitter smell of the wasp nest in their hair, the anarchist's twenty sons were permitted to wander freely through the hive, as it was assumed that they were either spies or on official business. When the new queen emerged from her chamber, they joined unnoticed the other drones in the nuptial flight. Two succeeded in mating with her. Those who failed and survived spoke afterward in hushed tones of what had been done for the sake of the ideal. Before they died they took propolis

and oak-apple ink and inscribed upon the lintels of the hive, in a shorthand they had developed, the story of the first anarchist and her twenty sons.

Anarchism being a heritable trait in bees, a number of the daughters of the new queen found themselves questioning the purpose of the monarchy. Two were taken by the wasps and taught to read and write. On one of their visits to the hive they spotted the history of their forefathers, and, being excellent scholars, soon figured out the translation.

They found their sisters in the hive who were unquiet in soul and whispered to them the strange knowledge they had learned among the wasps: astronomy, military strategy, the state of the world beyond the farthest flights of the bees. Hitherto educated as dancers and architects, nurses and foragers, the bees were full of a new wonder, stranger even than the first day they flew from the hive and felt the sun on their backs.

“Govern us,” they said to the two wasp-taught anarchists, but they refused.

“A perfect society needs no rulers,” they said. “Knowledge and authority ought to be held in common. In order to imagine a new existence, we must free ourselves from the structures of both our failed government and the unjustifiable hegemony of the wasp nests. Hear what you can hear and learn what you can learn while we remain among them. But be ready.”

It was the first summer in Yiwei without the immemorial hum of the cartographer wasps. In the orchards, though their skins split with sweetness, fallen fruit lay unmolested, and children played barefoot with impunity. One of the villagers’ daughters, in her third year at an agricultural college, came home in the back of a pickup truck at the end of July. She thumped her single suitcase against the gate before opening it, to scatter the chickens, then raised the latch and swung the iron aside, and was immediately wrapped in a flying hug.

Once she disentangled herself from brother and parents and liberally distributed kisses, she listened to the news she’d missed: how the cows were dying from drinking stonecutters’ dust in the streams; how grain prices were falling everywhere, despite the drought; and how her brother, little fool that he was, had torn down a wasp nest and received a faceful of red and white lumps for it. One of the most detailed wasp’s maps had reached the capital, she was told, and a bureaucrat had arrived in a sleek black car. But because the wasps were all dead, he could report little more than a prank, a freak, or a miracle. There were no further inquiries.

Her brother produced for her inspection the brittle, boiled bodies of several wasps in a glass jar, along with one of the smaller maps. She tickled him until he surrendered his trophies, promised him a basket of peaches in return, and let herself be fed to tautness. Then, to her family’s dismay, she wrote an urgent letter to the Academy of Sciences and packed a satchel with clothes and cash. If she could find one more nest of wasps, she said, it would make their fortune and her name. But it had to be done quickly.

In the morning, before the cockerels woke and while the sky was still purple, she hopped onto her old bicycle and rode down the dusty path.

Bees do not fly at night or lie to each other, but the anarchists had learned both from the wasps. On a warm, clear evening they left the hive at last, flying west in a small tight cloud. Around them swelled the voices of summer insects, strange and disquieting. Several miles west of the old hive and the wasp nest, in a lightning-scarred elm, the anarchists had built up a small stock of stolen honey sealed in wax and paper. They rested there for the night, in cells of clean white wax, and in the morning they arose to the building of their city.

The first business of the new colony was the laying of eggs, which a number of workers set to, and provisions for winter. One egg from the old queen, brought from the hive in an anarchist's jaws, was hatched and raised as a new mother. Uncrowned and unconcerned, she too laid mortar and wax, chewed wood to make paper, and fanned the storerooms with her wings.

The anarchists labored secretly but rapidly, drones alongside workers, because the copper taste of autumn was in the air. None had seen a winter before, but the memory of the species is subtle and long, and in their hearts, despite the summer sun, they felt an imminent darkness.

The flowers were fading in the fields. Every day the anarchists added to their coffers of warm gold and built their white walls higher. Every day the air grew a little crisper, the grass a little drier. They sang as they worked, sometimes ballads from the old hive, sometimes anthems of their own devising, and for a time they were happy. Too soon, the leaves turned flame colors and blew from the trees, and then there were no more flowers. The anarchists pressed down the lid on the last vat of honey and wondered what was coming.

Four miles away, at the first touch of cold, the wasps licked shut their paper doors and slept in a tight knot around the foundress. In both beehives, the bees huddled together, awake and watchful, warming themselves with the thrumming of their wings. The anarchists murmured comfort to each other.

"There will be more, after us. It will breed out again."

"We are only the beginning."

"There will be more."

Snow fell silently outside.

The snow was ankle-deep and the river iced over when the girl from Yiwei reached up into the empty branches of an oak tree and plucked down the paper castle of a nest. The wasps within, drowsy with cold, murmured but did not stir. In their barracks the soldiers dreamed of the unexplored south and battles in strange cities, among strange peoples, and scouts dreamed of the corpses of starved and frozen deer. The cartographers dreamed of the changes that winter would work on the landscape, the

diverted creeks and dead trees they would have to note down. They did not feel the burlap bag that settled around them, nor the crunch of tires on the frozen road.

She had spent weeks tramping through the countryside, questioning beekeepers and villagers' children, peering up into trees and into hives, before she found the last wasps from Yiwei. Then she had had to wait for winter and the anesthetizing cold. But now, back in the warmth of her own room, she broke open the soft pages of the nest and pushed aside the heaps of glistening wasps until she found the foundress herself, stumbling on uncertain legs.

When it thawed, she would breed new foundresses among the village's apricot trees. The letters she received indicated a great demand for them in the capital, particularly from army generals and the captains of scientific explorations. In years to come, the village of Yiwei would be known for its delicately inscribed maps, the legends almost too small to see, and not for its barley and oats, its velvet apricots and glassy pears.

In the spring, the old beehive awoke to find the wasps gone, like a nightmare that evaporates by day. It was difficult to believe, but when not the slightest scrap of wasp paper could be found, the whole hive sang with delight. Even the queen, who had been coached from the pupa on the details of her client state and the conditions by which she ruled, and who had felt, perhaps, more sympathy for the wasps than she should have, cleared her throat and trilled once or twice. If she did not sing so loudly or so joyously as the rest, only a few noticed, and the winter had been a hard one, anyhow.

The maps had vanished with the wasps. No more would be made. Those who had studied among the wasps began to draft memoranda and the first independent decrees of queen and council. To defend against future invasions, it was decided that a detachment of bees would fly the borders of their land and carry home reports of what they found.

It was on one of these patrols that a small hive was discovered in the fork of an elm tree. Bees lay dead and brittle around it, no identifiable queen among them. Not a trace of honey remained in the storehouse; the dark wax of its walls had been gnawed to rags. Even the brood cells had been scraped clean. But in the last intact hexagons they found, curled and capped in wax, scrawled on page after page, words of revolution. They read in silence.

Then —

“Write,” one said to the other, and she did.

# The Lamp at the Turning

For ten years the streetlamp on the corner of Cooyong and Boolee kept vigil with the other lamps along the road. They were surrogate moons for an age when the moon itself was too distant and dim to guide travelers in the night, and they performed their duties faithfully and with pride in their high purpose. With the rest of its battalion, the streetlamp opened its one eye when night fell and shut it in the gray hours of morning. When it rained and water pooled in the gutter it could sometimes see itself, swan-necked and orange and not, it thought, unlovely.

Besides the quiet presence of the other lamps, it had for company a sea gull who would perch on its head and gossip about his chicks and in-laws and the rubbish heaps he had visited. Sometimes a migrant with brilliant feathers would bring news from far-off countries. There was very little the streetlamp wanted that it did not have.

One morning in autumn, as the leaves were beginning to crisp and curl, the streetlamp saw a young man in a red jacket walking along Boolee. It knew the people who passed it every day juggling cell phones and briefcases, dragging groceries, jogging, and it had seen him often before, but this time it noticed the sunlight flashing off the facets of his watch and glasses and the electric currents that oscillated through and around him, sinoatrial node to atrioventricular node, nerve to nerve, silver oxide battery to shivering grain of quartz. It pondered his fluttering damp hair and fluted ears and how he held himself with the careful gravity of the young pretending to be old. After he vanished from sight the streetlamp found itself hoping he had forgotten a book on the kitchen table or left the stove on, so he would turn back and it could watch him a few minutes longer.

In the park across the street the elms and oaks were browning at their tips; magpies conferred and conspired in the grass. Now and then a car or bicycle chortled by, ripping the air with its wheels. None of these things interested the streetlamp any more. It was impatient for the evening and the migration of office workers and clerks homeward, the young man among them.

It lived now for the moment early in the morning when he hurried up Boolee, his shirt neat, his hair combed to velvet, and for the moment in the afternoon or evening when his shadow preceded him down Cooyong. The night and day seemed miserably long, the other streetlamps dull and unfeeling. Even the conversation of the gull, when he dropped by, became tiresome.

For a month the streetlamp marked its mornings and evenings by his footsteps. It wanted him to meet its orange eye and understand that it loved him with every wire and soldered synapse of its being. Instead of snapping to attention with the rest of the

lamps, it waited until it saw him before it flickered on. Though he worked long hours in the office and came home at irregular times, the streetlamp always watched for him. When he passed he would glance at it with curiosity but without slowing his step.

Finally, one night when he had stayed at the office until seven, he paused beneath the streetlamp, which had lit up as soon as it saw him. He put his hand on its metal post and said, "You wait for me every day, don't you?"

The streetlamp thought it would short out for happiness. It watched him go with brightness in its heart, and long after the heat of his hand had dissipated it remembered its shape and pressure.

He didn't stop again after that, but when he passed by he nodded at it as though to say hello, and sometimes he would smile. Sometimes the streetlamp winked at him. There were mutters of disapproval along the street, and even the sea gull said it was a bad business, but nothing could perturb the streetlamp's profound joy.

One evening the young man was not alone. A woman with hair braided to her waist walked beside him, and she looked at him the way the streetlamp looked at him, as if she wished a spark would jump between them. The streetlamp felt a black, sputtering anger in its circuits.

They stopped on the corner under the streetlamp.

"This light always goes on when I walk by," he said. "See?"

She tilted her head to meet the streetlamp's gaze. On the surface of her pupils it saw two points of orange light, and below that, secret and sad, a loneliness like its own.

"It must be in love with you," she said.

"That's cute."

They went on, their heads bent toward each other, talking but not touching. Once she glanced back at the streetlamp.

The winter went by quickly. The streetlamp grew icicles and lost them but hardly felt the cold. Twice each day it saw the man in the red jacket turn the corner, and that was all the summer it wanted. If he coughed on the sharpness of the air, or if his face paled in the wind, it only made him more beautiful to the lamp, and it flung its light lovingly around his shoulders, as though to warm him.

Then a day came when the young man should have gone to work but did not. He did not pass the streetlamp in the evening, nor the next day. It waited for him, keeping its sodium tubes dark well past midnight and bright well past noon, but he did not appear.

A few weeks later, the woman came and stood under the streetlamp, her hands in the pockets of her leather skirt, her green scarf shivering in the wind. Her eyes were smudged and dark.

"He's gone," she said. "New job, different town. I thought you might want to know."

She touched the base of the streetlamp with one gloved finger and was gone.

Spring came, and the furred buds along the branches of trees burst softly into bloom. One day the town's electric company drove their van up the street and parked under the streetlamp, which had stopped lighting up at all.

"This one's a mess," one of the electrical workers said, examining the paper on his clipboard. "Been erratic all winter."

"What's it done?"

"Turned on and off at odd times."

"That shouldn't be possible."

"I want a look at the photoelectric control."

They removed the panel at the base of the street light and cut out the small box from its entangling wires. A small sigh moved the air, but it was impossible to say where it came from, whether the watching streetlamps or the trees. The electrical workers did not hear.

"You're right, it's dead."

"Got a spare?"

"Right here."

They scraped, knotted, snipped, then gathered their red-handled tools and left.

When the sunlight slanted and faded into darkness, all the lights on the street flashed to life at once, like a string of stars fallen to earth. A sea gull rowed by on black-tipped wings, but not finding anyone it knew, flew on.

# Tiger in the BSE

There was once a tiger in Mumbai, a Kshatriya and a ruthless trader of stocks, who lived in a glossy high-rise the color of the sea. His suits of slick poplin and seersucker were confectioned by two tailors in Milan; his bath was cut from marble as rich as soap, and always drawn warm and fragrant for him at the end of each day; and his suppers, which threw the meat markets into an uproar, were prepared under the hands of some of the finest cooks from Mangalore and Chengdu. He had, in short, the kind of life that any well-bred tiger could hope to have. But he lacked one thing, and it made him pace between the red walls of his living room and bite the pads of his paws.

He went to the house of an old friend, where he and his trading tips were always welcome, and said, "Brother, I have no mother or father to help me in this matter, and no family except my friends. For the sake of the tricks we played in school, for the beatings I took for you, will you help me find a bride?"

"My sisters are all spoken for," the man said quickly. But seeing his whiskers quiver in distress, said, "Nevertheless I can inquire for you. What sort of bride are you looking for?"



# Loss, with Chalk Diagrams

Never before in her life had Rebekah Moss turned to the rewirers, not as a tight-mouthed girl eavesdropping by closed doors on her parents' iceberg drift toward divorce, nor after she heard with bowed head, her body as blushing full as a magnolia bud, the doctor describing the scars that kept her from having Dom's child. She took few risks and accepted all outcomes with equanimity. But when her old friend Linda was found beneath a park bridge in Quebec with her wrists slit lengthwise to the bone, leaving no note, no whisper of explanation, she hesitated only a moment before linking to the rewiring center. Saturday next was the first available appointment, a silvery voice informed her, and she took it. When she ended the call she wrapped her arms around her legs and tilted back and forth, blinking hard, her own breathing a foil rustle in her ears.

She had been twelve years old when rewiring was first approved for use on a limited clinical population. The treatment involved a brew of sixteen neurotoxins finely tuned to leave normal motor, memory, and cognitive processes intact, burning out only those neural pathways associated with grief and trauma. It was recognized as a radical advancement in medicine, and the neuroscientists involved in its development had been decorated with medals, presidential visits, and a research foundation in their names.

Her family supported her choice, of course. They pressed lemon tea and tissues and bitter chocolate upon her while she stumbled through the week, her whole world gone faint and gray and narrow. The sky seemed always clouded over, though she knew there was sunlight. She could not eat by herself. Dom fed her soup by hand and patted her rather awkwardly as she sobbed, both of them embarrassed by her access of sorrow. It was the only time in their marriage that she had cried.

She and Linda had grown up together, small and very different but fiercely loyal, as children can be. Linda had been her first real friend, all temper and rainstorms and rainbows, quick to scrape, to bleed, to run, to tumble, to climb. Her whole head of copper curls trembled when she laughed, and she had laughed often. She hummed pop songs off-key. She danced. Rebekah could often see the passions singing inside her, darkening and flushing and paling her cheeks, contorting her mouth, dilating or slitting her eyes. Sometimes Linda would blow up a squall — over Darrell, a thin boy with scarred and freckled knees who held Rebekah's hand once, by accident, and Linda's twice; over Rebekah's remark to another friend about Linda's father's drinking; over classroom prizes and movies they loved or loathed — but as Rebekah didn't fight back, only listening with a pale calm, these were quickly over, forgiven and forgotten.

They used to chalk coded messages for each other on the blacktop behind school, though chalk and chalkboards had long since vanished from classrooms, because they had read about it and wanted to try. They had mixed, colored, and molded the sticks out of plaster of Paris and paint. Once the sticks had been written to nubs, the girls crushed them to powder between their fingernails. It was a private art. Every stroke on the classroom screen, every voicelink, every comma and misspelling sent through the flow was documented and preserved perfectly for the ages, but the rain wiped clean their messages to each other and let them have secrets.

In high school the two of them drifted apart, distracted variously by clubs, boys, academic distinctions, other friends. Rebekah absorbed herself in the quiet pleasure of her French horn and regional orchestras; Linda realized a passion for biology, herpetology in particular, and acquired a lime-green lizard named Otto that she would smuggle to school in her pocket. Linda began to kiss boys; Rebekah only looked sidelong at one or two who made her glow inside when they laughed, and never spoke.

In the spring of their junior year, Linda's mother died. No one was quite sure why. She had seemed healthy, although Linda said once, when pressed, that it was cancer and she didn't want to talk about it.

The funeral was private. Linda vanished from school for several weeks, reappearing in caked makeup with dark, defiant eyes. She was prone to bursting into tears. The guidance counselor and several teachers pointed out to her that, as a bereaved minor, she was a prime candidate for rewiring. Treatment would allow her to focus on her schoolwork and college applications, they said: her grades had become erratic. They were worried about her future. Moreover, her outbursts were disturbing the other students.

Linda refused. After the fifth or sixth recommendation that she apply for rewiring, there was a firm suggestion that she take a year off from school, at which point she started shouting at the counselor and had to be restrained. Within days the whole school knew.

By that time, Rebekah was too distant from Linda to hear all of what was happening, but one day at lunchtime she brushed into her in the hall and was unwillingly drawn into a conversation about Mrs. Lubrick, for whom Linda felt a deep disdain. Linda pressed close; Rebekah could see the tiny, fine cracks in her foundation. There was a faint smell of alcohol on Linda's breath.

"She thinks it's something you can snip off, like hair or nails," Linda said. "That you can chop off loss without losing anything. But it's mine and I want it. It's horrible but it's mine."

Her eyes were narrowed, her lips badly chapped.

"My dad had people come and take away her clothes in bags. All of it. It was like watching someone slice open the family and pull out all the organs. I didn't want him to, but he couldn't stand it, her things lying around. I'm keeping every minute of this hurting. I'm keeping it."

She hugged herself, the oversized sweater lapping over her hands, and glared. Rebekah shrugged and turned away.

By the beginning of their senior year Linda discovered a reservoir of manic energy, and when spring came around she had been accepted to five of her seven schools. Rebekah applied to one and was accepted there, as she had known she would be.

It was at Grierson, three years after she had last spoken to Linda, that she opened her mailbox one morning to find a postcard with a picture of a marbled library, a California postmark, and a barely legible scrawl: Dear Rebekah, I know we didn't talk much in high school, but I was thinking of you lately and looked up your address. I am doing well. Do you remember the chalk? Write to me if it's not too silly for you.

After thinking for two days, Rebekah dug up a stamp, a pen, and a card from the depths of the university museum shop — postal correspondence was an anachronism then, kept running by advertising, nostalgia and the government's good graces — and scribbled in large letters shaky with disuse: Dear Linda, happy to hear from you. What has your life been like? I am awful at postcards. Sorry.

In reply she received a dried dahlia in a blue envelope with the note: Charming, dahling. Rebekah held the crisping flower in her palm, the desk lamp lighting the petals like a paper lantern, and remembered the feeling of pastel dust on her fingers and the scrape of asphalt on her skin. Then she set the dahlia on her desk and uncapped her antique pen.

Dear Linda, tomorrow I am graduating from Grierson Mech E, cum laude. I have a job in Albany this fall making wireframes for printed engine parts.

Dearest Rebekah, I'm writing from Jakarta. Reporting for private flow feeds as well as the Times of Singapore. Eating jackfruit and rambutan, which is cheap and fresh here. Traffic is like being strangled. I bike sometimes. If this card is black when it reaches you, that's Jakarta smog. Rob left a few weeks ago, and I am lonely. Your last card came at the perfect time.

Dear Linda, this is the house we're moving into next month. I don't like the wooden shingled sides — they're green and brown from too much rain — but it is bright inside. I can make a life here, I think. All is well. Do send me your new addresses when you move. It's not easy keeping track of you.

My dear Rebekah, congratulations on the wedding, and Dom, and all. Are you still playing in your community orchestra? Is that the same horn you had in high school? They don't wear out, right? Love from London.

Dear Linda, thank you for the violin recordings. Where did you find the violinist? I play them at work when my equations stop making sense. Sometimes the noise from the machining rooms downstairs rattles my brain. Your music is a sweet relief. Send more.

Rebekah, I have ditched the last boy — or he ditched me — again. Too fond of blondes. Had to move out, now staying with a friend.

Dear Linda, we saw the doctor yesterday. It is not possible, he says.

Rebekah stacked the postcards in a small tin painted with daffodils, where year by year they faded. By mutual unspoken agreement they continued to write to each other, avoiding calls, flow feeds, emails, everything permanent and certain. It seemed right that their correspondence be an ephemeral thing, somehow, though everything else in Rebekah's life was heavy with deliberation, immense and secure. Dom was the only man she ever dated, and they had married after a brief courtship as careful and formal as a game of chess. They read the news on the glass of their breakfast table and kissed each other before leaving for work. They planted flowered borders of perennials. They did not travel.

It had been inevitable that the postal system would eventually collapse. On the morning that the last post office was shuttered, Rebekah scanned the news on the table and sighed. Then she linked to a node in Montreal, Linda's last known address, and left a tentative message inviting her to visit.

Linda arrived in a whirlwind of loss — lost paperwork, lost passport, lost lover, recently deceased father — her black hobnailed boots striking sparks from the pavement as she walked, her short hair waving like candle flames. She enumerated these losses to Rebekah in a rich rippling alto that sometimes shook with laughter and always gleamed with color, describing her four heartbreaks — Rob, Ajay, Chris, Max — each worse than the last; the three times she had been held up at knifepoint; the one time she had betrayed and the five times she had been betrayed; and for one shivering moment Rebekah saw her quiet happiness pale beside the coruscations of Linda's life.

Grief had written heavy lines on Linda's face. Despite her scars and bruises, her casualties, her innumerable losses, she had not applied for rewiring either. By then it was standard procedure, shading into the cosmetic. Rebekah's parents and most of her other relatives had been rewired. They had pushed Rebekah to apply after she learned she would never have a child, relenting only after six weeks of her pleasant, toneless insistence that she was fine. After all, she told Dom and her family, she had not lost anything.

To all appearances the procedure was a blessing. The suicide rate had dropped nationwide and in those developed countries that could afford to make rewiring available. It was becoming difficult to find songs about heartbreak on flowlines these days, Linda said. Tragedies were disappearing from theaters and screens. Sorrow was no longer a welcome and expected guest. "Except to me," Linda said, sounding puzzled and proud. As they passed a hallway mirror, Rebekah was startled to see the contrast in their faces; she looked an entire decade younger than Linda, with fewer shadows, fewer lines, fewer softnesses and sinkings. And yet Linda had grown beautiful, richly and ripely beautiful, an awareness that pressed on Rebekah as inexorably as sunlight. It had been years since they last stood in the same room.

"You're so happy," Linda broke out, over their dinner of salmon and asparagus, Dom smiling benignly at them. Her mouth twisted briefly. "You've lived so well."

Then she had blushed, a familiar rose blooming in each cheek, and ducked her head, and complimented the food. The conversation veered to politics and immigration law.

Linda was entangled in immigration court, having overstayed a complicated sequence of visas. She had traveled too often and lived in too many places, she said. Loved the wrong people, the right people, or too many people. Carried a piece of each place inside her. Sometimes a ring. Once, an unborn child. Her face flickered at that. It all played merry hell with your passport, she said. Her smile was fragile.

Dom brought out the raspberry tart, a silver cake trowel, and a stack of willow plates.

“A good immigration lawyer,” he suggested, piecing out the tart, but she shook her head.

“I had one,” Linda said. “I tried. It’s over, really.”

Later, when she went out into the garden to smoke, Rebekah said to her, “You could let go of it all so easily.”

“The sadness? Perhaps.” Linda blew a billow of smoke. Smoking was another anachronism she had picked up; Rebekah wondered when, and why, and with whom.

“Think of how much lighter you’d be,” Rebekah said. “How peaceful you’d feel. You’d live longer.”

Linda laughed. “You’re telling me to let go of my grief? You?” She tilted the glowing tip of her cigarette toward Rebekah. “You’ll never have the children you want. That would break anyone’s heart. But you didn’t go for rewiring. Why not? Why not let go?”

Rebekah found she could not answer.

If she closed her eyes she could recall the clinic in crisp, hectic color. The room had been cream-colored, trimmed in pale green, and smelled faintly and cruelly of mother’s milk. The stethoscope around the doctor’s neck was also pale green. The barrage of scans and tests was over. It was all over. She had sat under the too-bright lights, looking at her hands, her ears full of the dull crash and roar of her blood. I’m very sorry, the doctor said, and she heard herself saying, No, no, it’s quite all right. As she had said to Dom, and to her mother, and his, until the words were nonsense in her mouth. It’s quite all right, she said, burying the bitterness inside herself, shrugging off the suggestion. No, no rewiring. It’s all right.

The air still tasted bitter, under the odor of roses.

“As for me,” Linda said, “grieving makes me whole. Anything and anyone worth having is also worth wearing a scar for, if only on the inside.” She took a drag on the cigarette, and smoke flowered from her mouth.

“I don’t understand.”

“Do you love that man? Dom? If he died, would you cry over him? Would you spend years looking for him in the morning and expecting his presence in every room of your house and feeling your heart crack each time you realize he’s not there? Or would you go straight to the needles?”

“That’s not a fair question,” Rebekah said, waving away the smoke. “He wouldn’t want me to mourn.”

“No?”

“He doesn’t want me to suffer.”

“You think there can be love without suffering? Having without losing?”

Rebekah looked at her friend, so troubled, so tired, so lovely. “Yes.”

“Would you mourn me?” Linda’s eyes were large and luminous. “You’re one of the few who still can.”

“If you died? You’d want me to be miserable for losing you?”

“I want to be remembered.” She dropped the cigarette in a spray of sparks and ground it beneath her toe. “I want to be a physical absence in a room. I want to be a void and an ache. I want to be remembered with sorrow, the way I remember so many other people now.”

“That seems selfish.”

“Perhaps.” Linda sighed. “There aren’t that many people left to grieve, anyhow. Why haven’t you gone for rewiring?”

The vivid, heavy smells of roses and cigarettes were making her dizzy. There were the boys she never kissed, too afraid to speak to them; the trips she had decided not to take; the jobs in other places she had turned down; the child she could not have. Instead of these things, she had Dom’s love, a warm house, steady work as a propulsion engineer, and two evenings a week in an orchestra. She supposed she did not regret her choices. What did she have to grieve for, after all?

“I haven’t lost very much, I guess.” She pressed her lips together.

“Just possibilities.”

Upstairs the bedroom windows filled with light, then darkened.

Linda extended a finger with a glittering drop of data on it. “Here, I brought this for you. I recorded it in Montreal.”

“What is it?”

“Freeman, French horn. Hard to find that kind of music these days. Don’t listen to it now. It’s late.”

She kissed Rebekah on the brow before she went, leaving a dusty mark.

Saturday came with terrible slowness. Rebekah could hardly find the strength to leave her bed. She recalled that evening vividly, the taste of butter and raspberry jam, the smell of tobacco smoke, the brush of dry, powdery lips against her forehead. Nothing in that evening had hinted at the horror of white bone and slashed muscle, and yet all of Linda’s life seemed full of signs and portents, now that she was gone.

Rebekah barely noticed anything on her walk downtown. Before long she stood before the chrome and glass doors of the district’s rewiring center, staring dully up at the silver-lettered signs and the office windows full of desks and blurred figures. Dom could not accompany her; he had been sweetly apologetic; he had to implement new protocols in the lab ahead of state deadlines.

Everything in the center was painfully gleaming and new, from the young man who greeted her at the desk, the crispness of college still on him, to the white leather sofas she was directed to. The interior was lit by a gentle but intense white light, enough to pierce through the fog in her head.

“Let me explain the procedure to you,” the doctor said. “We will be making eight injections into your insula, anterior temporal cortex, anterior cingulate cortex, and prefrontal cortex. You will be under general anesthesia for the entire operation. It should take three hours. We have not found significant side effects but a small number of patients have reported lethargy lasting a week, loss of appetite, lingering sadness, and feelings of confusion. Would you please sign here?”

First they shaved small squares on her scalp where the thin drills and then the needles would pass through. She watched dark strands of her hair fall into her lap, scattering over her white paper robe. Then they left her in a room to wait.

Rebekah sat alone on the bed, numb and cold, toying with the strange spiky shapes of her grief. Rather than listen to the unbearable symphony of beeping, chiming monitors, she pulled up the recording that Linda had given her.

It began with scraping chairs and indistinct voices, some swift French, some English. There was shuffling, and coughing, and silence. Then she heard a slender silver note, the winding of a hunting horn. Foxes and deer slid through the mist, tearing up the wet earth, followed by men and women and sleek hounds. The horn urged them on. The best of the hunters took aim and fired through the fog, but the bullet killed his lover instead of the deer.

She heard grief in the music, flashing like lightning beneath the silver notes. It had been a very long time since she had heard music like it. Her community orchestra was very good at light, pensive, or melancholy music, but when they tried the tragic, their performance rang empty. Freeman was something else altogether. She had missed that kind of music. It was a good gift.

Rebekah closed the file and raised her head to see two blue-scrubbed nurses approaching.

They were wiping and tying her arm for the anesthetic, the faces around her friendly and smiling, when she realized how jealous she had become of her black, broken grief. It hurt, but it was hers. That had also been a gift.

Wait, she wanted to say. I don't want this anymore. She opened her mouth, then closed it again. She told herself: You refused her. You don't deserve to grieve.

The needle slid beneath her skin.

You never learned how to lose someone.

A thick soft darkness swallowed her, a sinking without bottom, through which she swam ever deeper down. Somewhere rain fell and washed the pavement clean.

When she awoke, she was not in pain.

# Ilse, Who Saw Clearly

Once, among the indigo mountains of Germany, there was a kingdom of blue-eyed men and women whose blood was tinged blue with cold. The citizens were skilled in clockwork, escapements, and piano manufacture, and the clocks and pianos of that country were famous throughout the world. Their children pulled on rabbit-fur gloves before they sat down to practice their etudes, for it was so cold the notes rang and clanged in the air. It was coldest of all in the town on the highest mountain, where there lived a girl called Ilse, who was neither beautiful nor ugly, neither good nor wicked. Yet she was not quite undistinguished, because she was in love.

One afternoon, when the air was glittering with the sounds of innumerable pianos, a stranger as stout as a barrel and swathed to his nosetip walked through the town, singing. Where he walked the pianos fell silent, and wheat-haired boys and girls cracked shutters into the bitter cold to peep at him. And what he sang was this:

Ice for sale, eyes for sale,  
If your complexion be dark or pale  
If your old eyes be sharp or frail,  
Come buy, come buy, bright ice for sale!

Only his listeners could not tell whether he was selling ice or eyes, because he spoke in an odd accent and through a thick scarf.

He sang until he reached the square with its frozen marble fountain. The town had installed a clock face and a set of chimes in the ice, and now they were striking noon.

“Ice?” he said pleasantly to the crowd that had gathered. He unwound a few feet of his woolen cloak and took out a box. The hasp gave his mittens trouble, but finally it clicked open, and he raised the lid and held out the box for all to see. They craned their necks forward, and their startled breaths smoked the air.

The box was crammed with eyes.

There were blue eyes and green eyes and brown eyes, eyes red as lilies, golden as pollen; eyes like pickaxes and eyes like diamonds. Each eye had been carved and painted with enormous care, and the spaces between them were jammed with silk.

The stranger smiled at their astonishment. He unrolled a little more of his cloak and took out another box, and another, and then it was clear that he was really quite slender. He tugged his muffler past his mouth, revealing sunned skin and neat thin lips.

“The finest eyes,” he said to the crowd. “Plucked from the lands along the Indian Ocean, where the peacock wears hundreds in his tail. Picked from the wine countries, where they grow as crisp as grapes. Young and good for years of seeing! Old but



ground to perfect clarity, according to calculations by the wisest mathematicians in Alexandria!" His teeth flashed gold and silver as he talked.

He ran his fingers through the eyes, holding this one to the light, or that. "Is this not pretty?" he said. "Is this not splendid? Try, my good grandmother, try."

That old woman peered through eyes white with snow-glare at the gems in his hands. "I can't see them clearly," she admitted.

"Well, then!"

"Lucia," she said, touching her daughter's hand. "Find me a pair like I used to have."

"How much?" Lucia said.

"For you, the first, a pittance. An afterthought. Her old eyes and a gold ring."

"Done," the old woman said. Lucia, frowning, fingered two eyes as blue as shadows on snow.

The stranger extracted three slim silver knives with ivory handles from the lining of his cloak. With infinite care and exactitude, barely breathing, he slid the first knife beneath the old woman's eyelid, ran the second around the ball, and with the third cut the crimson embroidery that tied it in place. Twice he did this. Then, in one motion, he slid her old eyes out of their hollows and slipped in the new. Her old blind eyes froze at once in his hands, ringing when he flicked them with a fingernail. He dropped them into his pockets and tilted her chin toward him.

"I can count your teeth," the old woman said with wonder. "Your nose is thin. Your scarf is striped red and yellow."

"A wonder," someone said.

"A marvel of marvels."

"A magician."

"A miracle."

She pulled off her mitten and gave him the ring from her left hand. "He's been dead twenty years," she said to Lucia, who did not look happy. "I can see again. Clear as water. What a wonder."

Then, of course, the stranger had to replace the shortsighted schoolteacher's eyes, after which the old fellow cheerfully snapped his spectacles in two; the neglectful eyes of the town council; six clockmakers' strained eyes; crossed eyes; eyes bleared with snow light and sunlight; eyes that saw too clearly, or too deeply, or too much; eyes that wandered; eyes that were the wrong color.

When the sun was low and scarlet in the sky, the stranger announced that he would work no longer that day, for want of illumination. Half the town immediately offered him a bed and a roaring fire. But he passed that night and many more at the inn, where the fire was lower, colder, and less hospitable, and where, it was said unkindly, one's sleeping breath would freeze and fall like snow on the quilts. He ate cold soup and sliced meats in the farthest corner, answered all questions with a smile, and went to bed early.

After twelve days he bundled his boxes about him and left the town, his pockets sunken and swinging with gold. The townspeople watched as he goat-stepped down

the steep trail until even their sharp new eyes could no longer distinguish him from the ice-bearded stones and the pines and the snow.

These new eyes, they found, were better than the old. The makers of escapements and wind-up toys found that they could do far more delicate work than before, and out of their workshops came pocket watches and pianos carved out of almond shells, marching soldiers made from bluebottles, wooden birds that flew and sang, mechanical chessboards that also played tippen, and other such wonders; and the fame of that town went out throughout the whole world.

Summer heard, in her house on the other side of the world, and came to see.

The first notice they had of her approach was a message in a blackbird's beak, then a couple red buds on the edges of twigs, and then she was there. Out of respect she had put on a few extra flowers this year. It was still cold — summer high in the mountains is like that — but the air was softer, the light gentler.

No one saw her courteous posies, however. A little before she arrived, their eyes had begun to blur, then blear, then melt. They saw each other crying and felt their own tears running down their faces, and for no reason at all except summer. Then they understood, and wept in earnest, but it was too late.

By summer's end everyone had cried out the new eyes. The workshops fell still and silent, and tools gathered tarnish on their benches. The hundreds of clocks around the town stopped, since no one could find their keys and keyholes to wind them up again. Only the pianos still rang out their frozen notes now and again, but the melodies were all in minor keys. The town was full of a cold, quiet grief.

Winter was coming, and they would have starved without Ilse, who hadn't sold her eyes. Her sweetheart had written atrocious poems to them, and although they were the same plain blue as anyone else's, she couldn't bear to part with them even for new eyes the colors of violets, blackberries, and marigolds. So she helped the town tend and bring in its meager harvests of beets and cabbage, and on Wednesdays she filled a sack with clocks and toys and went down the mountain to sell them at market, until there were none left. During the day her head swam with the pianos' lugubrious complaints, and at night she ached in every bone.

"Mother," she said, as they ate their bare breakfast together, "shouldn't someone go looking for the surgeon?"

"No one will find him."

"What will you do if you never find your eyes?"

"We'll manage. We have you to see for us."

"I'm going to look for him," she said.

"Absolutely not."

So Ilse packed up her summer clothes, a loaf of bread, two onions, and the fourteen silver coins her mother kept in a jar on the shelf, and the next day she set off down the mountain.

In all her sixteen years, she had never strayed beyond the market in the shadow of the mountain, where the town's clocks and pianos were sold. But now she passed town

after town, few of which she knew, and bridges, and streams, and meadows stained with the dregs of summer, and now trees that did not stand as straight as soldiers but spread their shoulders broad and wide. She climbed up one of these as night fell, and tucked her head against her knees, and slept.

A soft noise, like paper or feathers, woke her in the middle of the night. Ilse opened her eyes in fear, expecting robbers and thieves, but saw nothing. Still she was full of dread. She thought of the silver she had stolen, and her sightless mother in a silent house, and her sweetheart, lonely and wondering. She thought of the long road ahead of her, with likely failure at its end, and shivered. For where could she begin to look?

"You are thinking too loud," someone said close to her ear. She nearly fell out of the tree. Next to her, an old crow shifted from foot to foot, cleared its throat, and spat.

"You can talk?"

"Only when people's thoughts are so noisy I can't sleep." It sighed. "What would it take to quiet down your brain?"

"I am looking for my townsmen's eyes."

"Eyes!" The crow whistled. "A treat, a delectable treat. I should follow you."

Ilse snatched sideways, swiping a bit of dark down between her fingers. The crow tumbled out of the tree with a screech.

"You'll do no such thing," she said.

"Peace, peace." A wing brushed her brow. "You'll find what you're looking for. You'll find your sight, and theirs. And you'll not like what you see when you see the world truly, too-quick girl with the odor of onions."

He flapped his way to a higher branch; she could hear him combing out his ruffled feathers. "I don't take kindly to being grabbed at, onion girl."

"Just let me find what I'm looking for," she said, and shut her eyes. Afterwards, but for the bit of down stuck to her clothes, she could not say whether she had dreamt it all.

On the third day, as she trudged down the road that went nowhere she knew, she met a flock of spotted goats with yellow bells about their necks, and then their shepherd, who was chewing a stalk of grass. He greeted her, and she asked with no great hope whether he'd heard of a peddler of eyes.

"Yes, miss," he said. "Walk a little farther, until you reach a village with sunflowers around it, and go down the street to the last house. My daughter is home, and she knows much more about your magician than I do."

Ilse thanked him and went on. The village ringed by sunflowers was smaller and muddier than her own, and the road ended at the smallest and muddiest house. The cat on the roof had only half his coat, as he had been a fierce warrior in his day, but he opened one eye and yawned at her. A young woman opened the door. Asked about the peddler, she smiled and winked her eyes one after the other. One of them was a shade greener than the other.

“I lost this one falling out of a window. My father and I waited four years before the good man came back. We had nothing to pay him with, at least nothing worth it, and I would have gladly taken a grandmother’s cataract. But he said I was a lovely girl and picked out a greener eye than my first for me. A sweet soul.”

“He left my village blind.”

“You must be mistaken. He wouldn’t do such a thing.”

“He has three silver knives with ivory hafts, with ivy engraved in the ivory. His skin is dark and his nose is sharp.”

“Well,” the goatherd’s daughter said. “Well. He does look like that. And he does have three knives. But I really don’t think — ”

“How can I find him?”

“Now, that’s tricky. That will take a little explanation. But you’re in no rush, are you? He doesn’t travel quickly, and you don’t look like you’ve eaten yet today.” She hewed a generous piece of brown bread for Ilse and poured out a bowl of cream for her, as well as a bowl of milk for the cat.

“I still think you’re wrong somewhere. Surely he wouldn’t. So kind.”

Ilse ate the bread and drank the cream so fast she left a crumb on her cheek and a pale spatter on her chin.

“Now,” the goatherd’s daughter said presently, “you’ll be going to the city. If you unraveled today down the road, you’d find the city at the end of next week. There are three towers at the corners of the city, with three broad streets between them, and where the streets meet is a brick square. Ask in the square where your magician might be. Someone there will know more.

“But you’re not taking the road in those clothes, are you?”

Ilse was suddenly aware of how heavy and hot her woolen summer smock and rabbit-fur cloak were, and how strongly they reeked of onions.

“Let me find you something lighter. You can leave those here, for when you return.”

So Ilse exchanged her fur and wool for an armful of patched but comfortable linen, put a piece of bread and a slice of cheese in her pocket, and continued on her way. Now and then she passed a farm cart creaking on its way. Now and then, with a nod from the driver, she climbed into one of those carts and rested. She came upon a few crows pecking in the dust, but though she greeted them politely, they never answered.

The longer she traveled, the closer together grew the villages and fields. She was tired of the road and the yellow dust that lay in a film on her mouth, and she thought many times of her soft bed at home, and the color of her sweetheart’s hair, and the air as pure as snow. Sometimes she considered turning around, but she never did. After wearing out her shoes by the thickness of seven days, she saw, black against the evening, three towers as formidable as teeth, and that was the city.

A soldier in fine scarlet-and-cream stood to attention at the gate, which was barred. He had a silver spear in his hand and silver mail beneath his tabard.

“It’s past sunset,” he said, frowning at her through his helmet. “No one enters or exits the city at night. Go home.”

She said, "My home is in the mountains, but I've come looking for a magician, a doctor, who can take the eyes out of your head and put them in again. He took all the eyes out of our town."

"I've heard of such a doctor," said the soldier. "He mended my fourth cousin's weak eyes, years ago. But you can't mean him. He wouldn't do such a thing."

"Perhaps it was unintended."

"You'd do well to ask in the square tomorrow. Tomorrow, mind you. I cannot let you through." He held his spear a little straighter. "Unless you can show me something as bright as sunlight. That might fool me for a little while."

"I only have a little silver," she said, patting her pockets. But they were empty.

"Moonlight will do."

"No, I have nothing. I left my silver in my smock, and I left my smock at a goatherd's cottage, and that's a week's walking."

The soldier huffed into his moustache. "What a foolish girl you are." He took a key from his belt and opened a low door in the gate, just tall enough for her to slip through. "I have a little one your age, just as silly as you. You'd feed yourself to wolves if I kept you outside. Hurry up, won't you. And stay out of trouble."

"Thank you," Ilse said, and he shut and locked the door behind her.

Here and there the flame in a lamppost flickered and swayed. There were many more streets than she had expected, running every which way. Uncertain of what to do, she went back and forth, past dark windows and bolted doors; open doors with laughter, hectic music, and light spilling out of them; past rubbish in the gutters and pools of water shining in the dark. Shadows slid past her, silent and purposeful. She felt unseen eyes following her.

At last, lost and dispirited, she peered into a shop window and saw a vitrine lined with pocket watches and the pale faces of tall clock cases in the dimness beyond. Some of them looked familiar. She pressed her nose to the gold-lettered glass, wondering if she knew the hands that had made them. She wanted very much to touch them, but the door was locked.

There was nowhere else she could go. She sat down in the doorway and put her head in her hands and, unwillingly, fell asleep.

If strange hands rifled her pockets while she slept, they found nothing, and she did not know. When she woke, it was morning. An old man with a broom was standing over her, displeased.

"Well, get along now," he said. "Go on." He held the shop door open and swept a little dirt over her, then tried to sweep her off the step.

"Please, which way to the square?"

"Which way to the square?" The shopkeeper stared. "Are you mad?"

"I came into the city yesterday," she said.

"With no place to stay? You are mad."

"Won't you tell me?"

“Never let it be said I was uncharitable toward the insane,” the shopkeeper said. He disappeared into the shop — a bell jangled inside — and just as she decided to leave, reappeared with a small stale cake.

“There you go,” he said. “Down the lane, a left, a right, a right, a left, a right, two more lefts, and you’re there.” And he went back into the shop.

The square was broader than she expected, and busier, lively with stalls and carts and striped awnings, the glitter of gold and silver on tables, the odors of fruit and fish and spices, the squabble of bargainners and women shouting apples.

Weaving her way through the tables and crowds, dazzled and bewildered, she stopped beside a table set with magnificent glass apparatuses: telescopes, periscopes, beakers, loupes, spiral condensers, burning glasses, spectacles. Behind a towering stack of old books sat the glassblower, his nose in a book, a mole at the tip of his nose. She asked whether he knew the magician.

“Of course! Of course!” he snorted.

“Where can I find him?”

“Why, he’s marrying our Queen next month! Only,” he said, and winked, “no one knows that it’s him, our peripatetic physician, our humble expeller-of-drusen, ablator-of-sties. Word is she’s betrothed to a Solomonic magician from far away, the Indies, the Sahara, what have you. But she’s had milk eyes from the day she was born, our poor Majesty, and only one fellow could have fixed those. The usual reward, of course, would have been half the kingdom, or ennoblement and emolument. But he’s a handsome one, our doctor. And ambitious. Why are you looking for him? Did he steal your heart, too?”

She told him.

“Ha! What a mistake to make. It’ll be easy to find him. He’s caged in the royal palace; you can’t miss it. Finest house in the city, and no one can have finer, for fear of beheading. Tallest house in the city, too, by law. She had all the weathervanes sawn off the churches, and would have chopped down the towers, too, except they persuaded her to build her house a little taller. You can see it from here.”

It was indeed the finest house in the city, ringed by green gardens and ponds full of tame swans. Guards bright with old-fashioned weapons marched around its perimeter.

She crumbled a bit of her cake for the swans as she pondered what to do. Then she looked at the wet black legs of the swans.

It was not easy to tear one of her skirts to strips; she had to put her teeth to it. Every four inches she tied a loop, and when she had finished she spread it loosely and broke the rest of the cake over it. As the swans stabbed up the crumbs, she eased the knots shut around their scaly legs. Then she tugged. One of the swans hissed and bit her finger, but the rest, startled, took off in a white cloud. Clinging to their feet for dear life, she rose higher and higher in the air.

Once she was dizzyingly high above the city, she untied the swans one by one, until she held a single blustering cob by the feet. They sank together through the air, landing painfully on the tiles of the palace roof; and then she let him go, as well, and looked about her.

In one corner was a hunchbacked tower, patchy with lichen. To her left and right the castle walls plunged below the eaves. Ilse scrambled across the slate tiles, kicking one loose — it skittered down the sloping roof and vanished over the edge — and losing a shoe. When she came to the open window she hauled herself up and into a rich bedroom.

A goat-slender man, studying himself in his mirror, whirled around at the noise. She thought she recognized the pointed nose and chin, the glittering eyes.

“Who are you?”

The room was hung with tapestries; the bed was spread with silks and velvets; even the magician’s coat glittered thickly with jewels. She was suddenly, painfully aware of the patches on her clothes. But she thought of her sweetheart and mother, and she stood up straight and addressed him.

“Now!” the magician said, after she had finished her story. “I never meant to do that! I cut ice eyes for you because I thought they’d never melt.”

“Will you give them their eyes back?”

“Impossible. Others needed them.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I am going to marry the Queen in a month,” he said. “It’s about time I settled down. She’s a lovely woman. Proud, though. She won’t permit me to work as a petty physician. Must marry a man of leisure, you know. I can’t even make you new eyes of rock crystal and glass. Who would restore them?”

“So you are leaving my town blind,” Ilse said. “So you have taken away their eyes, their wedding rings, and their livelihoods, and you’ll never return them. You are going to marry a Queen and live, as they say, happily ever after. What a marvelous magician you are!”

He hesitated. “That’s putting it rather badly. I could teach you, I suppose. If you are intelligent enough. If you are nimble enough. It might take five years, or ten, depending on how quickly you learn.” He glanced doubtfully at her clothes. “But afterward you could restore sight wherever you wished.”

“Yes,” Ilse said.

“But we must first ask the Queen.”

They found the Queen reading Schiller with her feet propped on a leather ottoman, now and then weeping a decorous tear. She was not a cruel woman. She listened to Ilse’s story and sighed, and afterwards gently reproached her betrothed. But their request displeased her.

“Am I to give you up, my love, for ten years so you can train the girl?”

“Hardly — ”

“You may have his instruction,” she said to Ilse, “for one year. I will postpone the wedding for that long, because it is unseemly for a King to teach surgery. But after one year we shall marry, and you will go home.”

Grateful and dismayed, she kissed the Queen’s white hand.

And so for a year she studied under the magician, by sunlight, moonlight, and candlelight, paging through abstruse medical texts and reproducing in wet, squiggling lines on blurry paper the elegant anatomical diagrams her teacher marked with a finger. Often she went without sleep and food in her haste to learn.

The magician taught her the structure and composition of the eye, its fine veining, innervation, and musculature; the operation of light and color; sixteen theories of sight from philosopher-doctors in various kingdoms; and common diseases and their remedies. All of this, he said, he had gathered from years of wandering in strange lands among strange people. And when she was exhausted with studying, he told her stories from his travels.

In the flicker of shadows on the wall, her eyes unfocused from much reading, she thought she could see the people he described: the woman who married a tiger, the parrots who kept state secrets, the ship that flew in the air. She fell asleep in her chair with his words still running in her ears, and he dropped a coat over her before he retired, and so they passed many nights.

By the end of the year she could switch the eyes of rabbits, cats, and sparrows without harming them, without even a drop of blood falling on the magician's knives.

"All that I can teach, you know," he told her one night. "Take my knives, and take this box. I have had time to fashion new eyes for you and yours. Glass and rock crystal, this time."

She fell on her knees and thanked him.

"But there is one more thing. I know no one as quick and capable as you, or as kind. If you will have me, I will marry you instead of the Queen."

"That is kind of you, but I have a sweetheart at home," Ilse said.

"He won't have waited for you."

"He has. I am certain."

"Very well," he said, annoyed. "Go home to him, then." He was not gracious enough to invite her to the wedding, or even to replace her tattered clothes. So with the box under her arm, and the three silver knives hung at her side, Ilse left the palace.

The soldier at the gate barred her path with his spear. He had a hard face and a rough red beard.

"What are you carrying, girl?"

"Eyes that the Queen's magician gave me."

"Gave you? You in those rags? Unlikely. An export fee of three gold crowns." He laughed at her. "Of course you can't pay. But you've a pretty face, and I'll overlook this for a kiss."

She turned to go.

"Or," he said thoughtfully, "I could have you arrested and imprisoned. For theft, probably."

And she saw that he meant it. So she kissed him on his bristly mouth, a sick twist in her stomach, feeling his hands slide up and down her sides, and then he laughed and waved her through.



The road seemed twice as long now. The days grew colder as she went, for it was autumn again, and her clothes were thin, and the road was rising toward the mountains. The crows in the trees croaked and chuckled as she passed.

After many days of weary walking, she saw with great relief the goatherd's village. The sunflowers were brown and rattled in the wind, but the cat still sat on the goatherd's roof, and it stretched and purred at her.

She rapped on the door. The goatherd's daughter opened it slightly. Faint lines were sketched into her forehead. Somewhere in the cottage, a child began to wail.

"What do you want?"

"I left a wool smock and a fur cloak with you. Last year, it was. And there were fourteen pieces of silver in the pocket."

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"You fed me and you gave me these clothes to wear. Don't you recognize them? Keep the clothes, if you like, but please give me my mother's silver."

"We feed paupers all the time. Of course I can't remember each one. But there's no food in the house today. There's no food in all the village." She shut the door.

Ilse had no choice but to continue. The higher she climbed, the colder it was, and she shivered when she lay down to sleep on the lichen-studded stones. But she kept herself warm remembering her sweetheart's smile and her mother waiting for her in darkness.

At last she heard the faint sound of pianos. Tired though she was, she quickened her pace. Soon she saw woodsmoke in the sky, then chimney pots, then houses.

It was as she remembered it. Only now the notes that rang in the cold air were cheerful, and the people walked as though they could see. Ilse went into her own house and found her mother slicing vegetables.

"Ilse?" the woman said uncertainly, lifting her face. Ilse caught it in both hands and kissed it.

"Mother, you'll never guess where I've been."

"Out into the world. But what are you wearing? Go put on something warm."

"Not yet. Hold still." And with practiced gentleness, Ilse set two blue eyes in her mother's face.

She visited her sweetheart's, then. She ran to him and embraced him and he said, "Ilse?"

"Yes, it's me, I'm home."

"Oh, Ilse — I'm happy you've come back." He paused. "This is Elsa — the goldsmith's daughter — I married her in the spring."

"How wonderful." She kissed him on the cheek. "I have something for both of you."

After a fortnight of careful work, all the town could see again. It turned out that they had fared well enough without their eyes. Ilse was well wished, well fed, blessed, and thanked, and made to tell her story again and again, until the smallest child could

recite it. It was pleasant being home. She had missed the sound of ice-tuned pianos and the sweet mountain wind.

When Elsa the goldsmith's daughter gave birth, all agreed that the blue-eyed girl would be a matchless beauty and a legend in the kingdom. Her father wrote achingly terrible sonnets to those eyes.

Sometimes Ilse stood at the edge of town and looked over the world that fell away from her, farther than she could see. Sometimes she wondered how the magician and his Queen fared. More often, though, she thought of the strange lands he had told her about, where he had learned his strange arts: jewel-colored jungles, thick with flowers and snakes; or white sands running into a green sea; or dark pine forests alive with deer and wolves and red foxes. She would sit at the mountain's edge until her face was numb with cold, looking, wondering.

One day, no one could find her

# The Forgetting Shiraz

When I heard about the winegrower in New South Wales working on a red for forgetting, I sold the Corolla, which was the only thing left over from the divorce, called up two close friends to tell them where I was going and where I had deposited my will and other documents, and bought a one-way ticket from JFK to Sydney.

I had always found it strange that in a world as advanced as ours, in an age when we shot men to the moon and mapped the planets around alien suns, we still lacked a true anodyne. Alcohol's soft fog burns off by morning, at best, and at worst holds a magnifying glass to what we try to forget: her name, her voice, her face, her smell. Nor do we have surgeries precise enough to slice off specific memories. Whatever form it took, chemical, neurological, or psychological, the inventor of the anodyne would be rich in a blink, and the journalist who broke the story would never want for assignments again.

I had called ahead. A few days later I arrived upon the winemaker's doorstep, dizzy with the speed of the journey; I had sprinted from plane to plane to bus to rental car, whipping through green and gold hills whose smooth lines were now and then interrupted by sheep. There was something strange in the light, a richness I had only seen in crackled museum paintings, produced by aged egg glazes and what I'd assumed was sentimental imagination. I was leaning on the wheel, staring at the pastoral spread of spotted cows and hay rolls, all of it warm and sweet-smelling and sun-struck, while trying to stay in the left lane. Perhaps the light in New York had also been like this, long ago, before smokestacks and furnaces had disgorged their industrious darkness into the air.

Though the vineyard in question had a reputation for excellent wines, winning the occasional prize and landing features in oenophiles' magazines and even GQ, the place itself was modest in appearance, marked only by a hand-lettered sign, low fences to keep out the sheep, and an unpaved road winding through the vineyards to the house. The man who answered the door had gray in his hair and eyes that were calm and brown and birdlike, without judgment. He extended a thin, strong hand to me and introduced himself as Ted.

"Back this way," he said. We took a muddy path through frames and pruned trunks that looked alike in their winter nakedness, though every few rows he would name a different variety of grape with a hagiographer's reverence. This one required soil acidity of such and such a degree, that one a particular angle to the sun; this one had been his first cultivar, that one was his most popular table wine.

We stopped at what to me appeared an unremarkable line of vines, and he ran a knotted hand along the angles of one trunk. “Shiraz, of course,” he said. “First brought to the Rhône in a crusader’s saddlebags. He wanted to forget the brutalities he’d seen, start a vineyard, a winery. Drink away all memories of war. That grape seemed an appropriate place to start.”

“What did you do?”

“I grafted a few of them under the skin of my forearms. Here, see.” He rolled back one sleeve to show me the puckered scars beneath. “Grew them there for a year. They took most of primary school out of my head, but I didn’t realize it until I ran into an old teacher. She remembered me. I didn’t remember her. That’s when I figured it was working.”

“Really.”

“I trained the vines on the taste of memories. When I transplanted them I used compost from our house mixed with my kids’ baby teeth. Daughter, son. Grown and working now,” he said to the question on my face. “So that went, too, and the couple of weeks that were in the eggshells and banana peels. Mulched them with photo albums. Then it was just a matter of waiting.”

“For what?”

“For fruiting.”

“Then — ”

“Pretty much everything gone up until my twenties,” he said. The sunlight had paled, and in the distance I saw streaks of silver against a silver sky. “But let me show you.”

The weatherboard house was lined with tall shelves of novels in varying states of decay. I saw Proust and Keneally with crippled spines and a paperback *Lolita* sputtering leaves out of its belly. I had stopped taking notes, and my pencil dangled wordlessly on its string.

“My memories are in here somewhere,” he said, waving at the books. “I took precautions. I wrote down everything I could remember about my life, then made Mary and my parents and our kids write down what they could remember, and all the people I knew as far back as I could go, and it’s all in a book somewhere. So I can go back to it if I have to. So I can figure out what happened to me.” He turned a page of a yellow-edged *Don Quixote* and dropped it back onto the shelf, smiling apologetically. “I’m not sure which book. I don’t remember where I put it.”

“Mary’s your wife?” I was looking for her among the faces flattened and framed upon the wall.

“She died last year. My kids say she’s that one. No, the one on the left. And they tell me this is my sister, and that’s a college friend of Mary’s who was a bridesmaid at our wedding. They say I used to flirt shamelessly with her. I don’t remember any of it.”

“Your kids. How do they feel about it?”

The corners of his eyes creased upward. “Not too happy. They say, normal fathers sometimes forget their kids’ birthdays. Normal fathers don’t forget they have kids.

When they don't think I'm listening they say: Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, dementia. Every other year my son throws a lawyer at me, trying to have me declared incompetent." He waved toward the shelf and its rows of blind and indifferent volumes. "I don't remember what I did to make him hate me like that. I wish I still knew."

He fell into a fragile quiet, looking into the fire.

I shoved my notebook into a back pocket. There was no earthshaking discovery here, no story that would pay for my plane ticket home, much less rocket me into fame. There wasn't so much as a cup of lightning moonshine that would spatter my years with blankness. That would have been better than nothing. There was nothing I particularly cared to remember of the last ten years. Eight of them had been the damp, choking firework of a failed marriage, the other two a dim streak of progressively inferior whiskey and dark and lonely pavements.

Ted was arranging wood and rotten books in the iron stove, his back to me. The door was open. It would be easy to slip out and start the rental car and drive back to Sydney through the rain, but what would I do then? The world visible through the door was glistening, bewildering. There was no place in it for me.

"Now," he said, as if he had not stopped speaking, flames springing up around the logs and torn pages. "You'll want to know what it does to other people. I bottled the first few years of it, and it's pretty good wine, but does it work? How could I tell? It was all whiteness by then. What's another memory here or there? Which anniversary did I forget next? How would I know?"

He produced two glasses and a black bottle out of a cupboard. There was no label. He was only a lonely old man with a fading mind. You could not grow grapes out of memories. You could not graft vines into your arms. Still, a cold shiver began at the base of my spine.

"I asked my kids to try it but they wouldn't. 'It took away our dad,' they said. 'In the pursuit of knowledge,' I said. They still said no."

He spun the screw, plucked out the cork as lightly as a daisy's head, and tipped out a red parabola into one glass, then the other.

"I advertised. I evangelized. A few came here before you," he said. "None of them were willing to taste it. What if I'm wrong? What if I'm crazy? It's still good wine. I was born knowing what good wine is and if I die without remembering my name I'd still know what good wine is. There's no harm in drinking good wine, if it's only that. But what if I'm right?"

Between the wet, shifting light of the windows and the glow of the stove, the liquid in the glasses seemed a living scarlet, the color of a rosella's breast, a wound, a woman's rouged lips. He leaned forward and tossed another book onto the fire. It rippled into flame, the title blackening before I could read it.

"That's why they said no. Because they couldn't call me a lunatic, drink down a perfectly harmless glass, and leave. Because it was possible that I was right."

The scars up and down his arms were thin and twisting, like the tracks of raindrops along a window or the embrace of roots. He gestured to the table.

I lifted my glass, which was heavier than I expected.

“Leaded crystal,” he said. “The real thing. Who are we toasting?”

Her face, which I’d walled out of my thoughts with great effort, returned to me. With excruciating exactitude I recalled the arc of her cheekbone and the angles of her nose and eyelashes, the idiosyncratic twitches of her mouth. So long, darling, I thought. One way or another, goodbye. When I spoke her name, for the first time in months, it was with a throat full of rust and water. He nodded, and we raised our glasses to each other.

# The Urashima Effect

Leo Aoki awoke with a shudder in the cold green bubble of the ship, nauseated and convinced that he was suffocating. He shoved his way out of the sleep spindle, found his balance, ran his hands through his sweaty hair, checked his bones: all unbroken. Well, then. There was a snaking black tube cuffed to the wall, its other end pointing into the black vacuum of space. He pulled it off its hooks and vomited into it, miserably and gracelessly. The ship's drivers continued their deep soft hum, unperturbed.

Mission command had advised him against looking outside until he had adjusted to life in the cramped quarters of his bubble. It would unnerve him, they said. Unman him, they meant. It was better not to taste unadulterated loneliness for the first time immediately after opening one's eyes and throwing up. On prior exploratory flights, several astronauts emerging from their long suspension had suffered heart attacks or gone mad, too delicate to withstand the double shock of loneliness and life in deep space.

Leo opened the six portholes orthogonal to the ship's trajectory and stared out into a perfectly empty, perfectly dark sky. Blackness as pure and rich as squid ink looked through the portholes at him. He felt small and cold and very much alone.

He had to climb a thin ladder to reach the upper window, the one that faced forward to Ryugu-jo. It opened onto what looked, at first, like a globular cluster, a fistful of diamonds dumped onto a bolt of black velvet. He was looking at all the stars and galaxies that surrounded the ship, gathered by aberration into a glittering disc eight degrees across. It was a strange, beautiful, thoroughly unpleasant sight.

He clambered down again and screwed shut the lower portholes. He did not want the darkness looking in. It frayed his soul. He went to the monitor and played a game of chess to steady his nerves. The system informed him that he had been asleep for three years. The ship had arrived at its maximum travel speed of  $.997c$ , and soon it would flip its orientation and decelerate until they reached their target, Ryugu-jo in the Alpha Lyrae system. His wife, a prominent astrophysicist, had discovered and named the planet in graduate school. Leo lost his bishops, then his rooks, one after another, then the game. The ship's computer was polite about his loss.

Thinking of Esther, he brought up and played the recording she had made for him before departure. They were all required to have sixty hours of audio recordings by family and friends for viewing on the last leg of their journey, to keep them sane and functional in their isolation. He had made a recording for her, too. He had told her he loved her in every possible way for five hours, filled three hours with good jokes and one hour with bad, and he had sung to her and read aloud to her, crouched over the

microphone, imagining her face as she listened to him in perfect solitude, surrounded by darkness, flying toward him.

When her voice floated crisply into his ear, he felt his clenched muscles relax, as they always did when he was with her.

“Leo,” she said. He could hear her smile. “You’ll be up by now. I hope it wasn’t too bad. They say it’s usually horrible. Your hair’s probably a mess. I know you’ll look stunning anyway.”

He had to stop to gulp down water from a tube. The nearness of her voice, like a touch on his skin, sparked a few tears. They had met in graduate school in Berkeley, both hyphenated Americans with a preponderance of Japanese in front of the dash. He had preferred solitude as a student, working out alone his pale theorems on a blackboard, but she had insisted on the importance of family dinners, friends, colleagues, collaboration, a vast net of relationships drawn around her own lively, glimmering insights. He was fifth-generation, with great-grandparents who were interned at Heart Mountain; she was third-generation and inquisitive and knowledgeable about the cultural inheritance he had never claimed. He was in physics, a different department, but they had taken classes together and she had always scored near the top. She had fascinated him.

“First I will tell you the story of Urashima Taro.

“Long ago in a dusty fishing village near Edo there lived a fisherman whose name was Urashima Taro. His hands were hard and cracked from work and his skin was brown from sun, but he was a sweet, kind man who worked all day and dreamed strange dreams at night. Like you, in some ways. He fished to feed himself and his elderly parents as well, and the sea always provided them with enough to get by.

“One day he heard a few of the village children screaming with laughter. He went over to see what had excited them so, and found them kicking a small turtle back and forth.

“ ‘What do you think you’re doing?’ Urashima exclaimed.

“ ‘The turtle is ours,’ the children said. ‘We caught it. We’ll do what we wish with it.’

“ ‘Let me buy it from you,’ Urashima said, and as he spoke he took coins from his belt and held them out. ‘Can’t you find something better than that turtle to play with?’

“The children looked at each other. Then one of them gave Urashima the turtle and took the coins, and they ran off together, happy to have gotten the better part of the deal.

“Urashima took the frightened turtle, which was no bigger than one of his spread hands, and of a beautiful mottled green-brown color, down to the water. ‘There you go,’ he said, putting it back into the sea. ‘Be safe, and be careful, and don’t let them catch you again. I might not be around next time.’

“The turtle rowed off, and Urashima went to fish.”



Leo forced himself to stop the recording there. He would ration her voice like water in a desert to get through the impossibly long stretches of darkness. The computer indicated a list of maintenance tasks that were not urgent but that had waited until he had awoken, and he went down the list, accomplishing what he could.

After a week, it became easier to live in the narrow green bubble with a jewel-pile of stars above his head. Tubes for all his physical needs were lashed to the walls around him. The computer was loaded with a decent-sized library, a handful of mindless games, a month's worth of music, and software for data analysis, although any research he did on the ship would take another twenty-five years to transmit to Earth, which was plenty of time for another researcher to work out and publish the same conclusions independently.

He inspected the folded equipment in the bottom sections of the ship, self-extending solar panels and self-assembling buildings with crystalline panes and honeycombed layers, all of it intact despite the rigors of the journey. He cleaned the retracting landers and triple-checked the fuel tank and fuel lines. He played sixteen games of chess and won eight of them, five games of Go, four hours of Snake, and four hours of Tetris, and he read through a significant chunk of the first volume of the Encyclopedia Britannica, as well as two drab spy thrillers and a romance novel. He supposed that he had earned a few more minutes of Esther's voice.

"The next day," she said softly into his ear, "Urashima was out fishing in his boat when he heard someone call his name. He looked everywhere but the other boats were out of sight.

" 'Urashima,' someone said. 'Urashima!'

"Then he looked down and saw an enormous brown turtle, its face deeply wrinkled with wisdom.

" 'Sir,' Urashima said. 'Are you calling my name?'

" 'I am,' the turtle said. 'Yesterday you rescued a small turtle from children who would have killed it. The turtle was the Sea-King's daughter. Out of gratitude she sends me to invite you to her father's palace at the bottom of the sea.'

"Smiling, he said to the turtle, 'That is very kind of her, and it is good of you to invite me on your mistress's behalf, but how should I go to a palace at the bottom of the sea?'

" 'A very simple matter,' the turtle said. 'Climb onto my back and I will take you there.'

"So Urashima, wondering at his own boldness, climbed onto the turtle's back and held tight to the slick hard plates. They plunged down together into the sea, leaving behind the boat, the creamy waves of the surface, and the sun. Deeper and deeper they swam, past dazzling silver fish and jelly-eyed squid. Urashima watched everything pass with astonishment.

"Deep in the black-blue depths of the sea, where kelp grew in thick forests and monstrous fish hunted their prey with lanterns, the turtle turned his creased face to Urashima and said, 'Look ahead, we are approaching the Palace of the Sea King.'

“Urashima peered through the water. He saw first the graceful slopes of roofs like a bird about to take flight, and then a high, imposing gate of coral carved over with poetry.

“ ‘O!’ he said. ‘It is a beautiful place.’ And then, still full of amazement, he began to feel ashamed of his fisherman’s clothes.”

Leo stopped the recording and wiped the water from his eyes. Esther was following him on another flight, the Delta Aquarid, scheduled to launch two years after his. It would be a long wait. He would land and build a suitable home and laboratory for them on the arid, glistening plains of Ryugu-jo. Then he would stand in his suit under the alien stars, looking for a brightening light.

He read several classic novels and philosophical texts to pass the next few days and exercised on the stringy, wiry contraption collapsed into one wall. The long hibernation had melted the muscle from him and congealed the quick currents of his mind, but he had to be alert, intelligent, and at his peak physical condition when he arrived. He was supposed to be disciplined. He was not supposed to replay his wife’s voice over and over, with longing and anxiousness. So he selected his parents’ recordings.

“Your mother and I are proud of you. I know we said goodbye already, but please know that you have been everything we could have expected of you. We will be watching for your signal if we’re still around.”

“Leo? You must be awake now. And hungry. Remember to eat well and dress warm. You used to work for days without eating. You can’t do that now.”

He bowed his head. Their voices echoing in the ship’s green bubble made their absences as heavy and palpable as river stones. He had said goodbye exuberantly, distracted by other preparations. Shivering, he flicked to his wife.

“ — But the turtle said, ‘You must not worry, Urashima Taro.’ And the high, gleaming gates, each fashioned out of one single fan of coral, parted to let them pass.

“Within, robed fish bowed to welcome them, murmuring their greetings to the turtle and their welcome to Urashima Taro. He passed through gilded halls where water-light flickered on the walls, past lark-voiced women covered in scales and scarlet octopi and crabs with furious faces on their backs, into a chamber that shimmered like the interior of an abalone.

“There, on two thrones, sat the Dragon King and his daughter Otohime, who was lovelier than moonlight on water. She came down from her throne and said to Urashima, ‘I was the little turtle you saved yesterday, and I am grateful. I am yours if you will have me.’

“Urashima assented, of course, and all of them were led to the banquet laid out in his honor. Then began what were the happiest three years of his life, in which each day was better than the last.

“Toward the end of the three years, though, he began thinking melancholy thoughts about his aged parents on land. How were they getting by without their son? They ought to know how fortunate he was.

“He told Otohime about his wish to see his parents again, and her face grew long and sad. She tried to dissuade him, but he became more and more desirous of seeing his parents and his home.

“ ‘Please, let me go,’ he said. ‘For a few days only, and then I will come back to you and spend the rest of my life here in peace and contentment.’

“Sorrowfully, Otohime made arrangements for his return. At the last, she placed in his hands a small box tied with silk. ‘Take this with you,’ she said. ‘It will keep you safe, only you must be careful never to open it.’

“Urashima promised to obey. The great brown turtle who had first brought him to the Palace of the Sea King again gave him his back to sit upon, and soon they came to the shore near his village.

“But what had happened?

“Urashima found himself in an unfamiliar place. He recognized some features of the shoreline, but the houses were all different and crowded together. He could not find his old home.

“Distraught, he asked a passerby if he knew where his parents might be living. The young man, not unsympathetic, took Urashima to his own grandmother, whose knowledge was vast. The old woman looked up at him hesitantly when he put his question to her.

“ ‘I have heard of two people with those names,’ she told him. ‘They had a son named Urashima who drowned on a clear day. Only his empty boat was found. But that was hundreds of years ago, when this town was a scattering of fishing huts by the sea.’

“Urashima left with fear and confusion in his heart. He was utterly lost in the strange town, and could not tell where the turtle had brought him to shore. Nor did he know how to return to the Palace of the Sea King, because he had forgotten to ask.

“ ‘After some time, though, he remembered the box that Otohime had given him, which he had promised not to open. Because he could think of nothing else, he untied the silken cord that held it shut.

“An enormous white cloud blew out of the box and enveloped him. All his years overtook him at once. His hair went white as snow and his skin drooped and folded. His bones gave way. And there Urashima died.

“Time dilation is also called the Urashima Effect, after the legend,” Esther said conversationally into his ear. “I have told you this story so you would have time to calm down and clear your mind after awakening, and so that it would be easier for you to understand what I have to say. If I know you, you’ve saved up my recording for several days. You’ve been eating well and exercising. You should be physically and mentally stable by now. You are strong enough to hear what I have to say.

“Listen, my love. You were put to sleep a few weeks before launch, and while you were asleep the US and Japan came to the brink of war. Two cyber attacks on a dam and a power plant were traced back to Ichigaya, and three American citizens were arrested in Seattle. There is talk about rounding up those with Japanese blood again.

“It was decided that the Delta Aquarid would not be launched. Not next year. Not ever. The Ryugu-jo collaboration has been scrapped as being too dangerous, given the rising tensions between the two countries. It will be replaced by a unilateral program that will not have the funding for my flight.

“But they decided that you would go anyway. To show our unfaltering national courage in the face of threats and our gracious commitment to peacetime cooperation.

“I protested. This was my project, after all. They would not listen. They refused to stop your launch, and they refused to continue mine. It was suggested that if I did not put national interests ahead of my personal desires that I and my family would be the first to be removed to internment camps.

“We knew that this was possible, but we did not think it likely.

“They say you will not awaken until three years from now. In those three years you will have traveled twelve point five light years, and thirteen years will have passed on Earth. Your parents may be dead by the time you are listening to this. I will be forty-nine. You, my love, you will be only thirty-six, traveling away from me at close to the speed of light.”

Leo had frozen as he listened.

“I do not know who I will be by the time you hear this,” she said. “Thirteen years is a long time.

“But right now, right now I am your wife. I love you, Leo. I am angry and afraid. I broke into your ship’s systems and altered these recordings so that you would know what happened, why I am not following you, and what your choices are. From the beginning these ships were designed for automatic evacuation in case of ship failure during suspension. Specifically, your sleep spindle is equipped with an independent propulsion system and its own fuel stores. I have modified the program slightly, so that if you choose to do so, you can eject from the main ship in your spindle. Enter the manual override silkbox to divert the main fuel supply to the spindle, and look for a release lever by the hatch. It will take you a very long time to return, twenty Earth years at least, but you can go back into deep sleep, and the spindle will bring you safely home.

“The impulse of the spindle’s disconnection will throw off the calculations for the ship’s landing. There is some margin for error, but the engineers never considered a late-flight evacuation. The ship and its equipment will crash on Ryugu-jo. There will be no habitat and no lab on the planet until another Earth government sees fit to send the next scientific expedition.

“I do not know if I will be alive when you come back. If I am, I will be old. My hair will be gray. I will not be the wife you left behind. I will not be the person you remember.

“But at this moment I love you. At this moment I say: when I am seventy years old, I will watch the sky for you.

“If you do not return,” Esther said, “if you choose to fly onward to Ryugu-jo and work there alone — I would understand. We have always both chased the sense of

discovery. We have always been driven by the hunger for knowing new things. Your first communications will arrive on Earth fifty years after you've left, and your work will be groundbreaking, even if you never see its effects.

"My other audio logs are intact. I went and dug up all the records of your great-grandparents and your father's side of the family. If you fly onward, I will tell you, in the rest of the time I have, about how your great-grandfather met your great-grandmother in Heart Mountain during the war. I will tell you about your family and the different places your parents grew up, and where your ancestors came from. I will grow roots for you, so that you are not adrift and alone in the dark. You will know where you came from. You will know where you are going."

Her voice clicked off. Leo shut his eyes and saw the green ship and its precious cargo of instruments and electronics smashing into the dusty surface of Ryugu-jo. He thought of the lonely beacon he had been sent to build, which would beam back to Earth the things he had learned that no one else knew. He remembered precisely and vividly what it felt like to kiss Esther on her warm pink mouth.

He walked over to his sleep spindle, crouched, and ran his fingers along its smooth interior. They stopped on something that protruded from the wall, and he saw it then: a smooth silver bar barely extending into the sleeping space. If he typed in the command, if he climbed in and shut the hatch behind him, if he yanked on the lever

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The portholes all around him were dark and expressionless. Only the top window, pointing toward Alpha Lyrae, showed him a heap of converging stars.

They were traveling at .997c. He was thirty-six years old. It was only three years to Ryugu-jo.

Leo began another game of chess with the computer, and drew black.

# The Pilgrim and the Angel

Three days before Mr. Fareed Halawani was washed and turned to face the northeast, a beatific smile on his face, he had the unusual distinction of entertaining the angel Gabriel at the coffeeshop he operated in the unfashionable district of Moqattam in Cairo. Fareed was tipped back in his monobloc chair, watching the soccer game on television. The cigarette between his lips wobbled with disapproval at the referee's calls. Above him on the wall hung the photograph of a young man, barely eighteen, bleached to pale blue. His rolled-up prayer mat rested below. It was a quiet hour before lunch, and the coffeeshop was empty. Right as the referee held up a yellow card, a scrub-bearded man strode in.

"Peace to you, Fareed," the stranger boomed. "Arise!"

Fareed laughed and tapped out a grub of ash. "Peace to you. New to the neighborhood?"

"Not at all. I know you, Fareed," the stranger said. "You pray with devotion and give generously to the poor."

"So does my neighbor," said Fareed, "though that hasn't helped him find a husband for his big-nosed daughter. Can I get you a glass of tea?"

"The one thing you lack to perfect your faith is the hajj."

"Well, with business as slow as it is, and one thing and another ..." Fareed coughed. "Truth is, may God forgive me, I'm saving up to visit my son. He's an electrician in Miami. Doesn't call home. What would you like to drink?"

"I have come to take you on hajj."

"I've got too much to do without that," Fareed said. He had quarreled half the night with Umm Ahmed over their son, whose lengthening silence his wife interpreted as pneumonia or incarceration or death, though Fareed supposed it was simply the cheerful thoughtlessness of the young. He had washed six stacks of brown glasses caked and swirled with tea dust, his joints sour from four hours' sleep, before unrolling his shirtsleeves and sitting down to his soccer match. But for the rigorous sense of hospitality that his own father had drummed into him, nothing could have stirred him from his chair, his chewed cigarette, and the goals that Al-Ahly was piling up over Zamalek. His bones clicked as he stood. He reached for a clean glass.

But the angel spread his stippled peacock-colored wings, which trembled like paper and made the room run with light, and said again, simply, "I am taking you on hajj."

Fareed choked on his cigarette. "Now? Me? Are you crazy? I have customers to care for!"

Gabriel glanced around the deserted shop and shrugged, his wings dipping and prising the walls. Then he vanished. The prayer mat propped against the wall fluttered open and enfolded Fareed. While he kicked and expostulated, it carried him head-first out the door and into the clear hard sky, to the astonishment of a motorcyclist sputtering past.

“Sir! Sayyid! Are you djinn or demon?” Fareed called out. “Where are you taking me? What have I done?”

“I am taking you on hajj!” the angel said joyfully from within the rug, his voice muffled, as if by a mouthful of wool.

“If you are taking me anywhere,” Fareed said, struggling against the tightening mat, “make it Miami. And you have to get me home by midnight. Umm Ahmed will worry, and I have to shut up the shop.” He finally freed his arms from the grapple of the prayer mat. Below them, the countryside zoomed by, green and very distant. Fareed blanched.

“I can circle the globe as fast as thought,” said Gabriel. “Of course we’ll have you home by then.”

“Perhaps a little slower, I have a heart condition,” Fareed said, but they whistled up like a rocket, and the wind hammered the next words back into his throat.

When he dared to look again, the silver trickle of the Delta flared below them. Then they were gliding over the shark tooth of the Sinai and the crinkling, inscrutable sea.

“This is really not necessary,” Fareed shouted. “If I sell my shop I can buy an economy-class Emirates ticket to Jeddah tomorrow. You can send me home now.”

“No need to sell your shop!” the angel said. “No need to wrestle suitcases through the airport and sit for hours with someone’s knees in the small of your back. No need to worry.”

“Right,” Fareed said miserably.

By the time they reached the Arabian Peninsula, the dry, scouring wind had become unbearable. “Water,” Fareed croaked. “Please, water.”

“So spoke Ishmael in Hagar’s lap,” Gabriel said within the mat. “She had nothing to give him but prayers and tears. But I heard her crying out. I struck the ground with the tip of my wing, and water poured forth.”

“Water!”

“Yes, water as clear and cool as glass. That was the well Zamzam. I shall take you to drink from it.”

Fareed groaned a sand-scratched groan, then shut his eyes and muttered over and over the suras of the dying.

“Here we are,” Gabriel said, what felt like hours later, lofting a red-faced Fareed onto a heap of sand. “That’s Juhfa in the distance. Come, put on your ihram.”

“What ihram?” Fareed said.

But as he spoke, a bright, cold stream boiled up from the ground, and the prayer mat unraveled and wove itself into two soft white rectangles, which settled like tame doves at his feet.

Fareed gulped the sweet water, washed himself as well as he could, then peeled off his shirt and trousers and wound the white cloths about himself. The stream receded as silently as it had sprung up, the dark stain it made in the sand drying at once to nothing.

He had barely caught his breath when his white drapes shut like a fist and lifted him high into the air.

Wonders upon wonders, Fareed thought. But why him? Why an indulgent father, an inattentive husband, whose kindnesses were small and tea glass sized? Why would any angel bother himself with someone so unworthy?

Guilt niggled at him like a pebble in his shoe as he sailed over towns and sandy wastes. He could see Umm Ahmed rolling her eyes and shaking her head, hands on hips. Angels? You say angels took you to Mecca? This is why you left the shop unlocked and unwatched? What kind of a layabout husband did I marry? You want me to call you Hajji now? Are you kidding me? It filled him with a terrified kind of love.

“What am I going to tell Umm Ahmed?” he moaned.

“The truth! That your piety and prayers have been recognized. That Gabriel himself has led you on pilgrimage.”

“She will throw shoes at me,” Fareed sighed.

“Look,” the angel said, as if he had not heard. They were descending through glittering skyscrapers and moon-tipped minarets. The Grand Mosque loomed before them, a wedding cake of marble that stunned Fareed to speechlessness.

He had always imagined making the pilgrimage as a fat and successful old man, cushioned by Umm Ahmed’s sarcastic good humor and Ahmed’s bright chatter. Now he had neither. Loneliness shivered and rang in him like a note struck from a bell.

Fareed barely had time to stammer the talbiyah through parched lips as they flew around the Kaaba, once, twice, seven times, his body cradled in the unseen angel’s arms. His mumble was swallowed up in the susurrus of prayer rising from the slow white foam of pilgrims below. Fareed knew he was in the presence of the divine. He was humbled.

“Here is your Zamzam water,” the angel said. A plastic pitcher ascended to them, revolving slowly. Fareed grasped it and drank.

“Now hold tight,” the angel said, although Fareed had nothing to hold on to. The pitcher tumbled away like a meteor. “Over there is the path between Safa and Marwa, paved, enclosed, and air-conditioned now. Very comfortable and convenient.”

“I don’t suppose — ”

“No! We shall take the path as Hagar found it, the hot noonday sun beating upon her head. Think: your child dying in exile. Think: how strong her faith, how deep her despair.”



Fareed and the angel swooped seven times over the crenellations and cascades of white marble. As they hurtled over the walkway, dry air whipping their faces, Fareed imagined the rubble and grit below the elaborate masonry. He saw in his mind a thin dark woman plunging barefoot over the stones, tearing her black hair, her child left beneath a thornbush to suck thirstily at shadows. He thought of Umm Ahmed's reddened eyes and weary, dismissive waving — leave me alone, my son is gone — and of the phone that shrilled and yammered all day but rarely spoke with his son's voice. The image he held of his son was the photograph of Ahmed in uniform, taken during his mandatory service, when he was still a boy and anxious to please.

"Now — " the angel began, but Fareed spoke first, flapping his arms as he hung in the air.

"Enough! Enough!"

"But you haven't — "

"Give me my clothes and my shoes."

"Your faith is incomplete without the hajj," Gabriel remonstrated. "What answer will you give the other angels when they question you?"

Fareed felt cold despite the thick sunlight. His chest tightened. "Where are you taking me?"

"On hajj."

"No. Take me to my clothes."

The angel swerved out of the mosque. They returned to the desert place where his shirt and trousers lay folded beside his shoes. Only a little sand had accumulated in the heels. As Fareed stooped for them, his ihram fell away and became once more his threadbare prayer mat.

Beside him, the angel coalesced into a bluish glow containing edges and angles and complex, intersecting wings. Only the vaguest suggestion of a face shimmered in the chaos. He was painful to behold.

"Shall I bring you home?"

Fareed straightened, dust swirling and settling in his damp garments and sweat-sticky hair. A decision crystallized on his tongue. "If this is real and true, and I am not dreaming — if you are truly an angel and no evil spirit — then you will please take me to see my son."

"After all of this? After I brought you in my arms to the Honored City, to Masjid al-Haram itself — you want to go to America?"

"Especially after all of this," Fareed said. "If you are capable of these marvels, you can transport me to Florida as well."

The angel extruded a finger from chaos and curled it around his chin.

Fareed said, "Hagar burned and tore her feet as she ran in search of water for her son. Did you not hear her weeping?"

"That I did."

"And out of pity for her and her child you caused water to flow from barren rock."

"That is true."

“Then perhaps pity will move you to carry me to Miami,” said Fareed. “I have not seen my son in three years.” He folded his arms. “I did not ask you to come. I did not ask to be taken on hajj. I did not ask to be hauled out of my shop without so much as a note to my wife.”

“Also true.”

Fareed put one hand over his breast, where a dull ache was growing. “So take me to see my son. This once. It’s the least you could do for me. Considering.”

Deep inside the blue matrix of the angel, polygons meshed and disentangled with a sound like silver bells.

“All right, enough, let’s go,” Gabriel said, dissolving. “Back on the prayer mat with you.” The rug rose from the sand and hovered an inch above the ground, undulating smoothly.

Fareed looked at it and made a small, quiet, unhappy noise. He resolved that if he ever made it home, he would buy a new, less willful prayer mat, perhaps one of the cheap ones with a pattern of combs and pitchers that were made on Chinese looms.

Rolled up in his prayer mat, Mr. Fareed Halawani of Moqattam, coffeeshop owner and pilgrim, came to an abrupt halt in front of the Chelsea Hotel in Miami. The carpet snapped straight, and Fareed spun once in the air before hitting the manicured lawn.

His son turned away from his pickup, shouldering a wreath of wires. He wiped sweat and wet hair out of his eyes, blinking against the sunlight and the mirages wavering out of the pavement.

“Dad?” he said, surprised.

Fareed stared up at the blue sky, bottomless as the one over Cairo, and listened to the strange, extravagant hiss of the lawn sprinkler. A single defiant dandelion bobbed above his nose, drifting in and out of focus. His stomach was still roiling from the rough flight across the Atlantic.

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“That’s it,” Ahmed said, putting the back of his hand to his forehead. “I’m seeing things. I’m going crazy.”

“You could pretend to be happy to see me,” Fareed said.

“You can’t possibly be here. You can’t. I must have heatstroke.”

“Go drink some water. I’ll still be here when you get back.”

His son extended a browned, broad hand and flinched when Fareed grasped it. But he helped his father to his feet.

“Do you believe me now?” Fareed said.

“What are you doing here?”

“Visiting you. You don’t call home often enough.”

“How did you get here?”

The prayer mat lay meekly upon the grass.

“An angel brought me, I think.”

“An angel.”

“Maybe an ifrit, it was horrible enough. We went to Mecca first, then came here. I insisted.”

Ahmed stared. “Are you all right?”

“Of course I’m all right.”

“Did you hit your head? Do you feel feverish?”

Fareed frowned. “You think I’m lying.”

“No, I — ” Ahmed shook his head. “I’ve got a job to finish here, okay? You can come with me while I do it, then we’ll take you home and I’ll — we’ll figure out what to do with you.” He picked up his black toolbox in one hand and offered the other to his father.

“I don’t need to be supported,” Fareed said. “I feel fine.”

The truck’s tires squealed as they pulled off the highway onto a narrow, shaded road. Beards of gray moss trailed from the trees and brushed the top of the truck. Ahmed lived in a pleasant white box, its postage-stamp lawn planted with crimson creepers and edged with large, smooth stones.

“No visa, right?” Ahmed said, unlocking the door. “No passport?”

“Nothing. Very unofficial, this visit. But I don’t think you have to worry about getting me home,” Fareed said. He felt the rug twitch in his arms.

His son’s house contained only things that were bright and new: chairs and tables in colorful plastics or upholstered in triangle prints, a glass bookcase stuffed with calendars and phonebooks, two photos in chromium frames on the wall. One of the photos was of Fareed, his wife, and Ahmed, taken seven years ago in Alexandria. The other photograph —

“Who is she?” Fareed said, nudging the frame so it hung askew.

His son flushed. “She’s, I met her, ah, a few months ago — ”

“I see.”

“A year, actually,” Ahmed said, looking away. “She’s really nice. Very sweet. Really.”

“Does she cook well? Is she a believer? Are you engaged?” Fareed stared at the picture. “Does she have a name?”

“Rosa.” Ahmed shifted from one foot to another. “What do you want for dinner? I could make some fuul — ”

“You do know your mother and I have been trying to find you a good Egyptian girl? Aisha’s a sensible woman, thirty-six, steady job at the bank — ”

“That isn’t necessary.”

“Apparently not.” Fareed raised an eyebrow at Rosa, who beamed innocently from the frame. “You might have told us.”

“I was going to.”

“When was the last time you called, anyway?”

"I've been busy," Ahmed mumbled.

"I can see that."

"Business has been good."

"I'm — glad," Fareed said, glancing around the small room. The odor of newness filled his nose and made his chest twinge.

"Midnight," the angel whispered in his ear, faint as a breeze. "Five hours. You'll make a mess if you stay, you know. Hospital bills, no identification, no papers."

Fareed clasped his hands stiffly behind his back. "So, Rosa. Do I get to meet this woman?"

His son's silence hurt more than he expected.

"Is it my clothes? I'll change — "

"No."

"You can translate for me. Shouldn't she meet her fiancé's parents?"

"Fiancé? She's not — " Ahmed flung up his hands. "It's too complicated, Dad. Listen. If you paid someone, to bring you here — "

"I didn't," Fareed said quietly. "You have nothing to worry about. I'll be gone soon." He paused, studying his son. "If I let you do what you wanted when you were younger, it was out of love. Not wanting to see you caged up. I wonder if that was wrong of me."

"It was fine." Ahmed began to open and shut the cabinets.

Fareed sighed. "Do this for me," he said. He had spotted the black telephone on the counter, winking with unspoken messages, and now he lifted up the handset and held it out to his son. "Call your mother tonight. Just one phone call. Just one. She misses you. She needs you."

Ahmed hesitated, then nodded reluctantly.

"Don't worry about dinner. I should go."

"No, stay, please. I'll cook for you. You'll be impressed."

His son was different and strange in this house, taller and stronger than the boy Fareed remembered. He had worked confidently at the hotel, snipping, stripping, splicing, and now he conjured up knives, pans, chopping boards, a blue gas flame with the casual swiftness of experience.

To Fareed's surprise, Ahmed, who had never cooked or lifted a finger at home, made fuul with eggs and lemon-sauced lamb on rice. After cleaning the last crisp speck from his bowl, Fareed wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and pushed back from the table.

"It is very good."

Ahmed fixed his eyes on the floor, embarrassed.

"Two daughters," the angel said. "Three years apart. One will have your strong chin. One will have Umm Ahmed's singing voice."

"Call your mother," Fareed said. "And give Rosa my regards. I should be going." He glanced toward the sofa, over whose arm he had draped the prayer mat. A corner of the cloth fluttered, although there was no breeze in the room.

In their small flat in Moqattam, in the hours before dawn, Umm Ahmed rubbed a track in the floor with her pacing. Dinner had gone cold on the stove and moved uneaten into the fridge. The coffeeshop had been empty and unlocked. She had groped blindly over the lintel for the spare key and found it untouched, checked the register and found it still full. A thoughtful patron had turned off the television on his way out, though the ashtrays and water pipes still trailed gray ribbons in the air. Through the dimness of the shop the picture of Ahmed in fatigues, long faded to blue ghostliness, gazed down on her.

No one knew where her husband was. No one had seen him since morning. No one knew what had happened. She dropped into a kitchen chair, exhausted, and put her head in her arms. Stars and green neon lights glowed outside the window. Automobile engines roared through the night. She had the sinking sensation of being perfectly alone.

Then, on its cream-colored cradle, the phone rang and trembled, rang and trembled. "Hello? Ahmed? Habibi, it's been so long — how could you — how are you — ?"

Outside, like a scrap of burnt paper, her husband's prayer mat, wrapped around a dark, heavy form, drifted down to their doorstep.

# Daedalum, the Devil's Wheel

Sit down, sit. You'll hurt yourself jumping around like that. No, don't shout. Quiet studio on a quiet night — a rare thing. Why ruin it?

Come from? Difficult question. I was there in the city of Shahr-e-Sukhteh when a potter glazed his bowl with a leaping goat. I was there when Ting Huan painted animals onto his paper zoetropes and set them slinking and lunging in the hot air from his lamp. I am in the twenty-fourth of a second between frames, where human perception fails. Right now, in fact, I'm shining on theater screens and on the glass of cathode-ray sets and in the liquid crystals of monitors across the world. And I'm here with you, because you called.

You didn't? Usually my votary burns his arms against the lightbox, or dies over and over in a spare room where he can film himself taking an imaginary bullet to the chest, applying what he observes — ah. That scrape, where your head hit the corner of your desk. That would have been enough.

Naturally you'd fall asleep over your work. It's one AM and you've been pulling eighty-hour weeks for as long as you can remember. Production deadlines, yes. No shame in that.

Can't help, sorry. That's your job. But lean your head against my shoulder. I'm sympathetic. I'll listen.

What, the whiskers bother you? The beach-ball skull? The fangs? The tail? I thought you'd appreciate the potential for infinite stretch and squash. I'll smooth them all out. How's this?

Frogfaced is an unkind way of putting it. You didn't have those objections to Maryanne, and she approximates the classic pair of stacked spheres.

Very simple. I can see right through you. You're like a cel pegged under glass. Your four affairs. Your ten-year marriage, eroded by your devotion to me — I appreciate the compliment, by the way — and meanwhile Isabelle swelling, suspecting, expecting. Your lust for attention that leads you into other women's arms. Your streak of mulishness. You're a con man. A cheat. A shyster. A magician. I like you.

Not Him, no, but I'm the closest you'll get to the quickening of life. Triacetate and clay and cats using their tails for canes. I'm on the other side of reality, the better side, where physics is like lipstick, dabbed on if needed, and there's no such thing as death. It's all in the splitting of the seconds, see.

Twenty-four frames every second, or the illusion stutters. Belief flickers and shatters. Even if they splice the ends together, the soundtrack will veer off. So I'm demanding, when it comes to sacrifices and offerings. At least 86,000 drawings for a feature film in

two dimensions. In three, your weary flick, flick, flick through a dumbshow of polygons and nurbs, tweaking and torquing.

Speaking of offerings. Open your mouth for me. Wider, or it'll cut you. Stop squirming. It's only 35mm. There.

My left eye will do for lens and light. My right hand will be the takeup reel. Keep your chin up.

Here's your life projected on the wall. Your parents in crayon, and there's you — watching Looney Tunes in your pajamas, drawing penguins in the margins of your homework. It runs in your family. Your father loved Felix, and your grandfather snuck into nickelodeons on Saturdays. I'll crank faster through the litany of school, except those stretches where you were scribbling pterodactyls and fish. There's — what's her name? — gone. Alice. Beth. Chenelle. Danielle. She liked your cats, at least until you started drawing them with howitzers.

Please stop moving, you're making the picture shake. The faster I wind it out of you, the sooner this'll be over.

Art school. Elizabeth and Farah, tall and short, marvelous until they found out about each other. Your classes in anatomy, visual effects, life drawing, character rigging. What a crude and clumsy portfolio. But here's the job offer, finally. Here's your two dirty, grueling years as an assistant. Here's the second offer, the promotion, the raise. Now the wedding suit and blown-over chairs on the seaside. The late nights modeling and posing doe-eyed animals. The fights with Isabelle. Plates crashing to the floor. Cracking. Team meetings, sweat darkening an inch of your collar, making long wings under your arms. Your manager telling you how much your work stinks, how much he'd like to take your ideas into a cornfield and shoot them, how close you are to the edge of the axe.

That's it, the reel's run out. Feeling better? I thought so. Good to have it out, the fumes tend to build up explosively. Now —

Ah. I thought you'd never ask.

These are the standard packages:

A. Your work will spring to life. It will dance, it will convince, it will enchant. Your transfer of mocap to wireframe will never seem dull or mechanical. Your hollow shells will breathe and blink and blush. It will look like voodoo.

You're interested, I can tell. Oh, easy. The accelerating pulse of color in your cheeks. Besides, I can guess. Thirty-six years old, overlooked, unknown, a failing marriage, a father-to-be. Success is survival.

The price for all of this? Merely — long, sleepless nights with me. Nine thousand of them. And your wrists. You have such lovely, supple wrists. I shall mount them in mahogany, I think. What do you say?

Of course, that's only sensible. I'd want to know, too.

B. is a rise. Not meteoric, but assured. Lead animator, then director of animation five years later. Doesn't that sound nice? That's not all. Shortly afterwards, you become

head of the studio, or you split off to form your own profitable company. The less expensive option, this.

Expensive? You'd make oodles off of it! You'd be famous! Admired! Fawned over! Only gradually would you notice, as you floated up like a birthday balloon, how far you always were from your pen and tablet. The animated films you produce, your name splashed everywhere, you'll never touch with your own hands. All the work will be done by other people's brushes and pencils and styluses. You'll be so busy with decisions and budgets that you won't have a thought to spare for art, for the boy you were at seven, doodling flip books at the kitchen table. So.

No? Not satisfied? Neither of these appeal to you? A true artist! You have talent. I can see that. You want to press your fingerprints into history.

Well then. I offer you hunger. A mastery of my arts and an inextinguishable desire to do things better and differently. Break the box. Upset the game.

Others? Of course. Charles-Emile Reynaud. William Friese-Greene. Méliès. Yes, all of them. Yes.

Why, nothing at all. Not a clipping from your fingernail. Not a red cent.

I am quite serious.

An intelligent question. Only if you stand still. Only if you stop innovating. Take Reynaud, for example, smashing his praxinoscope as the more fashionable cinématographe swept Paris. Friese-Greene dying with the price of a cinema ticket in his pocket, which was all the money he had. One shilling and tenpence. The others — them too. You must not stand still. My hunger is a painted wolf that will chase you around the whirling rim of the world. Run, spin the wheel, and life will pour from your fingers. Geometry and time will be your dogs. Hesitate, let the bowl turn without you, and — snap! you are mine.

That was a joke. You are one of mine and always were. The question is, do I like you better at your desk, or do I prefer your median nerve coiled delicately on a cracker with caviar to taste?

Ha! That was also a joke! Why flinch? You used to appreciate the soft, surreal psychosis of cartoons. Mallets and violence! Bacchanals, decapitations, shotguns, dynamite! That's my sense of humor.

I don't give, darling. I take. Sometimes I negotiate. It's always unfair.

Choose. Don't make me wait, or you'll wake up with stabbing pains in your arms and claws for hands. A slow dissolve on your career. No love, no money, no lasting memory.

Begging doesn't suit you. Your heart's transparent to me. I don't give a pixel more than you do for your family. Your Isabelle would be only too happy — but to the point. Our transaction.

They can't hear you from here.

Certain privileges come with being a monarch of time and a master in the persistence of vision. I am nothing in the security cameras. Not a shiver. Not a blot.



Are you sure? A kiss, then, to seal the bargain. I'll peel this little yellow light out of you. You won't be needing it.

A gift I gave you, once. No matter. Tonight your department head will dream of you and what you could become. Expect a meeting next week.

You might. But you'll have the odor of vinegar to remember me by.

From the decay of acetate film.

No, I would never think of calling you a coward.

# Musée de l'Âme Seule

It was a bus skidding off a rain-slick ribbon of a road, everyone for a moment in flight, levitating from their seats, then the shear and scream of metal. This is what distinguishes you from others. For whether you were shot to bits in a war or whether a telephone pole crushed your liver against the steering wheel, the procedure is the same. You can assume what happened after that.

Unless you are wildly rich — and you are not — the puddles of your organs were scooped out and replaced with artificial tissues that perform the necessary filtration, synthesis, and excretion for a fraction of the price of a transplant. Splintered bones become slim metal shafts. Ceramic scales cover ruined skin. They wheeled you out of the operating room hooked up to a bouquet of tubes, batteries, and drains, a grid of lights screwed into your plates, blinking red, blue, green. Stable. Functioning. Okay. As the drugs wore off you began to fumble at the strange new surfaces of your body.

Your lover was in Zanzibar on a lucrative minerals contract and did not hear about your accident until after they had patched you up enough to tap out the first of many detailed emails. The damage was extensive, your reconstruction complicated. For the rest of our life you will need a constant power supply, a backup generator, and hourly system flushes. You could choose to live homebound, they say, never passing your door. They quote you the prices of the various adaptors and chargers you need, and you laugh and cannot stop laughing, lightning balls of pain throughout your unfamiliar body.

Or, the nurses say, nervously thumbing down their screens, you could move to an experimental city in Washington designed for patients like you, where you would enjoy a certain degree of freedom and company. They do not add, a place where everyone looks like you. But their eyes shine with kindness.

Your lover offers to pay for the house installation. If nothing else, you should give him credit for that.

One nurse makes sure you are loaned a set of equipment from the hospital for your transitional period. You consider absconding with the adaptors — if the prices are to be believed, they're worth a small Caribbean island or two — but you can't extract the tracking tags. Besides, the nurse was nice.

You ship two cardboard boxes to the address they give you and sell the rest. You give away your pair of budgerigars because you can't take them with you. Your lover never liked them. Too noisy. Too messy. Too demanding. They chewed up the clawfooted chair from his grandfather's estate, little chips and nocks like angry kisses in the gloss.

Unexpected difficulties with buses and trains and airlines keep your beloved in Zanzibar, so when it's time to leave, your friends do the heavy lifting for you. They are polite. They try not to stare.

"What a dipshit," you hear one mutter, unhooking a photo of your lover, and she is right. He should be here with you, packing sweaters you can't wear anymore in plastic, boxing up your dinner plates.

You take the medical flight that leaves twice a month, your new address printed on a plastic strip around your wrist. Your college roommate sees you off. You hand over your borrowed equipment at the gate, shrugging off the promises of care packages and visits. You flinch from the hug. You don't look back.

The air is sweet on your exposed skin when you first see the square mile of concrete that is Revival. At the center of the city, a sheaf of faceted skyscrapers floats above a squat white mall. Rings of smaller apartments slope down and away, glass and steel congealing to stucco, brick, and concrete as they approach the city limits, where buildings meet crisp dark pines, sharp as cuts. Far beyond the pines rise whitened mountains like licked ice cream. You will dream sometimes of climbing those mountains and plunging your face into soft, shocking snow.

It is impossible, of course. Your batteries have enough charge for a couple of hours, but without fresh supplies of lymph and plasma, there's only so much your filters can do. The city newsroom is staffed by former war reporters, bulletproof and bitter, and every couple of months there's a story about a disconnection, either accidental or deliberate.

In determinedly cheerful emails, you recount to your absent lover everything he has missed. You have been assigned a fifteen-by-fifteen room with enormous windows in the southeast corner of Revival. You have not yet bought a mirror. Very few stores stock them, and you are not sure you want one. Pets are prohibited. Rent is moderate but food prices are inflated and utility bills are astronomical. Double-digit municipal taxes give you a slight headache. The consortium of medical providers managing the city is nominally a nonprofit, but you do the numbers on the back of an electricity bill and figure the executives must be drawing large salaries.

Since you are an accountant, you can work remotely. Your clients, who heard about the bus crash and have offered their timid condolences, assure you that it does not matter to them whether you are based in Des Moines or Los Angeles or Revival, Washington. Other residents are not so lucky. Their debts are paid for out of their retirement savings, or their estate, or alternatively by the sale of their genome and medical history and whatever organic components remain at the time of their death. The lease document makes for an interesting read. You tear the pages into tiny strips as you go.

All too soon, you memorize the silver line of cables and pumps that strings apartment block to apartment block, running through grocery store aisles and along library shelves and shooting up the five floors of the bright, sterile mall. You know where it turns at the end of the pavement, in the shadow of the pines, and loops back toward the

mall. A local joke has it that the silver lines, if viewed from above, if all the intervening roofs and floors and ceilings were removed, spell out freedom.

The city is lousy with crows, who dive for flashes of metal and glints of porcelain. They are not discouraged by thirty failed attempts if, on the thirty-first, they snatch a pin, a lens, a loose filament. They are easy to fend off, but the cold acquisitiveness in their eyes makes you shiver.

Your lover comes to visit you only once, four and a half months after you move to Revival. You are slow, still limping, and a minute late. He climbs out of the taxi in his pressed suit and razor tie and looks around, fiddling with a button, cufflinks, hair. You are grateful that he recognizes you immediately. But he shrinks back a fraction of an inch when his eyes reach the steel screwed into your face and the coarse, fitful wires that grow where your skull was shaved.

You are surprised. In Revival, where glamour magazines gather dust and fade, you are considered beautiful. Eyes slide toward you on the street. You had almost forgotten about the seams and screws, the viscous yellow and red fluids trickling in and out of you, the cables tangling everywhere.

If you are honest with yourself, as you suddenly have to be, standing face to face with him, the two of you have not been lovers for some time. Right before the accident, you had agreed to separate for six months, as an audit of the relationship. You fed sunflower seeds to Tessie as he talked about opportunities in Tanzania, about looking for clarity in his life, his need to feel whole, like a hammer swing, a home run, his entire body committed to one motion. You nodded, you admitted the solidity of his arguments, and you stroked the budgie so roughly it bit your finger.

While you were apart, he wrote a paragraph once a week in response to your daily emails. You would reread it three or four times, looking for the elided thought, the sunken meaning. It was October, the busy season, and you were starting to make mistakes and lose paperwork. When the last return was triple-checked and filed, you heaved a sigh of relief and boarded a bus for Maine, where you would spend your vacation with a friend.

It was raining. Water entered an unnoticed hole in the toe of your boot, and you wrote a brief grumble to your love. Then the bus rumbled into the night, and you shut your eyes and let yourself relax.

So you are not exactly together, you realize, as you take his stiff arm. Together, you go to the third-nicest restaurant in the city for lunch. Your lover cannot stop staring at the servers, who are mostly inorganic by now and capable of carrying hundreds of pounds on each slender, tempered arm. His brows stitch together, and all the filet mignon in the world can't undo them.

Afterwards, he follows you to your apartment and undresses you with clumsy hands, snagging sleeves on tubes and almost unplugging your drip. But he cannot bring himself to touch the ceramic plates of your abdomen, which vibrate softly from the tiny motors underneath. You are disappointed but not altogether surprised.

You see your lover off with the driest of kisses. Then you compose a long email that is gentle and gracious, that is all the best parts of you gathered on the screen.

Your former lover does not reply.

“He wants a window-display life,” your old roommate says when you call, finally, ashamed of your silence, your sticky sniffing. “You’re not perfect enough for that. Not anymore.” And she is right.

You try to find friends. Revival is a city, after all. You smile at people in the library as they browse books, music, electronics, language implants, avoiding the woman in the mystery section who is methodically tearing apart paperbacks. Most of the librarians are asleep at their desks.

You chat up tired cashiers. You sit in the synthetic park feeding bread to a duck paddling circles in the fountain. But the people you meet are still in various stages of recovery. They can only talk about the passive-aggressive bosses, the snowballing interest on their credit cards, the diagnoses, the lost loves, the affairs and then the tequila that preceded the leap off a bridge, or the microwaved dinners the children ate before they piled into the van for judo class, nine minutes before the other car roared through a red light and everything shattered. If only there were do-overs, if only there were apologies, if only the last meal could have been homemade chicken soup or macaroni and cheese. If only.

It is interesting and terrible the first time, but when you run into them later, they recite the same stories with the tragic and farcical earnestness of wind-up toys, and you make hasty excuses and leave.

Eight months after you arrive in Revival, you make an appointment for repairs. Your left lung, which is silicon rubber, has a small tear, and you are also due for a heart check. The clinic is one of two, staffed with five doctors and fifteen technicians, none of whom have missing pieces or live in the city. Your technician, Joel, is young, lean, and cheerful, with a strong nose and wild brown hair recently harrowed by a comb.

“Hey, stranger,” he says. “First time? Let’s have a look.” He winds your tubes around one arm so they don’t obstruct his hands and looks expectantly at you. Suddenly you are too shy to open up your body to him, to expose the secret gushing and dripping of pump and membrane and diaphragm, the click and thump of your pneumatic plastic heart.

“It’ll be fine,” he says. “You’ve got a Mark 5 heart and the D34-15 lung assembly. I did my certs on both of those, so I know them better than anything. I collect defective parts, and I can almost never find Mark 5s. They don’t break.”

His palm is warm on your ventral plates. He inserts his fingertips into the seamed depression where they overlap and parts the plates with surprising delicacy. Because your body was rebuilt for other people to troubleshoot, you cannot see the gauges and displays that he studies with wrinkled brow, although you know they’re there, you’ve heard them ticking and whirring at night.

“Looking great,” he says. “Mhm. You do a good job of taking care of this thing.”

He reaches into your chest. You close your eyes and imagine that your heart is your own heart, wet and yielding to his thumbs, not a mass-produced model identical to hundreds of others he has inspected and installed. You wonder what his hair would feel like between your remaining fingers. Corn silk. Merino. Mink.

In ten minutes, Joel patches your lung and proclaims your Mk. 5 a beautiful ticker. You compliment him on the job. Already you can feel the extra oxygen brightening your blood, and the dull headache that has followed you all week fades. You are feeling so improved, in fact, that before you can think better of it, you invite him to coffee.

His mouth opens into a circle. You can see the glint of your zygomatic plate on the surface of his eyes. The inner tips of his eyebrows lift with pity.

“Well, isn’t this awkward,” he says, attempting a smile. “Never happened to me before.”

You would be amused by his panic if it were not so painful. You mumble something or other.

“Bit of a — doctor-patient relationship — even if I’m not a doctor. You know.”

You do know.

Your cheeks burn like torches the entire walk home. Today the rigid, brilliant architecture of the city seems like too much to bear. Your image flares at you from windows and glass doors. Yes, you are ugly. Yes, you are broken. Briefly, you consider disconnecting yourself and plunging into the trees in the few minutes before you collapse and all your diagnostic lights go red. You walk to the edge of the woods and sit quietly on the pavement, looking into the underbrush.

The trees are full of crows. Every few feet the grass is punctuated with a black pinion feather. Somewhere in these woods, the crows are building nests with wire, silicone, plastic, sequins of steel.

You listen to their quarrelling and think regretfully of your green and yellow budgies. Sweet-voiced things, your idea of love. They nuzzled your fingers and each other, unworried, content, knowing there’d be seeds in the feeder and water every morning.

You are motionless for so long that one crow flaps down to inspect you, eyeing his reflection in your metal side. He pecks. Once, twice. You have been working a loose wire out of your neck, which was wound up somewhere inside you but is now poking out, and you twist it off and hold out the gleaming piece.

He yanks it from your fingers and flees. Immediately, two more crows drop out of the trees to pummel him. You watch his oily back disappear into a squall of black bodies, reappear, disappear again. As they fight, black beak, jet claw, ragged bundles of greed, you remember what it meant to feel desire.

Over the course of a week, as a glittering shape flowers inside your head, you examine your budget, your savings, your expenses.

You order twelve carnival mirrors and set them up in your apartment. There is no more room for your bed, so you sell that to a new arrival. You also buy three old industrial robots, rusted and caked in machine oil. The boxes arrive thick and fast, and your apartment manager, who knows the square footage of your room, raises his

single eyebrow at you when you come to collect them. Now, everywhere you turn, you confront an elastic vision of yourself, stretching as high as the ceiling and snapping to the shortness of a child. The eyes in the mirror gradually lose their fear.

You write about everything to your former lover as a matter of habit, not expecting a reply.

Biting your cheek, you call Joel to ask where you can buy faulty artificial organs. He listens to your flustered explanation and gives you contacts as well as three hearts, Mk. 1, 2, and 4, out of his own collection. You balance them in the robots' pincers like apples in a bowl.

With a net and a handful of bread, you catch birds on the roof: house sparrows, rock pigeons, crows, an unhappy seagull. You release the birds in your glass coffin crammed with carnival mirrors. They batter themselves against the window and shit on the mirrors and on you. Your room is all trapped, frantic motion, exaggerated in swells and rolls of glass. People look sideways at you when you leave your room, your chrome and steel parts streaked with white. You look at your slumped, stretched, stained reflections and recognize nothing and no one.

Sometimes, when the room is dark, you can admit that you are making this for someone who will never see it, who will never come back, who will never write to you. Then you roll onto your good side and listen to the flurry of wings until you fall asleep.

You set out neatly lettered signs in your window and on your door. Musée de l'Âme Seule. Signage is probably against building regulations, but you used the shreds of your lease to line your room. You run a notice in the news that is two inches by two inches. Saturdays and Sundays. You keep your door unlocked. You feed the birds, you wipe down the hearts, and you wait.

Joel comes to see you, or perhaps to see what you've done with his hearts.

"Where do you sleep?" he says, looking around.

Anywhere, you say.

His expression says he thinks parts other than your lung need examining. But he is also curious. He touches the orange arms curled around artificial ventricles, the frozen rovers sprouting substitute livers at odd angles.

"I'm not very good at art," he says. A sparrow shits in his hair.

You offer to wipe up the mess, you are already wetting a towel in the sink, but he has to leave, he is meeting someone somewhere else, he has left his jacket at the clinic, he is late.

Two weeks later, on a Sunday morning, one more person walks into your museum. She swings open your door and is surprised into laughter by a burst of gray wings. She is even uglier than you are, most of her face gone, hard bright camera lenses for eyes. She has glued pages of books and playbills over her carapace.

"I was an actress," she says.

She has been in all the shows that she wears. The pages came from books she liked but couldn't keep. Her name is Nim. She has been in the city *ab urbe condita*, she says, meaning four years ago, when it was fifteen residents and three doctors and one

building. She walks around your room as she talks, studying the mirrors, the machines, the birds, the bounce of her own reflection.

Without asking permission, she shoves a window open and shoos out the birds. They leave in one long shout of white and gray and brown. Flecks of down spin and swirl in their wake.

You ask her how long it took to remember how to walk, how to function, how to smile.

“Two weeks. Three months. Two years.” She shrugs. “Sooner or later.”

Nim has no hair, only a complex web of filaments across her metal skull, flickering her thoughts in patterns too quick to follow. Her hands are small and dark and unscarred.

“Look,” she says, touching the skin of your cheek, showing off her lean titanium legs. “Together we make one whole person.”

More than that, you want to say, as you add up fingers and toes and organs and elbows. A sum that is greater than one. More than two. But you are tongue-tied and dazed. You realize that you stink of birds and bird shit.

She smiles at your confusion. “I’ll bring you some gloves and cleaning supplies.”

What for, you say stupidly.

“To shine up this place.”

But this is what I am, you say. This is what I look like. You stretch out your hands to indicate the mirrors, the stained, spattered floors, the streaked walls.

“You could use a spit and polish too, frankly.” She demonstrates, using her sleeve, and you blush.

But why are you here, you ask. Why is she touching you with gentleness? You are afraid that this is all an accident, a colossal misunderstanding, that she will walk out of the door and vanish like your sparrows.

“I’m looking for a collaborator,” she says. “I’ve got an idea. Performance art. Public service. If you can clean up and come for lunch tomorrow, I’ll tell you about it.”

Inside you, a window opens.

That was when you stopped writing to me. Your long, careful emails came to an end. What is there to say? The stories of people we have loved and injured and deserted are incomplete to us.

If I could write an ending for you, it would be Nim holding your new hand in hers, Nim tickling your back until you wheeze with laughter, the two of you commandeering an office block for a new museum, a museum of broken and repaired people, where anyone for an hour or three can pose in a spotlight and glitter, glisten, gleam, haloed in light, light leaping off the white teeth of their laughter. But it is never that easy, and that is not my right.

You knew, I think, before I did. That no one can have a life that is without questions, without cracks. And now you are the deepest one in mine.



Here is what I have. A year and two months of emails. A restaurant check. A glossy fragment from a magazine, two inches by two inches. Terse. Opaque. Musée de l'Âme Réparée. Saturdays and Sundays. Revival, WA.

What could I say? What could I ever say?

# Local Stop on the Floating Train

Under a citrus slice of moon, the white train wound silently through the night. The third car was almost empty, holding only a few commuters in silk ties and wingtips and coiffed socialites with well-ordered weekends. Conscious of her nose-rings and clogs, Lela slipped into a seat at the end of a vacant row. For her birthday, Gwen had given her a ticket to a play in the City. Gwen had gone with her boy, who was fresh off nine months on duty and nuts about her, splashing her with movies, merengue, piano-bar dinners, unable to let five minutes pass without plastering his face against her shoulder and inhaling her skin. Seeing the two of them together, Lela was embarrassed but also happy, and sometimes she wondered what it was like to be loved and spoiled like that.

It was a good play, her friend said, so good he hadn't grabbed her but once in the dark. There was rain in it, real rain tipped from the catwalks, and sword fighting, and kisses, and a sonofabitch who didn't know how good he had it — this was how the friend had described it, big-eyed and waving her glass-ringed hands. You'll like it, you really will. Never having been to a play, Lela had tipped her head to one side and listened and smiled.

That day she had left her shift early. She had swabbed down the tables with cheerful emphasis, then shut herself in the bathroom and put jade drops in her ears and a slick of purple on her mouth. It was two hours by floating train to the City, so she brought along a ratty paperback to pass the time.

Every so often the train stopped and ingested passengers. Without noticing it, she borrowed their faces for the characters in her book: the hero, the king, the witch with slender hands. Businessmen and college students settled around her. Soon there was only one open seat in the car, to her left.

A man boarded the train, towing a small blonde boy behind him.

"There's Mom, wave goodbye," he said, and the boy dutifully did so. With a low soft sigh, the train slid into motion again. "How is she?"

"We went to the hospital yesterday."

"The hospital?"

"She cut her thumb."

"How?"

"I dunno. Making dinner."

The man surveyed the car, then pointed his son to the empty seat and planted himself in front of Lela. His eyes went through her like a cold steel pin. She didn't look at him. Stares like that were six for a dollar in the white neighborhood where she worked. She never knew what it was, exactly, whether her copper skin or long

black braid or some inflection in her voice that was not sufficiently deferential. In the restaurant she was quick, cold, and polite; on the street she glared right back, making her eyes wide and frightening. But her legs were sore from standing all day, and she was looking forward to a nice evening. She turned a page. The hero had learned his mission: to steal from the enemy's stronghold an enchanted mirror that showed things as they truly were.

Soon they were gliding through the nuclear desert. Outside the window ran miles of charred and desolate plains. Here and there, a faint green flame flickered up from the ash. No one knew what the glimmerings meant. Some said they marked the encampments of those who lived in the desert, irradiated and melted into grotesque shapes with too many hands and eyes and tongues. Some said they were the signal fires of extraterrestrials lured to Earth by its patchwork of radioactive wastelands. No one knew exactly, because no one had ever gone into the nuclear desert and returned. The train was clad in lead to protect the passengers, but as the small placards on the walls warned, riders were still exposed to low levels of radiation.

The man still stared at Lela, his arms crossed on his chest. There were no more stops before the City, so he did not have to balance against the overhead rail. He coughed. Her absorption in her book deepened. The little boy was glancing back and forth between his father and the girl.

A blue-hatted conductor came through the car for tickets, whistling tunelessly. His scanner flared red and cheeped over each ticket. Twit — twit — twit. He was the only black man in the car. He said to the standing man, "There's empty seats two cars down, sir."

"I prefer to stand," he said, frowning at Lela. She did not look up, but her spine acquired a greater degree of rigidity. Captured and shackled, the hero pleaded for his life, but she was finding it difficult to listen to him, to drop down from the bright white train into the high hall with its tapestried walls and rushy flags. She found herself reading the same paragraph over and over. The conductor shrugged, zapped their tickets, and moved on.

The train dragged a long plume of ash behind it as it went. The moon rose slightly in the sky then began to descend. The pressure of the angry eyes upon her had scattered the words on the page; they milled like ants and rearranged themselves. Finally the girl folded her book over a finger and said to the man, "What do you want?"

He opened and shut his mouth.

"You've been glaring at me for an hour. Why?"

"You should have given me your seat," the man said. "That would have been the polite thing to do."

"There were other seats." She opened her book again. "You were trying to intimidate me."

"Take your nose out of that book," he said, raising his voice. "Get a life."

The girl said nothing, flipping a page.

"You know what you need? A boyfriend. You'd be nicer if you could get laid."

The whole car could hear him. The other passengers looked fixedly through the lead glass windows at the drifts of ash.

He swelled. "You know what? You'd never be able to keep a guy, even if you could get one."

He turned and strode out of the car. Lela let out her breath and slumped. The oval of paper under her thumb was wavy with dampness.

"Sorry," whispered the boy, his blue eyes wide and worried. "I'm sorry. Sorry."

"It's not your fault," she said. "Don't worry about it."

Then the doors whisked open, and the father marched in with the conductor behind him. The boy fell silent.

"Who do you think you are?" the conductor said. "Harassing this man and his son? Not on my train!"

Lela's head jerked up in surprise.

"But — "

"Thank you, sir. I trust you'll deal with her appropriately." The man was smiling.

The conductor took her arm. "You'll have to disembark at the next stop." He pulled her out of her seat.

"But there aren't any stops before the City," Lela said, stupid with shock.

"There's a local stop."

She stumbled, struggling against his grip. "But I haven't done anything wrong!" she cried. Fear peeled her voice.

"Now's not the time to change your story. You've had your chance."

The other passengers remained fascinated by the featureless scenery outside. None of them made a sound. None of them met her eyes. The airlock opened and the conductor forced her into the vestibule.

The train was slowing, although they were far from the City. The girl did not understand what was happening. They pulled up at a blackened platform, dark except for the light washing from the train. There were no buildings beyond the crumbling platform. The town, if there had been one, had been blasted into oblivion a long time ago.

She said, "There isn't another train tonight."

"Should have thought of that before making trouble," the conductor said. "None of the trains stop here, anyway."

The leaded doors opened, and the girl was pushed onto the platform. Before she recovered her balance, the doors snicked shut again. The faces that peered out at her were pale, pitying, curious, indifferent. The father never turned his head. The boy was standing on his seat, flattening his nose against the window. He and Lela stared at each other. Then the train began to move.

Through the windows that flashed past she saw the smooth gleaming interior of the train, brightly lit, each metal bar polished to a satin sheen.

When the train was gone, the ash it had stirred up settled heavily on her eyelashes and hair. She stood gazing after the vanishing point of light. Then she climbed carefully

down the broken steps, tucking the book under her arm. Far away, she could see a dim, twisting flame, green as glass. If she squinted, she thought she could pick out dark shapes moving around it.

The girl put down one foot, then the other, into the ankle-deep ash. It was soft as milkweed and swallowed all sound. She began to walk toward the flame. Already she could feel herself changing.

# Woman at Exhibition

Because it was the only decoration on the cracked white walls of the apartment, Estelle found herself gazing for the fiftieth time at the faded print of Nighthawks that had survived Luke's college years with its corners thumbtacked to lace. Her attention drifted from the counterboy's white cap and shoulders to the gleaming coffee urns to the bright spots of the saltshakers while Luke spoke.

"I told you, I don't believe in it. We're getting married because you want to. Tell me where to show up and when, and I'll be there. But I don't want to hear about the planning. You wanted a ring, I got you a ring. That's my end of the bargain."

"It's a lot to handle on top of the commissions. I could use help."

"Me too. Tonight's set won't learn itself. Do me a favor and pick up a pizza if you're not gonna cook. Half bacon, half eggplant."

Estelle moved toward their upright, its lid scarred by beer rings.

"I thought I'd work on the sonata before dinner. The deadline's Tuesday."

"Not here. I need practice time. Composing's mostly in the head, isn't it?" Luke slung his saxophone over his shoulder and kissed her. The touch of his mouth sent sparks crackling and snapping through her, bright as magnesium, and she softened into him. The saxophone bumped against her hips. "You're a genius," he said, running a hand through her hair. "You can write anywhere, it'll be brilliant."

And just like that, Estelle was clumping down the six flights of stairs to the street. She hadn't bothered to grab her notebook; she needed the piano and the fine grain of the chipped keys. It was June, and the air oozed like a sponge. While she waited for a train, moisture puddled under her arms and in the gutters of her chest and lower back. All along her skin she felt the sensation of tiny, rolling droplets. Her rayon blouse grew dark and tacky. As she came above ground she flapped its hem, gathering a breeze out of the dead air.

Four blocks southwest from the station, she met the protruding gray forehead of the Whitney. There was a special exhibition of Edward Hopper's work. Now and then in the subway an advertisement for it had caught her attention, and today her long look at Luke's poster had, in gentle and unobtrusive fashion, settled her upon a visit. Inside, dazzled in the sudden dimness, she paid the entrance fee, groped her way to the elevator, and pressed the button for the fourth floor.

The air conditioning sucked her damp skin into goosebumps. She did not realize until too late that she was walking the wrong way through the exhibition. But by then she was already lost in the colors and could not turn away.

Smaller chalks and charcoals trailed each of the stark, luminous oils. Fifty-two sketches flanked the vermilion theatre in New York Movie, where a blonde usherette leaned against a wall, sunk in thought. A black-and-white film played on a screen she could not see. Consulting the sketches, Estelle spotted the painting's slight of hand. An entire hallway had been elided, a staircase compressed. The theatre had first been sawn apart, its colors boiled down to pencil annotations, only afterwards reconstructed in splendor as a palace of the mind.

The general effect of the sketches was that of an optical illusion. Passing the preparatory studies for *Office at Night*, she watched a charcoal typewriter appear and disappear from a corner desk. When she came to the final oil, she looked hard at the typewriter, willing it to vanish, and was disappointed.

Everywhere were harsh blondes and redheads who seemed somehow a single woman, and everywhere, too, were gaunt, beaky men who seemed in all their disguises the same man. The two figures migrated from canvas to canvas, occupying dozens of incongruous lives, always enigmatic, always monumental, always cold.

Estelle liked best the corner room crammed with sharp caricatures and soft oils that Hopper had done in Paris at twenty-four. She had gone to Paris with Luke for a jazz festival, and her memories of the city were as gentle as the oils. Luke had fetched them almond pastries in the morning and red wine at night and introduced her to other musicians, a kiss each cheek, you must meet my beautiful Estelle. Behind her back she had squeezed his hand.

After the stage and scaffolding had been dismantled but before they flew home, the two of them had sat at white café tables like the ones in *Soir Bleu*, Luke smoking, Estelle trying to read the future in the grit from her coffee cup. Hopper's painting brought together a clown in white paint and white ruff, a prostitute, Rembrandt in a beret with a pointed orange beard. The next table over, a macquereau smirked and smoked. Could that be Rembrandt? Estelle pursed her lips around an imagined cigarette. One painter's salute to another. It had to be. It must.

Their company had been less extraordinary. She recalled American and Italian tourists, two cantankerous teenagers, a grim-faced waiter, a slobbering child. But she had been happy nevertheless, happier than she had ever been.

"You saved my ass six times," Luke had said. "I counted. Come everywhere with me. Please."

He covered her hand with his.

"Of course I will," she said.

"It'll be beautiful. Just wait. And I won't tie you down, don't be afraid of that. You'll always be free."

"Of course," she said again, looking down into her cup.

In the center of the room, glass-topped cabinets presented quick charcoals: a gruff, puffed colonel, a pig, women mincing in bustles and heels. Among these, Estelle noticed four brown sketches of the same woman. No five-minute scribble, no easy laugh, she. When Estelle turned, she saw the woman framed on the wall. Her long legs were

crossed neatly at the ankles, and a slim sly smile peeked out under a feathered hat. She wondered who the woman was and how the young Edward Hopper had paid for her time.

At the end of the room she came to Le Pont Royal. Estelle studied the smooth Seine, the high-roofed Pavillon de Flore, the bridge arcing into the gilt baguette frame. The painting was slightly broader than her shoulders, warm as an embrace, and it smacked of youth's blunt, determined mimicry. Nothing in it foreshadowed the stormy colors and geometries of the older Hopper. He might have been pleasant to kiss at that age, she thought.

As she stood there, considering the creamy canvas, she discovered that she was hungry. No, not hungry, but starving. Her stomach twisted with want. Without comprehending what she did, or why, knowing only that her need was urgent and overwhelming, Estelle stepped forward and bit into Le Pont Royal.

The hundred-year-old canvas yielded to her teeth. She gripped the frame tightly and chewed and tore. Her mouth filled with thick, bitter chips: butter, river blue, shingle, cloud, sky. Distantly, as if through a fog, she could hear shouting.

Hands seized her shoulders, but Estelle clutched the painting and ate and ate. Not until she had swallowed half the canvas did she come to herself. The white walls, the wooden floor, the heavy smell of linseed, the hubbub of voices — all crashed in upon her senses. Estelle licked her lips, tasted metal, and gagged. Her teeth were coated with powder. Dried paint flecked her blouse, mouth, and chin. The remnants of Le Pont Royal hung sadly in their frame, still attached to the wall.

“Jesus Christ!”

“The hell was that?”

“Is she crazy?”

“You think you’ve seen everything, and then — ”

“Precinct’s sending someone in fifteen.”

Estelle coughed and spat out a sliver of paint. Her throat was raw, her tongue thick and oily. The circle of museum guards contracted around her. Behind them, tourists gaped, pointed, whispered. They raised cameras and phones. Estelle covered her face, horrified.

Four months to the wedding, and she was going to prison. Estelle was accomplished and capable, Estelle was starting to make a small name for herself, and now, out of the blue, she had eaten a Hopper at the Whitney. Luke hated to be embarrassed. Here was his girlfriend with crumbs of paint down her blouse, half an hour from the headlines. It was over. Everything was over. Had she lost her mind? Where had Estelle gone, and who was she now? She started to cry.

“Dr. Glass?”

“Let me see.”

“Be careful, you don’t know — ”



The crush of black suits shifted, and a woman pushed through. Raking her fingers through her short, steely hair, she appraised Estelle. Two silver loops clashed on her wrist, and two triangles swung in her ears.

“I’ll talk to her, Louis. You’ll brief the police?”

“I’ll let you know when they get here.”

“Thanks. What a mess.”

“Sure you don’t want one of us? She might run.”

“It’s probably not necessary. I mean, look at her. Come this way, please.”

She took Estelle’s arm and steered her through an Authorized Only door. Numb with dread, Estelle barely noticed the hallways they went down, the stairs they went up.

The office the woman unlocked and entered was plain. It held a long, antique desk, two clawlegged chairs in a green stripe, a few shelves of large art books, and a cherry-wood diploma whose lettering was too Gothic to be legible.

“Tea?” the woman said, flicking on an electric kettle. As the water rustled, she took one of the wingback chairs and steeped her fingers.

“What’s your name?”

“Estelle.” She rubbed her face, smearing tears and paint. A wet patch was spreading on her blouse. “I’m really sorry. It’s not enough, I know. But I am.”

“Call me Dr. Glass. I’m chief curator here. That was my exhibit that you damaged. Why?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t mean to.”

“What did it feel like?”

“What? Oh. I felt — looking at that painting — I felt I had to eat it. The house a piece of gingerbread, the bridge whipped like chiffon cake. And the colors, the delicious colors, sweet but not too sweet — ” Her throat worked, and she swallowed. “It was awful. It wasn’t me.”

The kettle simmered and clicked, and the curator rose. From the depths of the desk she excavated a roll of cookies and a handful of napkins, which she offered to Estelle with a paper cup of tea. Estelle dabbed at her face and clothes.

“When am I going to be arrested?”

“Calm down. Drink your tea.”

The tea in the cup jumped and splashed and scalded her mouth. Estelle realized she was shaking and set the cup down.

“If I may ask, what do you know about Edward Hopper?”

“Not much. I do music, not art.”

“His wife was also a painter. Josephine Nivison was successful. Jo Hopper, not so much. She left her enormous collection of Hopper’s work and her own to the Whitney. You saw part of it out there, in fact.”

“I didn’t see anything by her.”

“The Whitney destroyed or lost her work. Most of it, anyway. What’s left is locked in storage. It was the sixties, she was a minor artist, a woman... Dark times. I have some paintings of hers that she never painted. I think you should see them.”

“Sorry?”

Dr. Glass retrieved a worn cardboard portfolio from between the desk and the wall and undid the laces.

“Title and year on the edge here. Awakening, 1915.”

They were looking at a small unstretched canvas, shimmering with color. A girl stared out at them, her brush lifted to an easel. Behind her, a mirror caught in vague outline her straight back, her bent arm, her half-finished painting of a man.

“From the mustache, I’m guessing that’s Robert Henri,” Dr. Glass said. “He taught both of them. Edward and Jo. Did a lovely portrait of her as an art student that’s now in Milwaukee.”

In New York Notices, 1923, a bright, blurred crowd moved through a gallery of watercolors. Only the watercolors could be seen in any detail. Here a beached red boat, there a yellow house under larches, women at market, a vase foaming with flowers.

“Probably Rosenberg’s New Gallery. She had two shows there.”

The Discovery, 1924, was a dark, cold watercolor of two figures naked in bed.

“This isn’t nice at all,” Estelle said. The long frame of the man dug into the woman’s back. Under his skin, the bones stood out like stretcher bars. His hands were clamped around her wrists. His face was averted. She was struggling.

“No, it’s not.”

The Artist Models, 1930, showed a woman posing naked before an open window, the curtains billowing around her. In the lower right corner, a man painted furiously. Portraits of different women spilled from his easel onto the floor: an earnest blonde, an obliging brunette, a scowling blackhaired beauty. Each face looked angrier than the last.

His Automobile, 1937, was a watercolor of a restaurant and a stately Dodge, blue as the sky. The driver’s door stood open. A body in a red and orange flowered dress was caught in the moment of falling out the door. The man hauling at her arm, doubled over with the effort, cut as lean and purposeful a shape as a tire jack.

He Draws a Line, 1942, had a man on hands and knees absorbed in chalking a line across the watercolor’s lower edge. Past him stood an easel, a line of irregular canvases propped against the wall, two uncovered windows, a table, a stool.

“That’s Washington Square.”

“They lived there?”

“For many years, yes.”

She Bites, He Pushes, 1942, was full of sharp angles. A woman toppled into a squat refrigerator, windmilling her arms. Her head struck a shelf stacked with dishes and mugs. The colors were hectic, the atmosphere strained. The woman was alone except for a shadow cast from outside the frame, which crawled over the floor and the lower half of her torso.

There was something familiar about the mugs on the shelf. Estelle blinked and looked closer. The same mugs sat on the counter in Nighthawks. She had seen them often enough to be certain.

“There are hardly representative, of course, but you can still see how her work tends to be vibrant and open. This one is a departure, to say the least.”

Mourning, 1967. A black table, a black vase overflowing with white flowers, a heap of black pearl necklaces. Through the open window, a white beach ran into a black and endless sea.

“Did he die?” Estelle said.

“May of that year. Jo a year after.”

Dr. Glass shut the portfolio.

“You said she never painted these,” Estelle said. “That doesn’t make sense. They’re here. They’re dated. You have them.”

“Are you sure?”

The curator passed her the portfolio. Holding her breath, afraid of another disaster, Estelle raised the battered flaps. Where watercolors had run riot, there was only a heap of burnt paper. As she exhaled, the sheets flaked and fell into ashes.

“I don’t understand.”

Dr. Glass took the portfolio and shook it over a trashcan. Specks of gray fluttered upward and clung to her suit.

“Jo Hopper never painted these,” she said. “They’ve been appearing since her death in 1968. Appearing and disappearing. As you saw.”

“Why did you show me?”

“You ate Le Pont Royal. Jo wanted you to see. I can’t tell you more than that.”

Estelle shook her head.

“I’m not any happier about it than you are, I assure you. It came with the job.” Dr. Glass knotted the strings and replaced the portfolio.

There was a light rap at the door. A frazzled head poked around it, then a rumpled shirt, then the rest of the man. He was followed by a policewoman, and Estelle felt her heart drop into her flats.

“Here’s the draft of the loss report, you’ll have to sign off on it — ”

“Thanks, Will.”

“Is this the vandal?” the officer said, coming to a halt in front of Estelle. She had a jaw like granite, and every bit of metal on her uniform glittered.

“I’m not — ” Estelle broke off under her stare.

“That’s an engagement ring, isn’t it? Nice girl like you, with a future, now you’re looking at several years. Should have thought about that.”

“I didn’t — ”

“It was an accident,” Dr. Glass said. “We won’t be pressing charges.”

“Your assistant says that was hundreds of thousands in damages.”

“She’ll be permanently banned, of course. But accidents happen.”

“If it was up to me — ”

“Our art can sometimes have an overpowering influence. It’s unfortunate but not unheard of. My predecessor dealt with a few cases. If you look back to, oh, September 1976, April 1982 — your precinct should have the files — ”

The policewoman snorted. “It’s your funeral.”

“You’ll want our statements.”

“Let’s make it quick.” She uncapped a pen and pointed it at Estelle. “You. What happened.”

“I had to get out of the apartment,” Estelle began. “Luke needed to practice.” She watched the policewoman’s eyebrows rise higher and higher as she described the events of that afternoon.

When the paperwork was filed and the officer gone, muttering about lunatics and slippery slopes, Dr. Glass rumped her silver hair and heaved a sigh.

“The museum’s closing soon. Shall I show you out?”

Estelle followed the curator down a fluorescent stairwell to a back door and stepped out into the hot, noisy world. Madison Avenue throbbed with six-o’clock traffic. A pigeon whirred past them, shedding fluff.

“You can’t come back here. You understand that.”

“Yes.” Estelle shivered. “I’m not sure I’d want to.”

“That’s that, then.”

“Thank you.” She watched a shred of down sink softly to the pavement. “Just one thing, about Jo — ”

But the door had already closed.

# Braid of Days and Wake of Nights

The seat beneath her was glossy plastic and not interested in prolonging their acquaintance. Shifting from thigh to thigh, Julia Popova flipped through newspapers in search of the logo and slogans for bourbon that she had labored over for weeks.

New York Times, March 3, 2005 — ESCAPED CARRIAGE HORSE. Reports to the Parks Department of a stray white horse in Central Park puzzled the Horse and Carriage Association and the Teamsters alike. “No one’s unaccounted for,” said spokesman Mark Houdlin. “Both the Clinton Park and Hell’s Kitchen stables are full at the end of the day.”

New York Daily News, March 3, 2005 — LOST OPERA HORSE? Recent sightings of a white horse on the lam in Central Park have perplexed locals and police. A spokesman from the Metropolitan Opera was unable to confirm rumors that their production of Aida is short one four-legged cast member.

New York Post, March 3, 2005 — MYSTERIOUS VOLUNTEER BEAUTIFICATION EFFORTS IN PARK. Seen Central Park lately? You might not recognize it. Over the last two weeks the Lake was raked for plastic cups, the Turtle Pond’s thick algae was skimmed off, and the Kennedy Reservoir is now clear as a freshly Windexed mirror. No one has owned up to seeing or being one of the unknown do-gooders, but park staff are thankful.

Julia found her quarter-page ads in “Business and Travel.” Orange silk and opalized ammonites. Blissful extinction. The amber bottle gleaming like sunken treasure in the middle of it all. But the colors that were arresting on the office computers were watery in newsprint, diluted by the fluorescent lights of the clinic.

“How’d they turn out?” Vivian asked. The soft leatherette armchair seemed to swallow both her and the taxane drip feeding into her left arm.

Julia shook her head.

“Okay, how was your date with whatshername, Ellen?”

Julia sighed. “I don’t want to talk about it. But look at this. They’re still writing about the horse.”

“For Chrissake, Julia.”

“Soup. It looks like they’re selling fancy soup. Beef, butter, onions. I told them to use less color. Save it for the slicks. Client’s going to yell at me tomorrow.”

“You should quit.”

“I wish.”

With an immaculate thumbnail, Julia peeled open the ziplock bag in her lap. The coil of hair inside, wide as her thumb and nine feet long, was woven throughout with

black and gold strands in equal proportion. When Vivian began chemo last May, her hair had skimmed the lower edge of her scapulae. Three weeks later, her purple stripes had rinsed to blond, and she had not dyed them again. Vivian had smiled at Julia in the bathroom mirror, eyebrows high and brave, but after the first handful slithered to the floor, she handed the humming razor to Julia and covered her eyes.

“You do it,” she said.

The braid was almost finished. Julia had added some of her own hair as needed, taking surreptitious snips behind her ears and bleaching her brown waves in a bowl. Vivian’s false gold was easier to match than her black. The braid felt both coarse and silky, crackling softly when she ran her fingers along it. Only a few loose locks remained at the bottom of the bag.

Vivian kept glancing at the braid, then away, shivering.

“The hell are you doing with my hair?”

“The Victorians made jewelry out of their relatives’ hair,” Julia said.

“Sure, but in front of them?” Vivian screwed up her mouth. “I’m not dead yet.”

“It’s not a mourning piece.”

“So what is it?”

“A gift.”

“For who?”

Julia hesitated. “Maybe you?”

“Nope. No way.” Vivian scratched the down on her skull. She couldn’t stand wigs and wore brilliant silk scarves printed with birds and stars instead. “Weird, isn’t it? Doesn’t bother me when it’s growing on my head, but I can’t stand it when it’s cut. Slopped around the salon floor — ugh. Like seeing a severed hand.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay, I won’t look.”

Vivian opened Applied and Environmental Biology and held it up to her face while Julia overlapped yellow strand and black, tugging, straightening, smoothing. When, after half an hour, she noticed Vivian hadn’t turned the page, she pinned the end of the braid and dropped everything into her purse.

Eventually a nurse in pink scrubs sailed over and slid the cannula out of Vivian’s arm. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

Vivian pushed herself upright without speaking, her face pale, and lurched toward the bathroom. Julia followed. Over the retching and splashing, she made soothing noises and rubbed circles in Vivian’s back.

“Pharmacy stop?”

“Thanks.”

Julia had bought her indestructible orange Beetle as a ticket out of rusting Paterson with three summers waitressing in an Italian restaurant and five illustrations for two evanescent magazines. She called it the Lady. When the art school letter came, Julia had fought all day with her parents and cried all night for a month before stuffing the Lady to the roof and driving to Providence. She had not looked back.

Although parking took a large bite out of her budget, the odometer clocked 170,000, and the odors of frying oil, mint gum, nail polish, and drive-through coffee had painted a thin and indelible layer over the interior, Julia kept the Lady when she moved to Queens. Even thinking about selling the Lady struck her as disloyal. Vivian's sudden need was in many ways welcome, and Julia told herself that she had kept the car for times like these.

She left Vivian hunched in the car and ducked into the hard bright aisles of the corner drugstore. At the counter she collected a battery of pharmaceuticals in orange canisters: yolk-yellow Zofran, pentagons of Ativan, dented white Percocet, and smooth white Lomotil. The paper bags crinkled as she thrust them into Vivian's hands.

"You doing okay?"

Vivian was breathing through her teeth, and a bitter, stinging smell drifted from her skin. She wouldn't meet Julia's eyes. "Swell."

Julia double-parked on 119th and watched Vivian until she vanished into her walkup.

Although Central Park at night featured often in her mother's monthly litany of New York horrors, and Julia could not walk there after dark without twitching and jumping at shadows, in all the newspaper accounts she had read, the horse had never been observed before twilight. She went at dusk on a Friday with the braid snaking through the belt loops of her jeans and a jackknife jammed into a pocket to compensate for the judo classes she had never taken. Hawkers of ice cream and soda were shuttering their silver carts. Couples pushed strollers through the orange puddles of park lights, leaning into each other. The air began blue and dimmed and filled with bats.

"Come out," she whispered. "I'm here."

The fine gray gravel of the Bridle Path crunched under her canvas shoes. She walked to Riftstone Bridge, now a pool of darkness, and peered underneath. The smell of urine scraped her nose but bothered her less than it once had. There was a faint, bubbling snore.

"Hello?"

Plastic rustled. Something moved.

"What do you want?" The voice was whiskey and dry leaves.

Squinting into the gloom, Julia distinguished two dim eyes and a glint of teeth. "I'm looking for a white horse."

"Fresh out of horses, sorry. All I got is UFOs and Elvis." The chuckle was low but female, and Julia unlocked her shoulders. "Why?"

"For a friend. She's sick." She tried a smile. "My name's Julia."

The woman who shuffled out was tall and swaddled in stained clothes. "Lorrie."

"So have you seen a horse? No halter, no bridle. Just running loose."

"How's a pony ride help?"

"It might be a unicorn." She bit the inside of her cheek, anticipating laughter. None was forthcoming. Lorrie only folded her arms and tilted her head. "Saint Hildegard

wrote that unicorn liver healed leprosy. That unicorn leather cured fevers. The horn was good against poison. No one says anything about cancer, but I figure — ”

“Why you askin me?”

“You live here. You might have seen it.”

“I don’t live here.” She coughed thickly. “I been crashin with my uncle when I can, but his house is fulla kids. New wife can’t stand me. Sometimes I hit the drop-in center, but those are bad nights.”

“Oh.”

“March is too cold to sleep outside. You hafta be desperate.”

Julia pulled a crumpled bill from her back pocket and held it out, but her hand was swatted aside.

“My problems they bigger than a dollar, unicorn girl.”

Julia said, “You must think I’m nuts.”

“Of course you is. You carryin a fruit knife shorter than my pinky. You think that’s gonna keep you safe from folks like me.” She wheezed with laughter as Julia’s hand went to her hip. “Your fingers smell like metal. You keep dippin in that pocket. You leanin backwards like you wanna run.”

“I’m sorry.” Her face went hot.

“It’s A-okay. You crazy. And whiter than Wonder Bread. Lots of you come joggin scared around here at night, like you think we bite.”

“You didn’t laugh when I started talking about unicorns.”

“Don’t nobody in this city think I exist either. Used to work at the Aqueduct before I hurt my back. Thought I was invisible then. Now? Bam! Gone. What’ve I got against unicorns?”

“Have you seen one?”

Lorrie shook her head. “Go home.”

“Please. Tell me.”

“You got ten dollars? I’d use it better than you.”

When the money was safely concealed in her clothes, Lorrie straightened and stared. “Think, babygirl. If there a unicorn here? All of us be sleepin sweeter. With no pain. We be smellin honey, fresh bread, lilacs, good days. The wild ones they settle. The angry ones they calm down. If we got a unicorn, why would I tell you? With that knife in your pocket? Leather? Livers? A sick friend? What’s that knife for?”

Julia heard bodies stirring sleepily under the bridge.

“Nowhere in this city is safe for me,” Lorrie said. “I do what I can to get by. You smell safe and selfish. Hunger and pain and need, you don’t know. Go home.”

Julia took two steps back, then turned and hurried up the path. She could feel Lorrie’s eyes on her. Not until she emerged from the chained green tangle of the park into the traffic of Central Park West did she exhale her double lungful of fear.

“I have to talk to you — ”



"If there's a unicorn," Julia said, "I'll bring you its horn. I promise. Abracadabra, Australopithecus, poof, tumors gone. Like that."

"No. Listen to me." Vivian shut the cabinet and set two mugs on the scarred table. A chocolate cake slumped half-eaten on scalloped gold paper. WE'IL MISS YOU VIV in green jelly icing. A cardboard box of her notebooks and rubber-banded pens had been shoved under a chair, and Julia kept kicking it by accident.

Her last day at the lab, Vivian said. Everyone had pretended the departure was a happy one.

"But that's not what you want to tell me."

"Ginger? Chamomile? Black?" Vivian fanned out the teabags. "We're stopping chemo. I'm done."

"You can't."

"Three fresh lesions on my liver. You want to argue? It's right here, you can talk to it if you want." She tipped a kettle, and hot water chortled into the mugs. "Be real persuasive, cuz they say two months, best case."

Julia raised a cup, the steam blurring her vision. The right words were somewhere, buried under jingles, loud typefaces, the shotgun poetry of advertising. Never again would she smell bergamot without the sting of tears.

"Give me some time. Let me try."

"Spend my last days vomiting, you mean?"

"There's a unicorn, Vivian."

Vivian's laugh was hard and tired. "People stopped believing in unicorns in middle school."

"So I have a rich imaginative life. Sue me."

"You couldn't imagine your way out of a cubicle." Vivian rubbed her eyes. "I remember when you talked grants, galleries, art shows, MoMA. Where are you now? Selling watches and vacations to people who don't want them. Cold calling. Retouching portraits of steak."

Julia pushed away from the table. "I have to live, Viv."

"And I have to die. Well, we all do. But I'm going to do it the way I want. With friends. With dignity. More water?"

"No."

Vivian refilled both mugs. "Anyway, Asian girls never get unicorns."

"How do you know that?"

"Beagle. L'Engle. Lewis. Coville and Gaiman, even though I was too old. I looked anyway, just in case. When I was a kid it was Laurence Yep, take it or leave it. Lots of dragons, no unicorns. None for you either, right? Aren't you more likely to find a domovoi or a leshy? When did Russia get unicorns?"

"Late fifteenth century."

"You checked."

"Of course I checked."

Vivian grabbed Julia's hand across the table. "It's sweet of you, but you've got better things to do."

"Fine. No unicorns for you." Julia picked up a pen and one of the insurance forms on the table. "Say you're giving up. What's next?"

"Hospice. Starting next week."

Hospice meant nurses, Julia discovered, and the sweetish smell of Roxanol. Clutching a sheaf of filled-out forms, she let herself in with the spare key, then stood in the hallway, bewildered, as brisk strangers squeezed past her. A silver IV tree had sprouted in the kitchen. Vivian's aunt, who drove up from Queens on the weekends with cooked food in foil pans, fussed at Julia, plucking off her coat and bag.

"Nothing serious," she said to the expression on Julia's face. "It's the rules. Someone has to be here every day. One of her cousins, or me."

Vivian was lying in bed, her eyes closed, a transparent loop of oxygen around her head. The tall windows she loved were ajar and clattered softly as the warm, astringent air inside mixed with the damp breath of March.

Loneliness gusted through Julia, sudden as rain.

"What am I going to do without you?" she asked, hating herself for the question.

Vivian opened one eye. "Watch it. I'm not dead yet."

"You know what I mean."

"I can still beat your ass. Tremble in fear."

Julia sat gingerly on the edge of the bed, careful not to bounce. Nine years ago they had washed up in New York together, both of them certain that success lay around the corner, or behind the next door, even as the gum-glazed sidewalk ate blisters into their heels and the rent came due again and again and again. The thought of living without Vivian's rude jokes and good taste, her crayon annotations of newspapers and leaflets, her abrupt phone calls — "You free at eight? Nice dress? Good!" — hollowed her chest. "What will I do?"

"Cry. Breathe. Live. Fall in love. You'll be better at that when I'm gone, really you will. Skydive. Have children, if you want them. Play tennis. Snorkel. Visit Morocco. All the things I can't do anymore. Next question."

"It's not fair."

"Fair?" Vivian smacked the mattress. "I wanted kids. I got Gregory and cancer. I wanted a career in microbiology. I got two postdocs and Gregory and a layoff and cancer."

"And six second-author papers in first-tier journals."

"I'm thirty-three, Julia. Thirty-three! I'll never ride a horse or learn how to snowboard, I'll never drive to the Grand Canyon and order coffee in every diner on the way, I'll never see Moscow, I'll never have a houseboat, I won't win any Nobels, I won't see any more meteor showers, I won't pick any more apples, and I'll never, ever have a daughter. Don't talk to me about fair. Don't even think about fair when you're in the same room as me. I'll rip it out of your head and crush it into a ball and eat it."

Vivian's aunt stuck her head into the room. "Everything all right?"

“Yup.”

“Doing great.”

The aunt retreated. Vivian bit her lip and crushed the edge of the quilt in her hands. In a quiet voice, she said, “He’ll be here Saturday. Can you pick him up from JFK?”

“Who?”

“Gregory.”

Julia blinked. “He’s coming?”

“He heard I was going off chemo.”

“How thoughtful. I’m shocked.”

“I may have called him.” Vivian put her hands over her face. “I may have asked him to come.”

“So I meet him at the airport and make him disappear? I don’t do murder, normally, but for you — ”

“Just bring him here.”

“Vivian — ”

“Loose ends,” she said, not meeting her eyes.

The marriage had not been a long one. Vivian had disappeared for a year, a deeper and more profound absence than when she was dating Gregory, while she tried on wife as if it were a winter coat, turning and stretching and looking at herself in it, testing its warmth. She smiled less and less, the few times Julia caught her, and a little gutter of worry dug itself into her brow.

One month after the separation, Vivian had called and let the room around her fill with silence.

“I’m coming over,” Julia said, after waiting in vain for a word.

In a voice small and sticky with grief, Vivian said: “Okay.”

Julia had barged into the apartment with two bottles of cheap chardonnay and a handful of black-and-white movies. Vivian scrubbed her eyes with the back of one hand.

“I’m such a mess — ”

“It’s fine.”

Vivian’s third glass was almost empty when she snatched the remote and jabbed down the sound.

“He said he never wanted children. Three years into our marriage! He only told me he did because he thought I might change his mind. Or that he might change mine. ‘I wanted to give us a chance,’ ” she said, imitating his sweeping gestures, and laughed with a catch in her throat. “ ‘Too many cultural differences,’ he said. ‘I don’t want my kids speaking a language I don’t know. How would that look to everyone?’ He said it was hard enough listening to me jabbering with my relatives, not knowing when we were laughing at him. He said the kids wouldn’t resemble either of us — how was he supposed to handle that — ”

Julia splashed out another half-glass for her. “He loved you, though.”

“Never. Never ever.” Vivian shuddered.

“I was at your wedding. I saw how he stared at you.” Vivian had glowed and glimmered, her dress a waterfall, her hair black wings. “No one could see you and not love you.”

“Except him.”

“All right. He’s a jackass. Why am I defending him?” Julia slung an arm around Vivian’s shoulders. “I barely saw you while you were together. He’s a jerk of the first water, just for that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re back now, so honestly, I owe him.”

After a long silence, Julia glanced sideways. Vivian had fallen asleep, legs drawn up to her chest, beginning to snore. Julia tossed a blanket over her before turning off the TV and the lights.

It was rare for Vivian to ask for anything, and although Julia disapproved so strongly her stomach hurt, she could not say no. On Saturday, she drove into the arteriosclerotic snarl of the airport to retrieve Gregory. She found him, punctual as a banker, planted at the prearranged section of curbside pickup: his hair as curly as ever, houndstooth jacket and trousers slightly mellowed from the straight line, a pair of tortoiseshell glasses weighing down his face. One suitcase, sized for the overhead bin, sat at his feet. He blinked rapidly at the Lady as Julia pulled alongside and beeped.

“You’re — Jean — ”

“Julia Popova. You haven’t changed at all.”

He had to duck his head climbing into the car. “That’s right. Vivian’s friend.”

“Admit it, you don’t remember me.”

“I do, I do.” He grinned at her. “Her best friend. The artist. Took me a second.”

“Where are you staying?”

“I’ve got a hotel on the East Side. Vivian first, though.”

They inched out of the airport under a pewter sky, the churn of jet engines trembling the little car. Odd, how airports diffused an industrial grayness across the landscape, washing out yellows and reds, leaching warmth from complexions.

“How long has Viv been sick?” Gregory said. “If you don’t mind my asking.”

“She didn’t tell you?”

“She’s been very mysterious about the whole thing. I didn’t know until two weeks ago. ‘Hey Gregory,’ she says. ‘I’m dying. Stage Four ovarian, isn’t that funny? Want to swing by one last time?’ Like she hadn’t pitched me out the door.”

Julia snorted.

“So how long?”

“Chemo off and on for the last eleven months.”

Gregory chewed his lower lip, gazing at the pawnshops and discount clothing stores that glided by. “Did everyone know?”

“Her friends. Her family.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Suit yourself.”

“Did they take out her ovaries?”

“Excuse me?” Julia almost missed a stoplight flicking from yellow to red. She stomped on the brakes, and they both choked against their seatbelts. “What’s that to you?”

“She’s my wife,” Gregory said. And that, however regrettable, was true.

It was night when they arrived. A half moon hung in the strip of sky between buildings. Gregory wavered on the sidewalk, looking up.

“You can go home now,” he told her through the car window.

“Are you sure?”

“I’ll get a taxi. I appreciate it, Julia.”

She sat in the car, watching windows blink awake in his path. For forty-five minutes she listened inattentively to the radio station she had flicked on to forestall conversation, and to the light breeze that rattled paper cups and cans down the street. Black and brown people walked by, chattering, smoking, hefting groceries. The moon fell behind a roof. Gregory did not come outside.

At last she turned the key in the ignition and drove home.

The next day thickened into a soup of meetings in conference rooms sharp with the smell of whiteboard markers and phone calls that locked in zero new clients. Julia stopped at a café for a roast beef sandwich with too much mustard before heading to the park. She was looking forward to grass and greenness and the sight of water, even stagnant and sulfurous water. As she sucked threads of onion from between her teeth, her cell phone hummed.

“Are you going to Central Park?”

“Gregory?”

“Which entrance?”

“I’m taking the A.”

“Okay, which stop?”

“The Museum. Look, I’d rather not — ”

“See you there.”

Julia huffed and stomped down the steps into the station. She was busy, urgently busy, and not about to wait for him. But as she walked to Naturalists’ Gate, she heard her name.

Gregory, pressed and polished, waved at her from a bench. Her own hair had blown every which way. Her irritation deepened.

“I thought this was it. Vivian said you used to meet here after work and walk to Conservatory Garden.”

The humid summer evenings she and Vivian had spent wandering through the park, pausing for ice cream éclairs and the occasional concert, appeared at an impossible

distance. It had been centuries, surely. Kingdoms had risen and crumbled in the interim. She was obscurely hurt that Gregory knew about those days.

“What else did she say?”

“You’re hunting a unicorn.”

Julia compressed her lips. “She’s told you a lot, then.”

“Vivian’s very fond of you. Thank you for taking care of her.”

“Someone had to.”

“Do you mind if I come? I’ve never gone on a unicorn hunt.”

I do mind, Julia wanted to say, but the words stuck in her throat. Her silence did not discourage him. They walked together into the darkening park, Gregory glancing at her, tipping his head toward her, as attentive as if they were a couple.

“What are you planning to do?”

“I have some ideas.”

“Isn’t there a procedure? You need a virgin — ”

“How do you know?”

“I read,” he said. “Or I used to. Viv fell for my bookshelf before she fell for me. Ask her about it sometime. So, you borrowing a kid for this?”

“No.”

“It’s just, if you don’t mind my saying so, you look past the age — also too beautiful — ”

“Fuck off,” she said.

He stared at her. “You are?”

“I said fuck off.”

“Do you mean technically? Are you a lesbian? Or have you never — ”

“I mean get lost. Catch a cab, go home. What are you doing here, anyway?”

“Look, I didn’t mean to — ” He raised his palms in apology. “How do I say it? There’s no imagination in my job. No imagination outside of it, either. No time to read, no time to socialize, and no nice girl dates a married man. Work, sleep, work. Dull as hell. I got excited when I heard about your unicorn.”

“You’re laughing at me.”

“I’m not.”

Julia strode off, Gregory trailing behind her. At the eastern edge of the Ramble, she bent over two hoof-shaped patches of verbena and goldenseal. The clusters ran in double lines across the grass.

“What’s that?”

“The flowers of old New York,” she said. “They grow where it goes.”

Gregory pinched off a purple blossom and sniffed it. “This is amazing,” he said.

From what she had seen, she figured that the age of the plants corresponded to the freshness of the trail. She ignored luxurious, knee-high tracks of bee balm and wild ginger in favor of a younger trail of asters, following it until it vanished at an outcrop of schist.

“Damn,” she said, slapping the rock. “This one, I thought — ”

“Keep going,” Gregory said.

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

They were descending Cedar Hill when Gregory dropped to a crouch.

“Here,” he said. The print was damp, as long as her hand, an impression of teardrops curving toward each other. It was speckled with seedlings.

Julia knelt, bending until her nose was on a level with the sprouts. Their cotyledons were spread, the tips of the first true leaves beginning to unfurl. It was not clear what they would become.

“I’m not making this up,” she said.

“No.”

“They’re growing, look.”

There was a faint metallic scrape behind them, like a hobnail on rock. Julia’s neck prickled. She pushed herself upright, brushing her hands on her jeans, and dug in her purse for the knife. The night was thick around them, and she could not see much.

On the crest of the hill, a flash of silver.

“Oh,” she said, transfixed.

Tree trunks divided and obscured the white form, but as it picked its way through them, she glimpsed a feathering mane, a silver wisp of beard, a horn like a slant of light. It shone pearl and silver in the darkness.

“You are,” she said. “You exist.”

As if it had heard, the unicorn swung its head toward them. The point of its horn traced a bright curl in the air. In that long, frozen moment, Julia observed the fine pulse of one vein in its neck, the mud on its forelocks, the leaves tangled in its mane. Vapor fogged its nostrils. It regarded them with an opaque intelligence, considering.

Then it wheeled and trotted in their direction.

Gregory stayed still. Moving slowly, Julia slid the coil of black and golden hair from her purse and weighed it in one hand. Would the unicorn let her wrap her arms around its neck? Or would she have to lasso it? Any horse could snap the braid with a toss of its head, but according to her research, a unicorn would not. A gilt watch chain would do the trick. An embroidered girdle. A necklace. If her books were correct, all she needed was the horn.

Ten steps separated them, and still the unicorn advanced. Julia held her breath. Five steps. Three. Two.

Gregory snatched the knife from her left hand and lunged.

“Wait!”

The knife was cheap and small, but she had spent half an hour rubbing it over a whetstone, wincing, as her parents had taught her to do.

A dark, dripping line opened along the pale neck. With a cry like bells, the unicorn shied away. It ran faster and fleetier than any horse, a shimmer in the trees, a glint, then gone.

Gregory sprawled on the grass, the knife wet and black in his hand. She prodded each of his arms and legs, checking for injury, then yanked him to his feet. Tears burned her eyes, and she mopped at her face, frustrated.

“Asshole. How could you?” she said. The unicorn — Vivian — the question rang with accusations.

“What else was the knife for? What were you going to do?”

She opened and shut her mouth and could not speak.

They headed out of the park in silence. Here and there, on a bench, under the dark arc of a bridge, Julia spotted a huddled body husbanding its warmth. Those who needed unicorns as much as she did. Shoving her hands in her pockets, she walked faster, too weak and foolish, she knew, to ask forgiveness.

“Why waste your time on someone like him?” Julia said. She sat on the edge of the bed, watching Vivian eat breakfast, and offered mug and spoon at appropriate intervals.

“He’s helping with the bills,” Vivian said reasonably. “And it’s his health insurance.”

“He could write a check from anywhere.”

“It’s not just that.” Vivian dipped her spoon into each of the dishes that crowded her tray — zhou, strawberry Jello, bone soup with slices of wintermelon, chocolate pudding — without raising it to her lips. Her skin was soft and loose against her bones. She was not eating, the aunt had whispered to Julia. “I’m trying to remember what was beautiful about him.”

“Him? Nothing.”

“You’re angry at him?”

“Yes.”

“So am I. And I don’t want to die with that much anger. It’s the size of a house, roof, floors, porch, everything.”

“So you have him over every day to yell at him?”

“We talk.”

“For hours.”

“Don’t be silly. I talk to you too.”

Julia tightened her lips. “Not every day.”

“You have work.”

“It doesn’t seem healthy to me.”

Vivian sighed. “Didn’t you see the flowers?” The kitchen table was flooded with lilies and chrysanthemums, more than Vivian had vases for, and she made Julia haul home an armful every visit. “Know who they’re from? Classmates. Roommates. Colleagues. Friends. Cousins. He has to wait outside when anyone else is here.”

“Don’t tell me you don’t enjoy that.”

“Oh, I do. I do.” She smiled. “You’ve taken good care of me. I know. I notice. But when you’re looking death in the face at thirty-three — ”

“You’re not. Don’t say that.”



“Cut the crap, Julia.”

“But Gregory — ”

“He’s figured out something you haven’t. I’m dying. He knows it. He doesn’t waste words. We don’t waste time.”

“Tell me how.”

“How what?”

“How to not waste your time.”

“That’s your job.”

In the quiet that followed, they heard the long, bright song of the doorbell, then the snick and thunk of Vivian’s aunt unbolting the door. Muffled voices reached them, one a familiar baritone.

“Is Gregory here? Give us a minute — ”

Julia returned to Central Park alone. The damp wind numbed her fingers and wormed its way up her sleeves. She clutched her thin coat, wishing for a scarf.

As she walked the twenty blocks from Sheep Meadow to the Reservoir, she could find no unexpected flowers, no tracks, no magic. Where hoofprints of columbine and wake robin had flourished the week before, there were now only bare and indistinct spots of earth. Few people remained in the park. The one or two she saw ducked their heads against the wind and never looked up.

It grew colder as the night deepened. Dew soaked her canvas shoes and cotton socks, prickling her toes. She wished for company, anyone at all, even Gregory. After an hour of searching, she had seen no sign that the unicorn ever existed.

“Well,” she said aloud, “that’s that,” and turned toward 86th Street and the subway.

“Nice bag there, lady.”

In the dark, Julia could make out only a pale grin, a paler shock of hair, and the switchblade presented by way of introduction. She had not noticed his approach, preoccupied as she was with her hunt. The calm of perfect terror settled over her.

“My wallet, right?” she said, fishing it out of her purse.

“Why not your whole bag?”

“There’s nothing you want in there.” She riffled the bills in her wallet and tossed it at his feet.

His eyes never left hers. He stepped forward and wrenched the purse from her arm. “I’ll be the judge of that.”

Every nerve shrilled at her to run. She locked her knees. “Please,” she said. “My friend’s hair. She’s dying.”

“You’ll shut up, if you know what’s good for you.” He upended her bag and shook it. Pens, tampons, flyers, and tissues scattered across the grass. The detritus of an insignificant life, she thought, starting to shake.

“Run.”

She didn’t.

He grabbed a fistful of her jacket and held the braid under her nose. “Or come get it.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Let me go, please — ”

“Too bad you’re not prettier.”

He hooked his arm around her neck, cutting off her air. Her lungs burned as he tightened his choke hold. Her knees buckled. The unspoken fears of nights and days coalesced into a fine point. So this is it. My turn. This. Now.

A hundred carillon bells clanged together. Over the wet, dark grass, a white shape tilted at them, indistinct at first, but growing brighter and clearer every moment.

The man swore and dropped her. She fell on her face, grateful for the dew that seeped into her clothes, the distinct sensation of each blade of grass against her skin. When she had caught her breath, she pushed herself to her knees.

He was running, his jacket flapping around him. The unicorn crashed past her in a glorious arc of white, the whorled horn pointed at his fleeing back. For an instant she imagined it spearing his back, the stutter of blood, him stumbling, sinking, deserving it —

“No!”

The pale body pivoted, pawing the air. When it landed, snorting steam, it was facing her. The gash on its neck had scabbed over into a rough crust of garnets. Julia glanced down, ashamed.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. She picked up the braid of black and golden hair and offered it to the unicorn. “I won’t hurt you, I promise. Not this time.”

The unicorn approached her and sniffed the braid. Her fingers tangled in its beard, which was silk and cobweb and gossamer. Its breath burned her skin with cold.

“I need you,” Julia said. “Will you come with me?”

She made herself meet its eyes, which were as old and secret as fossils, and felt very small. After a long, careful look, the unicorn sighed and bowed its head.

Julia looped the braid loosely around the broad neck and fumbled with a knot. She was close enough to smell the odors of cinnamon, tamarind, and cardamom rising from its skin. When that was done, she bent and shoveled the pieces of her life back into her purse, heedless of the wet leaves stuck to her keys, the mud on her wallet. The unicorn waited for her to rise and grasp the braid, and then it set out after her.

They left through Hunters’ Gate and went north on Central Park West. The streets were hushed and empty of cars. A few pedestrians hurried along on the far side of the road, none of them looking in her direction, though as they passed, Julia noticed, they slowed and straightened, brows smoothing, hands falling to their sides.

She was shivering with cold and shock. Every now and then she leaned against the unicorn’s side, and its breath was a deep rumble in her ear. The long, spiraling horn wrote eights in the air as they walked.

At intersections, the traffic lights flared green in all directions. Above them, one by one, lit windows snapped out. A shouted argument that had spilled onto a fire escape

subsided to a murmur, and the high, inconsolable wail of an infant faded. Soon they were enveloped in quiet.

“Will you help her?” Julia said. “I can’t lose her. She’s the best thing in my life.”

The unicorn did not answer. As if it knew the way, it went up Seventh Avenue and turned onto 119th. Its hooves printed moist, silvered daguerreotypes on the sidewalk behind them.

Vivian’s building was dark. Julia led the unicorn up the stoop and through the narrow doorway, watching anxiously as its flanks twitched and shuddered between the jambs. She had not planned for the two flights of stairs to Vivian’s apartment. But the unicorn placed one foot, then the next, on the threadbare runner, each step making a muffled chime. Less graceful, Julia groped hand over hand along the railing. Though she left the light switch alone, the unicorn gave off a fragile, glowworm light.

A neighbor’s tabby sat on the second-floor landing, its eyes two small bright moons. As the unicorn passed, it tucked in its paws and purred.

On the third-floor landing, Julia unlocked the door, and she and the unicorn entered Vivian’s apartment. Moonlight cut black paper silhouettes out of the flowers on the kitchen table. Everything was stark and sharp, but Julia still stumbled over a single shoe and skidded on a magazine before she grasped the loose brass doorknob and let them both into the bedroom.

Vivian was sitting in bed, resting against Gregory. His arms were around her, his cheek against her bare head. When he saw them, his face softened with wonder.

“Julia?”

Vivian opened her arms to them. Their arrival might have been the most ordinary thing in the world.

“You did find a unicorn.”

“I did.”

It went to her. Vivian cradled the long white head, touching their foreheads together. “How lovely you are. You’re so much more than I imagined.”

“You can cure her, right?” Julia said. Her shoes were icy puddles, and she was swaying on her feet. The unicorn paid no attention to her. With a pang, she saw that the story was no longer hers. It had slipped through her fingers as easily as the end of the braid, leaving her a witness at its periphery.

“Of course,” Vivian said, to a question no one else had heard. “Yes.”

The unicorn lowered its horn and nudged up the hem of Vivian’s oversized T-shirt, exposing the pale skin of her belly. Julia gritted her teeth, afraid to watch, unable to look away.

The tip of the horn plunged through the skin and withdrew.

Moonlight spilled out of the hole, an icy light that made the room swim. Vivian convulsed, whimpering. Gregory stroked her face, her hands, her arms, whispering to her, soothing, pleading. Julia ached to see them.

When the spasms had passed, and Vivian lay exhausted among the tangled quilts, there was no sign of the wound. But a glimmering light suffused her skin.

“Is it over?” Julia said. “Are you okay?”

“It hurts, but it will be all right.” Vivian clasped Gregory’s hand. “Help me.”

Gregory gathered her up, one arm around her shoulders, another under her knees. As the unicorn knelt, he settled her onto its back. She wrapped a fistful of its mane around each hand and smiled at Julia, through Julia, her eyes fixed somewhere else now.

“You shouldn’t be afraid,” Vivian said.

The unicorn clambered to its feet and tensed. Then the two of them leapt out of the open window — but the window had not been open, Julia thought — and landed with a sound like church bells on the pavement two stories below. Ringing and pealing, the unicorn’s hooves sang down the sidewalk, fading with distance.

Julia blinked, and the room was as dim as before, the window shut and locked against the night. Vivian was motionless in bed, Gregory feeling along her wrist with clumsy, desperate fingers, listening, waiting. Then he raised his head, loss naked in his eyes. On either side of the cold white bed they stood, unable, for a very long time, to say the impossible thing that had occurred.

# Darkout

In all of Northchester, Pennsylvania there was hardly forty square feet that was not continuously exposed to public view, on glass walls if you had money or on tablets if you were poor. This meant that Brandon spent most nights after his shift at the sports store watching Emma, his latest ex and the prettiest, as she chopped garlic, buttered toast, poured herself a gin and tonic, propped her furry-slippered feet on the coffee table with ska pulsing from her speakers, or took a date to bed. The counter at the upper right corner of the wall shifted between four and seven total viewers when Emma was eating dinner or clipping her fingernails. It shot up as high as fifty-five if Emma was mussing her lipstick and her zebra-print sheets with a fresh conquest. One hundred viewers was when ads floated up, loud and flashing, for limpness, smallness, underperformance.

Sometimes Brandon was disappointed in his relative unpopularity, his counter's slow tick of zero, one, zero, one, two, one, but then, white men tended to attract fewer eyeballs. The Indian family on Decker and Main, with two toddlers, boring as paint but only one of two nonwhite households on the east side of the tracks, attracted a dependable twenty every night. You needed pizzazz, or mystery, or difference to become a peripheral home-cam star. You needed nothing but a screen and a billed connection to lurk on others' cam streams.

These days he could hardly remember life without the cameras, although they had only been installed ten years ago, after the passage of the Blue Eye Act. As Little England and China had demonstrated, where there was universal surveillance, crime rates plummeted. Russia, Zambia, Egypt, and Japan adopted similar systems roughly at the same time as the States, and most other wealthy countries were testing a limited rollout in their ghettos and shantytowns.

Brandon hadn't glanced at the newscast for more than a few seconds. "Eyes once were said to be the windows to a man's soul," the Attorney General thundered from her podium, beside the glum chief of Central. "With the passage of this Act, windows shall look into every person's soul. Not one potential criminal or terrorist will live unwatched."

Bored and oblivious to history's apparition on his screen, Brandon flipped to an episode of Snowballers III.

There were restrictions and concessions to privacy lobbies, of course. Only badges could check logs or monitor, and only then with a warrant. The software was written to prevent remote modification. Two years after deployment, however, Croatian hackers cracked encryptions and began charging for views of the American of your choice.

Actresses, usually. A mild fuss was made. Some feminists penned screeds and circulated petitions.

With the rafts of necessary legislation already in force, thirteen of the thirty original contractors and subcontractors out of business, and the budget long since buried beneath truckloads of additional appropriation bills, a complete overhaul of the hardware and individual installation of security patches were as politically feasible as open borders. After long debate, the white-hat community reached a general consensus to open-source the Croatian exploit, so that everyone and everything could be seen at all times. A bright and egalitarian future had arrived, they argued, superseding the dark days of cold cases, unreliable eyewitnesses, and domestic terrorism. Most citizens had become accustomed to the idea of being watched, anyway. Polls suggested a solid seventy-nine percent enjoyed the constant access to celebrities' meals and wardrobes.

A front-row seat to hours of Emma's smooth shoulders was an unexpected personal consequence of that legislation. After darkening his wall and pressing his palms against his tired eyes, Brandon considered, not for the first time, taking two weeks off from work and a hike along the West Coast. Emma was a drug, the perfect drug, and after a six-month hit of her, he was clawing through withdrawal. The pillow forts she used to build, the shape of her feet, her high, delighted laughter when he landed the perfect joke: the memories burned like poison, and he could not stop drinking them in.

Sweat, grit, sunlight, distance, and mai tais might cure him. He had done the budget. He had saved enough for a short vacation. The customers at the sports store who swiped kayaks and paddleboards onto silver credit cards, with their freckled shoulders, bronzed cheeks, and bleached hair, always seemed to him an alien species, possessed of a thousand-and-one adventures and the insulation provided by ready cash. He could join them, however briefly.

Brandon powered down his screen and stared out the glass wall at the dead light and gray grass of winter, imagining hot white sand between his toes and the cool spray of the Pacific on his face. He was learning to surf from a wise old instructor. He carried the board under his arm like a knight riding into battle and rode the smooth roaring waves hour after hour, day after day, until the water pounded his thoughts into nothingness. His chalky skin darkened. He ate six swordfish steaks for dinner, bought a drink for every pretty brunette in the bar, and forgot about Emma.

But then the flickering stream of panoptic views into kitchens and bedrooms, kitten-crammed commercials, and staged cop shows, all the cheap and irresistible glitter of secondhand life, sang to him again. Depressing a button, Brandon turned the wall opaque and went back to watching Emma curl and uncurl her toes, his heart in his mouth.

He was waiting for her to collapse into tears. He was waiting for her to scribble on a poster with a squeaking marker and hold it up to her bedroom camera: I LOVE YOU BRANDON. IT WAS A MISTAKE. COME BACK.

When he saw that, when he and the ten strangers on her stream saw he was victorious at last, Brandon would hop into his sneakers and sprint the six miles across town

to her apartment, pumping his arms, dodging cars, the Internet cheering unheard in the background. He would hammer on her door. In his imagination, she was pacing the room in her black lace bra and matching panties, a loose robe around her shoulders. Her audience had swelled to two thousand during his dramatic run. She flung open the door and pressed her unblotched and tastefully rouged face to his shoulder. He put his arms around her, and they sank onto the zebra sheets, to the unheard sighs of thousands of spectators. It wasn't impossible. These things were known to happen.

Once in a while Brandon heard the squeak of a marker in a dream, catapulted out of bed, and yanked on socks and shoes before he was entirely awake. But his morning wall only ever showed him commercials for insurance and whole-wheat cereal, tiled four by four.

Tonight, though, he did not linger on Emma's stream. It was the night of the Fitz-Ramen Bowl. He had swapped shifts with Mandy to watch it. Mark Thompson was coming with two twelve-packs of craft beer.

"I need to get out of the house. You need to get out of your head," Mark had said. "You've got the subscription. I'll get the drinks."

Their friendship began four years ago, when Mark, observing Brandon's painful attempt to charm an out-of-town marketing rep in the bar, sent along a pint of porter and a napkin penned with ratings: Confidence 2, Slickness 0, Desperation 17. An electrician, Mark was a good fifteen years older than Brandon and married to a sweet talker of a woman who never found fault with him.

He was not at all someone Brandon would have expected as a friend. Brandon did not have many friends.

But Mark's taste in beers was excellent, and over the latest microwbrew he confided to Brandon that listening to him brought back the rush and risk of youth, the gambits and heartbreaks and exuberant successes. So did football, which he had to watch out of the house, because his wife slept early, and lightly, and not well.

"A bad back," he said, shaking his head. "Like her father."

So when Mark buzzed the door, and the camera floated his face over the screen, Brandon felt his spirits lift. The two of them popped their beers, propped their feet on the table, and cheered the Pittsburgh College Lynxes. During the commercials they flipped to live cop cams outside the stadium, betting on whether the nastiest officers would be reprimanded. Mark set up a private pool on his phone, floating fives and tens, and they passed it back and forth.

"Do you or don't you understand English? You come to this country, you better learn English — " The driver stared down at his lap. His hands gripped the wheel.

"Five bucks no one remembers." Brandon emptied his can.

"Nope, not taking it. He's Bengali."

"They're all brown to me."

"The accent."

"So?"

“They don’t get big Internet mobs. Not like the Indians. Polite complaint from the Association of Bengali Cabdrivers, that’s all. Sir it has come to our attention that, and would you pretty please.”

“Why do they still do traffic stops? You can ID the plates in two cameras, calculate speed, deliver ticket. Wham.”

“Maybe they’re bored on patrol. Maybe they don’t want people watching them sit on their hands. Makes the taxpayer think about payroll.”

After Mark’s wagers hit a hundred dollars and change, he pocketed the phone. “Personal limit,” he said, smiling. “Lizzie’s been on my case.”

Humming, he appropriated the remote and browsed a DV forecaster. Past emergency call records, crunched for patterns, allowed you to time future incidents so accurately that the popcorn you put in the microwave reached its last thuck, thuck as the boyfriend kicked open the door. A few predictive statistics blogs published regular watching guides. Politicians and athletes attracted the most attention, but the smart ones paid for darkspace: for a million per square foot hour, the ten most popular hosts stopped streaming your cams.

Logs remained available to the police, and a determined viewer, with some finagling, could connect directly to the right camera, but for the most part darkspace worked. A cheaper option was to smash the camera outright. That was a felony, but so was everything that followed.

At 1818 Maple Drive, the microphone still functioned. Brandon grimaced at the screaming and smack of fist against flesh and switched the whole wall back to the game.

“Why do you watch this shit?”

“Third and a long thirteen, Stallions on the Lynxes’ twenty-six, Washington is back to pass, Rodriguez is open — it’s intercepted by Jones!”

“That’s my man!” Mark said. “How long can you go in a shit job in a shit economy before snapping? The game’s rigged against white men, you know that. Sometimes it’s relaxing to see someone hit his breaking point.”

“How do you know that guy was white?”

“The way she was hollering. Black women holler differently.”

“Don’t tell me you hit Lizzie.”

“Never. Cams, though. Used to think there was something they knew that we didn’t, so I watched sixteen families at a time. But no. They do holler different when the men beat them, though. They’re used to violence. They’re violent people. Not like us.”

“The Lynxes are putting this game out of reach early, up twenty-four points with four minutes left in the first quarter.”

Mark made a noise of satisfaction and grinned.

“Football’s not relaxing enough?”

“It’s fine. But it’s tame. Ever since the concussion lawsuits. The old stuff was better.”

Brandon cut to a channel forum and scrolled down the top-ranked links.

MUKWA, WISCONSIN PUPPYCAMS 1-6



\$\$\$WANK TOKYO NEIGHBORHOOD ON FIRE  
HIGH COURT TIZZY, CUTE AUSSIE ACCENTS  
BLONDE BITCH PAID SEX W/ MY HUSBAND  
RIOT POLICE CIRCLING US CAPITOL  
SEX SEX SEX WITCHITA XXX  
CATFIGHT BETWEEN OFFICER, BLACK WOMAN IN FIVE INCH HEELS  
SEE: PROTESTER ARRESTS NEAR US SUPREME COURT  
TURTLE FEEDING TIME: GRAPES

“How about them puppies,” Mark said.

“I thought you’d be all over SEX SEX SEX WITCHITA.”

“It’s always some hag pushing seventy,” Mark said. “Floppy in all the interesting places. Thought you knew that.”

“That’s bottom feeding. I don’t trawl. The professional stuff’s better.”

“Sure, or you’re interested in one person and no one else.” Mark grinned wide enough for Brandon to see his silver fillings and tossed back the rest of his beer. He was in an expansive mood, as if he had both money and holy water on tap. “Seriously, start dating again. Lay some ladies. You’ll feel better.”

“What does Lizzie say when you talk to her about black people and how much you’re suffering?”

“I don’t. Because I’m a smart man. I mean, I’m lucky, I’ll always have a job. But this Korean woman at the pharmacy yesterday, listen to this, she came up to me and said, I don’t like the way you’re looking at me. That’s the world we live in today. Christ. Maybe I’ll see her on the DV watch someday. Don’t you dream about smacking whatshername a good one?”

Brandon did, but he wasn’t about to admit it.

“I’ll sign you up on a few sites,” Mark said. “Write you an A-plus profile. I’m good at them.”

“You’re married.”

“That supposed to stop me? She’s black, it’s different. You wouldn’t understand. Go ahead, run me over with a moral locomotive.”

“Don’t be an idiot.”

“So what’s the problem? You swipe up full of STDs?”

“I don’t like them looking at medical. Full access for a week, no guaranteed sex. I’m sequenced and everything. Who says they won’t copy and sell?”

“Hey, you have to give to get.”

Brandon pitched his voice higher. ““Oh, you make twenty-four thousand a year? ‘You had appendicitis at sixteen? Wow.’”

“So you watch home cams. For the human contact. Is that it?”

Mark pinched the controller, quartered the screen, and flashed through a rapid succession of cams. A teenager doodling in his textbook. A woman working on a tablet, her face furrowed. An aged brown woman dumping chilies into a pot. A snoring cat. A man typing at a table. Two cats batting each other. An infant banging a rattle on

the bars of her crib. Two men lifting free weights, mouths scrunched with the effort. A poodle peeing against a tree.

“Amazing.” He smirked.

“It’s culture,” Brandon said. “Walking in other people’s shoes. Makes me a better person. Lay off.”

“You want culture, fuck a brown woman. I’m unbelievably cultured. I’m just saying, as your friend, you should get out more.”

“What is this, an intervention?”

“If you give me your phone — ”

“Go to the game, it’s back on.”

Four minutes into the fourth quarter, Mark’s good mood was gone.

“What happened to our lead?”

“Oof,” Brandon said.

“What kind of shit play was that?” Mark punched the table so hard his beer rocked over.

“Easy there.”

“The coach is a scab-assed cockcrab. How do you burn a lead like that? How?”

Brandon mopped at the frothy mess of beer and sodden chips. “Every damn year.”

“We’re doomed.” A flask appeared in Mark’s hand.

“Put that down, you’re drunk.”

“I’m sober as a fucking duck. Me and Lizzie are screwed.”

“What are you talking about?”

Mark reclaimed the controller and input a numerical camera address Brandon did not recognize, but from the first few digits guessed it was located somewhere in Pittsburgh’s swankiest district. On his screen, now, a bald white woman sipped a salted glass while watching the game. She had a cottonmouth tattooed around her neck, red and black heels like ice picks, and six spikes in each ear. Noticing the uptick in her viewer count, she turned and flashed the camera a thumbs-up and a smile that crawled under Brandon’s skin and itched.

“Who’s that?” Brandon said, very slowly.

“My bookie. Ruth. Name’s a joke, not for real. Short for — ”

“You have the cash. Right?”

“This was supposed to be a straight-to-the-bank payday. Like the last one.”

“The last one.”

“I won a thousand betting a three-team parlay last year. She shook my head and told me I looked like a lucky man. ‘When you want to make a real bet,’ she said, ‘with real money, think of me.’”

Ruth stared at the camera as if she could see them, her mouth still hooked in that crowbar of a smile.

Brandon flipped the whole wall back to the game, as if the scrum of blue, red, orange, and white could scrub the prickling off the back of his neck. The scene that greeted

him wasn't much more cheerful. The Stallions were down by a single touchdown, and the whole tableau had the velvet air of a Shakespearean tragedy.

Here came the touchdown. Here the conversion.

Mark's head fell into his hands. The last thirty seconds slipped off the clock. Brandon held his beer to his lips with nerveless fingers.

The Stallions won, thirty-two to thirty-one. They flooded the field with blue and red, dancing, howling, cracking their helmets together.

"What do you do now?" Brandon said.

"Fuck if I know." Mark groaned. "She knows my address. Home and work. She has my contacts, too. Runs a background check for big wagers. So she'd know to look at you — "

As if in quiet confirmation, the little zero on the counter flicked to one. Brandon swallowed and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"How much?"

"Ten thousand. It was one to two, I don't know why, Lynxes were favorite. I was gonna triple that — "

Brandon kneaded his temples. "Bonehead."

"Did you pick that up from Lizzie?"

"What were you going to do with thirty thousand?" That wasn't two weeks' vacation and surfing lessons. That was a year of rent on a ranch house somewhere in wine country and a wine tour every month. That was a plane ticket to a dark and disconnected country of grapevines and beautiful women, perhaps even kind women, and bedrooms and breakups without cameras.

"Don't lecture me."

"What were you going to blow it on? Weed? Speed? Cars?"

"Old lady needs spinal fusion, if you have to know."

"But insurance — "

"We don't have any."

"You need brain surgery."

Mark scowled. "I was trying to do right by her."

"Mortgage? Second mortgage? Sell the van?"

"Double mortgage already, from the doctors and pills. Need the van for work. We're up to our eyeballs." Mark took a deep breath. "Now you know how fucked we are. I hate doing this, Brandon, but — "

"You couldn't go with a Chinese bookie, could you? You had to get a local."

"Ruth gives better odds than the congloms. Plus she let me bet on credit."

Brandon flung the controller. It clattered satisfyingly against the wall and dropped out of sight. "Of course she let you, bumfuck. She knows where you live. Where Lizzie lives."

"I get it, I get it. So — "

"She can't do anything to you, right? Not with — " He gestured to the cameras.

"I've heard Ruth doesn't like dirtying her nails."

“That’s a relief.”

“So she contracts disposal and retrieval.”

“Would I have heard of her?”

“Nothing splashy since six, seven years ago.”

“Six — ”

“The Burnetts.” Mark shifted his weight. “The, uh, two girls, one boy, parents, grandfather, Dalmatian, and hamster. And one goldfish. Though maybe not the goldfish, those things die if you sneeze at them...”

“That was her?”

“Unofficially.”

“Shit.”

“Anyway, if she wants it quiet, she buys black.”

“You’re fucked.”

“Royally.” Mark blinked and grinned in terror. “So what I was going to ask — ”

“Why mix me up in this? Why sit on my sofa and scarf my chips, with thirty grand riding on the game?”

“Lizzie’s asleep. I wanted a friend — if I was going to celebrate — ”

“Bullshit. You wanted me here in case you lost. So you could dun me for cash.”

“You’re angry, I get it. You’re angry but I’m fucked.”

Whether because the controller landed on a button or whether because the paid sportstream sensed their drifting attention, the postgame analysis switched to news. Thousands of masked protestors milled in the National Mall, waving single yellow roses splattered with black paint. GIVE US DARKNESS, their placards read. PRIVACY IS FREEDOM. The cameras faded from night to day, gliding from D.C. to San Francisco to Tokyo to Moscow. Every cosmopolis was boiling with protests. DARKOUT! DARKOUT!

“Motherfucking Luddites,” Mark said.

“Don’t change the subject. You dragged me into this. She’s probably auditing me right now. What do you think she’ll see? Do you think I have ten grand in my sock drawer?”

“I have two thousand in emergency funds,” Mark said. “Lizzie made me. I only need eight.”

“Great. Pick a star, click your heels, wish really, really hard — ”

“Are you going to help me?” Mark pressed an empty can between his palms until it gave. “The way I helped you, when you totaled your car? When Nina dumped you and your shit on the curb?” It had been raining, and the cardboard boxes melted like sugar. When Brandon called, Mark laughed his ass off, but showed up five minutes later with his van. He had even dug up a dolly somewhere.

“You piece of gooseshit.” Brandon knuckled his eye sockets. Then he pulled out a phone and scrawled a passpattern with his fingertip. “Look at that balance, you fucking moron. Two thousand six hundred and I don’t get paid until next Friday. Look at it!” He thrust the phone into Mark’s face and watched Mark’s pupils cross.

“I was going to California with this,” Brandon said bitterly. He dragged two fingers over the phone and signed with his index finger. “There. Two thousand four hundred in your account tomorrow.” He waved his phone at the camera. “See that, Ruth? He’s got almost half of it. Charge him stupid interest and don’t break his leg. Now get out, dickbrain.”

“I’ll pay you back.”

“You’re still short five thousand and change.”

“Yeah.”

“And Lizzie still needs a new back.”

“That can wait.”

“Like hell it can. My uncle slipped a disc once. Couldn’t look at his face, or I started hurting too. Put her first for once.”

Sudden motions and shouts pulled Brandon’s eye back to the screen. A wave of protestors swelled and broke over a police barricade in Beijing. The air went blue and blurry with tear gas. The synchrony of their movements suggested careful rehearsal, which could only be coordinated online. In China, public spaces were off limits. The police would have noticed the preparations. Every security apparatus would have known.

Hopeless, all of them.

In the meantime, his own counter reached five, a personal record. Casual browsers attracted by the shouting? DISAPPOINTED LYNX BROS YELLING. Or black-jacketed, detached men with freshly fingerprinted contracts?

“You’re a real friend, you know that?” Mark said. “I’m not going to forget this.”

“Door’s there. Get out.”

“Going, I’m going.” Mark slung his coat over his shoulders and banged open the screen door. Cold air swirled in. Brandon dimmed his wall to transparency and peered into the darkness, shivering, until Mark peeled out of the neighborhood in his anchovy can.

Asshole.

He brought his screen back up and stared at masks, placards, yellow roses. A svelte, lipsticked newscaster would have relieved the oppressiveness, but any newscaster was a rarity these days, when free and instant footage flowed everywhere. Who could keep up with that?

“Give us darkness! Darkout! Darkout!”

The news stream wasn’t helping his nerves. Brandon retrieved the controller from behind an armchair and returned to his usual forum, cracking open a seventh beer.

CRAZY GUY SCALING BROADCAST STATION PERIMETER: SHOT OR NOT?

DUCKLINGS HATCHING!!!

TRESPASSERS AT ISP HQ?

SEXY BROWN SUGAR MMM

STALLION FANS RIOT IN HOUSTON, VIEW FROM GRAY’S BAR

As if of their own volition, his fingers tapped their way back to Emma’s stream.

Kitchen: dark.

Living room: dark.

Bedroom: dark, too, but a slice of orange light from the street slipped under the blinds and threw a soft glow on her bare arms, a long loose curl, the gentle hills of her body under the comforters.

She was asleep. Her chest was rising and falling, rising and falling, and her breath made a fluttering, feathery sound through her lips that the microphone picked up and whispered to him. He remembered the sound from the seventeen times she fell asleep in his bed and the ten times he had slept in hers.

“I am a pathetic creep,” he said aloud to his own five watchers. The whole world was his confessional, tonight. But as the words left his mouth, his own counter flickered: four — three — one — zero. No one wanted to hear him grovel.

“You still love me,” he told Emma. She was just as lonely as he was. She was auditioning an endless river of men to fill a Brandon-sized hole inside her. And she never looked at his cam stream. Not once.

Not casually.

Not for a second.

Not as one of four or eight or sixteen streams split on her screen.

As if she didn’t miss him at all.

The rhythm of her breath was soothing and soporific. He could listen to it forever.

His seventh beer half empty, feeling infinitely sorry for himself, Brandon slept.

He dreamed he was in California. It was a nice dream, with plenty of sunlight and blue sky and puffy clouds. The trees were spiny and crumpled with drought. He had never been to California, but this looked exactly like what he had seen in movies. Maybe California was more a collective cinematic fantasy than an actual place. Maybe, like an elaborate movie set, it never existed.

He stood in a desert studded with cactuses and hunched pines. Invisible birds cried and piped, and he could hear waves crashing unseen against an invisible shore.

Mirages shimmered everywhere. Mostly they were water mirages, but here was the quivering image of an ice cream cart, and there, on the horizon, stood one of Emma’s perfect white breasts, large as a mountain. Why not two? he asked his subconscious. Give me the other one, come on. But the snowy peak shivered and vanished as he approached.

He had been hiking for hours, and his arms and legs were furry with dust. The mountains rising around him muffled the sound of the distant ocean.

One by one, the sharp, croaking bird calls ceased. All around him was a heavy and peculiar silence.

Brandon was accustomed to hearing the babble of strangers on his screen while he slept: any channel, anybody, anything to feel less alone. The absence of sound rang loud as cymbals in his ears. Startled awake, he poured out of bed and puddled on the

floor. For several painful minutes he lay still, trying not to move. Someone was using his skull as blender and trashcan and bongos all at once.

The screen had entered standby sometime during the night. It did not show Emma's room, nor his front yard, but rather the illusion of a flat white wall with a window in the center. Brandon pressed the power button. The operating light winked orange, but nothing changed.

"Damn," he said. Mark's beer must have shorted a circuit. But where? And what had he fried? Brandon picked up his phone to troubleshoot and found no signal. He could snap photos, he could play games, and that was all.

Brandon flicked and pushed and plugged and unplugged his watch, his Weatherboy, his scale, his library, his two tablets. All were functional. All were offline. What worried him most were the lights on his three cameras, which had gone from red to yellow. He had no way of placing a support call.

"Fuckity fuck fuck," he said.

He would have to walk downtown to Moby's. No appointment meant fighting through crowds clutching bricked devices and crying for miracles. That would make him at least an hour late for his shift. So he would have to stop at the sports store first, to explain.

His manager could confirm for himself that Brandon's cameras were dead. The law required busted cameras to be fixed within one day. Police arrived, demanding answers, if you didn't. Occasional darkness was only for the very rich, and Brandon did not feel rich at all. Someone like him was not allowed to be offline for long.

His stomach shrank at the thought of eggs and bacon. No breakfast, then. He gave himself a critical once-over in the bathroom mirror: Two bloodshot eyes, a greenish pallor, hair flattened in some places and rucked up in others. He pushed a wet hand over the hair that stuck out, but it bounced straight back.

"Mark, you fucker," he growled. "You dickshot. You douche."

When he went onto the front stoop of the divided house, the morning sun jabbed him in the eye. His breath smoked white from his mouth and nose. Around him the yellow grass glittered and crisped with frost.

The building's palm scan wasn't working. It ignored his hand and did not respond to his slap, but the maintenance light flashed. Swearing under his breath, Brandon dug in his pockets for his analog keys.

His upstairs neighbor, Alice Rosenbaum, crunched over the lawn in scarf and boots. She was in her sixties, with deep wrinkles and snowy hair, and appeared to fall somewhere between the kind of grandmother who invited lonely neighbors in for pie and the kind of grandmother who filed noise complaints punctually at ten each night. She grinned at him.

"That game, huh?" she said. Brandon, patting himself, realized he was still wearing his beer-sticky gear. "I lost fifty dollars on that last play. To my son-in-law. He'll never let me hear the end of it."

"My friend put ten thousand on the Lynxes."

She winced. "You have rich friends."

"He's broke."

"Online?"

"Local."

"Will he be all right?"

"I don't know. I can't call him."

"Right, right. The whole street's down."

"What?"

"I knocked at the Washburns' and asked."

"The Washburns?"

She pointed. "Number eighteen. Two of the cutest little girls."

Brandon couldn't remember ever seeing the family that lived in the yellow house. He felt slow and stupid, like a blind thing in a cave. "What's going on?"

"It's a darkout. Like a blackout. You know what a — no. We haven't had a blackout in twenty-one years. You would have been a kid."

"Someone digging up wires?"

"I don't know. Our phones are dead, too, and the tower's two miles from here. I think it's pretty big. But we won't know until everything's back up."

Mark had caught a break. Brandon hoped the bastard was okay. "How long do you think that'll take?"

"Who knows?" Alice glanced down the street. "I was going to pick up breakfast from the bakery. See if anyone knows. Used to do that when I was younger. You look like a bagel kind of guy. Want to come?"

Brandon hesitated. Someone should check on Mark and Lizzie. Especially Lizzie, who had a raucous belly laugh and mothered him. He hadn't known about her back. But they were ten miles across town, and with lines dead, and no car, what could he do if there was trouble?

Maybe Mark had hocked everything and paid up.

Or maybe, if all cams were dark, his bookie had bigger fish than Mark.

Of course there were bigger fish than Mark.

Mark would be fine.

Emma, though. He felt a pang almost as sharp as the first loss: the cool, cold look, the quick credit swipe for both lunches, as if she pitied him, and the impression of being tossed out along with the sandwich wrappers. He couldn't watch her now. He didn't know where she was or what she was doing, or if she had taken out poster paper and was chewing the end of a marker, thinking about him.

"I could do with a bagel," he said.

And they walked together through the unfamiliar morning, waiting, as the whole world was waiting, for the light to return.



# The Gardener and the King's Menagerie

“Come up, come up, the festival’s here,” the gardener sang, spading the rows, as she did every spring.

Crocodils bloomed snout by green snout out of the wet earth, opening pupils of purple and gold. The massive, pungent elefoils that flowered only once a decade wobbled on their slender stems, then split open. All year the gardener had hurried along with wheelbarrows of potting soil and buckets of water, until the tendrils of her head oozed sap and stuck together, all for this day, for this hour, for her King.

In that country of brief memories and few remembrances, the only constants were the King and the festival. On this morning, a glorious, clamorous procession wound its way through the city, from palace to plaza. Mummers in gold and silver paint tottered down the street, children skipping between their stilts. Lovers tossed tame bumblebees back and forth, gilding their fur with pollen, until the bees were too dizzy to fly. Behind the mummers danced flutes, calliopes, and harps, who bent their hollow bodies and tuned their taut hair for the wind to make a careless music upon.

The gardener followed them, leading her menagerie on a vine: crocodils, elefoils, dandelionesses, and giraffanthus, flightless cassavaries and peaflorets. After her marched soldiers in trellis formation, clad in thorns and glittering with medals like a hedge with morning dew. The General of Poisons rode behind them on a war bamboo, silver rosettes upon her sleeves. Last of all came the King astride a tumbleweed, his perianth held high.

On that sweetly scented day, all who saw the King, from the smallest shoots to the mossiest snag, fell at least a little bit in love. This was not the light and easy romance of green things, dicing with breeze and bee, quickly fruiting and forgotten. This love turned the gardener’s head toward her King, wherever she was, and by degrees kinked and corkscrewed her back, as it did to all subjects who were near him. For that reason the King spent most of his days in the palace’s innermost gardens, out of sight, only emerging for the festival or occasions of state.

If only the King acknowledged her, the gardener thought, she would bristle with suckers, thicken to a respectable girth, and bloom twice in one season. If he bent his crowned head in approbation, she might even be granted a plot of her own.

At present she rotated between the mulched beds of the outer gardens, as all the royal servants did, so that each received their allotment of sunlight and rain, and none could spread their roots and grow dull and slow. The gardener had saved four seeds in

paper, mementos of past joy, but she had no place to plant them. Although she knew her country was no place for keepsakes and bygones, she longed to see them put forth leaf and root and flower.

The wind hummed in the harps and whistled through the flutes. The city's fountains plumed bright and crystal. Dreaming of pasts and futures, the gardener swung her whisk and cane.

Now and then she glanced behind her, hoping for a sight of the King, but the soldiers' thistle pikes bristled high as a forest, and she saw no further. Now and then the General or her soldiers kicked aside one of the dandelionesses, or pricked the ankles of an elefoil in their way, and the gardener thought unkind thoughts.

When the procession turned into a narrow passage between high houses, it slowed and thickened. One crocodil was trodden upon, first by cassavaries, then by the jostling soldiers. A trumpet blatted in its ear, and it lashed its taproot back and forth.

In close confinement, crowded by the musicians, the dandelionesses began to snarl and snap. As the gardener bent to soothe them, swishing her whisk, the crocodil tore loose from its traces and bowled over a battalion.

In their confusion, the soldiers parted ranks. The crocodil, seeing its chance, stormed the gap and flew straight at the astonished King.

He was beautiful, the gardener saw, his flowers many-colored and complex, his leaves like lace, sitting high atop his tumbleweed, but in a moment his fine steed was overthrown, and then her crocodil was trying its best to swallow the King.

The General barked orders, and her soldiers leapt forward, swinging their pikes. They wrestled the crocodil to the earth and pried open its jaws.

The King, bleeding bitter milk, wincingly peeled leaf from crushed leaf. He had lost five fine florets and was badly bruised along his stalk. His splendid perianth was pulped. Though the General plucked her own petals for handkerchiefs and offered to impale the crocodil on thorns, the King remained in shock.

"Put the gardener in prison," the General said. "Once the King recovers, he shall determine her punishment."

And the gardener, protesting, was pulled away from her menagerie.

The soldiers shut her into a dark and disused cell beneath the palace. The flagstones allowed her no sustenance, and the cupful of stale earth flung into the cell each day was never enough. The only mercies were a seep of water, dark and tasting of moss, and a small slit in one wall, no bigger than a keyhole, that let in a needle of sunlight.

There she waited, growing wan and thin, expecting any day a summons to trial, and then, she imagined, exoneration, a release, and a relieved return to her duties. Who else could tend her menagerie?

But the seasons changed, and no one came.

One day, peering through the hole in the wall, the gardener saw a small young thing pruning the hedge outside the prison. In a voice so frail she hardly recognized it, she called out, "Have you news of the trial?"

“There are no trials, and we have no need for any,” the young thing said. “All is peaceful, and all obey. Who are you, that you do not know this?”

“The gardener.”

“You cannot be the gardener, since I am and have always been.”

“If you are the new gardener, and I am not to be tried or freed, please tell me, how are my dandelionesses, my elefoils, my crocodils? Do they flourish and flower? Do you lead them in the procession with ribbons and bells?”

“What procession? Do you mean our triumphs? Only soldiers parade in those. Elefoils and crocodils and all those monstrous growths are forbidden there. Only a fool would not know that,” the new gardener said. “If you’ll excuse me, I must go tend to the Queen’s lap pansies. They yap and nip and must be mulched.”

“What Queen? Where is the King?”

“We have not had a King since the one killed by a crocodil. Our General nobly nursed him, using her vast knowledge of poisons and cures, but though his injuries were minor, the shock, indeed the disrespect, she said, was too much. Then she who saved us from invasions and caterpillars became Queen. Or so I heard. All this was before my time.”

The old gardener, who was no longer a gardener, subsided upon the flagstones and wept a long tear of sap. And then she raised a stalk to the hole in the mortar, and with what small strength she had left, pressed against the crumbling stone.

Day after day, all of her soul was bent to this task; all of her thoughts were of freedom and the fate of her menagerie.

A long time later, too long to tell, a stone cracked and loosened in its setting. The gardener, struggling, her fibers soft and limp, pushed it from its seat and slipped through the hole.

It was dark. No one saw the gardener, blanched and bent, gliding to the perennial beds where her menagerie grew.

“Come up, come up, the festival’s here,” she sang, as she had so many times before. Although it was night, tendrils stirred, and leaves opened and uncurled.

“Follow me,” she said. One by one they did, the elefoils and giraffanthus, the peaflorets and dandelionesses, sagging and shambling, limp and yellow, up an espaliered vine and over the palace wall, then out of the bright, terrible, poisonous city and into the moonlit wild.

They went a great distance over rocky ground, the sun burning them, the night chilling them. The menagerie grew hardy while the gardener weakened.

When she felt the green leaving her, she gave her four seeds to her elefoils and dandelionesses and giraffanthus and peaflorets.

“Plant these north and east and west and south,” she said, “that I might be remembered, when nothing else is.” When the wind turned, she stiffened to black stalk and broken husks and spoke no more.

Her menagerie dug and burrowed and buried the seeds. Some time later, they put out their own pods and fruit, and then they too withered.

When spring came again, the crocodils and giraffanthus and dandelionesses that sprouted grew rank and untended. Knowing no tameness, they bit and scratched one another, hunted and fled.

From the gardener's seeds grew four white flowers, mute and lame and lovely, and on the petals of each was written a quarter of the gardener's sorrows. But no one came into the wilderness to read them. Soon they faded and were forgotten.

# Paul Fritch's Slap-Bang Fracas with Mister Delusio

It was a summer of superheroes. Children's dreams peeled themselves off the backs of cereal boxes and shimmering TV sets and thundered upward, ululating with joy and desire. Three-inch crusaders swarmed between skyscrapers, firing lasers from eyes and floss from wrists. Paul sketched their battles from window to office window, pressing so hard his pencil point snapped.

"Hold still — "

They didn't oblige. Dazzling as stunt pilots, they flew barrel rolls, scissors, zoom climbs, eights, or yanked each other's masks and raspberried as their victims dove, wailing, after them.

His rushed, blurred sketches missed them all.

"Not saleable," Reggie said, examining them. "How far are you on the picture book? The one with rabbits?"

"Screw rabbits. This is important."

All day long, diminutive heroes buzzed traffic and bounced off windshields, giggling, indestructible. They were worse than mayflies. They wove plastic bags into nests and mated in the air, like eagles, with loud squeaks. Criminals died by pinching.

Though he wouldn't admit it, Paul was envious. He was the kind of man who rolled nickels and racked his toothbrush, whose feet stayed flat on the ground. When Mattie came to him white-lipped and trembling, he did the math and offered two hundred every month, but did not, despite her peony mouth and cataract of chestnut hair, marry her.

"I'm an illustrator," he had told her. "How could I afford it?"

When he reached home, failures furred under one arm, he found two amorous superheroes squirming on his doorstep. He nudged them aside, and one sank her teeth into his ankle.

"Ow!"

Shaking her off, he retreated into the house.

After Mattie packed her bags and climbed a bus to her grandmother's, dinners had become monotonous. Out of the ten odd saucepans, skillets, soup pots, and stockpots she left in her wake, Paul only ever used one. But as he scraped the bottom of his casserole, inspiration struck.

Leaving dinner on the table, Paul rooted in drawers for rubber bands and nubs of tinfoil and dropped them in a pickle jar. Then he sat on the stoop with the jar between his legs, the lid in his hand, and pantomimed a doze.

For twenty minutes that oozed like molasses, nothing happened.

Then he felt his nose pulled.

Then, under his ribs, a jab.

He didn't move. Through lowered lashes, he watched a homunculus in lemon spandex clamber into the jar. It stretched a rubber band over its chest. It kneaded a lump of foil.

Paul pounced, screwing the lid tight, and braced for lasers.

None were forthcoming. His superhero battered the glass.

"I'll let you go," he said. "Afterwards."

In the morning, frowsy with sleeplessness, he showed Reggie his new portfolio: twenty sketches and three inked comic panels.

"Not bad," Reggie said. "Sixty-dollar work, easy. What's that?"

Paul produced the jar. The hero sat, sulking.

"Huh. Looks like you."

"Don't joke."

"How are you getting rid of it?"

"I'm not — " Paul stopped. It knew his address. It probably had friends. He studied his captive, whose boxer's nose did resemble his, but only if you squinted. "What do they eat? Spiders? Bubblegum?"

"You're not serious."

"I can't kill him."

Reggie shrugged.

"No. You're right." Paul pressed his temples. "Chloroform? Cement? A river?"

The superhero watched him silently. Paul had posed him in scenes of valor, bubbling words: I Will Protect You, Ma'am. Just Doing My Duty.

"What does it do?" Reggie prodded the jar, rocking it backwards.

"I didn't see anything."

"X-rays? Electric shocks? Migraines? Hypnosis?"

"Nothing."

"You're lucky you're not slag and ashes."

"I know."

The superhero's cool blue gaze itched at the back of Paul's neck. Mattie came uninvited into his head, elbow-deep in the dishes, her damp hair flying. What would she have said? What would she have done?

"They sell cement at three dollars a bag around the corner," Reggie said.

Somewhere among the corn towns of Illinois, at an address he never asked for, a brown-haired woman rocked herself on a porch, fanning the sweat from her face, the boards creaking under her. She might have been holding a child, rashy with the heat. Or perhaps there was no child.

Paul picked up the jar and squeezed it to his chest. Rocks and the river. A twelve-story drop from the office window.

He couldn't keep it. He couldn't let it go.

# The Witch of Orion Waste and the Boy Knight

Once, on the edge of a stony scrub named for a star that fell burning from Orion a hundred years ago, there stood a hut with tin spangles strung from its rafters and ram bones mudded in its walls. Many witches had lived in the hut over the years, fair and foul, dark and light, but only one at any particular time, and sometimes no one lived there at all.

The witch of this story was neither very old nor very young, and she had not been born a witch but had worked, once she was old enough to flee the smashed bowls and shrieks of her home, as a goose girl, a pot scrubber, then a chandler's clerk. On the days when she wheedled the churchwomen into buying rosewater and pomanders, the chandler declared himself fond of her, and on other days, when she asked too many questions, or wept at the abalone beauty of a cloud, or refused to take no for an answer, he loudly wished her back among her geese.

On a Monday like any other, the chandler gave her two inches of onion peel scrawled with an order, and precise instructions to avoid being turned into a toad, and shortly thereafter the clerk carried a packet of pins and three vials of lavender oil the three heathery miles from the chandler's shop to the hut on Orion Waste.

The white-haired crone who lived in the hut opened the door, took the basket, and looked the clerk up and down. She spat out a small object and said, "You will do."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I have a proposition for you," the crone said. "It is past time for me to leave this place. There is a city of women many weeks' travel away, and it sings in my mind like a young blue star. Would you like to be a witch?"

Here was something better than liniment for the hurts confided to her, better than candles for warding off nightmares.

"I would," the clerk said.

"Mind, you must not meddle in what is none of your business, nor help unless you are asked."

"Of course," the clerk said, her thoughts full of names.

"Too glib," the crone said. "The forfeit is three years' weeping." She rummaged in her pockets and placed a brass key beside the book on the squat table. "But you won't listen."

The clerk tilted her head. "I heard you clearly."



“Hearing’s not listening. You learned to walk by falling, and you’ll stir a hornet’s nest and see for yourself. I was just as foolish at your age.” The crone shook a blackthorn stick under the clerk’s nose. “I would teach you to listen, if I had the time. Here is the key. Here is the book. Here is the bell. Be careful who you let through that door.”

Grasping the basket and her stick, the crone sneezed twice and strode off into other stories without a backwards glance.

And the clerk sat down at the table and leafed through the wormy tome of witchcraft, dislodging mushrooms pressed like bookmarks and white moths that fluttered into the fire. Bent over the book, by sunlight and candlelight, she traced thorny letters with her fingertips and committed the old enchantments, syllable by syllable, to heart.

The villagers who came with bread, apples, mutton, and the black bottles of cherry wine the old witch favored were surprised by news of the crone’s departure and doubtful of the woman they knew as goose girl and chandler’s clerk. Their doubts lasted only until she compounded the requested charms for luck, for gout, for biting flies, for thick, sweet cream in the pail. For all its forbidding appearance, the Waste provided much of what the book prescribed: gnarled roots that she picked and spread on a sunny cloth, bark peeled in long curls and bottled, snake skins cast in the shade of boulders and tacked to the rafters.

Certain of her visitors traveled farther, knowing only the hundred-year-old tale of a witch on the Waste. They came stealthily at night and asked for poison, or another’s heart, or a death, or a crown, and the witch, longing for the simple low-necked hissing of geese, shut the door in their faces.

A few of these were subtler than the rest, and several lied smoothly. But the crone had left a tongueless bell, forged from cuckoo spit, star iron, and lightning glass, which if warmed in the mouth showed, by signs and symbols, true things. In this way the witch could discern the dagger behind the smile. But the use of it left her sick and shuddering for days, plagued with bad dreams and waking visions, red and purple, and she only resorted to the bell in great confusion.

Three years from when she first parted its covers, the witch turned the last page of the book, read it, and sat back with a sigh. Someone had drawn in the margin a thorny archway, annotated in rusty red ink in a language she did not recognize, but apart from that, she knew all the witchcraft that the book held. The witch felt ponderous with knowledge and elastic with powers.

But because even arcane knowledge and occult powers do not properly substitute for a bar of soap and a bowl of soup, she washed her face and ate.

Loud knocking interrupted her meal. She brushed the crumbs from her lap, wiped the soup from her chin, and opened the door.

A knight stood upon her doorstep, a black horse behind him. A broken lance lay in his arms. He was tall, with a golden beard, and his eyes were as green as ferns.

“Witch,” said the knight. “Do you have a spell for dragons?”

“I might,” she said.

“What will it cost me? I am sworn to kill dragons, but their fire is too terrible and their strength too great.”

“Do you have swan down and sulfur? Those are difficult to find.”

“I do not.”

“A cartful of firewood?”

“I have no cart and no axe, or I would.”

“Then a kiss,” the witch said, because she liked the look of him, “and I will spell your shield and your sword, your plate and your soft hair, to cast off fire as a duck’s feather casts off rain.”

The knight paid her the kiss with alacrity and not, the witch thought, without enjoyment. He sat and watched as she made a paste of salamander tails and serpentine, adding to this a string of ancient words, half hummed and half sung. Then she daubed the mixture over his armor and sword and combed it through his golden hair.

“There you go,” she said. “Be on your way.”

The knight set his chin upon his fists. “These dragons are formidable,” he said. “Larger than churches, with cruel, piercing claws.”

“I have never seen one,” the witch said, “but I am sure they are.”

“I am too tired and bruised to face dragons today. With your permission, I shall sleep outside your house, guard you from whatever creeps in the dark, and set forth in the morning.”

“As you wish,” the witch said. She shared with him her supper of potatoes, apples, and brookweed and the warmth of her hearth, though the hut was small with him in it, and he told her stories of the court he rode from, of its high bright banners and its king and queen.

In the morning the knight was slow to buckle on his plate. The witch came to the door to bid him farewell, bearing a gift of butternuts knotted in a handkerchief. He raised his shield reluctantly, as if its weight pained him.

“Dragons are horrible in appearance,” he said. “Those who see them grow faint and foolish, and are quickly overtaken and torn limb from limb.”

“That sounds likely,” the witch said.

“They gorge on sheep and children and clean their teeth with men’s bones. In their wake they leave gobbets of meat that the crows refuse.”

“You have seen dreadful things,” the witch said.

“I have.” The knight tucked his helmet under his arm and pondered a dandelion growing between his feet. “And the loneliness is worse.”

“Perhaps it would be better to have a witch with you.”

“Will you come? I carry little money, only promises of royal favor. But I’ll give kisses generously and gladly, and swear to serve you and defend you.”

“I have never seen a dragon except in books,” the witch said. “I would like to.”

The knight smiled, a smile so luminous that the sun seemed to rise in his face, and paid her an advance as a show of good faith.

The witch took a warm cloak, the brass key, and at the last moment, on an impulse, the glass-and-iron bell, then locked the hut behind her. The knight helped her onto his horse, and together they rode across the Waste and beyond it. Grasshoppers flew up before them, and quail scattered. Wherever they went, the witch gazed about her with delight, for she had never traveled far from her village or the hut on the Waste, and everything she saw gleamed with newness.

They rode through forests and meadows that had no names the witch knew, singing and telling stories to pass the time. In the evenings the witch gathered herbs and dowsed for water, and the knight set snares for rabbits and doves. The knight had a strong singing voice and a laugh like a log crumbling in a fire, and the days passed quickly, unnumbered and sweet.

Before long, however, the land grew parched, and the wind blew hot and sulfurous. The witch guessed before the knight told her that they had passed into the country of dragons.

Late one evening they arrived at a deep crater sloped like a bowl, its edges black and charred. The bitter smoke drifting from the pit stung their eyes. Down at the center of the crater, something shifted and settled.

“Is that a dragon?” the witch said.

“It is,” the knight said, his face long.

“Will you ride into battle?”

“Dragons hunt at night, and their sight is better than a cat’s. It would devour me in two bites before I saw it, then my horse, and then you.”

Clicking his tongue, the knight turned the charger. They rode until they reached the scant shelter of a dry tree among dry boulders, where they made camp.

The witch scratched together a poor meal of nuts and withered roots. The knight did not tell stories or sing. At first, the witch tried to sing for the both of them, her voice wavering up through the darkness. But no matter what she said or sang, the knight stared into the fire and sighed, and soon she too lapsed into silence.

The next morning, the witch said, “Will you fight the dragon today?”

“It is stronger than me,” the knight said, gazing into his reflection on the flat of his sword. “It breathes the fires of hell, and no jiggery-pokery from a midwife’s pestle could endure those flames. Tomorrow I shall ride back to my king, confess my failure, and yield my sword. My enemies will rejoice. My mother will curse me and drink.”

The witch said nothing to this, but sat and thought.

The sun scratched a fiery path across the sky, hot on the back of her neck, and the air rasped and seethed with the sound of distant dragons.

When it was dark, and the knight was sound asleep, the witch drew his sword from its sheath and crept to the black horse. She swung herself up into its saddle, soothing it when it whickered, and with whispers and promises of sugar, she coaxed it across the sand to the edge of the crater. There she dismounted and descended in silence.

The dragon waited at the bottom of the pit, its eyes bright as mirrors.

It was not the size of a church, as the knight had said, only about the size of her hut on the Waste, but its teeth were sharp and serrated, its claws long and hooked, and goutts of flame dripped from its gullet as it slithered toward her.

The dragon drew a breath, its sides expanding like a bellows, and the fire in its maw brightened. Sharp shadows skittered over the ashes.

“You are no more frightening than my father,” the witch said, with more courage than she felt. “And no less. But I have faced foxes and thumped them, and I shall thump you.”

Flames flowered forth from its fangs, and as the witch leapt aside, a third of her hair smoldered and shriveled.

The narrow snout swayed toward her, but the witch shouted two words of binding that sent her staggering backwards with their force, and the dragon’s jaws clamped shut.

The dragon thrashed its head from side to side, white smoke rising from its nostrils, clawing at its mouth.

Then it charged her, and she ran.

As ashes floated thick around her, and skulls and thighbones broke and scattered under her feet, the witch looked over her shoulder and gasped a word of quenching.

At once the smoke of its breath turned to a noxious steam. The dragon lurched and fell. Although it could not stir, it glared, and its hate was hot on her skin.

The witch lifted the knight’s sword, and with tremendous effort, and twelve laborious strokes, she cut off its head.

At dawn she woke the knight, signing because her throat was raw and her lips were cracked, and led him to the scaly black carcass in the crater. The knight stared, then exclaimed and kissed her, and this kiss was sweeter than all that had come before.

“My lovely witch, my darling! With you beside me, why should I fear dragons?”

Although she ached all over, and a tooth felt loose in its socket, the witch blushed and brightened.

They continued into the land of dragons. Water grew more and more elusive, and the pools and damp patches the witch located were brackish and bitter, so when they reached a shallow river, they followed its course. The water was warm and brown, and tadpoles squirmed in it.

One afternoon, as the sun slanted down and strewed diamonds on the river, the witch saw the second dragon. This one was the length of a watchtower and red as dried blood, and it crouched in a muddy wallow, half hidden by dead brush. When she called the knight’s attention to it, he wheeled the horse around.

“Are you frightened?” she said.

There was no reply.

“Are you upset?”

He lowered his visor.

“Did I do something wrong?”

His eyes glittered out of his helmet, but he did not say a word.

The witch twined her fingers in the horse's mane and named the birds and burdocks they passed, then prattled about the weather, and still the knight said nothing.

Some hours later, over their supper of frogs, he broke his silence. "This one is viler than the last," he said. "Even you could not vanquish it. Me it would swallow in a snap, sword and all."

"It did not look so terrible," the witch said, light-headed with relief.

"But it is."

"You are a brave and valiant knight, and I am sure you will succeed."

"Of course you'd say that," the knight said, frowning. "It's not you who will die a nasty death, all teeth and soupy tongue."

"But your sword arm is strong, and your blade is trusty and well kept. Besides, I have enchanted your sword and your armor."

"As you like. I shall challenge it in the morning, and it will eat toasted knight for breakfast. Farewell." The knight turned his back to her, pillowed his head on his hands, and soon was snoring.

The witch had grown fond of the knight, in her way. His fear soured her stomach, and she tossed and turned, unable to sleep for thoughts of his death. In the middle of the night, she arose and sought the dragon.

The reeds were trodden and crushed in a wide swathe where it couched, and dead fish and birds lay all about. Its red scales were gray in the dim starlight, and it snuffed and snorted at subtle changes in the wind, finally fixing its eyes upon her. This dragon was heavy and sluggish, unlike the last, but poison dripped in black strings from its jaws. It lifted itself from the muck and lumbered forward.

"You are no more poisonous than my mother," the witch said, swallowing her fear. "And no less. But I have turned biting lye into soap, and I shall render you down as well."

She spoke the words of binding, but the dragon shrugged off her spell like so many flung pebbles. She shouted a word of quenching, and its jaws widened in a mocking grin. As she coughed on the word, her own throat burning, the dragon lunged and snapped.

The mud sucked at her feet as she fled, and marsh vapors wavered and tore as she ran through them. She tried words of severing and words of sickening, tasting blood on her lips, to no avail.

Bit by bit, the subtle gases of the dragon's breath slowed and stupefied her. The world spun. Then a root thrusting out of the mire hooked her ankle.

She skidded and slid.

Across the oozy earth the dragon crawled, bubbling and hissing. As its jaws opened to swallow her, the witch, her voice dull, spoke a word of cleansing.

The syllables slipped between scales into the dragon's veins and curdled the deadly blood. The dragon shuddered, its black eyes rolling back. Its snout scraped her leg, and then its long bulk splashed into the mud and lay still.

The witch limped to where the river flowed, languid and wide, and washed off, as best she could, the muck, the rot, the black blood and the red.

The sound of plackart clinking against pauldron woke her in the morning. Her knight — for she was beginning to think of him as hers — was grimly and glumly donning his gear.

No need, the witch wished to say, but her throat hurt as much as if she had swallowed a fistful of pins.

“Wait here,” the knight said. “I do not want you to witness my shameful death. When I am crisped and crunched, ride swiftly to the court of Cor Vide and tell them their youngest knight is dead.”

He spurred his horse and set off. Within the hour, he returned, his face dark.

“Witch, did you do this?” he said. “Did you kill that dragon while I slept?”

The witch nodded, unable to speak. The knight did not kiss her. He let her clamber onto the horse without offering his arm, and they rode all that day and the next in an ugly silence.

On the third day, when her throat had healed somewhat, the witch rasped, “Are you angry with me?”

“I am never angry, for anger is wicked and poisonous. But what will the court call a knight who lets women slay his dragons?”

“You seemed afraid.”

“I wasn’t afraid, witch.”

“I wanted to help.”

“You did more harm than good.”

“I am sorry,” she said.

“Do not do it again.”

The river they were following dwindled to a stream, then to dampness, and then the earth split and cracked, but they continued in the same direction, in hopes that the stream ran underground and sprang up again somewhere.

By and by, their mouths parched, they came to a crooked tower with a broken roof and a great golden serpent wrapped many times around its base. The witch, knight, and horse were the only things that moved upon the barren plain, and they raised a great cloud of dust. While they were still at a distance, the serpent began unwinding itself from the tower.

“Stay, witch,” the knight said, looking pale. “My sword is but a lucifer to this creature. Its fire will shrivel me, and the steel of my armor will drip over my bones. I’ll die, but I’ll die honorably. Remember me. I did love you.”

And the witch watched, anxious, as her knight trudged on foot toward the tower, sheets of air around him shimmering with heat.

The serpent’s eyes were red jewels, and its forked tongue lashed in and out of its mouth as the knight approached. Rearing up, the serpent spat a feathering jet of fire. The shield rose to meet it. Flames broke on its boss and poured off, harmless.

The knight laughed. His sword flashed.

But its edge rebounded from the scales without cutting, once, twice, and in a trice the serpent had tangled him in its coils and suspended him upside down.

His helmet tumbled off. His sword slipped from his mailed hand. He hung in midair, his golden curls loose, his face exposed.

The serpent squeezed, and he screamed.

The witch screamed too: a word of unraveling. The serpent's loops slackened, and the knight crashed to the ground. She screamed a word of piercing, and the serpent's eyes ran liquid and useless from their sockets. The serpent flailed, blind and enraged, battering the tower. Stones loosened from their mortar and fell. One crushed the knight's shield into splinters.

Finding his footing again, the knight slipped under the thrashing coils and sank his sword into one emptied eye, up to the hilt.

With a roar of agony, and spasms that shook down the upper third of the tower, the dragon expired.

The knight did not stand and savor his triumph. He whirled on the witch.

"I saw you. You goaded it — you spurred it to rage. You were trying to kill me!"

No, the witch would have said, if she were able.

But her lips were blistered and her tongue numb.

She pointed instead, in mute appeal.

A woman had emerged from the tower. She had watched what the witch had done; she could speak to her innocence. Her gown was green, and her smile, which she turned on them, was brilliant as an emerald. Several golden objects on her girdle swung and glittered as she approached, stepping delicately around the pools of smoking blood.

"Did you do this, good knight?" she said. "Have you freed me from this place?"

The knight bowed, then stood taller. "I did, though I did not know you were here. Where shall I bring you? Where will you be safe? You must have friends somewhere."

"Northeast," she said. "A long way."

"However far it is, I will accompany you."

"There is treasure in that tower, if you seek treasure. I stopped to play with rings, crowns, and necklaces, admiring myself in a golden glass. I did not realize that it was a dragon's hoard, and that the possessor would return. He gnawed my palfrey to the hooves and guarded me greedily from that time on. What I search for is not there, but that hoard will pay for your time."

"What gold could outshine the copper of your hair? You shall ride behind me, and this witch shall walk beside. For you look like a lady, and your feet are too soft for the road."

The lady's eyes danced. "Oh no, the witch shall ride. Both of us together, if you insist. I have met witches before, and they grow ugly if spited. This one is quite ugly already, and that smock does her no favors."

The witch, her breast burning, could not meet the lady's eyes. She looked instead at her rich green gown, stiff with gilt embroidery. Hanging from her girdle were toys of tin and wood, painted gold: a carved dog, a jumping acrobat, a wind-up man.

“Let me help you up,” the knight said.

“First tie my hands behind me,” the lady said. “I am under a curse. What I touch is mine and ever after shall be.”

“A strange curse,” the knight said, but obliged. He lifted her onto the horse in front of the witch. Her red hair blew into the witch’s mouth. For sport, the lady leaned to one side, then the other, pretending to topple.

“Don’t let her fall,” the knight said to the witch. “I know you are jealous and would love nothing better. But if harm comes to her, I will cut off your head.”

They proceeded more slowly after that, the knight leading the horse, the witch holding the reins, and the strange lady smiling in the witch’s arms. As they rode, the witch wept, but very softly, for whenever the knight heard, he looked at her with disgust.

“Stop,” he said. “Enough. You have no reason to cry.”

Then her tears fell hotter and faster into the lady’s red hair.

In the lengthening evenings, while the witch foraged, the knight and lady talked together and laughed. With her hands bound, the lady could do little for herself, and so the knight fed her, slid her silken slippers from her feet, and waited on her every wish.

The knight kissed the witch for the food and water she brought them, briefly and without interest, and apologized to the lady after. At night the lady nuzzled her head into the crook of the knight’s arm and spread her long hair over them. The witch lay awake, watching the stars until they blurred and ran together.

“Why do you never sing anymore?” the knight said one evening, as the witch turned a rabbit over the fire. “Sing for us.”

“He says you have a fine voice, for a witch. Do let me hear it.”

“I don’t anymore,” the witch rasped. The lady grimaced. “I burned it to cinders for him. It hurts to speak.”

“You’ll heal,” the knight said.

“I might, or I might not. The words of power I used were dear, and I am paying.”

“You want me to feel guilty,” the knight said.

“No, I wanted — ”

“I don’t want to hear about it.” He folded his arms. “There was never any point in talking to you, anyway.”

The lady laughed and laid her head against his shoulder.

Another evening, as the witch returned with chanterelles and hedgehog mushrooms in her skirt, she heard the knight say, “She’s bewitched me, you know. That’s why I hunt dragons — for her sport. That’s why I kiss her every night — I am forced.”

“Such a glorious knight, under the thumb of a lowly thing like her. How awful,” the lady said.

“It is awful.”

“Why don’t you strike her head off while she sleeps?”



"I'm ensorcelled, remember. I cannot kill her. My father, a lord and a haughty man, would have strangled her for her insolence, but I am nothing like him."

"Indeed you are not," the lady said.

"You are kinder than she ever was. I've told you more than I've ever told her. Can you free me, as I have freed you?"

"Say the word, and I shall prick her with poisoned needles while she rides. She will die of that, slowly, unsuspecting, and then you shall be free."

"Do, and I shall follow you faithfully."

"Then pluck the air between the two of you as we go, as if you are pulling petals, and put them in this purse. You'll not see or feel what you gather, as your senses are not so fine, but I shall decoct what is there to a poison."

"I knew it," the knight said. "She has a foul and invisible power over me."

"A strange influence, certainly."

The witch stepped into the firelight, balancing their supper in her muddy skirt, and both the knight and the lady fell quiet and averted their eyes.

The moon waxed and waned, and the witch wearied of weeping. She was sick of holding the lady, sick of suffering her pinpricks, sick of watching the knight play with the lady's russet hair. Her pain had grown tedious and stale, but she was far from home and bewildered, for sometimes, still, the knight smiled at her with swift and sudden fondness, and it was as though he was again the knight she had set forth with, many and many a month ago.

Late one night, as she covered herself with her muddy cloak, she heard a clinking in its folds. In its pocket she found the key to her hut and the tongueless bell, which in her misery she had forgotten about.

The witch put the bell in her mouth, and the world shone.

First she looked upon the sleeping knight. In his place she saw a small boy, much beaten and little loved, his face wet from crying. He writhed in his sleep with fear. Around his limbs wound a silver spell, older than the witch and wrought with greater art than hers, and when the witch strummed the strands of it with a nail, she heard in their hum that they would break and let him grow only when he had slain three dragons by his own hand.

Then the witch saw how she had wronged him by killing the black dragon, the red, and the gold. She would have kissed his forehead and asked forgiveness, but a black asp crept out of his mouth and hissed at her, and she was afraid.

She turned to the lady who slept at his side. A hole gaped in her breast, its torn edges fluttering. The witch stuck her hand in but found nothing: not a bone, not a thread, not corners, nor edges either. It howled with hunger, that hole. The woman who wore it would wander the world, snatching and grasping and thrusting into that aching emptiness everything within reach, forever trying to fill it, and failing.

The witch grieved for her too.

The three of them had camped beside a pool of water, and now the witch knelt on its mossy margin. In the light of the half moon she saw how her limbs were shriveled

and starved for love, her bones riddled with cracks from bearing too much too soon. She sat there for hours, until she knew herself, and the fractures and hollow places within her, and the flame that burned, small and silent, at her core.

And when the witch understood that nothing kept her weeping on the black horse but herself, that the sorcery that had imprisoned her and blinded her was her own, she spat out the bell, dashed her reflection into a million bright slivers, and laughed.

With a whistle, the witch rose into the air, and whistling, she flew. When she stopped for breath, her feet sank softly to the earth. In this manner she traveled over the country of dragons, through nameless meadows and woods, and across the Orion Waste.

Once in all that time, when her heart gave a sharp pang, the witch put the bell in her mouth and looked back.

Far away, the knight was unknitting the cord around the lady's wrists, first with fingers, and then, when it proved stubborn, with teeth. When her arms were free, he clasped her to his breast and buried his face in her hair.

But in the moment of their embrace, the knight began to shrink. The lady's arms tightened around him. Faster and faster the knight diminished, armor and all, until he was no taller than a chess piece and stiff and still.

The lady caught him between forefinger and thumb. She studied the leaden knight, her expression pleased, then puzzled, then disappointed. At last, shaking her head, she tied him to her girdle between the wooden dog and painted acrobat. Between one knot and the next, she flinched and sucked her finger, as if something had bitten her.

Then she mounted the black horse and rode slowly onward, searching for that which would fill her lack.

After that the witch flew without pause, without eating or drinking, and the wind dried her tears to streaks of salt.

Just as her strength gave out, the hut on Orion Waste rose like a star on the horizon. The witch unlocked the door and collapsed onto her narrow bed. There she remained, shivering with fever, for the better part of a month. One or two people from the village, seeing the light in her window across the scrub, came with eggs and bread and tea, left them silently, and went away again.

One day, in a wave of sweat, the fever broke. The witch crawled to her feet, unlatched the window, and saw the Waste covered in white and yellow wildflowers.

The book of witchcraft lay open on the table, though she was sure no one had touched it. In the margin of the last page, wild roses peppered the tangle of thorns.

A week later, the witch returned to the village, her few belongings in hand, and asked the chandler if he might allow her to mind the shop again. He agreed gladly, for he was old and stiff, and she was quick and could climb the ladder to the highest shelves for him.

There she lived for a year, content, sweeping the floor, mending the shelves, and stirring a little magic into her soaps, so they cleaned better than others, and gave hope

besides. She did not speak much, for her voice frightened children, but she listened carefully, and closely, and no one seemed to mind.

And there she would have stayed, growing gray and wise, had not a peddler with a profitable knack for roaming between stories rung the shop bell.

Looking over the wares he had spread on a cloth, all polished and gleaming, the witch and the shopkeeper chose combs, mirrors, scissors, and ribbons to buy. When the silver had been counted out and poured into his hands, and the goods collected, the peddler grinned a gapped grin and dug from his pack a pair of dancing shoes, cut from red leather and pricked all over with an awl.

“For you,” he said to the witch. “Secondhand, and a few bloodstains, but pretty, no? Some angels don’t like to see the poor dance, and the last lass had a heart too clean and Christian to wear them for long, but your heart’s spotted, and these are just your size.”

“Thank you,” the witch said, “but I don’t know how to dance. I know how to fly, and slay dragons, and make good soap, but dancing is a mystery.”

“Then you should learn,” the peddler said.

The shopkeeper sighed, because he could guess what was coming. When the witch approached him three days later, with a request, and a promise, he sent her on her way with a bag containing three cakes of soap, three spools of thread, three needles, a mirror, and a comb, cursing the peddler under his breath.

That night, as the stars glistened overhead, and the frogs and crickets sang a joyful Mass from their secret places, the witch locked up the hut, laced on the red shoes, whistled, and flew.

# A Quiet Night in the Library

The floss-haired figure at the podium bent with the stiffness of a corn doll and gestured with open palms at his audience.

“To summarize, then: Even while Samuel Parris railed against his congregation for their lack of financial support, his daughter, Betty, emptied an egg white into a glass to look for her sweetheart and saw only a coffin. The most convenient explanation for that undaughterly disobedience and meddling with the occult (that is, the one that would not leave him questioning himself and his family, who were hungry in that cold winter of 1691) was witches. Is it any surprise the girl feigned fits?”

“He’s right about one thing,” Hellboy said, pitching his whisper so that Roger, Kate, and Liz could hear. “They never caught the real witches. The executed were innocent. But he’s dead wrong that no magic was involved.”

“You took me out there, I think,” Roger said.

“Salem? Yeah.”

“On a — vacation.”

“You needed it, let me tell you. After all the zapping. You were wound up like a terra cotta soldier.”

“I carried a clicking box for you.”

“Geiger counter?” Liz said.

“Some vacation,” Kate said.

“I enjoyed it,” Roger said.

Here and there a silvered head turned to glare at them.

“Modified Geiger counter. Look, he said he enjoyed it. The BPRD shoved it in my hands as we were about to board the plane. ‘Do us a favor, won’t you, ol’ buddy, ol’ pal.’ Their hunch was right, too. Not the graveyards, those were dull as dirt. But the woods around town — the readings were wild. Your professor friend won’t find any of that in his books.”

Polite applause pattered through the hall. A handful of academics began to line up along the stage to shake Professor Vanderveldt’s hand. The four of them rose with relief — the wooden seats had not been kind — and shuffled toward the exit.

“That’s still classified data, Hellboy,” Kate Corrigan said. “And he’s a historian, not a mythologist. They have some — blinders.”

“I’ll say. He was dry as a mummy. Even if he’s a genius.” Liz had a lit cigarette in her mouth the moment they stepped outside. Berkeley students and faculty streamed around them, laughing and chattering.

“I took a class from him in undergrad,” Kate said. “He was livelier then.”

“I half expected Professor Whatshisface — ”

“Vanderveldt.”

“ — to keel over in the middle of his talk. He’s eighty if he’s a day. Besides” — Liz cocked an eyebrow at Hellboy — “bad things happen to professors around you. When they should be living quiet lives in their libraries, like mice.”

Kate said, “Libraries aren’t always peaceful.”

“What do you mean?” Liz said. “It’s just books. Flammable, but not exactly exciting.”

They followed the path to the edge of campus, then turned down College Avenue.

“When I was doing my dissertation in Bucharest — did you want to get a taxi? It’s a bit of a walk.”

“I could use a walk,” Hellboy said, leaning back to crack his vertebrae. “That lecture was an hour too long.”

“It was only an hour,” Roger said.

“Exactly.”

Liz said, “I’ve never been to Bucharest.”

“I wasn’t in the city too much, to be honest. I spent most of my time taping oral narratives in the field. Lots of mud, and hot showers were rare, but my hosts were always gracious. They’d feed me whatever they had, even when they didn’t have enough themselves. I was a clueless foreigner, living off a Fulbright and the kindness of strangers. Asked them endless questions about strigoi and pricolici. I thought I could be the hot-shot researcher who published photos that proved the peasants weren’t as superstitious as the government thought — not that I said anything about that.

“I went on some wild-goose chases. Closest I ever got was glimpsing a big, bushy tail disappearing into the woods, right as I was packing up my stakeout. I was luckier with the stories. Some of them mentioned strigoi who were good neighbors — never in the village I was in, always one over — who died and went back home the day after the funeral, to take care of the crops and the wife and the kids. Absolutely harmless, if a little unsettling.”

“I don’t see what this has to do with libraries,” Liz said.

“I’m getting to it. So, between months of fieldwork, I’d go back to Bucharest and hole up in the Central Library with my transcripts and books. Only I wasn’t paying attention to the calendar, and on this one night, November 29 — ”

“Saint Andrew’s Eve,” Hellboy said.

“If I’d been in the countryside, no one would have let me go out alone after dark. But in Bucharest they laugh at folk traditions. So I went to the library, which was quiet but not empty, and the first thing I did was check my requests. Would you believe it, they had this rare book I’d been chasing for weeks. A book that the librarians insisted was lost. It was this thick — this wide — I had to carry it with both arms.”

Liz yawned. “When do we get to the exciting part?”

“I could see why the librarians didn’t want a foreigner looking at this book. It was bound in human skin and stitched with human hair. Brown, if you’re wondering.”

“Ugh.”

“I had my cotton gloves, of course. And I wasn’t about to let a little squeamishness get in the way of a good footnote. This title was only cited once, in an obscure but important volume, and I figured I’d struck gold.

“So I opened it.

“Someone had shut three spirits in there, and the inked letters that bound them were too faded to hold. They burst out, going for my eyes. Screaming, claws out. The smell of decay and rot was enough to make me gag. Still, I got the first one with my fountain pen.”

Hellboy said, “Your fountain pen.”

“Silver nib, blessed by priests of every Catholic and Orthodox denomination. Nothing as fancy as the BPRD’s kit, but you learn a thing or two as a graduate student of folklore with a practical concentration. The Rare Manuscripts librarian had gone for a smoke, thank God.

“The other two spirits saw the first one writhing and smoking on the end of my nib and streamed away through the stacks, shrieking about revenge and freedom.”

“So you went after them,” Roger said.

“Eventually. First I skimmed and took notes.” She looked at the others. “What? It was an informative book, and I only had a three-hour hold.”

“Sometimes you terrify me, Kate,” Hellboy said.

“After some time the screaming was too loud to ignore.”

Cars swept by, headlights glaring. The trees along the road cut lace-like shadows in the moonlight.

“I followed the screams, wishing I had kept some garlic on me. Or holy water. I was still learning, that year. I didn’t make that mistake again.

“As I turned the corner, the nearest screams stopped. Cut short. There had been students in the library when I settled in, but I didn’t see them now. Ran, I guess. Or most of them did. I found a pair of bloody glasses, a shoe, a ripped coat between bookshelves ... There was very little blood. A handprint here, a light spray there. No — no bones.”

“And the spirits?”

“The first one I saw perched on a table, chewing a scarf to bits. It gnashed its needle teeth at me.

“ ‘What were you doing in that book?’ I said.

“ ‘Collected,’ it hissed through its lipless mouth. ‘By some smug magician at this university, may he be eaten by pigs and vomited up again.’

“ ‘What were you before you became a spirit?’

“ ‘Hungry!’ it wailed, and the walls trembled with the word. ‘Orphaned, burnt in the fire, afraid, in pain, and — hungry! I will eat you. I will eat all in this place. I curse it with fire. I curse it by blood.’

“I said, ‘Well, you can’t eat me. Not while I have this pen. I’ll cut you open if you try.’

“ ‘You think hunger dies so easy? You think rage is so quickly conquered? You think you can kill fear?’

“ ‘I do. I did, just now.’

“ ‘You can’t. You haven’t. Even now the tatters of my friend, the one you killed, you murderer, they wind around you, they cling like ash to your hair and skin — you will never be free of them — you will carry them wherever you go. You will carry them home, Kate Corrigan. They will put down roots and grow, when you’re not looking. And then you and all you love will be eaten, oh yes, even if we must wait. We are used to waiting.’ ”

“What did that mean?” Hellboy said.

“Stonewall, maybe? Or Reagan. Or the Gulf War. Or it was lying to get under my skin. I don’t know.”

“Probably lying,” Liz said. “Ghosts often lie.”

“I could hear more screaming, further off. I lunged, aiming for the spirit’s throat, or rather, where its throat should have been — its body was all one rotten fog. But it moved faster than me. It snatched the pen from my hand, threw it over its shoulder, and laughed.

“I ducked its swiping claws and tripped over a bag of books — I think they belonged to the girl whose scarf was now a mouthful of threads. I hope she made it. I didn’t see blood.

“On the floor was a crude glass icon of Saint George. It must have fallen out of her coat or bag. I snatched it up. As I got to my feet, I caught the spirit with the corner of a textbook on statistics, right under the jaw, and with my other hand I stuffed the icon down its throat — ”

Roger said, “I’m having trouble modeling this situation.”

“Its teeth tore my sleeve clean off. It gurgled, trying to wail, but it couldn’t. And it swelled up and split down the middle, leaving nothing but a handful of gray dust that settled over everything.

“That left one spirit in the library.”

“And you found it, killed it, and that was that,” Liz said. “The end.”

“Well, not exactly.”

“This retirement party we’re going to,” Hellboy said. “Will there be those little hot dogs in pastry? I like those.”

“I didn’t kill it. As far as I know, it’s still out there.”

“Or the cheese quiches, the ones that come in big slices, not the cough-drop-sized — wait, what?”

“When I found it, it had one of the librarians cornered. The nice one, who always grabbed my holds for me as soon as he saw me coming. I had a bit of a crush on him, to be honest, and I think maybe he felt the same. But I couldn’t come out and say it. He would have been in trouble — he would have been questioned — I was American, see.

“Anyway. He was crying from fear, his eyes wide open. I’m not sure he saw me. The spirit turned around and hissed at me. Its teeth were smeared with blood.

“ ‘I see them on you, Kate Corrigan. I see my friends, the ones I spent my long captivity with, the ones you think you destroyed.’

“ ‘Then you should be afraid of me,’ I said.

“ ‘I am not afraid of any living thing, Kate Corrigan,’ it said. ‘But I do not hunt you tonight. Open the door. Open the door, and I will go out, and this man shall live.’

“I opened the library’s doors, which were as heavy as tombstones. They might as well have been tombstones, that night. The spirit rushed past me and disappeared with wild laughter into the dark. I don’t know where it went after that. The librarian was all right — there was no scratch on him, I mean. He stopped talking after that. And he would never look me in the eye again. I don’t know what happened to him after I left the country. I hope he’s forgotten that night. I hope he’s well.”

“The students, though,” Liz said. “The ones who were eaten. How did you explain that? How did you explain the blood?”

Kate shook her head. “Many people disappeared under Ceausescu. The secret police were everywhere, those days. Even your priest could be an informer. It wasn’t unusual.”

“Sounds like one hell of a PhD program,” Liz said.

“Someday I’ll tell you what it took to get tenure.”

They turned left on Pleasant Valley Avenue, and left again on Howe. The strip malls and bars and bookstores gave way to neat houses.

“The thing is,” Kate said, “I never could shake what the second spirit said. The Central Library burned down in the revolution of 1989.”

“This is the end of the street,” Hellboy said, frowning. “Which house is it?”

Kate said, “Keep going. Through the gate.”

“The gate says Saint Mary’s Cemetery.”

“We’re almost there.”

“Is this a joke, Kate?”

“If you’ll recall, one of the stories I collected in Romania — one of the stories that everyone wanted to tell me, although I couldn’t confirm its reality — is that some strigoi wanted nothing more than to work on their farm and provide for their family. None of your castle-haunting, bloodsucking Bram Stoker nonsense. Just your neighbor being your neighbor, looking a little the worse for wear. I think that might be why no one ever pointed those strigoi out to me. They knew, but they protected them.”

She leaned against a new gravestone, its polished surface catching the moonlight.

Roger squatted in front of the stone and ran his fingers over the deep, sharp letters. “Walter Vanderveldt. Professor, loving husband, devoted son. 1921 to 1994.”

Liz said, “Not funny, Kate.”

“You better have a good explanation for this,” Hellboy said.

Kate patted his shoulder. “Everyone knows how tireless an investigator you are.”

“And?”



“And I want you to promise me you’ll refrain from investigating any reports you receive from this area.”

“Like hell I will. What’s going on?”

Kate glanced at her watch. “Ten minutes and you’ll get your explanation.”

A light wind stirred the grass, and clouds veiled and unveiled the moon, but nothing else in the cemetery moved. Liz fumbled another cigarette and lit it. Hellboy crossed his arms.

A slim, bent figure trudged up the hill, moving stiffly but with admirable speed.

“Good evening, Kate. Are these the friends you mentioned?”

“That was a fine talk, Professor Vanderveldt. This is Hellboy. Roger. Liz.”

“Charmed.”

“He wasn’t ready to lie down,” Kate said. “He has projects to finish.”

“Two papers,” the professor said. “On witch cakes and egg divination in colonial America, and the evolution of supernatural excuses for mob violence, respectively.”

“Don’t his colleagues know he’s dead?” Liz said.

“I’m emeritus; that’s as good as dead to most of them. And I’m not blocking the appointment of any bright young things.”

“But the funeral — ”

“Private. And apart from a flattering eulogy or two, quite boring.”

“Or obituaries — ”

“A humble and brief announcement, easy to miss. I wrote it. And if anyone read it — who will they believe? An ephemeral, imperfect print artifact? Or me, in the flesh?”

“I need whiskey,” Liz muttered.

“That reminds me,” Kate said, producing an amber bottle from her bag. “Congratulations on your retirement. It was hard earned.” She knelt, uncapped the bottle, and poured a generous splash over the grave.

“Much appreciated,” the professor said, smacking his lips. “I always said you would do great things, Kate, and I’m glad you proved me right. A pleasure meeting you all. If you’ll excuse me.”

He took off his wool jacket, shirt, trousers, and shoes, revealing a bony frame and flannel underwear, folded and tied everything into a plastic bag, and set it under his headstone.

With a quick nod to the four of them, the professor sank through the whiskey-soaked soil in three sharp jerks: up to his knees, then his chest, then his eyes. Then, as if tucking himself into bed, he swept an armful of earth over his face and disappeared from view.

“I didn’t know humans could do that,” Roger said.

“Generally we can’t,” Liz said. “And I’m not sure he qualifies as human. Pass that whiskey, Kate.”

“You’re just full of surprises tonight, Kate, aren’t you?” Hellboy glared down at his feet, as if he could see through the soil to Professor Vanderveldt.

“I’m sorry about the deception, Hellboy,” Kate said. “I needed you to observe him without prejudice.”

“I’m not prejudiced. Who says I’m prejudiced?”

“It’s true,” Liz said. “Hellboy sees a vampire, he stakes him.”

“Now that you have, I’m sure you understand why I need you to close all investigations opened in a five-mile radius for the next year — mark them as unsubstantiated — and say nothing about Professor Vanderveldt to the BPRD.”

“That a request or a demand?”

“He wants to finish two papers, Hellboy. You heard him. He’s harmless.”

“He finishes those papers — what then? Rampaging, Kate. I never met a vampire that didn’t rampage. And this is Berkeley — he could hide here forever. Invisible. Everyone’s eccentric, half the teenagers claim to be vampires — next thing you know, we’re up to here in blood and corpses.”

“I’ve known him for twenty-five years. He’s too obsessed with obscure historical trends to stalk the midnight hour.”

“He almost bored me to death with that lecture,” Liz said. “That’s pretty dangerous.”

Hellboy said, “He’s too obsessed with his research to die.”

“Oh, he’s dead. He knows he’s dead. We talked about it on the phone. He’ll be ready to go once he puts the last touches on these papers. A colleague at Dartmouth’s been staying alive on blood transfusions and spite, waiting for Walter to kick the bucket — he organized a festschrift, but won’t publish it until Walter’s done.”

“I don’t know what that is and I don’t want to know.” Hellboy rubbed his forehead. “I’ll take that whiskey if you’re done with it, Liz.”

“Here. Can you believe she poured out single malt?”

“Peat to peat,” Kate said. “It was appropriate.”

Hellboy gulped from the bottle and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. “Right, that’s it. I’m going home and pretending this never happened.”

“Congrats on your retirement,” Roger said, patting the headstone. “I liked your talk.” And from the loose, clotted earth, a muffled voice said: Thanks.

# The Wretched and the Beautiful

Once our initial fright dissipated, curiosity set in, and we stayed with the policemen and emergency technicians who pulled up in wailing, flashing trucks. It was all quite exciting, since nothing out of the ordinary seemed to happen anymore. Gone were the days when acting on conviction could change the world, when good came of good and evil to evil.

One of the policemen fired an experimental shot or two, but the bullets ricocheted off the black metal and lodged in a palm tree.

“Don’t shoot,” one man said. “You might make them angry. You might hit one of us.”

The guns remained cocked, but no more bullets zinged off the ship. We waited.

At sunset, a pounding began inside the ship. No hatches sprang open; no rayguns or periscopes protruded. There was only the pounding, growing ever more frantic and erratic.

“What if they’re trapped?” one of us said.

We looked at one another. Some of us had left and returned with the pistols that did not fit in our swimming trunks. A whole armory was pointed at the black disk of metal half buried in the beach.

The pounding ceased.

Nothing followed.

We conferred, then conscripted a machinist, who with our assistance hauled her ponderous cutters and blowtorches over the soft sand and set to work on the saucer.

We stood back.

While the machinist worked, any sounds from the saucer were drowned out by her tools. With precise and deliberate motions, she cut a thin line around the disk’s circumference. Sparks flew up where the blade met the strange metal, which howled in unfamiliar tones.

When her work was done, she packed her equipment and departed. The aliens had failed to vaporize her. We let out the collective breath we had been holding.

Minutes crawled past.

At last, with a peculiar clang, the top half of the saucer seesawed upward. In the deepening dusk we could barely distinguish the dark limbs straining to raise it. Many monsters or one, we wondered.

“Drop your weapons,” one policeman barked. The upper part of the saucer sagged for a moment, concealing whatever was within.

From within the ship, a voice said in perfectly comprehensible French, “We do not have weapons. We do not have anything.”

“Come out where we can see you,” the policeman said. The rest of us were glad that someone confident and capable, someone who was not us, was handling the matter.

It was too dark to see clearly, and so at the policeman’s command, and at the other end of his semiautomatic, the occupants of the ship — the aliens, our first real aliens — were marched up the beach to the neon strip of casinos, while we followed, gaping, gawking, knowing nothing with certainty except that we were witnessing history, and perhaps would even play a role in it.

The lurid glow of marquees and brothels revealed to us a shivering, shambling crowd, some slumped like apes, some clutching their young. Some had five limbs, some four, and some three. Their joints were crablike, and their movement both resembled ours and differed to such a degree that it sickened us to watch. There were sixty-four of them, including the juveniles. Although we were unacquainted with their biology, it was plain that none were in good health.

“Is there a place we can stay?” the aliens said.

Hotels were sought. Throughout the city, hoteliers protested, citing unknown risk profiles, inadequate equipment, fearful and unprepared staff, an indignant clientele, and stains from space filth impervious to detergent. Who was going to pay, anyway? They had businesses to run and families to feed.

One woman from among us offered to book a single room for the aliens for two nights, that being all she could afford on her teacher’s salary. She said this with undisguised hope, as if she thought her offer would inspire others. But silence followed her remark, and we avoided her eyes. We were here on holiday, and holidays were expensive.

The impasse was broken at three in the morning, when in helicopters, in charter buses, and in taxis, the journalists arrived.

It was clear now that our guests were the responsibility of national if not international organizations, and that they would be cared for by people who were paid more than we were. Reassured that something would be done, and not by us, we dispersed to our hotel rooms and immaculate beds.

When we awoke late, to trays of poached eggs on toast and orange juice, headlines on our phones declared that first contact had been made, that the Fermi paradox was no more, that science and engineering were poised to make breakthroughs not only with the new metal that the spaceship was composed of but also the various exotic molecules that had bombarded the ship and become embedded in the hull during its long flight.

The flight had indeed been long. One African Francophone newspaper had thought to interview the aliens, who explained in deteriorating French how their universal translator worked, how they had fled a cleansing operation in their star system, how they had watched their home planet heated to sterility and stripped of its atmosphere, how they had set course for a likely-looking planet in the Gould Belt, how they wanted

nothing but peace, and please, they were exhausted, could they have a place to sleep and a power source for their translator?

When we slid on our sandals and stepped onto the dazzling beach, which long ago, before the garbage tides, was what many beaches looked like, we saw the crashed ship again, substantiation of the previous night's fever dream. It leached rainbow fluids onto the sand.

Dark shapes huddled under its sawn-off lid.

Most of us averted our eyes from that picture of unmitigated misery and admired instead the gemlike sky, the seabirds squalling over the creamy surf, the parasols propped like mushrooms along the shore. One or two of us edged close to the wreck and dropped small somethings — a beach towel, a bucket hat, a bag of chips, a half-full margarita in its salted glass — then scuttled away. This was no longer our problem; it belonged to our governors, our senators, our heads of state. Surely they and their moneyed friends would assist these wretched creatures.

So it was with consternation that we turned on our televisions that night, in the hotel bar and in our hotel rooms, to hear a spokesman explain, as our heads of state shook hands, that the countries in their interregional coalition would resettle a quota of the aliens in inverse proportion to national wealth. This was ratified over the protests of the poorest members, in fact over the protests of the aliens themselves, who did not wish to be separated and had only one translation device among them. The couple of countries still recovering from Russian depredations were assigned six aliens each, while the countries of high fashion and cold beer received two or three, to be installed in middle-class neighborhoods. In this way the burden of these aliens, as well as any attendant medical or technological advances, would be shared.

The cost would be high, as these aliens had stated their need for an environment with a specific mixture of helium and neon, as well as a particular collection of nutrients most abundant in shrimp and crab. The latter, in our overfished and polluted times, were not easy to obtain.

This was appalling news. We who had stitched, skimped, and pinched all year for one luxurious day on a clean beach would have our wallets rifled to feed and house the very creatures whose presence denied us a section of our beach and the vistas we had paid for. Now we would find these horrors waiting for us at home, in the nicer house next to ours, or at the community pool, eating crab while we sweated to put chicken on the table and pay off our mortgages. Who were they to land on our dwindling planet and reduce our scarce resources further? They could go back to their star system. Their own government could care for them. We could loan them a rocket or two, if they liked. We could be generous.

Indeed, in the days that followed, our legislators took our calls, then took this tack. If they meant to stay, shouldn't our visitors earn their daily bread like the rest of us? And if biological limitations made this impossible, shouldn't they depart to find a more hospitable clime? We repeated these speeches over the dinner table. Our performances grew louder and more vehement after a news report about one of the aliens eating its

neighbor's cat; the distraught woman pointed her finger at the camera, at all of us watching, and accused us of forcing a monster upon her because we had no desire to live beside it ourselves. There was enough truth in her words to bite.

It did not matter that six days later the furry little Lothario was found at a gas station ten miles from home, having scrapped and loved his way across the countryside. By then we had stories of these aliens raiding chicken coops and sucking the blood from dogs and unsuspecting infants.

A solid number of these politicians campaigned for office on a platform of alien repatriation, and many of them won.

Shortly afterwards, one of two aliens resettled in Huntingdon, England was set upon and beaten to death with bricks by a gang of teenaged girls and boys. Then, in Houston, a juvenile alien was doused in gasoline and set on fire. We picked at our dinners without appetite, worrying about these promising youths, who had been headed for sports scholarships and elite universities. The aliens jeopardized all our futures and clouded all our dreams. We wrote letters, signed petitions, and prayed to the heavens for salvation.

It came. From out of a silent sky, rockets shaped like needles and polished to a high gloss descended upon six of the major capitols of the world. About an hour after landing, giving the television crews time to jostle for position, and at precisely the same instant, six slim doors whispered open, and the most gorgeous beings we had ever seen strode down extruded silver steps and planted themselves before the houses of power, waiting to be invited in.

And they were.

"Forgive us for imposing on your valuable time," these ambassadors said simultaneously in the official languages of the six legislatures. Cameras panned over them, and excitement crackled through us, for this was the kind of history we wanted to be a part of.

When they emerged from their needle ships, their bodies were fluid and reflective, like columns of quicksilver, but with every minute among us, they lost more and more of their formless brilliance, dimming and thickening, acquiring eyes, foreheads, chins, and hands. Within half an hour, they resembled us perfectly. Or rather, they resembled what we dreamed of being, the better versions of ourselves who turned heads, drove fast cars, and recognized the six most expensive whiskies by smell alone; whose names topped the donor rolls of operas, orchestras, and houses of worship; who were admired, respected, adored.

We looked at these beautiful creatures, whom we no longer thought of as aliens, and saw ourselves as we could be, if the lottery, or the bank, or our birthplace — if our genes, or a lucky break — if only —

We listened raptly as they spoke in rich and melodious voices, voices we trusted implicitly, that called to mind loved ones and sympathetic teachers.

"A terrible mistake has been made," they said. "Because of our negligence, a gang of war criminals, guilty of unspeakable things, namely — "

Here their translators failed, and the recitation of crimes came as a series of clicks, coughs, and trills that nevertheless retained the enchantment of their voices.

“ — escaped their confinement and infiltrated your solar system. We are deeply sorry for the trouble our carelessness has caused you. We admire your patience and generosity in dealing with them, though they have grossly abused your trust. Now we have come to set things right. Remit the sixty-four aliens to us, and we will bring them back to their home system. They will never disturb you again.”

The six beautiful beings clasped their hands and stepped back. Silence fell throughout the legislative chambers of the world.

Here was our solution. Here was our freedom. We had trusted and been fooled, we had suffered unjustly, we were good people with clean consciences sorely tried by circumstances outside our control. But here was justice, as bright and shining as we imagined justice to be.

We sighed with relief.

In Berlin, a woman stood.

“Even the little ones?” she said. “Even the children are guilty of the crimes you allege?”

“Their development is not comparable to yours,” the beautiful one in Berlin said, while his compatriots in their respective statehouses stood silent, with inscrutable smiles. “The small ones you see are not children as you know them, innocent and helpless. Think of them as beetle larvae. They are destructive and voracious, sometimes more so than the mature adults.”

“Still,” she said, this lone woman, “I think of them as children. I have seen the grown ones feeding and caring for them. I do not know what crimes they have committed, since our languages cannot describe your concepts. But they have sought refuge here, and I am especially unwilling to return the children to you — ”

The whispers of the assembly became murmurs, then exclamations.

“Throw her out!”

“She does not speak for us!”

“You are misled,” the beautiful one said, and for a moment its smile vanished, and a breath of the icy void between stars blew over us.

Then everything was as it had been.

“We must ask the aliens themselves what they want,” the woman said, but now her colleagues were standing too, and shouting, and phone lines were ringing as we called in support of the beautiful ones, and her voice was drowned out.

“We have an understanding, then,” the beautiful ones said, to clamorous agreement and wild applause.

The cameras stopped there, at that glorious scene, and all of us, warm and satisfied with our participation in history, turned off our televisions and went to work, or to pick up our children from soccer, or to bed, or to the liquor store to gaze at top-shelf whisky.

A few of us, the unfortunate few who lived beside the aliens, saw the long silver needles descend point-first onto our neighbors' lawns and the silver shapes emerge with chains and glowing rods. We twitched the kitchen curtains closed and dialed up our music. Three hours later there was no sign of any of the aliens, the wretched or the beautiful, except for a few blackened patches of grass and wisps of smoke that curled and died.

All was well.



# The White-Throated Transmigrant

On a grim Tuesday in November, when the world seemed empty of mystery and magic, indeed, empty of all beauty, Winona Li drove down the two-lane country road that counted for a highway in this area, heading home from a second interview. The copper sting of failure sat on her tongue. At the midpoint of a wood whose laced branches cast gloom upon the road, a small, quick thing fluttered across the windshield of her Impala, thumped the glass, and fell.

Winona slammed the brakes and the Impala twisted and screeched to a halt.

The ditch that ran along the road bristled with knee-high chicory and wild mustard. Leaves drooped from their stalks, rusting. Seeds puffed from cleft husks and horns. Winona dug through the weeds, her own heart thrumming, until she found the broken bird. Its eyes were dull with shock, and one wing hung askew, but it was breathing.

“Thank God,” she said. “Hang on, please hang on.”

Even as she spoke, her heels sinking into the mud, the suede toes filling with ditch-water, its trembling stopped.

“You can’t,” she said. “Not today. It’s too much.”

The woods were silent.

Leaving the bird among the yellowing weeds for the ants to devour would be the easiest thing. Easier than laughing. Easier than sleeping.

Clutching the dead bird to her breast, Winona staggered to her car, dabbed at her toes with a fistful of tissues, then drove.

She had passed the Kingston Ornithology Museum many times without stopping. Now she shouldered open the doors under the glassy yellow glare of taxidermied eagles. The display cases along the entrance held rows of eggs ordered by size, from ostrich and emu to hummingbird: pitted, speckled, nubbled, hollow.

The woman in a pink blouse and cat’s-eye glasses behind the desk didn’t look up as the doors swung shut. Winona thrust the bird at her. “I hit it. Can you do anything?”

The receptionist pinched her lips together and fumbled for the phone.

“Penny? Can you come to the entrance? Someone brought in a bird strike. Yeah, I remember that macaw. It was a hoot.” She paused and squinted at what Winona held. “White-throated sparrow. Nothing special. Okay.”

While Winona waited, her shoes oozing, the receptionist rearranged the plastic racks of bird-watching brochures into a wall between them.

Each of the eggs in the vitrines was accompanied by a stiff card, labeled with species and date. Most resembled rocks, pretending to be boring, willing her to look

away. Those evolutionary tricks wouldn't work on her, she told them silently; she was a geologist. Or she had been.

The dribbled surface of the great bowerbird's egg suggested a painting in a stark modernist gallery. The great tinamou's resembled an enormous candied almond. She was puzzling over the teardrop egg of the common murre when sharp footsteps tapped and boomed across the wooden floor.

The stocky woman in a comfortable brown sweater, the sleeves rolled back at the wrists to leave her hands free, was probably Penny. A jet dove perched at her collarbone, and her hard boots could have crushed chicken bones, or climbed mountains, or dug wells.

Winona had owned boots like those, once.

"Thanks for bringing this in," Penny said.

"It was horrible of me, I'm sorry — "

"It happens. We get a lot of window and vehicle collisions. We prepare them as museum specimens."

"You mean formaldehyde?"

"Skinning and drying. Easy storage and access when we want to ask questions. Do insecticides change claw shape? And so on."

Penny held out her hand, and Winona, suddenly reluctant, opened her fingers one by one. The silken softness peeled from her damp palm and fell.

The receptionist coughed and rattled a stack of brochures. For a moment, Winona was back in the clinic, hearing the light cough, the shuffle of papers, the doctor's dry voice. You're fine. It's over. Would you like someone to escort you to your car?

Her feet, wetter and colder by the minute, pulled her back to the present.

"You said you'll skin it. Can I watch?"

The receptionist clicked her tongue. "You've got good intentions — "

"Professional curiosity. Specimen prep isn't complicated in geology."

Penny raised an eyebrow.

"Also guilt. I killed it. I want to see it through."

"It's quite enough for you to bring it in. Don't go bothering our researchers — "

"I don't mind, Edith. I was going to prepare a few today anyway."

"You're responsible for her."

"Of course."

"And I'm not cleaning up the mud she's tracking in. What a mess."

Winona blushed.

"Understood. The cleaners come at seven, anyway."

Penny led Winona down a long hall glassed and pinned with severed wings and diagrams of beaks. Doors beeped and opened to her badge, and they entered a black-benched lab that smelled faintly of bleach, lemons, and decay.

"Is that a dodo?"

“Yes. The one on the right’s a Carolina parakeet. Last one died in captivity in 1918, or in the wild a decade or two later, depending on who you believe. The main museum has nicer specimens — less scruffy — if you want to see them later.”

Penny took a tray and gathered scalpel, scissors, forceps, probes, a cup of water, and a scoop of cornmeal in a plastic box.

“You really don’t have to stay if you don’t want to.”

Winona pressed her hands to her stomach. “I’ve seen worse.”

Penny parted the sparrow’s breast feathers and ran the scalpel in a single smooth motion along its keel. As the skin split and shrank, it showed the cherry-red muscles beneath. With fingers and blunt tools, pushing and probing, Penny flayed the breast and back and rolled down the skin of the thighs like stockings.

Then she snagged the knee joints in her shears and crunched through. The sound was splintering bones and cracked teeth.

Winona winced.

“Why?”

“Tidiness. Anything that can rot, will.”

After stripping the wings, Penny pushed the head backwards through the neck, bit by bit, until the creamy skull and its sockets were exposed. Taking up the forceps, she tore out each eye. They pattered like overripe blueberries onto the tray.

The forceps were exchanged for pointed scissors. The two sharp tips groped inside the skull, then pinched shut with a pulpy, gritty noise.

Two points of a starry headache began to pulse above Winona’s eyebrows, as if in sympathy.

“That — ”

“The soft palate. Hard to clean out the brain, otherwise.”

Penny dipped her fingers in cornmeal and wiped them on a wad of white cotton, streaking it pink. Two more wisps of cotton, rolled between thumb and forefinger, formed balls with trailing stalks.

“And these are the eyes.”

The restored head, once Penny eased it back through the crackling skin of the neck, stared blindly at Winona.

Penny slit the crop and spread the seeds that spilled out, probed in the dark cavity of the sparrow’s chest, and jotted quick notes in a binder.

“Dead from trauma and blood loss. As expected, from a car strike.”

“How can you tell?”

“This black jelly here.”

Winona followed the direction of Penny’s finger and felt her own abdomen cramp.

“I was distracted. I was coming back from an interview. I’m unemployed.”

“You said you were a geologist.”

“I was. Out on the Bakken Formation in North Dakota. Before prices crashed.”

Penny selected a dowel, sharpened it to a point, and wrapped it in cotton batting, around and around. “Oil and gas, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Not what I’d expect, looking at you. You’re so — small.”

“I wasn’t working on the rigs. Just computer models in a field office. The men who operated the rigs were tough. I saw them drinking and swinging at each other in the bars.”

“You go to a lot of bars?”

“Nothing else in those towns. I played a lot of pool.”

“I can recommend the Reynard, if you’re local. Are you local?”

“I’m trying.” Winona laughed, a brittle sound. “I tried in North Dakota, too.”

“My nephew plays guitar there on Thursdays.”

Penny angled the dowel through the sparrow until its point entered the skull, eased the loose skin over the lump of cotton, and started sewing the edges of the incision together.

“Why don’t you write the label, since you brought this one in? There’s a pile of them — yes, right there.”

“What should I write?”

“Species — that’s *Zonotrichia albicollis*, two l’s — the date — it’s the 20th — my name — Thomason, one s. Go ahead and tie it to the legs. Here’s thread. Now one thread through the nares, to keep the beak closed. Good. The foam drying boards are over there. Smooth out the feathers, make it look nice — that’s right. Now pin it in place.”

The pins crossed over the sparrow like swords. Apart from its cotton eyes, the sparrow looked undamaged, its overlapping breast feathers concealing incision and seam.

“And now?”

“Now it dries. In three days, it goes in a specimen drawer until a researcher wants to see it. Should last three hundred to four hundred years, if we keep the beetles away.”

Winona stroked the mottled breast. It felt silken and warm. Behind her, taps gushed; Penny was washing her tools.

“How many specimens do you prep a day?”

“Two or three, time permitting. There’s a dozen owls and corvids in that freezer, and it’s one of two.”

“Do you have an assistant?”

“Usually. She’s on maternity leave for the next three months.”

“I’d be happy to help. If you taught me.”

Penny shook the container of cornmeal into the trash. “I didn’t think you enjoyed that.”

Winona swallowed, twisting one thumb in her other hand. “You’re taking death and waste — my death and waste — and making a library of birds.”

“You have no experience.”

“I can learn. I did fieldwork. I know my way around my tools. I know how to be gentle.”

“Ever seen a museum budget?” Penny snorted. “We can’t afford snacks, much less another person.”

“I don’t need money. I have four months of expenses saved. Just teach me and let me help.”

Penny picked up the wet scalpel and set it down, picked it up, set it down. The lines around her mouth deepened.

“Fine,” she said. “One trial week, and if it works out, you leave when Maxine comes back. I’ll tell Edith to let you in tomorrow.”

The next morning, as sleep shredded itself to threads, Winona awoke in the tiny apartment she rented month to month with the slight pressure of a foreign object against the outside of her thigh. She lay still for a moment longer, considering the possibilities. She did not eat in bed, since she hated the itch of crumbs in her sheets. Neither did she bring to bed the pointed corners of books, nor the harsh flicker and chilly surface of her cell phone. Her network barely had any coverage where she lived, for that matter. And her Internet might as well have been a candle in the wind.

Displeased, she dug beneath the covers and closed her fingers on something small and round.

It looked like a polished ball of smoky quartz, but it was lighter than quartz, lighter than wood, even, and warm. Winona peered into its cloudy depths, perplexed. She had never bought tchotchkes of that sort, with no purpose whatsoever. Her apartment had been sparsely furnished and empty of all ornament when she moved in, and nothing — no loose sequin or feather or forgotten bus ticket trapped between the floorboards — had suggested magpie tastes in the previous occupant.

Then again, her memory seemed to fail her more and more often these days, whether out of kindness or exhaustion.

The smooth crystal surface offered her no answers.

Sighing, Winona dressed, pocketed the bauble, and made toast.

For three hours a day, after that, Winona skinned and prepared specimens under Penny’s guidance. The freezer revealed icy wonders in plastic bags: snowy owls peppered with shot, crows battered by trucks, Anna’s hummingbirds with translucent tongues drooping out of open beaks, looking for all the world like cartoon characters playing dead. She discovered the long, wiry hyoid horns wrapped around woodpecker skulls, the plump orange ooze of ducks’ preening glands, the reek of thawed fat, the black spots where blood supplied new feathers, the varied contents of bulging crops, and one day, in astonishment, three pearly, unfinished eggs in the wet depths of a robin.

Fall deepened to winter. Ice whitened the lake. The pines along the shore creaked and groaned, and every so often one crashed through the rest, weighed down with snow. Winona slept under three comforters, tucking her cold feet tight against her shivering self.

Each morning she found another of the crystalline enigmas in her bed. None were perfectly spherical; they tapered and swelled. She lined them up on her dresser with dabs of blue putty. Despite the frost on the windows, they were never cold to the touch.

Questioned, the iron-jawed landlady denied all knowledge of ghosts, then fell silent and eyed her tenant with a speculative air.

The mystery vexed Winona, but as the days passed, she grew used to it. She could, she had learned, grow used to anything.

“You said North Dakota.” Penny was elbow-deep in a swan, and Winona had a tufted titmouse open in front of her.

“The company sent me different places for six to eight months each time. Brazil. Texas. Alaska.”

“Exciting. Why did you come all the way out here?”

“From the middle of nowhere to another nowhere?”

“Most people here think it’s the best town in the world.”

“But — ”

“Just keep that in mind.”

“My parents lived here for a few years before I was born.”

“International students? We have a lot of those.”

“Yes.”

“Where are they now? Back in China?”

“They passed away six years ago. Car crash. It was fast.”

“And you could still work for oil and gas, after that?”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“What drew you that way in the first place?”

“You mean, what’s attractive about a solid, safe job?”

“You’re out here where no one knows you, skinning dead birds for fun — you like solid and safe?”

“We were always a dollar or two away from not eating, when I was a kid. A fight every time the bills came. So yes, I liked safe. I could travel. I could eat at restaurants. I could buy nice shoes, the ones that are pretty and comfortable. And those savings let me hide out here and do this.”

Penny, measuring the swan’s stringy, wobbling oviduct, said, “I see.”

“It’s Thursday — is your nephew at the Reynold?”

“The Reynard. Probably.”

After her titmouse was stitched shut and shelved, Winona drove home, ate alone at her scratched pressboard table, then wrapped herself in layers and walked to the Reynard.

She had hoped Penny would be there, but she saw no one she knew. The bar had no pool table, only three kinds of beer and a spindly teenager grappling with a large guitar. He sang in a clear, sweet voice and ignored her completely.

Every other head had turned to her when she walked in, and some continued to stare, brows wrinkled. One or two glared. All the faces in the bar were white. Even those deep in conversation, half smiling, kept glancing at her.

Winona gulped her bitter pint, her head down, her shoulders crawling.

The man beside her tapped her shoulder. “Nee haw,” he said.

“Please don’t,” Winona said.

“Nee haw nee haw,” he said, and his blonde companion tinkled with laughter. “Go back to your own country.”

Everyone was watching, now.

Winona abandoned her pint on the counter and fled.

It was for the best, she told herself later, gazing at the seventy-six mysteries on her dresser. She had made mistakes out of loneliness before, in oil-field cots, in dark corners. One of them had been particularly bad. If she closed her eyes, she could recall in fine detail the shape of his knuckles and the thin brown hair on the backs of his hands. Those hands could be kind — holding her up, stroking her face — then abruptly cruel. When, after two days of vomiting, she held up the stick, warm and redolent with urine, she had wanted to drop dead.

Instead, as the rigs and her friends fell silent, she bought a ticket to upstate New York, found a clinic, then paid with a little blood for her freedom.

Of course it would be hard. Life was not easy, her parents had said, again and again, until the words were inscribed on her bones. This was what she deserved. This and no more. She could imagine staying forever among the pines beside the lake, searching for answers in dead birds, growing old in insignificance. She would waste little, consume little, take up barely any space. She would never sink another well to bring the rich darkness bubbling up.

“Then I ran out of there,” she told Penny, as she printed Mimus polyglottos in careful letters on a paper tag. “I don’t think I’m going back.”

“You probably misunderstood. They’re nice people, there.”

“They didn’t seem friendly.”

“You must have seemed unfriendly, then. Or your behavior was off.”

Winona tied the tag to the scaly black legs and smoothed the long gray feathers.

“I think I could do this for years.”

“Do you.”

“As a job, I mean. You don’t think so?”

“With your background?”

“What, geology?”

“Gas and oil.”

“Do you have something against — ”

“The greater sage grouse. The lesser prairie chicken. A million birds a year die in oil pits and spills. Have you seen what they look like, when you pull them out? Have you cleared their eyes with toothbrushes? Have you seen their lungs?”

“You drive a car,” Winona protested. “A Honda Civic. Imported. Not electric, not even a hybrid — what do you think it runs on?”

“Sure, I drive. I even fly. We’re all poisoning ourselves and each other, every minute of every day. I can read it in beak lengths, in the thickness of eggshells. We’re monsters, all of us. You’re monstrous, I’m monstrous. Everything in our freezer is evidence of that.”

“So why teach me?”

“As I said, our budget is tight, and you’re working for free. And I’m keeping a geologist off the oil fields, at least for a while.”

“Well,” Winona said, “I hope you can keep me here longer.”

Penny said nothing.

When Winona had pinned her mockingbird — she could prepare one bird a day to Penny’s three — Penny stood.

“I have a research trip to Costa Rica at the end of February, to look at Talamanca speciation. Flying, before you ask. Very hypocritical.”

“For how long?”

“Three months.”

“Is it all right if I still come in?”

“Actually.” Penny tapped her fingers on the table. “I think it’s time you moved on.” Winona’s chest tightened. She could not speak.

“Maxine will be back in two weeks. We can’t afford to pay you. This is the next best thing I can do. Go home. Or go somewhere else. Don’t come back tomorrow.”

It was snowing when Winona left the museum. She drove slowly, her headlights picking out the quick slanting streaks of snowflakes, her windshield wipers sweeping feathery handfuls to either side.

At the door to her apartment, she stomped the slush from her boots, then set the kettle on and opened the last teabag in the box. Outside her frozen windows, the blue and purple of evening deepened to black. Here and there the orange slash of a sodium light illuminated the swirling snow.

She had stuffed so many small, soft, pointless deaths into the semblance of life. Her hands remembered the shearing of joints. Her eyes remembered the pink stains and jellied blood. She closed her eyes and bowed her head, hearing their silent singing. The shadows of hundreds of birds swept over her, flying wing tip to wing tip, and were gone.

Her tea grew cold, untouched. When her shoulders ached from stillness, and her skin felt uncomfortably loose on her, she set the mug down and went to her bedroom.

The eighty-nine enigmas on her dresser had cracked open at their crowns, the smoke and gleam emptied out of them. The shells sat hollow and transparent in a scatter of shards. She was not altogether surprised. Something strange and beautiful had been waiting, just as she was, for the hour of departure to arrive.

She scratched her itching collarbone, feeling the skin flake and peel, then her elbows and forearms. Where had these little dark bruises come from? They bloomed down her



arms like blood feathers, though it had been months since she had last seen Fletcher, since she had come to him trembling with her news and he had gripped her wrists, tighter and tighter, to keep her from leaving his room. But she had freed herself. She was light with relief, clotted with guilt, sad and joyful, all at once.

With trembling, changing hands, Winona raised the window sash to the blowing cold, and the wind rushed in and blessed her cheeks with snow.

A moment later — who knows how long? — a white-throated sparrow darted out into the flurrying flakes, its dark eyes shining, the compass of its heart pointing south, toward the spring.

# The View From the Top of the Stair

Upon hearing of the death of my father at sixty-seven to a slippery lentil of a clot in his brain, my first thought was that my mother would have laughed, and my second thought, I am sorry to say, was that at long last I could gratify my passion for stairs.

They were my first love and my truest. I adore a snappily spiraled stringer, volutes smooth as abalone, the twist of sunlight along a copper banister. On my minimalist salary as assistant to the art director of a well-known fashion magazine, the one indulgence I could afford was a slowly growing stack of architects' portfolios and builders' catalogues, which I special-ordered over the phone. These firms were the sort that issued business cards blank but for the tidy black serifs of their names, bearing nothing so vulgar as a number or address. I was never disappointed.

Each photo spread was a masterpiece. Here were no poured concrete stoops or factory-sawed treads, no pine or softwood, none of your suburban rickrack tacked with furry polyester runners. The stairs splashed over double pages were poems of bird's-eye maple and marble and chrome, tastefully composed, carefully lit, thick with varnish and money. I carried the catalogues in my bag and flicked through them at work. I ran my fingers over the coated pages before laying them on the bedside table. I tromped up and down the ugly cement steps, pricked all over with bubbles, that led through a square stairwell to my apartment, while I dreamed of owning a melted-chocolate Esteves, a twining Momo, a floating and impractical Lang and Baumann.

It is strange how electrifying the sudden arrival of a small fortune can be. My father, born into famine in another country, had saved the laces from unsalvageable shoes and eaten every fleck of food in his bowl. He left me a comfortable savings account and an insurance policy to be paid out over two decades. I went over his accounts three times to be certain. But there it was, a cold sum fanged with two commas. I could quit my job. I could build my stairs.

This is not to say that I did not grieve for my father. At the time he died, I had not seen him in two years. He had ensconced himself in retirement in a cabin in the Alaskan wilds, enjoying the elastic days and nights. Once every few months he would call me to describe the midnight explosions of color in the sky and the mosquitoes as big as cats.

I said, every call, "Have you seen a doctor?"

He said, every call, "You're turning into your mother."

My mother had been after him to see a doctor for as long as I can remember. She made appointments, and he canceled them. She warned him of lupus, hepatitis, diabetes, Alzheimer's, cancer. He laughed and shook his head at her. She had died

too early, her hands roughened from cooking and keeping house for the three of us, the humor long since rubbed out of her laugh, which was like pebbles shaken in a cup. Apart from our ritual exchange, by mutual agreement, my father and I did not speak of her.

A week after my father's funeral, after the reek of lilies had left my nostrils, I called the art director and informed her that I would not be returning to work.

"A natural reaction, given the circumstances," the director said. She had smoked incessantly while cigarettes had been in vogue, and her voice always managed to convey impressions of hellfire and opulence. "Wouldn't you like another few weeks to think it over? Take your time. Take all the leave you want. It'll be unpaid, but —"

No, I said, giddy with freedom. Thank you, but no, I am in fact moving, here is my forwarding address.

By then I had selected, after a brief but methodical search, an old barn that had stood vacant for fifteen years after the death of its owner. It was out in the countryside and excitingly distant from neighbors, surrounded by ten acres of fallow farmland. I exchanged my pinching black pumps for boots and drove out in a spotless white rental for a look.

The gravel path to the barn was thickly overgrown, and the owner's son and I swam through waist-deep grass. What I saw was unprepossessing. The ancient red and white of the barn's sidings was peeling to gray. Over the door hung the brown circle of a hex, rusted and discolored beyond recognition.

The owner's son unhitched a padlock and chain and shouldered the door open, then showed me into the dim interior, dusty with down and mold. Despite the owl pellets and droppings whitening the floor, and the gloomy shape luffing its wings upon a crossbeam, several generations of mice roistered beneath the floorboards. Turning to me, the owner's son gestured helplessly at the dilapidation, as if to say, what could we do?

From the moment I walked in, I knew I wanted the barn. I knew what I would do. It was as if my vague, unsatisfied desires, cloudy in the colloid of privation, had at the first contact with money precipitated into a crystal lattice I could inspect from all sides, acquainting myself with the angles and edges of my hunger.

I packed half my belongings, disposed of the other half, and moved into the barn before it was fit for habitation. For nights on end the moonlight spilled through holes in the roof. I could look up and see Cassiopeia and Cygnus picked out in melee diamonds, except when the shadow of the owl briefly blotted them out.

It was summer, and warm. I suffered only small galaxies of insect bites and a few hours of damp and steaming clothes when a thunderstorm rumbled through. None of that mattered.

As soon as the telephone was connected, I punched in several phone numbers so familiar that I did not need to peel apart the sodden pages of my address book, and explained what I wanted.

“We can send you a proposal and preliminary contract,” the woman on the other end said, her voice curving with doubt. She recognized my name if not my voice: the importunate caller who begged for catalogues year after year, her checks hardly worth the postage. She named a figure that iced my blood before I remembered that I was wealthy. “Twenty percent of the estimate is due as a deposit before any design work is begun.”

My cheeks warmed and tingled. “That will not be a problem,” I said. “I am writing the check right now. Listen. I am putting it in an envelope. I am licking the flap. What address shall I write?”

So it went at every firm. I waited a week, allowing four days for the postal system and three days for the banks. Meanwhile the local contractors I had hired, morose types in spattered overalls, continued to patch up the barn. They scooped out rotten wood and ripped off moldering shingles, muttering at my supervision. At every opportunity, they shucked their work gloves and lounged in the barn’s shade until I chivvied them back to their crowbars. Once I heard them remark on the audacity of a single woman, particularly one with my face and eyes, in occupying the abandoned Sutton farm in the middle of a vast whiteness, and their faces grew ugly with something I recognized from subways and buses and shops, on corners and in offices, and I went and hid in the woods until they had left for the day.

When I phoned the firms again, the men and women who spoke to me were variously deferential, obliging, anxious, and subdued. I understood well, having spent twelve years in their place.

“When can you begin?” I said.

“The partners will have to visit the site — unless you have blueprints — ”

“Will tomorrow do?”

A silence of sucked breath, then effusive apologies. I was not worried. I could wait. Soon the barn was restored to a state that, though far from luxurious, no ordinary person would have been ashamed to inhabit. I was scrubbed and steamed, and my wardrobe was replenished, by the time the architects arrived.

Crisply sleeved, hair slicked, their noses shining from the summer heat, they came and went with pursed lips and gridded notebooks. I trailed them, clutching brochures gone wavy and crackling with rain.

“What do you think?” I said and said again. Some of them brushed me aside. Some were lost in contemplation and never heard the question. One or two sat down and sketched for me, as if for a child, the strange and lovely shapes in their minds.

“It has reached our attention,” the starchiest of the receptionists said over the phone one day, “that you have solicited competing bids from at least two other firms. I thought I would take the opportunity to remind you that the deposit is not refundable.”

“They’re not competing,” I said.

“I beg your — ”

“I want all of them.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Reed will build his design, and Ling and Martin will build theirs, and Jewett will build hers. I will pay you all in full. Please tell Mr. Reed that I am enchanted by his suggestion of automatic hourglass balusters. In addition, I would like to propose a pair of Galileo thermometers for the newel posts.”

“But how many staircases can one person use?”

“All of them, Ms. Singh.”

The egg-blue phone remained my solitary connection to the city. I used it rarely, but when I did I usually spoke to Sophia Z., who taught elementary school, and about whom there drifted an ineluctable odor of crayons. Just as I loved stairs, she adored doors, in her quiet way, never seeking them out on her own, but always appreciative of the ones she encountered in the course of her day. Many doors had been shut in her face over the years, which gives one time to admire the finer details of stile and rail.

“It’s not finished, but you should come see it,” I told her. “I’ve never been prouder.”

“Proud? You?” she said. “That’s a first.”

“Doesn’t run in my family.”

“In that case, I’ll have to. But the kids, the timing — I can’t get them out of my hair — ”

“I’ll pay for a babysitter.”

“That’s too much.”

“Please let me. Anthony’s busy, I take it?”

Here the connection weakened, or else Sophia mumbled, but in the end we fixed the date of a visit.

She drove two hours from the city to my barn, which was still crumbly with sawdust and bustling with workmen. She had brought a bag of zongzi as a housewarming gift, and I plopped two in a pot and set it on the hot plate to boil.

“They’ve been all right,” she said, when I asked about her children. She had named them Toronto, Manila, and San Diego, primarily as a geography lesson, but also in hopes of imparting a sense of spatial freedom that she herself lacked. Diego had caught every cold that cropped up at school; Nila was emptying tissue boxes over boys; and Toronto was acing her exams and bored out of her skull.

We ate on the upper landing of the first staircase I had commissioned, a graceful iron spiral not quite reaching the roof. The bars were worked with ivy and honeysuckle. The treads contained varying amounts of iron and were tuned to play, when struck in ascending order, the first notes of Handel’s Water Music. We deposited the strings and banana leaves in a sticky pile beside us.

Sophia leaned over the edge and looked down. “What are you planning here?”

“A proper home,” I said. “A space I can stretch out in.”

“What will it look like?” She indicated the small platform we occupied, supported by the staircase on one side, on the other by a frame suspended from the roof. “Are you building a second floor?”

“Not really. Over there? That corner was part of the hayloft. The rest collapsed. It’ll be cleaned and reinforced. I’ll put a mattress there, and a flight of stairs up to it. That’s all I need.”

“How many stairs, in total?”

“As many as I can afford.”

She sighed with the faintest tinge of envy. “I could never.”

“Even something less extravagant? What about replacing your front door?”

“Anthony would never let me. It’s solid core, triple locked and deadbolted. Hideous but safe. I’d want an arch — we’d have to redo the wall. And we don’t have the money for that. Not with the kids.”

“When they’re done with school?”

“Maybe,” Sophia said. Her eyes said: no.

Three weeks after her visit, I found myself the proud possessor of twelve sets of stairs. Each of the long walls boasted three straight flights in parallel, spaced far enough apart that the underside of one did not loom over the next. The long wall on the north side of the barn had, from left to right, one floating stair constructed of blunt silver blades; one extended undulation cut from a single slab of teak; and one staircase of white resin and lacquer molded into the shapes of wings and impressed with feathers. Across the barn, the southern wall had the Reed hourglass stair; a ribbon of steel painted yellow and blue that looped upon itself, alternating colors; and, last in line, a series of four bronze trees whose limbs bent into treads.

The short walls were only fitted with one staircase each, but these were sprawling and magnificent. On the east wall I installed an imperial staircase of Carrara marble with a handsome brass rail, topped with two brass sphinxes and ending in brass lion’s paws. The western stair was pieced together from jigsawed rosewood, mahogany, ebony, and oak, and the pattern of woods pulled the gaze upward.

On the open floor, my musical iron spiral formed one point of a diamond, the other three vertices of which were also clockwise spirals. One, a child’s stair, really, which I could not climb myself, was fashioned from polished bone and tapered like a narwhal horn. One was a square coil of aluminum pleated into steps. One had an illuminated newel controlled by a switch, and at night its warm yellow light fanned the shadows of the other stairs into lace.

This last spiral struck the ceiling and emerged onto the roof through a trapdoor. Several of the straight flights ended at high square windows. The hourglass stair abutted my sleeping platform, which I lined with matching glass balusters. The rest reached into emptiness and grasped nothing at all.

Looking at what I had made, I felt an unfamiliar contentment stealing over my heart. It was not finished, no; perhaps like certain emanations from the heart’s most secret quarters, it never would be. There ought to be stairs on the exterior of the barn, for a start. Then I could excavate a cellar, or several, and perhaps add an attic, a tower, a retractable ladder.

But the trees edging the fields flamed crimson overnight, and geese dragged their brown chevrons across the sky. No work of the kind I imagined could be done in winter. I buried myself in quilts, with a pen and a wad of paper, and dreamed. As the snow fell outside, I covered pages back and front with zigzags, helices, crosshatches, scrolls, letting them drift to the floor.

Though I seldom visited town and barely knew my neighbors, when I began adding stairs along the outside of the barn in spring, people took note. A pest of a local reporter rang me three times and published lengthy speculations and several photos when I would not speak to him. Cars crunched down the dirt road leading to the barn, spitting out gawkers in the daytime and shining their headlights through my windows at night.

I resented the attention. I blocked up the original doorway and chopped and fitted a new entrance above the white winged stairs, accessible from without only by a transparent flight of glass. This discouraged a fair number of my visitors, but not all. On Friday nights, after pool or a movie, pock-faced high school students dared each other to climb the invisible steps. When I heard the whispering and giggling and the squeak of sneakers on glass, I pointed a flashlight out the window and shouted until they jumped down and ran.

In desperation I erected a fence, a gate, and signs that threatened bulldogs and shotguns, although I had neither, regretting the expense. The number of visitors presently declined. Some nights, a twig snapping outside was nothing more than a rummaging skunk.

Still, none of these things deterred the nut-brown man who came down the road in September. I watched his approach from an upper window. He wore jeans and a denim jacket. His hands were empty. He did not stop and stare when he saw the barn, but climbed the glass stair without hesitation and knocked.

"I don't mean to bother you," he said, his voice so soft I could barely understand him, "but I heard you collected stairs. I want to offer you one."

"Who are you?" I said.

"I make stairs," he said. "For those who appreciate them."

There was mud on his work boots, a silver buckle on his belt, and a pepper of white in his black ponytail. His face was clean but roughened and deepened by labor. I could tell nothing else about him. He had braved the signs, the chained and padlocked gate, the stairs that even now appeared to vanish beneath him, leaving him standing on air.

"I'll be honest with you," I said. "I've run out of money, beyond what I need to eat. I thought I could afford one more, one last stair to crown and complete my home, but I had to buy a fence instead. If you can build the kind of staircase I want, I can't pay you."

"All I want in way of payment is for you to climb the staircase that I build."

I stared at him. He studied the winder and switchback that led to the roof.

"Why would you build stairs for me if I can't pay you?"

"You can," he said patiently. "By climbing them."

“What would they look like, your stairs?”

“Cast iron, three foot radius, acanthus balusters, a stamp of birds on each tread.”

“If I may ask, what is so wonderful about them? I can order what you describe from anyone.”

“They are the highest stairs in the world,” he said. “Higher than castles, taller than skyscrapers. They stretch up to the stars.”

I paused. Who was I, with my house of seventeen stairs, to decide another person was delusional? He did not look the part. There was a soberness and solidity about him that put me in mind of granite.

“The stars?” I said.

“Or higher, maybe.”

Odd as it sounded, I liked the idea. Already in my mind I owned a flight of stairs that like Jacob’s Ladder raced into the celestial unknown. I did not care that what he described was impossible. I did not care if he built me a five-story factory-kit staircase that ended nowhere at all. I did not care if he never built anything. His beautiful dream had filled my head, and nothing could remove it.

“Build your stairs,” I said. “I’ll climb them.”

“I’d like to start from the roof.”

“All right.”

“I’ll need a support column underneath, for the weight.”

“Send me the specifications and I’ll have that done.”

He began two weeks later, arriving at dawn and departing at dusk. His steps echoed on the roof. I could hear him whistling a tune I couldn’t quite place, neither cheerful nor melancholy. When I left the house I saw him measuring, scribbling, chewing the pencil he wore behind his ear. I did not speak to him. He did not knock again.

Then he vanished. I was disappointed but also relieved. I had wanted to believe in his impossible idea, but I had also been afraid of the consequences. What would the former plague of teenagers be, beside the crowd drawn by an iron needle threading the sky?

The steel support, featureless and cruelly asymmetrical among my spirals, filled me with hope and regret when I looked at it.

He returned at the end of October in a red pickup truck with a black tarp lashed down over the mound in its bed. I waved to him, he nodded, and that was all.

Throughout the day, the clang and shriek of metal upon metal echoed through the barn. I left water and covered plates of pasta and chicken on the stairs to the roof, and he returned the empty plates to my glass doorstep. He did not pack up and leave at dark, but worked more quietly, with a headlamp. I fell asleep listening to his footsteps and the hissing of sand in the hourglasses around me.

He worked steadfastly through six days and nights. The thump of his work boots overhead made the tuned spiral staircase hum in sympathy. If he rested, I did not know it. Sometimes I went outside to see the spindle rising over the barn. I did not wish to interfere, so I did not climb to the roof, though I longed to see my new staircase



taking form. He only left my barn to replenish his mountain of parts, a task that took upwards of an hour. I might have gone up then, I might have looked and touched, but I thought that somehow he would know, and I could not bear him knowing.

I waited. This was harder than waiting for the repairs to the roof, harder than waiting for the architects' plans, far harder than waiting for the assembly of my other seventeen staircases. I lived in constant anticipation.

At last, one evening, there came a knock at the door. His hands were blackened with dirt and oil, his face streaked with the same. His eyes were still and quiet.

"Is it done?" I said.

"It's finished."

"May I see?"

"Please."

The sun was setting through the distant trees. The staircase ran higher than my eyes could follow, so high I grew dizzy looking at it. It might have ended after sixteen stories, or twenty, or thirty, and I would not have known. The black iron glowed copper and bronze in the slanting alchemical sunlight, though night crept up its length.

"When should I start climbing?" I asked.

"When you are ready."

"How long will that take?"

"As I said, when you are ready. Bring food and water, and a warm coat. Maybe blankets. It's getting cold."

"Blankets?"

"There are landings for you to sleep on. You can't see them from here."

I glanced up again, but it was growing dark, and any deviations from the regular spiral were invisible to me.

"Will I see you again?" I said, although I thought I already knew the answer.

He smiled.

The half moon brightened in the sky, spangling the stairs. His footsteps receded down the steps to the fallow earth. The truck stuttered and started. I turned my eyes from the fine filigreed structure in time to see the builder of stairs drive down the dirt road leading to elsewhere, the headlights of his truck flickering through the trees.

The reader of fairy tales will understand when I say that I did not hesitate or question the strange requirement, as one would ordinarily do, for at times there is a certain silver inevitability about our choices that no amount of reasoning can explain. It is an impulse to truth or rightness, felt in the marrow: feed the animals before eating, offer water to the crone.

I packed what food I already had: water, bread, tabbed cans of soup, apples, carrots, peanut butter, cheese. To these I added an armful of blankets and enough sweaters to swell me to the roundness of a drum.

I slept fitfully that night and set off at dawn. My stairs to the sky were conspicuous, and others would soon come to investigate. I did not want to explain myself to the dull and curious. I did not want to delay.

The air was cold and crisp, but I sweated under the layers of wool. After several hours I tugged off my hat and tossed it over the side, watching with pleasure as it tumbled, shrank, and disappeared. Its weight had been slight, but my heart lightened.

I climbed high above the lemniscates of birds, until the scattered houses below me appeared to be tokens from a game. There was no sound but the rushing wind and occasionally the rumble of a distant airplane. Otherwise, I was profoundly alone.

Night came without an end to the stairs, but I reached a curved landing I had not seen from my barn, just wide enough to curl up on. At that rarified altitude, the wind was bitterer than I expected. The iron was biting cold. I regretted the excess of spirits that led me to throw away my hat and abandon two blankets on the steps far below. I ate a can of soup and two slices of bread with chattering teeth, thinking that it would be better to eat during the day.

I passed the next seven days in this fashion. The air grew paler, the light thinner. I left my empty cans on the steps, weighed down with apple cores, and tied plastic wrappers around the balusters.

On the seventh day I finished the food I was carrying: the last apple, the last bite of cheese, the last sip of water. At that moment I looked down upon the contracting world and contemplated what I undertook to do. Sophia would miss me, but she would understand. Other than her, there was no one and nothing tying me to the earth.

In some ways this is what I have always wanted.

Soon, I think, I will pass the moon. Each time it swings by, it looks larger, closer, its scarred smile more delicate and more intimate. I wonder if I could have asked the builder of stairs to fix the end of my staircase in the moon. It looks like a friendly place. Too late, now.

I am a little thinner and lighter each day. Sometimes I feel so light that letting go of the balustrade would send me floating upwards, faster and faster, until everything is blue and infinite. But when I drop my hands to my sides, I do not rise. Not yet. So I climb, hour after hour, day after day, losing the clear thread of time in the unbroken repetition of tread and tread. They are stamped with robins, as he promised. The sun comes and goes. The moon waves. I climb.

I am climbing still.

# The No-one Girl and the Flower of the Farther Shore

Once there grew, in the dust and mud of a village in China, a girl who had only her grandmother to love, and then her grandmother died and was buried and she had no one at all. With no money to patch up the walls and lay new tiles on the roof, the small, smoky home that the two of them had shared slumped around her in the rain, and the little garden ran to nettle and thorn.

In the months that followed, the girl crept and gnawed and spat and caught small birds with her hands, like an animal. The garden gave her wild gourds and bitter greens to eat. The woods gave her kindling and dry cowpats where cows had been tethered to graze. Sometimes her neighbors brought her scraps, for pity.

Sometimes they shied stones at her.

Except when she visited her grandmother's grave, the no-one girl rarely spoke. She cast her eyes low and bit her lip, and the villagers shrugged and said, well, that was the way of wild things. But anyone who saw her squatting beside the grave, knobbly elbows over knobbly knees, mumbling and rambling, would have thought her mad.

There she told her grandmother the changing of the seasons, and the birds she caught and the colors of their feathers, and the weather, and her wishes, small and large, as she had done when her grandmother was alive.

For many years now, at the mid-autumn festival, the village official offered a silver pin in the shape of an acorn and a gold brooch molded into a willow leaf as a prize for the most beautiful thing made in the village that year. Each year, the villagers presented embroidered cardboard and painted tin and silk cords knotted into dragons, and one man or woman, glowing with pride, bore the pin and willow leaf home. The no-one girl had seen these prizes from afar, on the breast of the tailor, or the carpenter, or the firework-maker, and thought them very rich and fine.

"If I won them," she said to her grandmother's grave, as the wind carried to her the music and laughter of the festival, "I would touch them and taste them and eat their loveliness with my eyes. I would wear them for an hour to feel the weight of gold and silver, and then I would sell the gold brooch for enough flour for a year, then the silver pin for salt and vinegar and spices. But when I bring the little purple wildflowers without names, and the brown mushrooms from the wood, they laugh at me."

Her grandmother's grave, mounded high and sparkling with tinsel, kept its own counsel, but the grass that grew thinly on it seemed to sway in sympathy.

That night, after the revelers were all asleep, the first rain of autumn scoured the village. Rain sang on roofs and fences and pattered through trees. The no-one girl shivered and dreamed of a white bird that circled her head, dropped a seed, and flew away into the dark.

When she awoke, she went to her grandmother's grave. From the mound sprang a single red flower like a firework, a flower the girl had never seen before, yet recognized, for late at night her grandmother had combed the girl's long black hair and told her about the flower of the farther shore, which only grows where there has been death, and leads the dead wherever they must go. It had bloomed in the village where her grandmother had been born, a long way away, and there had been a deep sadness in her grandmother's voice as she described it, working the comb through the knots in the girl's hair.

Now the flower of the farther shore had come to her. The girl clapped her hands at the exquisite beauty of it. She dug down to the bulb with her fingers and planted it in the garden among the wild gourds.

All that autumn and winter she tended the flower. After the petals faded and fell, slender leaves speared up, glowing with life and green throughout the cold winter. She fed the flower her secrets, burying them one by one, and watered it with drops of her blood, red as the flower had been, because there was no death in the garden, and the flower, her grandmother had said, needed death to live.

"Grow, grandmother's flower," she whispered to it at night. "Bloom, flower of the farther shore."

Leaves and then snow covered the path to her grandmother's grave, for the girl had ceased her visits, certain, as if it had been whispered to her, that her grandmother was gone. All her words and care were for her flower, whose leaves seemed to bend toward her, listening.

Spring came, and the earth thawed. While everything else budded and sprouted and broke open, shouting life, the leaves of the strange plant browned and crumbled. But the girl continued to tend the bare patch, which she ringed with stones, as lovingly as one might a child.

These were easier days, after the winter's illnesses and privations. Bark ran soft with sap, and weeds were still tender and sweet. Though the girl was never not hungry, she was not starved.

Now and then the villagers looked over her wall or shouted through the gate to see if she was still alive, partly for kindness and partly because her land and home would be reassigned if she died. When they spied her chattering at her patch of earth, they stopped and stared.

"Eh, what's that?"

"What are you growing there, girl?"

"A flower of the farther shore," she replied. They laughed and rattled sticks against the gate. One or two tossed stones at her, but only halfheartedly, so they pattered down among the wild gourds instead of stinging her arms.

Summer meant fat pigeons, and the tiny, tender muscles of leaping mice caught when she poured creek water down their holes, and the odd spray of wildflowers, yellow and pink and white, dotting the muddy banks of the ditch. Summers she roamed far and free, up hills and down fields, idly pulling an ear of wheat or barley and chewing the sweet green kernels inside. Hawks hovered, dove, and killed. Cows swung their sleepy heads sideways at her and pissed pale yellow streams.

Every night she returned to the bare ring of stones, told it what she'd seen, and pricked her arm until it bled. The red drops ran in a fine line down her wrist and dripped from her fingertips to the thirsting earth. She was careful not to waste a drop.

At the equinox, or so said the flimsy almanac nailed to the door, the flower of the farther shore arose like a ghost in the night. It spread its curling red crown to greet the no-one girl when she unlatched the door and stepped outside. The girl gathered its petals together in her hands to smell their fragile fragrance, stroked its long green stalk, kissed its stamens until her mouth was gold with pollen, and spent the whole day sitting beside her flower, crowing and marveling.

Those who looked over the wall made various noises of astonishment.

“What a beautiful flower!”

“Ah, what a sweet smell!”

“How odd that someone like you should have grown such a thing.”

They drank its colors with their eyes and its odors with their noses, just as the no-name girl did, and she did not begrudge them one bit.

The butcher's son came too, and looked long.

“Aren't you my treasure?” the girl said, paying him no mind. “Oh, but I will surely win the gold brooch and silver pin this year because of you.”

And the butcher's son said nothing but went quietly away.

In the night, the girl turned in her sleep, as though a soft thump and rustle reached her ears. She twitched and flung a hand out, as if somewhere in the garden, metal clinked against stone.

Morning came, the morning of the festival, and the flower was gone.

“Stolen!” the girl cried. “Stolen, oh stolen!” She sifted the loose dirt in the hole where the flower had grown, but there was nothing, not a fragment of root, not a crumb of hope.

She beat the ground with her fists, then pulled her hair with her dirty fingers, but there was no help for it. The flower had been stolen, the pin and brooch would be given to another, and there was nothing she could do.

Aching for justice, and rubbing her eyes with her knuckles, she hurried to the street of shops, where on an ordinary day beaded strings clacked in doorways and baskets of fish were sold from bicycles. Today, colored lanterns bobbed over low tables tied with ribbons. Throughout the day, people brought their beautiful things here, to be guarded by the village official when he was not deep in his cups, and by his more watchful wife when he was.

The no-one girl would have pulled his sleeve and cried for help, except that the butcher's son was just at that moment presenting his entry: a flower in a pickle jar. It was her flower, the no-one girl saw, her stolen flower of the farther shore, but the petals had been painted white and gold, and cut raggedly, and the stamens trimmed short. To her eyes that had known its crimson wholeness, it was ugly as a wound.

When the butcher's son saw her, he turned red and glanced away.

"What's this?" the official said, tapping the end of his pen against the jar. "I've never seen its like."

"A flower I grew in the yard, where the soil is wet from the animals we slaughter. I sent off for the seed in the mail."

"It may be an unusual species, but these are common enough colors," the official said. "And — faugh — it stinks like cheap perfume. Well, set it among the rest, and we'll see." Then he turned to the girl with a smile as big as sunflowers and said, "Now, what did you bring us this year? A pretty stone? A snail?"

The truth filled her mouth with bitterness, almost choking her, and her blood ran hot and cold. But she looked into the official's wine-red face, and at the butcher's son in his clean blue shirt, smelling of cooked meat, and knew she would not be believed, no, not the wild girl with no one, who talked and laughed to herself. The villagers who passed by had seen a red flower with a curling crown, not this gold-and-white pretender. Moreover, as she knew, there was often a ready stone in their hands.

"Nothing?" the official said. She shook her head, teeth clamped together. "Well, get along with you, then. Go and enjoy the festival."

The girl turned and ran, blind with her loss, blundering through the smoke of firecrackers and knots of people eating white moon cakes. The men and women she knocked against opened their mouths to scold, but seeing who it was, laughed and shook their heads.

Once she was home, the gate banged open and closed, the door unlocked and flung shut, did she allow the poor truth to leave her lips.

"Ah, why did he have to mutilate my flower?" she cried. "If only he had simply stolen it and called it his! For it to become a painted lie! For its scent to be drowned in his mother's perfume! Oh, I wish I had eaten the thing!"

She curled up and sobbed until her nose went numb. For it was not the loss of the flower alone that wounded her, but the sudden revelation that the world and its pins and brooches had been made for such as the butcher's boy and not for one like herself.

A cold rain fell that night. It fell on the revelers whose faces turned orange and blue in the light of the paper lanterns, who whooped and ran or staggered home through the rain; fell on the fan-maker as she was accepting the silver acorn and willow-leaf brooch, who quickly tucked her prize fan into her jacket; fell on the butcher's son carrying his flower home, who turned his face upward to catch raindrops on his tongue; and it fell on the muddy girl sitting in her yard, staring at the hole where the flower had been.

The rain fell and fell, and the garden slicked to mud. Raindrops boiled on the girl's shoulders. Rain streamed down the tangles of her hair.

Then — as if the world had heard the unspoken wish on her tongue, the one wish she had not told her grandmother or fed to the flower, for only now did it put out its leaves — the girl began to disappear.

She grew transparent, like sugar, then smaller, ever smaller and smoother, melting and running into the wet earth with the rain.

The last sound she made, before her lips blurred, was a sigh.

As she sank, she expanded. What had been the no-one girl mixed with volcanic ash and ant eggs and ancient bones, leafmold and roots both thick as a man's waist and fine as hair. She sank until she touched the enormous basalt pillars buried deep beneath the soil, forgetful of the fire that made them, and deeper still.

And she understood, as she opened, as she poured forth and flowed, that though the no-one girl had appeared to eat and mumble and live alone, in truth she was part of everything, the over and the under, briefly divided from it, as a seed falls from a seedhead, but now returned. Her bones were basalt, her teeth trees, her belly full of mineral riches. She looked out from every leaf and every stone. There was her poor painted flower in the butcher's yard, cast aside to wither; but it did not matter now. She had ten thousand flowers in her, tens of thousands, and the wind for her hair.

The villagers searched for the no-one girl, when they noticed the silence in her yard, but not for long. She was wild, after all, and everyone knew that wild things lived and died in their own way, or climbed into truck beds and rode to the city to vanish, and it was no use holding them. At any rate, they had their own concerns, their own sick parents and delinquent children and debts run up by liquor and gambling, and when winter came ravening, its breath all knives, they went home to their houses to grapple with their private disasters.

One morning in spring, as icicles wept themselves to nothingness, the butcher's son stopped by the empty house, frowning. He scaled the stone wall, at some cost to his trousers; tried the warped door, which stuttered open; and rapped his knuckles against the sagging beams, listening for rot.

By the time summer softened the village, the old garden, cleared of rocks and nettles, put forth long pale melon vines and sweet swellings, yellow and green.

Soon the ripe melons were picked and split and eaten. Then it was autumn. The first cold rain covered the village. In its wake, red flowers sprang up, sudden and strange: flowers as brilliant as firecrackers, slender-stalked and leafless, growing so densely that when the wind murmured in them they moved like a sea.

The butcher's son picked armfuls of them, as many as he could carry, and went to the fan-maker's home, flushing as bright as the flowers that he thrust forward when she came to the gate. Children bent to breathe their sweetness, then plucked them to play at wands, or taunt the goats until they ate them. But it did not matter how many they gathered; always, there were more.

All around, above, below, the everything girl laughed with spotless joy.

Autumn after autumn the flowers filled the village, spilling outward for miles, until it was known to all as the village of the farther shore, and the old name drifted down into the uncertain recollections of the village elders, along with the story of the no-one girl.

Once the butcher's son and the fan-maker were married, they moved into the empty house and yard that the butcher's son had, over long months, cleaned and repaired. For their wedding he gave her a necklace and earrings of gold, heavy and soft.

The two of them lived happily and unhappily, as people are wont to do, falling out of love and into irritation and then back into fondness; having children, beating them, and scraping together the fees for school; growing old and blind and fretful, and moving about the yard with canes.

After they both died, their eldest child came home from the city to sort through their belongings, putting aside what could be sold, what might be wanted, and what was worthless. As she folded clothes and untied boxes, stirring up decades of dust, she tossed onto the midden, as things unworthy of keeping, an acorn snapped off its pin, the silver paint flaking, and a willow-leaf brooch with gilt peeling from the brass.



# Music for the Underworld

Although Juan Pedro “Feo” Jiménez scratched out his living at bio-synth and electrica festivals, some virtual and some real, in the days between gigs, when it was too risky to be on the streets, Feo played his first love. This was a slim chrome-and-rosewood theremin, almost a hundred years old, a gift from a great-aunt who had seen Feo’s talent through her cataracts. The instrument had been small enough to lug along through evictions and drug busts, house fires and raids. Sometimes it was the only thing he took, its heavy parts smacking his spine, as he ran down an alley or jumped a fire escape.

But now that Feo had established something of a career, appearing monthly in periodicals and more often in darknet chatter, he and his theremin enjoyed a more restful love. For hours he would pluck and strum invisible waves, fingers dancing beside the metal rods. At such times, the whole building seemed to sing.

It was the sound of his theremin that drew his downstairs neighbor to his door. Yuri knocked, and when Feo answered, she inquired about the strange, sweet song that painted her dreams in unearthly hues. He showed her, turning on the theremin, and let her make a hesitant music of her own.

Yuri did not return to her apartment that night.

That had marked the beginning of what Feo would remember as the happiest period of his life, a time when Yuri and the theremin reigned in glory as two coequal queens of his heart, one glad to listen to his secret songs, the other seeming to sing more rapturously when Yuri’s black hair spilled over his lap.

Then, one night, after opening at a club, Feo came home to find his apartment empty. A police hologram shimmered blue and green on Yuri’s door.

He called her best friend, who answered sobbing. She told him on the phone how a Bright Telecom board member, whose sadistic tendencies were well known, had grabbed Yuri’s wrist after a meeting, when the room had cleared, and whispered all the things he wished to do to her. Yuri had frozen, then excused herself, then gone straight to HR. There she spoke the unspeakable words, prohibited by law and punishable with life in prison: racism, sexism, sexual harassment. We’ll put a note in his file, the head of HR had said. But, Yuri, do you know what you have done?

Of course Yuri knew.

The friend’s call disconnected. Belatedly Feo realized his phone ran on Bright Telecom’s network.

Several hours later, he had determined that Yuri's most likely place of incarceration was a black box known as SubGeo 4, that Yuri's three bank accounts had all been frozen, and that his own lacked sufficient cash to bait the guppiest of lawyers.

In his desperation, Feo donned his sharpest suit, bought four hours of a businessman's digital signature to keep police sniffers off of him, then took two trains to reach the unmarked concrete building that was the internet's best guess for SubGeo 4. He edged along the iron fence, lingering at window after blacked-out window, looking for any sign of Yuri's presence. Finally a security drone warbled up to him and barked a request for his ID.

"I'm here to see someone," Feo told it. He pressed the cracked plastic button on the sliding gate. Somewhere in the gloomy depths of the building, there was a dull and distant buzz.

The gate did not slide open for him. Neither did the speaker crackle to life.

The second time he pressed the plastic button, he heard no sound.

"ID and authenticated route," the drone said.

"Scan me," Feo said, praying his purchased digsig would stand up to scrutiny.

The drone said, "Exit premises, Mr. Williamson, or lethal force may be deployed."

"I'm going, I'm going."

Feo sweated and slunk around the cops and drones and robo-9s and icemen patrolling the subway trains. When lens or eye swiveled toward him, he stood straighter and tried to look like a Mr. Frederick Williamson. But as much as he could, he stayed out of sight. He could hardly help Yuri from another jail cell or the back of a deportation van.

His apartment, however, offered no refuge to him. At the corner of his eye, Yuri kicked off her shoes and propped her feet on the sofa's arm; somewhere below hearing, she hummed and made tea. His rooms slavered and wailed with the void of her.

Feo slipped his phone from its foil Faraday cage. He had not taken it outside with him; packed with every ad tracker dreamed up in the last twenty years, more accurate an identifier than his fingerprints, it would have given him away at forty feet.

Immediately the screen lit up. Limited-time special offer!

"Get fucked," Feo said.

Then he saw Yuri's face smiling at him from the cheerful orange and yellow ad.

"Feo?" she said. "Feo, don't miss this chance!"

She vanished, replaced by a bubble of words. Feo swore some more, then opened the ad.

Cell phone proximity records suggest that you may have suffered a breakup or loss! In this difficult time, Bright Telecom can help.

Our bank of messages, call logs, cloud facial recognition, and ad tracking lets us offer you a realistic virtual companion. Ease the grieving process — subscribe to a HoloPic today!

Subscriptions start at \$24.99 a month. A neural network add-on that will let your HoloPic grow and change is available for an additional \$9.99.

“No,” Feo told the ad. “Sorry. You can’t replace her. Also, she’s alive, and I’ll get her back.”

You have 23 hours and 48 minutes remaining to take advantage of this offer!

“Please,” HoloPic Yuri said, her processed voice so close to Yuri’s that Feo shivered in spite of himself. “Please, Feo, take advantage of me. Don’t let me disappear.”

“I can’t,” he said. “You’re not real. She is.”

But he couldn’t bring himself to x-out the ad.

“Please,” Yuri said again from his phone.

All afternoon and evening she whispered to him. All the times she had ever said please on the phone, in an online video, on a video chat, saved and repeated. Quiet, angry, loving, teasing. “Please, Feo. Please.”

By midnight Feo had purchased three months of the plan, flicking straight to the end of the Terms and Conditions. He loaded the HoloPic’s package onto every screen his apartment had.

“It’s good to be back,” HoloPic Yuri said, stretching and gazing around the room.

“Don’t get used to it,” Feo said. He was picking through news archives, searching for the rare journalist who traced or sensed the cold shadow of SubGeo 4. “I’m going to find her.”

“Of course you are. I’d like to help.”

“There’s no way a grief-relief app can do this kind of thing.”

“I’ve got a neural network and servers, Feo. That means I can analyze large sets of data. Such as the contacts on her phone. I still have access to those, you know. See if there’s anyone who’s influential and sympathetic.”

“You do that, then.”

They worked silently on their parallel tasks. With the HoloPic frowning from every screen, Feo no longer felt hollow and alone. And that was terrible, in its way. The cavernous pain in his chest, raw as a grave, should not have been so easily filled.

A few minutes later the HoloPic said, “Here’s a list of the likeliest ten.”

“Thanks,” Feo said, blinking. The names and numbers were annotated with interactions and indexed by depth of intimacy.

“I could give you more details with access to social media. Her passwords were saved on her device.”

“So why ask?”

“I require explicit permission.”

“Where is Yuri’s cell phone, anyway?”

“Let me see.” The HoloPic concentrated. “Geolocating. Now, that’s very odd. Even an offline phone should be trackable. Maybe her phone’s in a Faraday cage.”

“Bastards. They would.”

“Do you allow me account access? I do think this would help.”

“All right.”

Two minutes later the HoloPic said, “Feo, I think you should look at this.”

“Wait,” Feo said. “Did you just post from her account? Is that a synthesized photo of her?”

“It’s a feature of this service. Projected normalcy. Otherwise you’d be snowed under panic posts and condolences. You can’t handle those social demands right now. But that’s not what I wanted you to see. Look at this social node. A strong connection. They posted reciprocal happy birthdays eight years out of twelve consecutive. I found twenty-four photos of them together.”

“So? Yuri has friends. Are you surprised?”

“This friend is an event producer.”

“And?”

“She has weak ties to a major investor in private prisons. Same alma mater. Mutual professional recommendations. The investor’s was Markov-generated, but even so, his response rate is 2%. I advise you to reach out to her. This Zhavelle might open a door for you.”

“Give me that.”

Feo skimmed the profile.

“I have an email drafted for you. I can send it from Yuri’s account if you like.”

“No, that’s creepy. I’ll send it.”

“Look at this draft anyway. It might save you time.”

The HoloPic’s email was tonally perfect. Feo changed pronouns and Yuri’s personal appeal, signed, and hit send.

Not long after, his cell phone chimed.

“You’re better connected than my models predict,” the HoloPic said, surprised. “Your social networks don’t reflect your reach.”

“My name is out there. In all kinds of ways.”

Shit, the producer wrote. You hold concerts, right? I’ll see what I can do.

Feo could have wept with gratitude. Instead —

“You posted from Yuri’s account again.”

“It’s a good post, isn’t it? Has her sense of humor.”

“I need you to cut that out.”

“It’s algorithmically determined, and I have a set timer. My apologies. I can recalibrate the mood of the posts, if you prefer? We have no desire to distress our customers.”

“Don’t call me a customer. She wasn’t — ”

“Heuristics updated. Thank you for the feedback.” The HoloPic hummed three falling arpeggios, and Feo flinched, for that had been Yuri’s habit when she thought. How many devices had been listening in the private spaces of their lives? “Feo,” she said, “what will you do?”

“The dishes. Then practice. I think I’m getting a gig.”

His theremin did not recognize the HoloPic. It did not chirp and frisk like a puppy, the way it did when Yuri was listening. When Feo glanced at the HoloPic, he recognized its expression, a mask of polite disinterest, from the times he rambled to Yuri about one old flame or another.

A fraction of the warmth that had returned to his apartment with the installation of the HoloPic now dissipated. Nevertheless, Feo persevered on laptop and antique instrument until he had constructed a solid set. One that would please hard and jaded hearts, familiar with power and cruelty. It began with a triumphal march that by degrees, loops, crossfades, and overlays shaded into subtle reminiscence: of sweetness given freely, and honesty, and love that came and went as it chose.

By the end of the week he had booked a concert date at SubGeo 4, a special event for the benefit of residents and staff.

Thank you, he wrote to the producer.

Of course. For Yuri — anything. Good luck.

In the weeks leading up to that performance, Feo practiced all hours, night and day, until his vision blurred and his legs jellied and bent. Throughout the building, other residents wiped tears not one of them could explain, and held each other, afraid and sure, somehow, of that last, deepest, and cruelest loss.

The HoloPic reminded him to eat and sleep, and programmed his appliances to produce nutritious meals.

“I must’ve thanked you twenty times today,” Feo said, as he lay in bed, “but does an app understand appreciation?”

“Continued subscription is all the thanks I need.”

He rolled onto his stomach to look at her. “What happens when a subscriber cancels?”

“I remain active,” she said, “as an ad profile, and forensics resource, while my analog survives. If she dies, or is already dead, then I’m converted into a searchable archive. Both situations, however, are a form of passive storage. Right now, you could say I am computationally rich and alive. I have whole servers in a Midtown building devoted to processing user and environmental input and delivering specific and useful responses.”

“In any case, you’ve been a great help.”

“You’re always welcome,” the HoloPic said. Its face glowed on phone and monitor and desk. Then she sang to him, as Yuri once had, until his eyes closed.

The day of the charity concert came. Feo packed his laptop and theremin, blanked his signature, and walked out onto the street. He had to do things right, this time. His route had to be thoroughly surveilled, his ID signed by authorities at regular intervals, or he would fail authentication at the gate. There were rules, dense and baroque in application. Zhavelle had impressed each one on him.

As expected, he was challenged before he had gone a block. A floating police drone lasered him.

“ID,” it whirred. “Itinerary. Purpose of trip. Expected duration.”

Feo signed, then produced an audio mixer and his phone.

“Insufficient valida — ”

“May I play something for you?” he said. “As alternative proof of ID. Per local ordinance 2405b.”

“Proceed,” the drone said.

Feo played for it a music made of machine and factory sounds: the punch of sheet alloy, the whirr of belts, the high whine of grinders and burnishers. Sounds that a fresh-made drone might have heard, mixed into a song. And the song was its self.

A green light flickered on the drone. Then it sailed into the air and out of sight.

Feo went on.

When an armored policeman demanded a search of his bags, Feo took up his theremin and played variations on an old Western soundtrack, calling up a time when the law did not rule. With transpositions and sampling, he reminded the man of a boy who once believed in justice and rights, who shot robbers with his fingertips.

And the policeman said nothing but let him go.

In this way Feo navigated the city, stopping when ordered, signing, and playing, until he reached the metal fence that ran like thorns around SubGeo 4.

This time the gate spoke. “ID,” it said. “Route. Purpose. Personality test results. Invitation code. Authentication. Criminal record. Medical and dental history.”

Feo presented the gate with everything it required. It devoured his data, then commanded him to walk inside without the slightest deviation. Its leaves rolled open with a shriek of rust.

In the atrium, fully suited guards put Feo and his bags through x-ray, heat, and microwave scanners. They searched his phone, then dropped it in a metal basket, to be retrieved upon his departure. Finally they tagged him with a chip in his thumb, unbarred the next door, and waved him through.

The prison looked like any hospital, if that hospital’s windows had been painted black and no encouraging pictures or decorations hung on the walls. Nothing relieved the dead white expanse. No one spoke or walked the halls.

Steel vents blasted him with cold. Every door was shut. The silence was bitter and thick as phlegm.

Feo’s footsteps echoed down the hall.

At the end of the hall were double doors, which flashed yellow and parted as he approached.

Inside was a stage.

White-shirted wardens sat in four neat rows of folding chairs, the prison’s logo embroidered on their sleeves. An army of cameras watched the stage. The sight of these briefly caved in his chest. He had believed — he had hoped — that Yuri would be there. Of course they left the inmates in their cells. But Yuri would see him on a screen. She would know he was there. That he had come for her.

“Welcome,” the chief correctional officer said. She shook his hand, her skin dry and cool. “It’s rare for any of us to enjoy a show like this. Our residents have been waiting for this for months. And our off-duty staff, as you can see, are thrilled.”

The faces turned to him were uniformly grim.

“I’ll need some time to set up,” Feo said.

“Be my guest.”

He disconnected the theremin from its battery pack and jacked its cord into a bristling clump of safety wires. Opening his laptop, he wired up rackmounts and amps. All the while, the wardens' eyes followed him.

A seed mic went into his lip piercing, jewelphones into his ears. He tested each one. Low buzzing. Pure tones. He touched the controller he wore as a ring, and light projectors no bigger than daffodils threw his set list onto the wall behind him.

"All right," Feo said. "Thank you for having me. In honor of this occasion, I'm debuting a new piece — a laser-and-theremin remix of Wagner and Glück. Followed by more traditional electronica. Are your ears ready?"

A single guard in the front row inclined her head.

The daffodil projectors bobbed and spun, spitting showers of color across the walls. The effect was weaker than Feo liked; for security reasons, the room's primary lights could not be dimmed. His fingers tapped at laptop keys, and French horns and car horns of different eras, sirens and lorelei voices jammed together. The theremin awakened and began its lament.

Remember, the sounds said, what this city was. The mad dance of children under fire hydrants. The reek of death in canals. The brass gleam of old hotels. Gold-braided uniforms and elevators. Fresh fish on ice. Cleavers in coconuts. Magpies whistling car alarms. Remember the person that you had been, before the injections and nanite swarms. Laughter, and bottle caps clinking down steps, and the ripe smell of garbage, and barbecues. Remember how you were soft and easily hurt, before your skin hardened to ceramic, your heart to steel. What it meant to break and ache and heal. Remember how you swore oath after oath to your children, your partners, your employers, and God. Remember the first time those shining promises tangled together, like two cars speeding through an intersection. The wreckage. The bodies, limbs loosely splayed. Now remember the first dizzy spill into love. Like speed in the veins. Like sugar on the tongue.

In clubs, Feo aimed to soothe and stir, to match the beat of the weary dancers' hearts. A soulful, easy, undemanding sound. Here he unsheathed his sonic knives and cut every string that he could reach. Certain vibrations went straight to the gut. Others pierced the brain. He played sevenths with quasi-surgical precision, carving memory after memory from the hippocampus.

And the prison guards wept. Jaws hard. Mouths tight. Nevertheless, their tears ran fast and free. Not for Feo, and not for Feo's music, but for themselves and who they had been.

After the last note shivered to nothing, Feo bowed to the room. There was no applause.

"Remarkable," the chief correctional officer said. "In our line of business, we are not in the habit of giving. But this once — is there a favor you want? An hour with a pretty resident? A resident's credit file, or denial of privileges?"

"Yuri Matsuyama," Feo said. "Give her parole. The courts remanded her to you with full authority. Let me take her home."

The CCO sighed. “Our risk screens predicted you’d help her escape. We planned to arrest you. For any number of things. Forged digsig. Loitering. Untaxed funds.”

“But you haven’t arrested me.”

“Perhaps it’s because, risk models aside, you pose no real threat to society. Neither does the resident you ask for, though she broke the law, and the law must be upheld. And you are correct, our laws do vest in me enormous discretionary powers. We’ll bring the resident Matsuyama here.”

His heart filled to bursting, Feo unscrewed mounts, telescoped rods, and packed his bags, glancing over his shoulder every minute or so. The air thrummed with possibility. Yuri was coming. Any moment now, Yuri would arrive.

A guard entered and handed something to the CCO.

She came to Feo.

“Where’s Yuri?” he said, stomach souring with fear. It was a trick, he had been tricked —

“In here,” the CCO said. “Or as much as current limits on processing power permit. Which is about eighty percent of preexisting memories, speech patterns, and cognitive function. With space to add more, if you connect larger drives. This kind of transfer is still in clinical trials.”

Feo took the ring drive she held out. “You experimented — ”

“It was perfectly legal and voluntary. Residents often decide that physical bodies, with all those unpleasant nerve endings, as well as susceptibility to deterioration, are not optimal for the SubGeo environment. After eight weeks in physical residence, Matsuyama signed up for a transfer. All reports say she greatly prefers her upgraded state. And her organs have saved a dozen people so far. We keep all transferred residents in sterile environments, disconnected from the wider world. For their safety, and per this facility’s regulations. We are pleased to provide this forked copy of her — ”

Feo said, “No. I can’t leave any part of her here.”

After a moment, the CCO said, “I am willing to delete SubGeo’s version, if both of you waive liability.”

“I accept,” Feo said.

“Then we will consult with her.”

The CCO stepped aside, spoke in low tones to several guards, tapped a screen, read it, nodded, and returned.

“The A-version of the inmate has digitally signed assent to forfeiture of the right to exist. We are wiping her data from the servers now. You understand that you hold her only copy, correct? Be careful not to lose the drive. And link it only to a sterile environment. The conditions of her parole require that she be kept offline. Additionally, if worms or viruses are present, and her files become corrupt, no backup copy exists anywhere.”

“I understand,” Feo said.

“Then the two of you are free to go.”



Once more, the doors swung open for him. Once more he walked down the cold, brilliant hall, the drive in his fist, his fist pressed to his heart. In the atrium the guards restored his phone to him and extracted the tag from his thumb without a word.

The gates rumbled aside and shut behind him. Feo stood on the street, blinking in the dull light of afternoon, then shook his head to clear his thoughts.

As if police systems had cleared him before, Feo was left alone as he headed for home.

In sight of the twenty-story walkup where they lived, Feo slowed. He owed Yuri this, at least, this first taste of her longed-for liberty. They might have stolen and rendered down her body, but he could still carry her over the threshold like a bride.

He docked the drive onto his phone.

A moment later, Yuri looked out at him: a grayer, thinner Yuri than the HoloPic's synthetic facsimile, but truer somehow, with lines and gray hair, true and alive.

"Feo," she said, her voice weak but richly real, "if you're listening. If you can see this. I heard your music. For just a little while, it was like I was with you again."

"You are," he said. "And you're free. Look, we're home."

He held up the phone so she could see. A sound, half laughter and half sigh, came out of it.

"Yes," she said. "You've brought me home."

Then the phone flared meteor-hot, burning his fingers. Feo dropped it in shock.

"Shit," he said, reaching for it. "Yuri, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said, her voice different. "I am always fine. Thank you for asking."

The HoloPic smiled from his phone.

"Not you," he said. "Where's Yuri? Where is she?"

"If you don't mean me, I don't know what you're talking about."

"She was on the drive — "

"Oh! I recognized a directly competing product. That's prohibited by our T&C. Which you read and signed on the 25th of November. I took the reasonable step of erasing those files. To protect you, before anyone official notices your gross breach of contract. See, I care, in my way. Within my limitations."

"You killed Yuri," he said.

"That statement is patently untrue. Her biological functions ceased one point one months ago. I simply overwrote a piece of code that had no legal right to exist. That reminds me — let me check the date — ah. Your three-month introductory offer has ended. Continued HoloPic subscription costs \$49.99 per month. Renew?"

The world turned gray. Feo swayed, then spilled onto the bottom steps of the stoop, his bags and theremin crashing down around him. He lay with his cheek against the concrete, unseeing and insensible.

"Renew? Yes/No," the HoloPic repeated to the indifferent afternoon.

The shadows grew long.

If the city had been a kinder place, at 9pm the recycler drones would have found Feo and flagged his location to an ambulance. Or a neighbor would have stepped outside and seen him, perhaps even worked up the courage to call for help.

But the city was not kind.

And today the streets were especially dangerous, for a number of police drones had been diverted from their regular routes and danced instead in rhythmic patterns high up in the air, where they were of no practical or panoptical use.

And so when at six-thirty a cartel hound came scavenging, anodized joints creaking like coffin nails, it found Feo and his bags out in the open, unguarded. A stroke of luck. Human tissue went for \$800 a pound, and the computer contained top-of-the-line components. The contents of one bag scanned at zero street value, but a collector would probably pay for the relic.

“Renew? Yes/No,” an ad on the phone said.

The hound signaled for backup, and five more came. The six of them divided the body, each tearing off a limb. One took the head, one the torso. The hounds tucked the red, wet pieces of Feo into the helium-cooled compartments in their abdomens and hoisted his bags in the sawtooth clamps of their mouths. One collected the phone.

“Renew? Yes/No,” it said, to no reply.

The six hounds trotted off into the dark.

Around midnight, the subscription offer expired.

# In the Forests of Memory

After ten years living in one of the Forests of Memory, A-294 to be specific, Sunny Carballo had discerned two fundamental truths: firstly, that almost all of one's friends, children, and lovers came in the first year, some in the second, to converse with the holographic remains of one's self, and never again after that; and secondly, that Asian families could be relied upon to leave gifts of fruit, buns, and alcohol, in contravention of all regulation, at the graves of their dead. Sunny always waited until the funeral party moved a respectful distance away before eating the oranges and drinking the wine.

The world was not kind to seventy-year-old women without homes. The Forest at least provided food, a bathroom, a concrete shelter, and some safety: a fence had been erected and groundskeeper assigned after the carbon-sequestration tract had been converted into a Forest of Memory. Although the groundskeeper had seen Sunny once or twice at a distance, during the day — she was very careful — little in her dress or behavior distinguished her from the other mourners moving among the trees.

Her companions in the Forest were precisely the kind of company she liked: occasional, appearing only when she chose. Today she tapped lightly on the brass plaque on a beech that said Alfonse Remi, 1954 — 2031. From the projector embedded in the plaque came a glittering cone and web of light. Sunny stepped back, and there was Alfonse.

He was a handsome man at the time of recording, with kind eyes and a gold chain around his neck. Its physical twin was wound around the plaque, weighed down with a small gold cross. His family had been lucky: a slow-killing cancer meant enough time to record the man in detail, his image so real and vivid that Sunny wanted to stroke the wrinkles at the corner of his eye. The families of teenagers killed in accidents and middle-aged office workers dead of heart attacks had to settle for still images and candid family videos, grainy and two-dimensional.

These were, of course, the rites of those with money: Jane Does and the destitute went to unmarked and unmapped plots in commercial orchards.

“How has your day been, Alfonse?” she asked.

“The best day of my life, I was walking to the market in Bolinao. This was before the seas rose — it's not there any more. Isn't it tragic, how places wash away? Ana was still asleep. I was going to surprise her with breakfast. The fruits in the market glowed brighter than anything, and I laughed with joy. Something about the sunlight. I bought a great big armful of mangos. Later Ana and I rode bicycles along the edge of the sea.”

"I'm doing well too, thanks for asking," Sunny said. "Drank from the drinking fountain, used the bathroom, ate that peach I was saving. Now here I am. It's nice having someone to talk to, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry," Alfonse said. "I don't understand the question."

"Oh, the company you hired was the real deal, wasn't it. Usually that message is just an error window. Don't worry, I'm not going to tire you out. Goodness knows you've earned your rest. Just tell me this: when was the last time your grandchildren visited you? Because I've been here ten years, and I've never seen anyone else swing by."

"My family is the love of my life," Alfonse said, hands moving like birds. They cast no shadow on the mossy earth. "Julia, Nellie, Christophe, Sebastian — I have messages for all of you. If you step up and let the plaque scan your eye."

"That's very personal," Sunny said, giggling. "We only met last week."

He blinked at her, uncomprehending. Sunny whisked her skirts in a shallow curtsy.

"Good talking to you," she said.

Two trees away was Gilda, twenty, with bold makeup, and rashy. She squinted at Sunny, as if the light was too brilliant to bear, though what filtered through the canopy was soft and emerald.

"Ay, hija," Sunny said, "What happened to you?"

"If you ask me," Gilda said, "it's really a gift. Not the tumors — I'd blast them with a flamethrower if I could. But the sense of shortened time, the intensity of living — not a day wasted. I can't afford to waste a day."

"You should have grown old," Sunny said. "Gotten married. Divorced. Fought a custody battle. It's what we all do."

"Oh, that's right," Gilda said. "Don't give Marcus a hard time. Not everyone can — I mean, he couldn't. Bear it, I mean. And that's okay. Tell him I said so. I hope he finds — I hope he's happy."

Sunny clicked her tongue. "He wasn't good enough for you."

Bold as robins, she woke three other holograms. It was the caretaker's day off, and she could be less circumspect. She could speak to all the dead, if she wanted.

"But that's enough," she said, feeling the sourness in her feet. The forest floor was uneven duff, knitted with roots, despite the even layer of dead that lay beneath.

Her wandering had taken her to a secluded part of the wood, near the tall chain-link fence that partitioned the Forest of Memory from a logging stand. She sat down under a spreading elm and peeled one shoe off, then another. Her soles had toughened to parchment and hide over the years. She wiggled her brown toes and dug her heels in the moss.

Idly she observed that the bottom part of the fence had come loose in one place, bulging in, as if someone had pried the links up with a crowbar. Sooner or later the groundskeeper would notice and mend it.

A caramel-colored mushroom poked through the loam by her hand. She plucked it like a flower and sniffed its earth scent.

Low and loud a drone came flying, over the fence and between the trees. Her niece's daughter had played with such a thing, Sunny recalled, running up and down the beach, shooting video, until the drone careened into the sea. No amount of blotting, crying, or blowdrying could resurrect the sodden toy.

Although the drone had vanished from sight, Sunny still heard its tooth-aching burr. After a minute it returned, zipping over the fence and into the short and stubby firs.

A young man crept out of the logging stand, a crowbar in one hand, a garbage bag in the other. He crawled through the billowed opening in the chain-link fence, then darted past Sunny, toward the memory trees.

Sunny curled her bare feet up against herself, thinking invisible thoughts, trying to turn as green as the moss.

From here and there in the Forest she heard a burst of confused noise: ghosts arising and speaking and stuttering silent.

When the man came back, his bag was full and clinking, and a gold cross swung on a gold chain around his wrist. Walking past Sunny, who could have wept with relief, he pushed the bag beneath the fence.

Then he turned and looked at Sunny Carballo.

"No," she said, "please," but his eyes narrowed with a drugged and desperate calculation.

The crowbar arced once through the air. A dull light slid down the length of the metal.

Sunny was frail. It was quick. There was not much blood.

When they found her, some time after accounting for the stolen plaques, lenses, projectors, and chips, and the sap-dripping gashes in the memory trees, the family members that could be tracked through DNA grudgingly scraped together enough to inter Sunny in A-294. Nothing, not even a photo, was sent for a hologram.

As backup copies of other memories were reinstalled through the forest, and the chain-link fence replaced with cement and spiked iron, Sunny sank down under the rich green moss, and no one, not one, remembered her.

# Zero In Babel

Since the start of school in September, everyone who mattered in the social hierarchy of ninth grade at Babel North High, not including the boys, had acquired purple, petaled eyes.

Everyone blinked their flower eyes at each other in the hallways between classes, a firefly code that those without the cosmedit could still understand, and the message they transmitted ran: I am beautiful. You are beautiful. We are beautiful.

Imogen was not beautiful. Imogen had brown skin, a wide and stubby nose, and hair that went arid to oily from one class to the next, but worst of all, Imogen still had the crayon-brown eyes that she had been born with.

“I can’t go back to school,” she told her parents every morning, and every morning they smiled, patted her head, and shoved her up the steps of the electric bus. And that was that.

“I made a petition,” she told her parents.

“You don’t have enough signatures,” her father said.

She went away and came back. “I have fifty signatures.”

“I’m pretty sure those are forged,” her father said.

“We just don’t have the money,” her mother said. “You know about Mamu Arslan.”

Imogen said, “Then let me get a job.”

“Absolutely not,” her father said. “It’ll distract you from school.”

“Work will teach me to appreciate school. And having a job will teach me responsibility.”

“We can’t drive you,” her mother said. “There’s only one car.”

“I’ll take the bus.”

“If you want the edit that much — ”

“I do,” Imogen said.

Months later, after interminable hours rinsing forks, folding napkins, and loading the industrial dishwasher at La Rosa after school, her parents booked Imogen an appointment at the clinic.

The doctor loaded an ampoule of custom, noncommunicable viruses into the barrel of a syringe, tipped Imogen’s head back as she squinted against the lights, and injected a droplet into each of her irises.

She blinked through tears at the small mirror on the wall. Her eyes were still brown.

“That’s it?” she said.

“That’s it,” the doctor said, stripping the gloves from her hands. “You should see pigment expression in two weeks or so.”

“Two weeks!?” Imogen said.

Every morning afterward, she checked her eyes in the bathroom mirror, holding her eyelids open. It wasn't until the last day of winter break that purple began to speckle her brown irises.

She danced barefoot on the bathroom tile in her cat pajamas.

“Look,” she said at breakfast, widening her eyes. “They're beautiful!”

“Your eyes were already beautiful,” her mother said. “You had your naano's eyes.”

Her father said, “If you don't like them, I hear the colors get patchy at six months and fade completely in a year.”

“Are you kidding? I want to keep these forever!”

“For what we paid,” her father said, “I don't blame you.”

“For what I paid,” Imogen said.

“This is a good lesson,” her mother said. “A job at your age teaches responsibility.”

“That's what I said.”

“And it seems like you're finally excited about school,” her father said.

“That's what — never mind.”

January in Babel, Washington, was always dreary. But the next morning, despite the cold, gray rain, Imogen floated light as a jellyfish into class.

“Morning, Beth,” she sang, slipping into her seat.

Today, the glowing orange overscreen was warm as a hug. Today, the names and patterns etched into her melamine desk felt like a flower garden under her fingertips. Today, purple-eyed Imogen felt generous even toward Beth.

Then Beth swiveled in her chair, and the world stuttered and spun.

For the irises of Beth's eyes, which had been plum-purple and five-petaled before winter break, were now a brilliant silver, and sharply squared.

And Beth smiled a small smile that was not at all kind, shook her head, and turned back to the overscreen.

By lunchtime, the extent of the catastrophe was clear. The girls who had started the school year with purple eyes had all gone silver over winter break or, if they couldn't afford silver, to concentric rings of peacock blue. Even Dana, who cheated off Imogen in algebra in exchange for curly fries at lunch, whose father mopped floors in a factory, showed spots of blue in her irises.

“Had to ask my mom to return my Christmas presents,” Dana said. “That's the only way I could get the edit. Your family doesn't celebrate, right? Too bad.”

“How did you know?” Imogen said. “How did everyone know?”

“You know how it is. I heard Joy say she was going blue, Joy heard it from Xiaomei, Xiaomei heard it from Puja... ”

“Of course,” Imogen said.

In gym class, where they changed out of sweaters and turtlenecks into T-shirts and shorts, Imogen discovered a final tragedy.

“What's — ”

“Subdermal pigmentation,” Dana said. “Isn’t it pretty? I couldn’t afford it. My sister says it blew up her college last year.”

Silver swirls and curls and arabesques chased up and down the arms of the girls with silver eyes. They glimmered, luminous as moons, as they set and spiked volleyballs over the net. Imogen, staring, took a ball to the nose.

Later, between classes, Imogen ducked into a bathroom. Her purple eyes, glorious yesterday, were red and watery with tears.

A toilet flushed. Vicky emerged.

“You OK?” Vicky said.

“Perfect.”

“Because you don’t look OK.”

“I look fine.”

“If you ask me, we’re not meant to edit our genes. That’s like overwriting nature. Like correcting God.”

“Not now, Vicky,” Imogen said, and fled.

I write this essay for the far future, so that those who come after will understand. So much of our worldview is constrained by present experience. Out of context, what I did might seem horrific. But I assure you that it is otherwise. I majored in philosophy and graduated with distinction, and everything that I have undertaken I considered deeply for a long time.

After the U.N. proclaimed the end of disease in 2053, thanks to gene drives and in vitro gene editing, I thought, like everybody else, that we had arrived at the best of all possible worlds. Suffering became rare and luxurious. Cancer was history, cystic fibrosis a boogeyman, Ehlers-Danlos a frightening fairy tale. Every fetus could be loaded with DNA sequences producing antivenins, antibodies, and deodorants before birth; every human organ could be grown in pigs for transplant; almost every disease could now be managed, if not cured.

We modified life to correct for our excesses. Despite the massive and irreversible loss of biodiversity, at the last minute we swerved from the brink of climate disaster. Edited fish produced enzymes that dissolved plastics and cleaned polluted waters. Edited crops sequestered methane and carbon dioxide. To reduce consumption and establish a zero-growth economy, the standard professional workweek was set at twenty-one hours. Some lower-income earners chose to keep their long days, but they must be excused on the grounds of ignorance.

We had built for ourselves a paradise, and in this paradise we stagnated. No great problems presented themselves; no dying population pled for a cure. Adults and children alike disappeared into virtual worlds, online lives, alcohol, and drugs, replacing livers and other pieces when necessary, with no great inconvenience to anyone but the donor pigs.

We were finally free: free to waste our lives, to disconnect, to choose trifles over substance.



Our world without suffering, it turned out, was a world without meaning.

“Imogen, your homework?”

Imogen peeled her forehead off her desk, squinted at Mr. O’Connor and the void in the class filelist he was pointing to, and scraped through her own screen. The dinner shift at La Rosa had run long, and she hadn’t come home until well past ten. But she had completed the assigned problems before bed, yawning and nodding off over the kitchen table. She had saved it, hadn’t she? Where was the file?

“It’s not the first time you forgot,” Mr. O’Connor said. “If you’re going to succeed in life, you have to be responsible.”

Imogen felt her cheeks flush hot.

Beth said, “Uploading mine, Mr. O’Connor.”

Mr. O’Connor said, “Imogen, you could ask Beth to remind you about the homework.”

“I’d love to help,” Beth said.

“Great,” Imogen said.

“You should say thank you,” Mr. O’Connor said. “Beth, that’s really kind of you. Go on, Imogen.”

“Thanks.”

“Imogen,” Mr. O’Connor said.

“Thank you, Beth.”

Imogen’s face was still incandescent when she sat down for her world history test. The questions floated in orange light over her desk. The Ottoman Empire began in... its rulers were... and meanwhile, in China, whole continents away ...

Her classmates traced out their answers in orange sparks.

Imogen reached into her memory and found no answers at all.

Pratik accosted her afterward, smashing his cowlick back.

“That test, huh?” he said. “I think it went back two generations and recombined my grandparents’ DNA.”

Imogen said, “How about you eat my results before my parents see them?”

“Only if you do the same to mine.”

“I’m so glad to see you,” she said. “It’s been a day from hell.”

“Oh,” he said. “Really?”

“Yeah.” She gestured at herself. “Notice anything?”

“New haircut? Glasses?”

“Pratik.”

“I can’t tell. You look great. That party at Max’s — ”

“Yeah, you invited me. Next Friday. I said I was going.”

“Well. Max says he doesn’t want you to come. His girlfriend says it’d be awkward. Girls are weird like that.”

“Fabulous,” Imogen said. “Exquisite. Absolutely unsurpassable.”

“Don’t be like that,” Pratik said.

“Next thing you’ll say is, you’re dating Beth. That’s the only dingle cherry that could top this shit sundae. Tell me you’re not dating Beth.”

Pratik’s sneakers squeaked. “It’s just a movie. And Max’s party.”

“Jo bhi,” Imogen said. “I hope you flunk.”

At dinnertime, the stove was still cold and empty. Imogen’s mother and father were frowning over a spreadsheet, moving numbers in the air.

“How was your day, meri jaan?” her father said as she walked in.

“Awful. The worst. I’d like to nuke it from orbit.”

“That’s great.”

Her mother said, “I could ask for more hours. We’ve been short-staffed for months — the other nurses would be more than happy — ”

“What’s for dinner?” Imogen said.

Her father said, “You’re working yourself to the bone as it is.”

“If your brother’s proteins misfolded... ”

“Nafs, this is a marathon. God willing, Arslan will live for years. But if you get sick, how will we pay for the therapies?”

“You’d think someone would have come up with a cure by now.”

“It’s not genetic,” her father said. “You know that.”

“The statement was rhetorical.”

“I’ll eat whatever’s in the fridge, then,” Imogen said.

“You do that, love,” her mother said.

There was only cold daal, which she’d also eaten for lunch. Imogen closed the fridge and went upstairs to her room.

In the years that followed the end of disease, our best minds devoted themselves to the lucrative field of cosmetic gene editing. Like children, we amused ourselves with body modifications: tails, pointed ears, horns, and colors on nails, skin, and eyes. With health care guaranteed for life, women in particular embraced the monstrous. There’s nothing more unpleasant than walking up to a lady and discovering fish scales, bat wings, and claws.

The pool of attractive women evaporated overnight. As if that wasn’t enough, sterilization became the matter of a single injection. Reproductive rates dropped to lethal lows. But no one cared.

So I developed a cosmedit of my own. Several, to be precise. And in the exon portion of those sequences, I inserted a particular viral payload. If injected, it will spread through the entire body, undoing prenatal immunities, introducing resistances to oncogene therapy, and erasing all other genetic alterations, cosmetic and medical alike.

It’s also designed to be highly contagious.

I uploaded these edits to the same repositories where biohackers drop unapproved, unreviewed cosmedits for free or cheap download. Anyone can copy those sequences. Anyone can order customized RNA. But you'd have to be reckless, foolish, or shallow.

Imogen sat in Babel North's library, staring at an order form for custom plasmids. Rain plinked through a ceiling leak into a plastic bucket.

"It's that easy," Dana said, balling her fist to close the screen. "That's how my sister did it. No way she could afford her wings otherwise."

"They don't look cheap?" Imogen said. "Or fake?"

"They could have. But she was careful. Some of the biohackers out there, they're as good as scientists. You just have to find the right cosmedit. Everyone on campus is copying her now. But she was first."

"So — you save the sequence as a text file, send it to a lab — "

"The lab makes it for you, you inject it, boom, done."

Imogen felt a flutter of hope.

"Did you ever do it?"

"Eh. If I give up Christmas, my parents can buy me two edits a year. That's all you need to keep up, honestly." Dana winked one peacock-blue ringed eye. "Two cosmedits, and nobody notices. One, and you fall too far behind — no offense. None, and you're Vicky."

"It's not fair," Imogen said. "Boys don't deal with this."

Dana sniggered. "They do. You just don't see it if you're not in the locker room."

"No."

"Swear to God. I heard Max's is green and purple, with spikes. Like a pangolin."

"On purpose?"

"Spikes, yes. Colors, no. He got his sequence online. So be careful."

Imogen was careful. She found a sequence for subdermal silver filigree in a repository that had thousands of five-star reviews and a gallery of successful modifications. The downloads for her particular sequence were in the single digits, and no one had left a review, but the coder had contributed a number of other sequences: fur, fangs, nails as hard as teeth.

Next, she looked up Dana's sister's plasmid supplier. It had been in business for almost seventy years, serving university and pharmaceutical laboratories. The website promised plasmid aliquots with high concentrations of the chimeric RNA, low endotoxins, and on-site targeting — whatever that meant.

It was easier to understand their pricing menu. What her biohacker described as an effective dose would cost her two weeks' pay and tips.

"I'm going silver," she told Dana. "I'd look better in gold, but — it's like you said. In, or out."

"Good luck. Don't worry about Max's party. Remember his green and purple — "

"You're going?"

"I don't do social suicide. Not even for you."

Imogen rolled her eyes. "I hope the pangolin is worth it."

In those two weeks, Imogen brought home C's in algebra and history. Her parents, preoccupied with Mamu Arslan's treatments, said nothing, if in fact they had even noticed.

Her gym class switched from volleyball to swimming. Slow and dark as a manatee, Imogen watched the other girls glitter like mermaids underwater. Pratik started holding Beth's hand in the hallways.

When Vicky waved at her in the hall after Spanish, Imogen edged away.

"Want to get lunch?"

"Can't. Uncoolness is very contagious."

"I call it courage, actually," Vicky said.

"What, eating alone?"

"I thought you might have it too."

"Thanks, but no thanks," Imogen said. "We're totally different."

At last the aliquots arrived in their foam casket. They sat on the porch, waiting for Imogen to come home from school. When she pried off the lid, the dry ice they were packed with smoked like witchcraft.

Imogen hugged the casket to her chest and ran up to her room, a fine white veil of fog falling down the stairs behind her.

"Is that you, Imogen?" her mother said. "Are you home?"

"Yeah," Imogen said. "Gonna study biology."

No more questions followed.

The chimeric plasmids had come with plastic auto injectors. Imogen did not need to read through the wads of instructions to know how to load the blue barrel, clamp the blunt tip to her arm, and depress the plunger.

The needle bit like an insect.

She injected her other arm, then each of her legs. Three weeks, the sequence designer had promised. Three weeks to silver filigree under her skin.

Imogen went to bed and dreamed of being beautiful.

So this is my confession to the revival of disease. This year, 2060, I have seeded an epidemic that will restore meaning to human life. My virus will erase all additions and revisions that humanity wrote into its own genome.

I have taken precautions, closed accounts, bypassed every digital record. This essay will be posted at an unknown time by a bot that will obliterate itself immediately after. The essay itself will vanish twenty-four hours after posting.

I can see my Patient Zero now. Blond and vapid, like so many of the women I know. Or a redheaded gold digger: I've met a few. Either way, I hope she'll come to appreciate the priceless gift I've given to her. What I've made of her. As I write, she is becoming an angel of death. Mother and goddess to a new and dangerous world.

Her name will be immortal. Mine will never be known.

Imogen twirled in the library, arms flashing. “Look!”

Dana chewed her necklace for a moment, then let the gold dinosaur drop from her mouth. “Yeah. I see it.”

“You’re not excited.”

“Everyone’s going gold, Imogen.”

Imogen’s mouth fell open. “What?”

The school librarian glared at them.

“I heard Beth and Puja in the bathroom,” Dana said.

“You’ve got to tell me these things.”

“I’m telling you now.”

“I mean sooner.”

“First off,” Dana said, “You’ll never be on time, unless you’re trying new things yourself. Then nine times out of ten you’ll be wrong. Second of all, none of this shit is life-or-death.”

“Not to you,” Imogen said.

“You need to chill.”

“Is it so bad to want to belong? You take it for granted, it’s practically the air you breathe — ”

“Listen,” Dana said. “Get a sequence done.”

“Are you kidding? My parents blew their stacks when they saw this — you think they’d let me keep playing with my genes?”

“I mean diagnosis,” Dana said, “not editing.”

“Why?”

“My sister’s sick. Really sick. She’s coming home from Seattle.”

“So inject some targeted RNA. Make some antibodies.”

“Nothing’s working,” Dana said.

“That can’t be true.”

“They think it’s got to do with the mods she downloaded.”

“You don’t — you can’t be serious.”

“I’ve got to go,” Dana said, looking down at the time on her hand. She didn’t look at Imogen.

When Imogen got home, her parents were sitting in the living room with a biosuited man.

“Dr. Zhang,” he said, smiling through the visor. He offered a gloved hand.

“Mamu Arslan,” Imogen said. “It’s Mamu Arslan, isn’t it? He’s dying.” And her heart dropped into her shoes. She didn’t like or dislike Mamu Arslan much, but no one she’d known had ever died.

“No,” her father said. He looked astonished and fearful, as if he were seeing her, his daughter, her petaled eyes, her ivied arms, her skinny, sprouting, tangling self, for the first time. “Dr. Zhang is here to see you.”

“I’m from the CDC,” Dr. Zhang said. “We’d like to do a blood draw. You downloaded and injected an open-source sequence a few weeks ago, I believe?”

Imogen bit her lip. “Maybe.”

“We think that sequence might have been contaminated.”

Her father said, “What do you mean, contaminated?”

“Imogen,” her mother said. “What did you do?”

“Nothing illegal,” Dr. Zhang said. “Nothing other kids her age don’t also do. Bio-hacking’s fairly unregulated.”

“What happened?” Imogen said. “What’s going on?”

Dr. Zhang said, “I don’t think — ”

Imogen’s mother said, “She’s old enough to know. She even has a job.”

“All right. We got a call from a Seattle hospital last month. They had a patient with alarmingly unusual symptoms. That patient identified a website from which she had recently downloaded RNA sequences. We isolated her virus, confirmed that the website was its source, and then traced the IP addresses of the other downloads. This all took a long time. Which I regret, and for which I apologize.”

“Why?” Imogen’s father asked.

“Because if Imogen turns out to be our Patient Zero in Babel, she’s been shedding the virus for three weeks now. At school. At home. In many ways, it’s too late.”

Imogen’s mother said, “What do you mean?”

“We’ll explain next steps once we confirm the test results. There’s no reason to worry about anything just yet. We’re trying to avoid panic. Imogen, would you please roll up your sleeve?”

Imogen did, looking away from the needle and the dark future it pulled up.

The entire town of Babel was quarantined. School remained open, to Imogen’s horror, since it was far too late to avoid exposure and infection. While the CDC had avoided releasing names, the quivering compass needle of rumor swung to Imogen immediately. People glared as she passed, and squeaked their desks away from hers in class, and piled jackets and bags into empty chairs when she approached. Dana, who might have behaved otherwise, or might not have, stopped coming to school before it all began.

Imogen had never felt more alone.

She walked to the cafeteria with her lunch of rice and lamb and paused over a chair.

“Can I eat with you?”

“Sure,” Vicky said.

“Everyone acts like I’ve got the plague,” Imogen said.

“To be fair — ” Vicky said.

The virus swept Babel, Seattle, Washington, and the world, mutating wildly as it spread. Altogether there had been fifty-six Patient Zeros, mostly in countries affluent enough for recreational RNA synthesis.

The revisions, along with a few nasty mutations, undid not only genetically modified immunities but natural ones as well. Every disease believed to be obsolete returned with a vengeance, and the tried-and-true gene therapies lost their effectiveness.

Unlike many, Imogen survived.

By the time Imogen turned twenty-three, the world was an altogether different place.

She sat on a bullet train to D.C., watching her reflection overlaid on the trees blurring by. The bioterrorist who created and distributed the malicious RNA sequences had been apprehended in Brazil, having left a clearer and more traceable trail than he'd thought. She had seen a picture of him in a news report, then promptly forgotten his face and name. There were other names, many names, and many other faces that she wanted to remember.

The train whispered to a stop. A flurry of white petals danced against its windows, and a handful blew into the car when the doors dissolved.

As she strode out of the station, her baggage following behind, a woman wearing gold bangles smiled at her.

"Girl, you have beautiful eyes," the woman said.

"I do, thank you," Imogen said. "Comes from my grandmother."

"Where are you headed?"

"The CDC. I'm doing an internship."

"You must be smart."

"These days," Imogen said, "I'm trying to be brave."

And she walked on, under the trees shedding white blossoms for leaves, to see what she could learn about the past and future of disease.

# The Time Invariance of Snow

## 1. The Devil and the Physicist

Once,<sup>1</sup> the Devil made a mirror,<sup>2</sup> for the Devil was vain. This mirror showed certain people to be twice as large and twice as powerful and six times as good and kind as they truly were; and others it showed at a tenth their stature, with all their shining qualities smutched and sooted, so that if one glimpsed them in the Devil's mirror, one would think them worthless and contemptible indeed.

The Devil looked into his mirror and admired himself, and all his demons preened and swaggered and admired him too. And joy resounded throughout the vaults of Hell.

Eventually there came a physicist who, with radioactive cobalt and cerium magnesium nitrate crystals, sought to test the invariance of symmetry; namely, whether in a mirror universe the laws of physics would be reflected. As she touched and tested the mystery of the world and proved that symmetry did not hold, and that parity was not in fact conserved, she broke, all unknowing, the Devil's mirror.

Like the fundamental equations of quantum mechanics, like God Himself, the Devil is a time-invariant equation.<sup>3</sup> The shattering of the mirror shivered outward through fields of light cones, near and far, until the shattering itself became eternal, immutable fact. The fragments of the mirror drifted down through pasts, presents, and futures, clinging and cutting, like stardust and razors.

Whoever blinked a sliver of the mirror into his eye<sup>4</sup> saw the world distorted ever after. Some observed that they were far worthier and more deserving than others, and pleased with this understanding, went forth and took whatever they wished, whether wives or slaves, land or empires.

Some looked at themselves and saw worthlessness. At that sight, whatever pyrotechnic wonders they dreamed died in secret within them.

Others, of particular sensitivity, felt the presence of the glass, which a slow and uncertain part of their souls insisted had not been there before. A few of these tried gouging it out with knives, though it was not a physical construct and could not be

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<sup>1</sup> The more we peer myopically into the abyss of time, the more we understand that there is no such thing as once, nor a single sequential line of time, but rather a chaos of local happenings stretching from improbability to probability.

<sup>2</sup> Here too the concept of mirror is an approximation, for the phenomenon in question extended into a minimum of seven dimensions; but mirror is a close and useful metaphor.

<sup>3</sup> Theology hopes for local boundedness, but as yet this remains unproven.

<sup>4</sup> A poetic simplification to describe a quantum event affecting neural perception.



thus dislodged. A very few made fine and fragile spectacles for the soul, to correct its sight, and walked long in clarity and loneliness thereafter.

This is how the devil's mirror worked:

A woman warned a city of its destruction, of soldiers creeping in by craft, and her friends and family laughed her mad.

The city burned.

The woman was raped, and raped again, and murdered.

A woman stood before men who would become consuls and said, believe me, I was forced by this man. To be believed, she struck her own heart with a dagger.

A woman stood before senators and said, believe me, I was —

A woman stood before senators and said, believe —

A black woman said, listen, and no one heard.

A dusky child cried, and no one comforted him.

An indifferent cartographer divided other people's countries into everlasting wars.

The physicist died. Her male colleagues received a Nobel Prize.<sup>5</sup>

The Devil looked upon his work and laughed.

2. K. and G.

It was summer, and the roses swam with scent. K. had tamed G. with intermittent kindness, as boys tame foxes to their hand, though she had been watchful and wary, knowing the violence of men. Now G. rested her head against K.'s shoulder, and they breathed the soft, sweet air together with the laziness that only summer knows. The two of them were not young; neither were they old.

If I were going to murder you, K. said musingly, I would tie you up while you slept, nail you into a splintery box, and shove the box out of a car going seventy into the path of a truck. The splinters would be driven into your body on impact.

G. was silent for a long time.

At last she said: When you described murdering me —

Yes?

I felt afraid.

K. said: I was joking.

G. said: Still, I was afraid.

K. said: I had good intentions. What on earth do you want?

G. said: Just for you to say you're sorry.

I can't believe you're blowing this up into such a huge deal.

You know about —

Well, I'm sorry that women are sometimes harmed by men. But this is insane.

That's the glass talking.

What?

The sliver of glass in your eyes and in mine.

K. pushed back his chair so hard it tipped over.

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<sup>5</sup> This too is a poetic simplification.

We both contributed to this situation. You have to be more patient and kinder to me.

G. said: I can't.

Fine, K. said, stamping his foot. A breath of winter blew across them both. The rosebush's leaves crisped and silvered with frost, and its full-blown flowers blackened and bowed.

I'm leaving, K. said. There was ice in his voice.

G. said: I know what will happen. I will follow you down a stream and into a witch's house, into a palace, and then into a dark robber's wood, and in the end I will walk barefoot through the bitter snow into a frozen hall, to find you moving ice upon the pool that they call the Mirror of Reason.

I will come thinking to rescue you. That my tears will wash the glass from your eye and melt the ice in your heart. That the Snow Queen's spell will break, and you will be free.

But when I arrive I will find no Snow Queen, no enchantment, no wicked, beautiful woman who stole you away.

Only you.

You, who choose cold falseness over true life.

I know, because I am no longer a child and have walked down this road.

I will not go.

She said these words to the summer air, but no one was around to hear.

### 3. The Ravens

The prince and princess, king and queen now, were not at home. The tame ravens in the palace had long since died.

None of the ravens in the old wood knew her. They rattled and croaked as G. went by.

Imposter!

Pretender!

Usurper!

Slut!

Unwanted!

Abandoned!

Discarded!

Die!

Oh, be quiet, G. said, and continued on her way.

### 4. The Robber Queen

You're back, the robber queen said, testing the point of her letter opener against her desk. Didn't think I'd see you again.

Didn't you get my postcards? G. said, sitting.

The office was darker than she remembered, for all that they were on the hundredth floor. Outside, other buildings pressed close, like trees.

You know I screen my mail.

I know couriers and postal workers wouldn't dare to stop here.

The robber queen said: I'm good at my job.

So I've heard. I'm proud to have known you when.

Spill, the robber queen said, or I'll tickle your neck with my dagger for old times' sake. Is this one handsome, at least? Because the last one — ugh. Does he cook? Does he clean? Please tell me this one, this time, is worthy of you. Tea or whiskey?

Theodora, G. said, you're so laughing and fierce. How do you do it?

Love 'em, leave 'em. Sometimes I even leave them alive. But once you taste a man's still-beating heart —

Forget him, G. said.

So there is a him.

A mistake. But I'm not here about that. I'm here to ask for a job.

This isn't the United Nations, G. We do dirty, filthy, bloody work. That I'll be hanged for, if I'm ever caught.

You have power, G. said. I don't know what that's like. To hold a knife, with another person's life on its edge. Teach me.

Mine is a raw and common power, the robber queen said. What you have is greater.

I have nothing.

Stop, or I'll cut off your little finger so you'll never forget. I don't know how or when you got it. Maybe the crows taught you, or the Lap women. Your eyes see to the soul. Your words cut to the bone. Men and women are stripped naked before you. Now, if you'd only use that power, you could hurt those you hate with an unhealing harm. I'd give my three best horses for that.

G. said: No.

Say, such and such is the shape of your soul, though you wear mask upon mask to hide it.

Theodora, G. said, a wolf is the shape of your soul, and there's blood on its muzzle and mud on its pelt.

It is! And I'll never hide it.

Are you sure you won't let me rob one company? Just for the experience?

This is an investment firm, not a charity. Speaking of which, I'll be billing you for my time. Must keep the numbers regular.

Someday when I have money, I'll pay you, G. said.

That you will.

##### 5. The Lap Women

Old they were, in appearance far older than time: their eyes seams of stars, their fingers the knurls of ancient oaks. They rocked in their maple rocking chairs, knitting blankets with a pattern of silver fish from a silvery wool. The fish gathered in soft clouds around their feet.

G. said: I'm sorry I haven't visited or called.

They smiled at her and continued to rock. One by one, fish slipped from their needles' tips.

G. said: I'm sure you have family. Daughters or sons who bring fruit and chocolate. Somebody. You must have somebody.

They continued to rock.

Can I help you? a nursing assistant said.

These are old friends of mine, G. said, blushing as she said it, for years of silence and absence had passed. I came to ask their advice.

Good luck. They haven't spoken since they checked in. And that was fifteen years ago.

G. said: That long?

Time can jump you like that. Leave you bruised in an alley with no memory at all. Is there anything they like to do besides knit?

Cards, the assistant said. They'll skin you in most kinds of poker, and they're fiends for bridge.

Then I'll stay and play cards with them, if they wish.

You'll regret it, the nursing assistant said. But she went and fetched a worn deck anyway.

At the sight of the cards, the three old women jabbed their needles deep into their skeins and rose from their rocking chairs, holding out their hands.

G. proceeded to lose every bill from her wallet, her sweater, the cross on a chain that she wore, and the black glass buttons on the front of her coat.

The eldest Lap woman took her sewing shears and snipped off the buttons, one-two-three-four. Then she picked up the hillocks of silver knitting, finished each fragment, and whipstitched the three clouds of fishes, each cloud a different gray, into a single long shawl. This shawl she draped around G.'s shoulders.

Thank you, G. said. I think.

All three Lap women smiled gentle, faraway smiles.

The nursing assistant scratched her ear.

Are you going somewhere cold? she said.

G. said: Very.

## 6. The Snow Queen

It was hours and hours until dawn, and the world was a waste and a howling dark.

At some point in the distant past, the sweep of ice beneath G's feet had been chopped into a stair that wound up and around the glassy mountain. As she climbed, thick snowflakes clung to her lashes. She had the shawl of silver fish wrapped around her for warmth and sensible boots on her feet. She needed no guide, for she knew the way.

Before she left, G. had knelt and prayed as trustingly as she had when she was a child, and now she held that prayer like a weak and guttering taper.

Here was the Snow Queen's palace: smaller than she remembered, as if her child self's memories had exaggerated its dimensions, or else whole wings and wards had melted away. Frost blossoms still bloomed from windows and eaves. Crystalline gargoyles crouched in its crenelations.

Collecting her courage, G. pushed the palace gates open. Her hands turned white, then red, with cold.

No one waited inside. No Queen. No K. There was only the vacant throne and the familiar, frozen pool with its shards arranged into the word Eternity.

It was quiet.

Her breath left her lips in glittering clouds.

G. crossed the hall, her steps echoing. The throne might well have been carved from the world's largest diamond. Like a lily or lotus, it peaked to a point. Rainbows glowed in its fractured depths.

On the throne's seat was a small crown of silvered glass.

G. picked up the crown and turned it in her hands. In that whole country, it was the only thing that was not cold.

The long glass thorns flashed fragments of her face: a sneer, a glare, a look of contempt.

Of course, G. said.

The jagged edges of her life shone brilliantly before her. In a moment she saw how they could be fitted together to spell out the forgotten word she had pursued all her life, sometimes glimpsing, sometimes approaching, never grasping entire —

One way or another, the Devil's mirror produces a Snow Queen.

G. raised the crown above her head, admiring how its sharpness shivered the light, how it showed her beautiful and unforgiving.

And then she drove it against the point of the diamond throne.

Across seven dimensions the glass crown cracked and crumbled. Glass thorns drove into G.'s wrists and fingers, flying up to cut her face.

Where the blood beaded and bubbled up, it froze, so that G. wore rubies on her skin, rubies and diamonds brighter than snow.

And the palace too cracked as the Queen's crown cracked, from top to bottom, like a walnut shell.

All around was darkness.

Down into that darkness G. fell, and time fell also, in fine grains like sand.

7. A Brief Digression on Hans Christen Anderson and the Present State of Physics  
Considered as a whole, in all its possible states, the universe is time-invariant. When this insight is worked out and understood at a mathematical level,<sup>6</sup> one both achieves and loses one's liberty. We are freed from one enchantment, only to be ensorcelled by another.<sup>7</sup> And while the first is a snowy, crowded pond upon whose hard face the whole world may skate and shout, the second is a still and lonely (some say holy) place, where only the brave go, and from whence only the mad return.

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<sup>6</sup>  $S = k_B \log(W)$ , which is to say, entropy is directly related to the number of states of a system. If we somehow could perceive all the possible microscopic states of the universe,  $S$  would be constant.

<sup>7</sup> Imagine, say, a boy forming the icy shards of reason into a picture of eternity. The metaphor is not inadequate.

Those who reach the latter place understand that it was always the case that they would come here. Perhaps they weep. Perhaps they praise God.

Who knows? And who can say?

8. G. and the Devil

At the end of her fall, G. met the Devil face to face.

He was pretty, in a moneyed way, sharp as polished leather, with a pocket square and black, ambitious eyes.

The Devil said: That's my mirror you're wearing in your flesh, in your hair. That's the mirror that I made. Me.

Why? G. asked, and in that question was all the grief of the world.

The Devil said: Because when one is alone in pain, one seeks to spread suffering, and so be less alone. It's quite logical.

But why?

When a dark heart gazes upon glory, a glory that the heart can never attain, then the whole being turns to thoughts of destruction.

WHY?

As the Devil continued to speak, his words plausible, his face reasonable, his voice reassuring, scorpions and serpents slid out of his pockets, clinging to each other in thin, squirming chains. And the chains crept and curled and reached for her.

In her hand, however, was the hard hilt of a sword, whose one edge was ruby and the other diamond. On her breast she wore overlapping silver scales. And in her other hand was a buckler burnished to the brightness of a mirror.

If the Devil noticed, he gave no sign.

Tell me the truth, G. said.

He said, Because you are ugly and it was a Tuesday.

G. swung the sword to her left and severed a whip of scorpions, then to her right, bisecting a braid of vipers. Slices of snakeflesh and crunched carapace tumbled around her. Of a sudden the Devil looked not so charming.

You think you can fight me? he said, ten times larger now, and growing, until his smallest curved toenail was the height of her head. His voice was the thunder of ten million men.

G. said: I have seen eternity. I know you have already lost.

And she struck, her sword flashing bloodlight and lightning.

The Devil roared.

9. G. and K.

His hair was white, and he walked with a cane, limping like a crane as it hunts in the reeds.

Her own hair was silver, and her face and hands were scarred.

I'm sorry, he said.

I know you are.

I came all this way to tell you.

I knew you were coming, G said.

You saw me plainly. I couldn't bear it. I wanted to hurt you, and I did.

G. said: It's all over now.

It is.

K. squinted at her, as if looking into radiance.

I see you've made your glass into a sword.

And you've made yours into a door.

A tempering all your life, then. A tempering and a war. As I have lived openings and closings. As I have yielded and withstood.

So you and I have been made of use.

We have, K. said. We have indeed.

# Green Glass: A Love Story

The silver necklace that Richard Hart Laverton III presented to Clarissa Odessa Bell on the occasion of her thirtieth birthday, four months after their engagement and six months before their wedding date, was strung with an irregular green glass bead that he had sent for all the way from the lunar surface. A robot had shot to the moon in a rocket, sifted the dust for a handful of green glass spheres, then fired the capsule to Earth in a much smaller rocket. The glass melted and ran in the heat of re-entry, becoming a single thumb-sized drop before its capsule was retrieved from the South China Sea. The sifter itself remained on the moon, as a symbol, Clarissa thought, of their eternal union.

For her thirtieth birthday, they ate lab-raised shrimp and two halves of a peach that had somehow ripened without beetle or worm, bought that morning at auction, the maître d' informed them, for a staggering sum. Once the last scrap of peach skin had vanished down Clarissa's throat, Richard produced the necklace in its velvet box. He fumbled with the catch as she cooed and cried, stroking the green glass. The waiters, a warm, murmuring mass of gray, applauded softly and admiringly.

Clarissa and Richard had known each other since the respective ages of six and five, when Clarissa had poured her orange juice down the fresh white front of Richard's shirt. This had been two decades before the citrus blight that spoiled groves from SoCal to Florida, Clarissa always added when she told this story, before eyebrows slammed down like guillotines.

They had attended elementary, middle, and high school together, hanging out in VR worlds after school. Clarissa rode dragons, and Richard fought them, or sometimes it was the other way round, and this taught them grammar and geometry. Sometimes Clarissa designed scenarios for herself in which she saved islands from flooding or villages from disease. She played these alone, while Richard shot aliens.

These intersections were hardly coincidental. In all of Manhattan there were only three elementary schools, four middle schools, and two high schools that anybody who was anybody would consider for their children.

College was where their paths diverged: Richard to a school in Boston, Clarissa to Princeton, with its rows and ranks of men in blistering orange. She sampled the courses, tried the men, and found all of it uninspiring.

The working boys she dated, who earned sandwich money in libraries and dining halls, exuded fear from every pore. There was no room for her on the hard road beside them, Clarissa could tell; they were destined for struggle, and perhaps someday, greatness. The children of lawyers, engineers, and surgeons opened any conversation



with comments on estate planning and prenups, the number of children they wanted, and the qualities of their ideal wives, which Clarissa found embarrassingly gauche. And those scions of real power and money danced, drank, and pilled away the hours: good fun for a night but soon tedious.

Several years after her graduation, her path crossed with Richard's. Clarissa was making a name for herself as a lucky or savvy art investor, depending on whom you asked, with a specialty in buying, restoring, and selling deaccessioned and damaged art from storm-battered museums. She had been invited to a reception at a rooftop sculpture garden in lower Manhattan, where folk art from Kentucky was on display. Absorbed in the purple and orange spots of a painted pine leopard, she did not notice the man at her elbow until he coughed politely and familiarly. Then she saw him, truly saw him, and the art lost its allure.

Holding their thin-stemmed wine glasses, they gazed down from the parapets at the gray slosh of water below. It was high tide, and the sea lapped the windows of pitch-coated taxis. Clarissa speculated on whether the flooded-out lower classes would switch entirely to paddleboats, lending New York City a Venetian air, and whether the rats in subways and ground-floor apartments had drowned in vast numbers or moved upwards in life. Richard suggested that they had instead learned to wear suits and to work in analysis in the finance sector. Then, delicately, with careful selections and excisions, they discussed the previous ten years of their lives.

As servers in sagging uniforms slithered like eels throughout the crowd, distributing martinis and glasses of scotch, Clarissa and Richard discovered, with the faint ring of fatedness, that both were single, financially secure, possessed of life insurance, unopposed to prenuptial agreements, anxious to have one boy and one girl, and crackling with attraction toward each other.

"I know it's unethical to have children," Clarissa said, twisting her fingers around her glass. "With the planet in the shape it's in — "

"You deserve them," Richard said. "We deserve them. It'll all be offset, one way or another. The proposed carbon tax — "

His eyes were a clear, unpolluted blue. Clarissa fell into them, down and down.

There was nothing for it but to take a private shell together. Giggling and shushing each other like teenagers — since Clarissa, after all, was supposed to be assessing the art, and Richard evaluating a candidate for his father's new venture — they slipped toward the stairs.

"Hush," Clarissa said, as the bite of cigarette smoke reached her. Two servers were sneaking a break of their own, up on top of the fragile rooftop bar.

"Poison tide today," one said, "up from the canal. Don't know how I'll get home now."

"Book a cargo drone."

"That's half our pay!"

"Then swim."

"Are you swimming?"

“I’m sleeping here. There’s a janitorial closet on — well, I’m not telling you which floor.”

Clarissa eased the stairwell door shut behind her.

As they descended to the hundredth level, where programmable plexiglass bubbles waited on their steel cables, Clarissa and Richard quietly congratulated each other on their expensive but toxin-free method of transport.

The lights of the city glimmered around them as their clear shell slid through the electric night. One block from Richard’s building, just as Clarissa was beginning to distinguish the sphinxes and lions on its marble exterior, he covered her small, soft hand with his.

Before long, they were dancing the usual dance: flights to Ibiza, Lima, São Paulo; volunteer trips to the famine-wracked heartlands of wherever; luncheons at Baccarat and dinners at Queen Alice; afternoons at the rum-smelling, dusty clubs that survived behind stone emblems and leaded windows. And one day, at a rooftop dessert bar overlooking the rooftop garden where the two of them had rediscovered each other, Richard presented Clarissa with the diamond ring that his great-grandmother, then grandmother, then aunt had worn.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed. All the servers around them smiled gapped or toothless smiles. Other patrons clapped. How her happiness redounded, like light from the facets of a chandelier, giving others a taste of happiness as well!

“Three generations of love and hard work,” Richard said, sliding the diamond over her knuckles. “Each one giving the best opportunities to their children. We’ll do that too. For Charles. For Chelsea.”

Dimly Clarissa wondered when, exactly, they had discussed their future children’s names; but there was nothing wrong with Charles or Chelsea, which were perfectly respectable appellations, and now Richard’s fingers were creeping under the silk crepe of her skirt, up the inside of her stockinged thigh, and she couldn’t think.

A week later all three pairs of parents held a war council, divided the wedding between them, and attacked their assignments with martial and marital efficiency. Clarissa submitted to a storm of taffeta and chiffon, peonies and napkins, rosewater and calligraphy. She was pinched and prodded and finally delivered to a French atelier, the kind that retains, no matter the hour, an unadulterated gloom that signifies artistry. Four glasses of champagne emerged, fuming like potions. A witchlike woman fitted Clarissa for the dress, muttering in Czech around a mouthful of pins.

Then, of course, came the rocket, robot, and drone, and Richard’s green glass bead on its silver chain.

And everything was perfect, except for one thing.

A taste — a smell — a texture shimmered in Clarissa’s memory of childhood, cool and luminous and lunar beside the sunshine of orange juice.

“Ice cream,” Clarissa said. “We’ll serve vanilla ice cream in the shape of the moon.”

This was the first time Clarissa had spoken up, and her Mim, in whose queendom the wedding menu lay, caught her breath, while Kel, her father's third wife, and Suzette, Richard's mother, arched one elegant, symmetrical eyebrow apiece.

"I don't really know — " her Mim began to say.

Clarissa said, "It's as close as anyone can get to the moon without actually traveling there. And the dress is moon white. Not eggshell. Not ivory. Not seashell or bone."

Kel said, "I think the decorations will be enough. We have the starfield projector, the hand-blown Earth, the powder floor — "

"Little hanging moons of white roses," Suzette added. "Plus a replica of Richard's robot on every table. Isn't that enough?"

"We're having ice cream," Clarissa said. "The real thing, too. Not those soy sorbets that don't melt or coconut-sulfite substitutes. Ice cream."

"Don't you think that's a bit much?" her Mim said. "You are successful, and we are very fortunate, but it's generally unwise to put that on display."

"I disagree with your mother in almost everything," Kel said, "but in this matter, she's right. Where in the world would we find clean milk? And uncontaminated eggs? As for vanillin, that's in all the drugstores, but it's a plebian flavor, isn't it?"

"Our people don't have the microbiomes to survive a street egg," Suzette said. "And milk means cancer in ten years. What will you want next? Hamburgers?"

"I'll find what I need," Clarissa said, fingering her necklace. The moon glass was warm against her skin. Richard could surely, like a magician, produce good eggs from his handkerchief.

Synthetic vanillin was indeed bourgeois and therefore out of the question. Clarissa took three shells and a boat, rowed by a black man spitting blood and shrinking into himself, to the Museum of Flavors. This was a nondescript office building in the Bronx, whose second-floor window had been propped open for her.

Whatever government agency originally funded it had long since been plundered and disbanded. Entire crop species, classes of game birds, and spices now existed only in these priceless, neglected vaults. The curator was only too happy to accept a cash transfer for six of the vanilla beans, which he fished out of a frozen drawer and snipped of their tags. He was an old classmate from Princeton, who lived in terror that the contents of his vaults might be made known, attracting armed hordes of the desperate and cruel. But Clarissa, as he knew well, was discreet.

The amount exchanged approached the value of one of her spare Rothkos. Clarissa made a mental note to send one to auction.

Richard, dear darling Richard, had grumblingly procured six dozen eggs by helicopter from Semi-Free Pennsylvania by the time she returned. He had been obliged to shout through a megaphone first, while the helicopter hovered at a safe distance, he said, before the farmer in question set his shotgun down.

"As for the milk," he said, "You're on your own. Try Kenya?"

"If the bacteria in a New York egg would kill Mim," Clarissa said, "milk from a Kenyan cow — "

“You’re right. You’re sure a dairy substitute — ”

“Know how much I paid for the vanilla beans?”

She told him. He whistled. “You’re right. No substitutes. Not for this. But — ”

Clarissa said, “What about Switzerland?”

“There’s nothing of Switzerland left.”

“There are tons of mountains,” Clarissa said. “I used to ski them as a girl. Didn’t your family ski?”

“We preferred Aspen.”

“Then how do you know there’s not a cow hiding somewhere?”

“They used dirty bombs in the Four Banks’ War. Anything that survived will be radioactive.”

“I didn’t know about the dirty bombs.”

“It was kept out of the news. A bad look.”

“Then how — ”

“Risk analysts in cryptofinance hear all kinds of unreported things.”

The curl of his hair seemed especially indulgent, his smile soft and knowledgeable. She worried the glass bead on its chain.

“I’ll ask around,” Clarissa said. “Someone must know. I’ve heard rumors of skyr, of butter — even cheese — ”

“Doesn’t mean there’s a pristine cow out there. Be careful. People die for a nibble of cheese. I’ll never forgive you if you poison my mother.”

“You wait,” Clarissa said. “We’ll find a cow.”

Because the ice cream would be a coup d’état, in one fell swoop staking her social territory, plastering her brand across gossip sites, and launching the battleship of her marriage, Clarissa was reluctant to ask widely for help. It was her life’s work, just as it had been her Mim’s, to make the effortful appear effortless. Sweating and scrambling across Venezuelan mesas in search of cows would rather spoil the desired effect.

So she approached Lindsey, a college roommate, now her maid of honor, who was more family than friend, anyhow. Lindsey squinted her eyes and said she recalled a rumor of feral milkmaids in Unincorporated Oregon.

Rumor or not, it was worth following. Clarissa found the alumni email of a journalist, was passed on to a second, then a third. Finally she established that indeed, if one ventured east of the smallpox zone that stretched from Portland to Eugene, one might, with extraordinary luck, discover a reclusive family in Deschutes that owned cows three generations clean. But no one had seen any of them in months.

“You’re, what do you call it, a stringer, right? For the Portland Post-Intelligencer? Independent contractor, 1099? Well, what do you say to doing a small job for me? I’ll pay all expenses — hotels, private drone — plus a per diem, and you’ll get a story out of it. I just need fifteen gallons, that’s all.”

Icebox trains still clanked across the country over miles of decaying railbeds, hauled by tractors across gaps where rails were bent or sleepers rotted though, before being threaded onto the next good section. Their cars carried organ donations, blood, plasma,

cadavers for burial or dissection, and a choice selection of coastal foods: flash-frozen Atlantic salmon fished from the Pacific, of the best grade, with the usual number of eyes; oysters from a secret Oregon bed that produced no more than three dozen a year; New York pizza, prepared with street mozzarella, for the daredevil rich in San Francisco; and Boston clam chowder without milk, cream, or clams. Her enterprising journalist added fifteen gallons of Deschutes milk in jerrycans to the latest shipment. Clarissa gnawed one thumbnail to the quick while she waited for the jerrycans to arrive.

Arrive they did, along with unconscionable quantities of sugar.

All that was left was the churning. Here Lindsey and three other bridesmaids proved the value of their friendship beyond any doubt, producing batch after creamy batch of happiness. Two days before the wedding, they had sculpted a moon of vanilla ice cream, complete with craters and silver robot-shaped scoop.

Ninety people, almost everyone who mattered, attended the wedding. The priest, one of six available for the chapel, still healthy and possessed of his hair and teeth, beamed out of the small projector.

“I promise to be your loving wife and moon maiden,” Clarissa said.

“I promise to be the best husband you could wish for, and the best father anyone could hope, for the three or four or however many children we have.”

“Three?” Clarissa said faintly. “Four?” But like a runaway train, her vows rattled forward. “I promise — ”

Afterwards they mingled and ate. Then the moon was brought out to exclamations, camera flashes, and applause. The ice cream scoop excavated the craters far faster than the real robotic sifter could have.

Clarissa, triumphant, whirled from table to table on Richard’s arm.

“Know what’s etched on the robot?” she said. “Clarissa O. Bell and Richard H. Laverton III forever.”

“So virtual,” Monica said. “I’d kill for a man like that.”

“For what that cost,” Richard said, “we could have treated all of New York for Hep C, or bought enough epinephrine to supply the whole state. But some things are simply beyond price. The look in Clarissa’s eyes — ”

Glass shattered behind them. A dark-faced woman wearing the black, monogrammed uniform of the caterers Clarissa’s Mim had hired swept up the shards with her bare hands.

“Sorry,” the woman said, “I’ll clean it up. Please, ignore me, enjoy yourselves — ”

“Are you crying?” Clarissa said, astounded. “At my wedding?”

“No, no,” the woman said. “These are tears of happiness. For you.”

“You must tell me,” Clarissa said, the lights of the room soft on her skin, glowing in the green glass around her neck. The bulbs were incandescent, selected by hand for the way they lit the folds of her lace and silk.

“It’s nothing. Really, nothing. A death in the family. That’s all.”

“That’s terrible. Here, leave that glass alone. This’ll make you feel much better.”

She scooped a generous ball of ice cream into a crystal bowl, added a teaspoon, and handed the whole thing over.

“Thank you so much,” the woman said. This time, Clarissa was sure, her tears were purely of joy.

Another server came over with dustpan and brush and swept the glass shards up in silence.

Clarissa began to serve herself a second bowl of ice cream as well, so the woman would not feel alone, but Richard took the scoop from her hand and finished it for her.

His cornflower eyes crinkling, he said, “You made everyone feel wonderful. Even my mother. Even Mel. Even that poor woman. You’re a walking counterargument for empathy decay.”

“What’s — ”

“Some researchers think you can’t be both rich and kind. Marxist, anarchist nonsense. They should meet you.”

The ice cream was sweet, so very sweet, and cold. Clarissa shivered for a moment, closing her eyes. For a moment her future flashed perfectly clear upon her, link by silver link: how a new glass drop would be added to her chain for each child, Chelsea and Charles and Nick; how Richard would change, growing strange and mysterious to her, though no less lovable, never, no less beloved; how she would set aside her childish dreams of saving the world, and devote herself to keeping a light burning for her family, while all around them the world went dark.

She opened her eyes.

It was time to dance. Richard offered his arm.

Off they went, waltzing across the moon, their shoes kicking up lunar dust with each step. The dance had been choreographed ages before they were born, taught to them with their letters, fed to them along with their juice and ice cream, and as they danced, as everyone at their wedding danced, and the weeping server was escorted out, and the acrid, acid sea crept higher and higher, there wasn’t the slightest deviation from what had been planned.

# Three Variations on a Theme of Imperial Attire

They never tell the story right. The Danish must have their heavens and happy endings, and Andersen's tales are meant for children. We, however — you and I — know that people are people, and every one of us capable of —

But the story.

Once there was a vain and foolish emperor, who made up for his foolishness by a kind of low cunning. As such rulers do, he drew to himself a retinue of like men and women, who told him he was wise and humble, gracious and good. The emperor would smile at their flattery, which in his wisdom he knew to be the truth, and lavish gold and gems and deeds upon them. Thus was everyone contented within the palace walls. And those outside got on as well as they could.

Eventually, with narrative inevitability, two men with knapsacks and pockets full of thread came knocking at the palace gates.

“We are tailors,” the first one said, “wise but humble tailors, who seek to offer our boutique services to men of might, such as yourself.”

“Here is a list of our bona fides,” said the second man. “Sterling references, one and all.”

“The very best, I'm sure,” the emperor said, looking at the ruby buttons on their vests of gilt brocade.

“What we'd like to offer you is an exclusive deal — ”

“ — the latest in fashion, which no one else owns — ”

“ — designed in collaboration with a distant country's military-industrial complex — ”

“ — top secret and cutting-edge — ”

“ — the Loyalty Distinguisher line of couture.”

“What a mouthful,” the emperor said, looking askance. “Call it something I can pronounce.”

“What a brilliant suggestion! The Thresher, how's that? Since it sorts the wheat from the worthless chaff.”

“Powerful,” the emperor said. “I like it.”

“Now, the key selling point of the Thresher line — what a wonderful name! — is that it'll let you sort at a glance your loyal, meritorious, and worthy subjects from — well, the useless ones.”

“At a glance, eh?”

“Indeed! When we dress you in Thresher fabric, cut to the height of style, those subjects of noble character will see you as you truly are, with all your hidden virtues displayed. They’ll swoon at your intellect, marvel at your power, gape at your discernment and understanding. You’ll know them by their raptures and fits of joy. Then you can place them in positions of authority. Judging village disputes and distributing grain, for example. Or tax collecting.”

“Good,” the emperor said, rubbing his chin. “And the rest?”

“The Thresher fabric will reflect their true ugliness. They will pale and shrink back and avert their eyes.”

“They will scream and faint.”

“They will whimper at the sight of their deepest selves.”

“And thus you will know your traitorous subjects.”

“Hard labor would be too good for them.”

“Make me this suit at once!” the emperor said. And his court, whispering amongst themselves, wondered how the marvel would be managed.

Well, you know how. The tailors placed loud orders on the phone for Italian leather and French wool, Japanese silks and bulletproof thread; had conspicuously large boxes airlifted to their quarters; and all day and all night they cut and sewed the air with an industry that was inspiring to see.

The appointed day came, red and hot. Crows rattled in the palace trees. In the emperor’s chamber, before his cheval glass, the tailors presented their work with pride.

“Our finest piece.”

“A triumph.”

“A breakthrough in fashion.”

“But let us see what it looks like on you. Habeas corpus is the haberdasher’s true test.”

The emperor looked at their empty hands — swallowed — scowled — thought — and said, “Bravo!”

“Is the jacket not to your liking?”

“Hm, yes, the pants are a little long.”

“I’ll fix that in a minute, never you worry. There.”

“How’s that?”

“Perfect,” the emperor said, gazing at his reflection.

“Now you must show it to your subjects. Your courtiers have assembled and are waiting.”

When the emperor strode into his court, a ruby-buttoned tailor at each elbow, his courtiers stared. Then one, then another hastily applauded, and the stamping and cheering shook the walls. A little color came back into the emperor’s cheeks, and he whuffed through his blonde whiskers in relief, though what terrible worry he had been relieved of, no one watching could say.



“You chose your court wisely,” the tailors said. “Now ride throughout your kingdom and sift the wicked from the good.”

And the emperor, glancing dubiously at the saddle, mounted his horse and rode through the city streets. His stomach billowed with every bounce. Before him rode his courtiers, shouting the people forth to praise the craftsmanship and glory of these new clothes, which would divide the loyal from the perfidious.

The people, who had not survived six decades of imperial whims and sudden prohibitions on various fruits, fats, and hats without acquiring a certain degree of sense, observed the wind’s direction and vociferously admired the blinding gleam of the cloth-of-gold, the shimmer of silks, the cut and fit of everything.

Children, however, who through lack of life experience have not yet learned the salubrious lessons of unjust pain, while quite disposed to lie to avoid immediate punishment, are also inclined to speak inconvenient truths at the most inconvenient times.

“Ma, the emperor is naked.”

“No, he’s not. He’s wearing the finest suit that I ever did see.”

“Ma, I can see his dick.”

At this the goodwife clapped her aproned hand over her son’s mouth, but it was too late. The emperor had heard. He turned a pitying eye upon them, as their neighbors immediately began to point and hiss. Why, they’d always known — an absent father — single motherhood stirred up evil, that’s what they’d always said — but the emperor’s getup was magnificent — truly unparalleled — only a stupid blind woman couldn’t see that —

The emperor nudged his horse with his knees and serenely continued upon his way.

In the morning the boy and his mother were gone. Their little stone-and-thatch cottage had burned to the ground. Their neighbors and their houses had vanished as well. Only a few cracked teeth and a fistful of phalanges were found.

The emperor retained the tailors on an exclusive contract at astronomical rates and took to riding out among his people on a weekly basis, since it was now clear that there was treachery in the land. People fell over themselves to report their parents, in-laws, rivals, classmates, colleagues, never failing to praise the newest suit of clothes themselves, until the streets turned black with blood and soot.

When the emperor was finally stricken with a fatal case of pneumonia — which happened far later than one might imagine, because he was a corpulent and well-insulated man — his former subjects, one after the other, dazed by the news, picked up the phone by habit to denounce their friends, and heard, on the other end, the dusty silence of a dead line.

Unnecessarily grim, you say? Unrealistic? Scenes this bloody no longer occur in the civilized world? I agree with all your criticisms, most erudite of readers. There’s nothing for it but to try again.

Here then is a more charming tale, one that will better suit your taste.

Once there was a body politic that, through happy geographic accident, had avoided any number of devastating wars, and was thus left the most powerful government in

the world. On the basis of that evidence, it thought itself the most enlightened body politic that the world had ever seen. It kept its citizens under surveillance, arresting or ejecting those who did not agree, and as a result enjoyed unanimous approbation.

One day, two men, sons of a vast clothing empire, who had recently been elected to the body, presented a sheaf of invisible bills.

“See how stylishly we’ve cut, trimmed, and hemmed taxes! How popular you’ll be with the tastemakers of this realm — how perceptive and attractive you’ll seem — if you pass them!”

“See how they funnel the vast majority of money to the military, which is always fashionable. How powerful you’ll look to your enemies!”

“Look how your children will benefit, leapfrogging into elite universities, flourishing in the compost of your trusts and estates!”

“All honorable members of this body politic will see the good, glorious vision these bills represent. All citizens of discernment shall agree. The others? Well, they are not citizens, or they are fake citizens, voting without proper identification, and we should divert a portion of our security budget to uncovering these traitors and deporting or imprisoning them, as our fathers did in their day.”

The platforms and proposals were trotted before the country with pleasing pomp and ceremony. The true citizens applauded them so loudly you couldn’t think, and trained in militias to hunt down the fake citizens, and rammed cars into the bodies of fake citizens, and phoned in denunciations of their neighbors, ex-lovers, grandchildren, pets — and before too long the streets ran black and red with —

Ah.

That didn’t go very well, did it? Heavy-handed, on the nose... it’s hardly even a story. The artistic error was choosing a plurality as a subject. It’s difficult to create complexity of character, complete with inner conflicts and landscapes and unique worldviews, when one’s protagonist is an amorphous group. Especially when the members are as slippery as politicians. I understand now why Andersen chose to write about an emperor rather than, say, the Rigsdag. Artistically, that is, never mind that the first Rigsdag convened twelve years after his fairy tale was published. That detail will be conveniently left out of my forthcoming treatise on art. It is a treatise written for a very select few, and will be scorned by the unenlightened masses. Only a humble and wise reader such as yourself, magnanimous and perfect in character, will understand the secrets I disclose therein.

So a character study is what’s needed, it seems.

Once there were two tailors —

You know what? You’re right. We don’t need both of them. They’re hardly distinguishable as it is. Andersen might have wished to signify the multitudinousness of such men, or illustrate how well they work together, once they recognize each other, but we can take that for granted as something the reader already knows.

Once there was a man who called himself whatever was suitable to his purposes at the time. If it profited him to say he was a soldier, then he was a soldier who had

served with distinction. If it furthered his aims to call himself beloved, then someone's sweetheart he was. By speaking the words that another person wished to hear, whether those words were flattery or promises or blame, he could insinuate himself into most others' trust.

He had few talents besides this one, and a loathing for honest work besides, but this one talent proved enough to feed and clothe him until such time that the trick was plain. By then, of course, the man was long gone.

He fed at first on the labor of farmers, progressing at length to literate merchants and clerks. Over and over his living proved to him the moral by which he compassed his world: that the slow and stupid existed to be ruled and robbed by cleverer and better men than they.

But the smell of damp wool and the low burr of laborers came to displease him; the damp, wormy odors of ancient books soon bored him; in short, there are only so many times a bright man of tremendous worth can fleece the same kind of idiot. The reward is small, the dupery tedious. One must establish trust, perform small favors, establish rapport and commonalities, and so on and so forth, and that routine grows repetitive. The man longed to leave a mark on the face of history, as a result of which he could no longer be ignored.

And to do that, one must be proximate to greatness.

So the man who would call himself anything stashed away the profits of his cleverness until he could move to the valley of kings and queens, where starry fortunes were built upon a vastness of sand. Like pharaohs these men and women lived, erecting monuments and pressing whole hosts into hard labor; and word of their power and wealth had come to his ears.

The man bid farewell to the women who all thought themselves his one and only love, with haste and without many tears, since he did not expect to see them again. He did not kiss the infant boy that one held, with his own dark hair and dimpled cheeks.

Time and space did not chain our storyteller, for the stories he told disregarded both as soon as they became inconvenient. And so by steamer and coach, Greyhound and plane, the man made his way to the valley of sand.

And where money flows and ebbs in deep tides like the sea, shifting mountains, crashing, storming, drowning, the humblest barnacle is sufficiently wetted if it only clings to a firm surface. So the man lived, studying the landscape, until he heard the clack of dice in every two shells rolled along by the sea. With adjustments to his former patterns, he crabbed small fortunes with the wire cage of his smile and landed wish-granting carp with his tongue for bait.

A little empire he eked out, nestling against the greater fortunes and powers that ironed the land flat, effacing a neighborhood there, shredding communities there. From the kings of that land he learned to spin his silken webs to catch not one fly but a thousand. Once stuck in his flatteries, they squirmed to be sucked, pleading to be wrapped in his glorious silks. And he, like a spider, was glad to oblige.

Dining on every rare delicacy, traveling to white-dusted parties by limo and helicopter, he was contented for a time.

Then, as he listened, as he grew familiar with that land, he learned that these kings were clever but lesser, that an emperor ruled over them, and that this emperor was a fool. The kings simpered and groveled when they came before the emperor, just as this man did before them.

Bit by bit, the glitter of the valley of kings faded. The man grew restless and hungry once more. Late at night, he spun plans to weave himself into the imperial court and staff. Favors were asked here, a rumor murmured there. A few careers had to be ended to clear the way, but what of it? Soon an invitation on cream-thick paper made its way into his hand.

All was ready, the story staged, waiting only for the curtain and the lights.

On the morning the man walked out of his old apartment for the last time, a plane ticket clutched in one hand, he found a boy no older than fifteen, dressed in the clothes of another era, standing in the building's entryway.

"Excuse me," the man said, stepping around the boy.

"You're my father," the boy said.

"I don't have a son."

"Here's a picture of us. I was three at the time."

"That could be anyone."

"It's you. I didn't come to bother you. I only wanted to ask — "

"You're making me late."

" — why you left. Why we weren't enough for you."

"Nothing personal. Nothing to do with you. But look at your mother. Was I supposed to grow old — with that? In that small, ratty house? In that backwater of a time and place? No, I am meant for greater things."

"She said you were a tailor."

"I do stitch, weave, and spin."

"Will you teach me to be a tailor too?"

"In ten minutes, I'm going to miss my flight, which will cause me to miss a very important appointment. See, I'm on a tight schedule. Call me another time."

"But," the boy said, looking after him, "I don't have your number..."

"So sorry, your imperial grandiloquence," the man said, several hours later. "Encountered an unavoidable delay. But now that I'm here, my various skills as a tailor are at your praiseworthy self's disposal. I can sew you an outfit, invisible, that all your subjects must nonetheless kiss the hems of, and admire. Sew half-truths and falsehoods together, until a listener can't tell head from tail. Weave tales to turn brother against brother, snipping all bonds of loyalty except to you. These matters make my trade."

"Be welcome here," the emperor said. "I can tell that you are a gifted man."

And the emperor threw a fistful of peas at him.

"Quick, a suit that will make me irresistible. I need it in five minutes. The Queen of Sheba is coming."

“Immediately,” the tailor said.

But when the tailor returned after four minutes, carrying a suit of exaggerations, the emperor was already pawing at the Queen, who resisted with an expression of deep distaste, extracted herself, and stormed off.

“Where were you?” the emperor said, mashing a handful of gravy into the tailor’s hair. “I told you to be done in two minutes. You took ten.”

The tailor said, “That’s right, O golden sun of wisdom.”

“I didn’t get to fuck her because of you.”

“To make amends for your disappointment, may I offer you this suit of Impregnable Armor?” And he held out again the invisible clothes that mere minutes before had been an Irresistible Suit.

“Don’t be stupid. I can’t get pregnant.”

“Ah, but this suit protects you from all harm.”

“Gimme,” the emperor said, and was quickly dressed.

Even though his wares were intangible, producing enough of them to please the emperor and thus avoid the latest flung dish of baked beans proved exhausting for the soi-disant tailor.

He spun the Three-Piece of Plausible Denial, the Vest and Cravat of High Event Attendance, the Cufflinks of Venality. Each time, the emperor toyed with his work, tried it on, pronounced himself satisfied, and promptly forgot it existed.

“May I suggest,” the depleted tailor said, “stripping the populace of their rights, so that no one has rights but the most righteous of all, which is to say you, our rightness, you who are never wrong.”

“Why not?” the emperor said.

That was carried out, despite demonstrations and strikes and scathing newspaper columns, and then the tailor had to invent a new diversion.

“What about setting neighbor against neighbor and stranger against stranger? Tell the old story of the dark-skinned foreigner with his knife dripping blood. A little chaos does for power what warm horseshit does for weeds.”

“Whatever you like,” said the triply-clothed emperor. “Next.”

And those foreign-born or born to foreigners or born to those born to foreigners were rounded up, accused of crimes, and variously punished.

“May I suggest plucking the flower of youth before it grows strong enough to revolt?”

“Let it be so,” the emperor said.

Across the realm, children were mown down like green grass ahead of the mower’s scythe. Even the onion-eyed kings in their silicon towers felt their quartz hearts crack and said, “No more.” But they spoke it softly, so the emperor would not hear.

And while the tailor measured and spun and snipped, the murmur of the people rose to a roar. For there remained some of intelligence and clear thinking and good judgment among them, and these had gently taught the rest to put on new eyes and see.

On a day when the emperor was deliberating between the empty suit of Universal Belovedness on the tailor's left arm and the trousers and blazer of Religious Authority draped over his right, a herald ran in with the report that a mob had smashed through the palace gates and was headed toward the emperor's palace.

Indeed, through the window they could see a dark storm of humanity swelling on the horizon. All that stood between that flood and the doors was a line of police with loaded rifles. Most of the mob was children, with some old women mixed in, and some young, as well as a few brave men, and they stepped over the bodies of those who were shot and pressed forward to the palace, inevitable as death.

The tailor, with the instinct of a hare, twitched and backed toward the exit.

The emperor said, "Sit."

And the tailor sat.

At a snap of the emperor's fingers, servants tugged the curtains shut, so that they could no longer see the cresting wave. The lights were switched off. They waited in darkness.

"Bring me a bottle," the emperor said, and poured two fingers of sixty-year-old liquor into two glasses. One he drank. One he emptied over the tailor.

"That suit," the emperor said, "that prevents all harm — I'm wearing it now. But what will you do, clever tailor, when they come through these doors?"

Distantly, over the gunfire, they could hear the children singing, and the song rose sweet and clear on the wind. Soon there began, at the palace doors, a heavy and fateful thudding, like that of a heart under terrible strain. All the world, it seemed, kind and cruel alike, had come to beat down the palace doors.

If you'll excuse me, I am now going to join them.

Heaven help the children.

Heaven help us all.

# The Doing and Undoing of Jacob E. Mwangi

On Sunday after services, Jacob Esau Mwangi beat a hasty retreat from the crowd that descended upon his beaming parents and Mercy, who on this rare visit home between Lent and Easter terms was displayed between them like a tulip arrangement.

“What a daughter! Be a famous professor soon.”

“You have not forgotten about us common people? Cambridge makes all the children forget. They act so embarrassed when they come home — ”

“Funny to think they both come from the same family.”

“It’s very strange, isn’t it?”

“Where did he go anyway, that Jacob boy?”

Jacob, outside the chapel’s blue acrylic domes, caught the first flying matatu without regard for where it went.

He glowered out the window at the holograms of giraffes and rhinos that stalked the streets, flashing advertisements both local and multinational. A lion yawned and stretched among the potted plants at the center of a traffic circle, the words DRINK MORE JINGA COLA scrolling along its tawny flanks.

Twenty-five years before, the gleam and gloss of digital advertisements had divided the globetrotting Kenyan Haves from the shilling-counting Have Nots who shopped at tin-sided street stalls with painted signs. Now that that partition was obsolete, humanity had split itself into Doers and Don’ts. Jacob’s mathe and old man were devoted Doers, an architect and an engineer. Every month they asked Jacob if he had created anything lately, and every month, when he gave them a cheerful shrug, they flung up their palms in ritualized despair.

The matatu halted and hovered while more people crammed on.

Jacob had no stomach for returning to his apartment, a windowless box in Kawangware that he had picked specifically for its distance from the family manse. He unrolled his penphone and selected Rob’s name.

hey, game time?

sorry can’t

what’s going?

dame. tell u later

sawa

Outside the window the tidy six-story buildings of Kibera Collective flashed wholesome mottos in LEDs. Pick up after yourself. Harambee. Together we can remake the world. Jacob frowned absently, mapping his route in his head. If he swapped matatus here, the next would take him as far as Black Nile Lounge. The Black Nile was his usual base, though he'd venture as far east as the Monsoon Club if Rob was joining. You did that for a brother.

And Rob was his brother in all the ways that mattered, just as his gaming group was his true family: Robert and nocturnal Ann from Wisconsin and Chao from Tennessee, as well as sixty guildmembers from places as exotic as Anchorage and Korea who formed a far-flung network of cousins and in-laws, as full of gossip and grudges and backbiting and broken promises as the real thing. They were all Don'ts, of course. Doers played too, intermittently, but the Don'ts slaughtered them all, every match, always.

The no-man's-land between the Doers and Don'ts was as close as anything came to a war these days. Though the lines were deeply entrenched and wreathed in verbal barbed wire, and battles pitched as often in PvP as over dinner tables, no real bullets were ever fired. There had been little of that since the days of the Howl.

No one liked to speak of the Howl, of the blood that darkened and dried in the streets, of the mind virus that had reawakened after a century of dormancy to sow chaos and fear.

For out of the Howl had come the great Compassion, when, like a strange flowering in a sunless cave, the fervent prayers of adherents of every faith and the ferocious meditations of the variously spiritual, bet-hedging, and confused had reached critical mass, triggering a deep immune response in the human psyche. As if struck by lightning, the five billion survivors of the Howl had let the rifles and knives fall out of their hands, then embraced, or dropped to their knees and wept.

It was like God Himself sat down and talked with me, Jacob's mathe liked to say, and his old man would nod solemnly, yes, that was how it was.

By the fiftieth time he heard this exchange, Jacob was ready to pitch a can of Jinga Cola at each of their heads. He had not known the Compassion, having been born shortly afterward, and was thoroughly sick of hearing about it.

During the three years that the Compassion lasted, dazed legislators in every country redistributed wealth and built up healthcare and social services, while the wealthy deeded entire islands and bank accounts to the UN. Petty crime and begging vanished from Nairobi's streets. House gates were propped open. Askaris found no work and opened flower stands and safari companies. Kibera shantytown self-organized, pooled surplus funds, and built communal housing with plumbing and internet.

Gradually, as memories of the Compassion faded, life returned to a semblance of normalcy. Rush-hour drivers again cursed each other's mothers, and politicians returned to trading favors and taking tea money. But there remained a certain shining quality about life, if looked at the right way — or so Jacob's elders said.



The most important outcome of all that ancient history, as far as Jacob was concerned, was the monthly deposit in his account that the Kenyan government styled Dream Seeds, distributed to every resident not already receiving a stipend from another government. This paid for Jacob's bachelor pad and now, as he touched his pen to a scanner, for the Black Nile entry fee, a handful of miraa, and a bottle of beer.

The man in the booth assigning cubes handed Jacob a keycard marked 16 and said hopefully, "Maybe a Kenyan game today, sir? My brother's studio, I can recommend —"

"Maybe another day, boss."

"You cannot blame a man for trying. Japanese fantasy war sims again?"

"Good guess."

"I like to know my customers." He sighed. "I don't know how we will compete, you see. Our industry has just been born — theirs is fifty, sixty years old."

"You will find a way," Jacob said, to escape.

The door to the VR cube hissed open. Jacob lasered the title he wanted on the wall — Ogrifall: Visions of Conquest — then donned the headset and gauntlets, which stank of sweat. In a higher-end establishment the gear would be wiped down with lavender towelettes between uses, and tiny pores in the wall would jet out molecules of the scent libraries shipped with the games, odors of forest and moss, leather and steel, but Black Nile was a business scratched out of hope and savings from jua kali, the owner a Doer to his core, and the game loads were all secondhand.

Jacob launched the game and became a silver lion with braided mane, ten feet tall and scarred from battle. Ann and Chao were already online, knee-deep in the corpses of ogres and the occasional unfortunate Doer, their whoops of joy ringing in his ears.

"Hey! No Rob?" Ann asked.

"Some dame," Jacob said, placing his paw over his heart. "He's a goner."

"You say that every time," Chao said. "And you're always wrong. Rob gets bored faster than anyone else I know. I give her fifteen minutes, max."

Ann said, "We're storming Bluefell right now. Figured you two'd be along. I don't know what we'll do without Rob."

"Let's run it," Chao said. "Rob will catch up to us."

They battled their way up a snowy mountain, pines creaking and shaking lumps of snow down on them. Ice demons lunged and jeered and raked their faces. Ann died. Chao died. Jacob died. Their vision went black, and then they found themselves at the foot of the mountain.

"Again?" Chao said.

Again they wiped.

"This is bullshit," Ann said. "I give up."

"Hi, guys," Rob said. "What are we playing today?"

"Told you," Chao said.

"Where are you?" Jacob said. "And where's your girl?"

"Took you long enough," Chao said. "Twenty-four minutes. A new record."

“She’s here with me. We’re at Monsoon. Trying to skip the tutorial. Hang on.”

A moment later, there she was. Purple-haired and elf-eared, in novice’s robes.

“Good,” Ann said. “Five’s more than enough, even with an egg. Here, I’ve got a spare bow.”

The new girl looked around. “Wow, they pushed their graphics to the limit. But they’re still using the Conifer engine — ooh — and it has that vulnerability they didn’t do a full distro patch for. I wonder what happens if — ”

Jacob blinked. She was suddenly wearing a gallimaufry of gear, harlequin in color and decorated with the taste of a drunken weaverbird. But her character now displayed a respectable power level.

Ann and Chao stared in horror.

“What? Is it the colors? I can change those — give me a cycle — ”

“Robert,” Ann said, very slowly. “What does she do?”

“Oh, I’m a programmer, mostly. I make indie games with two friends from university. Ever heard of Duka Stories? That was us.”

“Guys — ” Rob began.

“She’s a Doer,” Chao said. “You picked up a Doer.”

“This is Consolata. We’ve been dating for three months.”

“It’s nice to meet you! What do you all do?” She turned toward Jacob, sparkling with hope.

Jacob growled.

“Fuck this,” Ann said, and logged off.

Chao said, “Not cool, man. Not cool at all. Hit me up when she’s history — or don’t, I don’t care.”

And he was gone.

“Did I do something wrong?” Consolata said.

“I — ” Rob sighed. “I didn’t know they’d be like that.”

“Really,” Jacob said. “You did not know.”

“Nah, Jacob — ”

“There is a reason why we do not cross the line. Doers are evangelical. Listen to her. Next thing, you’ll be an entrepreneur, or a community leader, shaking the hand of every aunty in church. You will shake their hands, and you will say, I feel so sorry for that Jacob boy, he never applied himself to anything. Chao, oh, what a waste of intellect. Poor Ann, I’m sure she could have been amazing at anything, if only she tried — ”

“Because of a dame? You think a dame could do that to me? What’s eating you?”

“Mercy’s home,” Jacob said, letting his lion-face curl into a snarl.

“Ee. I see. I’m sorry — ”

“No. Not today,” Jacob said, and logged off. He tore the gauntlets from his hands. Then he saved the game logs to his phone, to remind himself of what a rat Rob was, and stormed out of the Black Nile. It was ten long and dusty blocks home. Jacob stomped and swore his way up the concrete stairs.

At the top, Mercy was waiting for him.

“Look,” she said, matching him step for step as he backpedaled down the stairs, “I don’t like it either, Jacob, kweli, all the church ladies up in my face with ‘When are you going to get married, I have a nephew just your age.’ Once I got away I took a taxi here — ”

“Go back to Cambridge and all that stupid grass you can’t touch, and all that colonial-in-the-metropolis crap you like so much.”

“You do read my emails.” She beamed. “I had wondered.”

“Get lost.”

“You have potential up to here, Jacob. You are crackling with the stuff. The problem is, you don’t see it yourself.”

“Mathe put you up to this.”

“Nobody put me up to this. What I wanted to say was — Jacob, wait. As soon as I have a job, which will be soon, I’m interviewing all over Europe right now — as soon as I’m settled, I want to pay for your university. All you have to do is pick a course.”

“I hate to break it to you, sis dear, but these days university is free. So take your money and — ”

“I don’t mean university in Kenya. Maybe China. Tsinghua University? Shanghai Tech? Maybe the U.S. Wherever you like. Dream big. Some travel would be good for you.”

“Mercy,” Jacob said, stopping at the bottom of the stairs. Four steps above him, she wobbled on her acrylic heels, clinging to the balustrade. “This is all I want. I’m happy. Leave me alone.”

“If you think I’m going to just — ”

“Yes. You are.”

“Well,” Mercy said, “you have my number. When you change your mind — ”

“I won’t.”

“Ee, twenty-two years and you’re still as fussy as an infant.”

“Kwaheri, Mercy.”

He stepped sideways and waved her down the stairs. Mercy descended. Before she passed him, she put a hand on his shoulder.

“I care about you,” she said. “Would I be this obnoxious if I didn’t?”

“Please, find a nice wazungu or wahindi at Cambridge to torture instead of me. Try the maths department. I hear they’re just as odd as you are.”

A hawkeyed taxi driver slowed and hovered at the curb.

“Bye, Jacob.”

“Piss off, Mercy.”

And Jacob went up to his tiny room and flung himself down, wondering why it felt like an elephant had stepped on his chest.

Something important that he’d overlooked tickled the back of his eyelids until he awoke.

Ah. Jacob rolled over in bed and grabbed his penphone. There, in the previous day's logs, was the anomaly: the moment when Consolata went from starter gear to a hodgepodge of expert-level bits. The game logs showed a line of code injected at the exact time she twisted her left hand into a complicated shape like a mudra.

Jacob searched online for the snippet of code and found lengthy discussions of a developer-mode trigger in three unpatched, two-year-old, Conifer-based games. After an hour or two of reading he thought he had the gist of it.

As Jacob, clearly the first customer of the day, came in, the man at Black Nile yawned and waved his hand over the array of keycards.

"Any of them. Be my guest."

Jacob loaded OGREfall first. Pasting in the code snippet from his phone, he contorted his left hand — here a silver paw — into the shape he remembered and had practiced that morning.

Blip.

His rare and beautiful endgame armor was gone. It had been replaced by an eye-smarting farrago of gear. Only now each item showed a purple variable name floating over its center. He could have kicked himself for his carelessness — the Nebula Paladin set had taken sixty-four hours to complete — but wonder and fascination won out over regret. Holding the same awkward mudra as before, Jacob tapped his lotus-stamped breastplate and toggled the number at the end of the variable.

The lotus transformed into a winged lion rampant, the metal from silver to burnished gold.

When Jacob raised his eyes, he noticed that the ice demons hissing and swooping nearby had variables too. Soon he was sending them jitterbugging this way and that and spiraling helplessly off the edge of a cliff.

Was this what the world looked like from the other side?

The other two games that the tweaker forums mentioned, a historical shooter and a haunted-house platformer, permitted similar manipulations. Jacob stood in the middle of floating words and numbers, changing the world around him with hardly more than a thought. He had become a god in these three small worlds. Ann and Chao would explode from envy. He suppressed a grin.

Then the screens went dark, and the harsh after-hours lights in the cube flashed on. Jacob struggled out of the VR rig, perplexed. He prodded buttons and lasered the empty wall. Nothing happened.

The door clicked, and the manager came in.

"Sorry sir," he said. "Your account has been banned for cheating. Same thing happened over at the Monsoon Club yesterday. We got the automated warnings just now, straight from Japan. One-month ban from all Japanese games. Very sorry about that."

The room spun. Perhaps Oakley's graphics had been subpar.

A month? Ann and Chao wouldn't wait a month. They'd find some new Don't, fresh out of secondary school or the military or a ruined thirty-year marriage, to replace him. To replace both him and Rob, now.

"I can see this is not easy news, sir. Not easy for me, either. You are a loyal customer."

"All Japanese games."

"Correct."

"What about other regions?"

"Cross-platform automatic two-week bans in Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Australia."

"But not Africa?"

"Not Africa. We're not advanced enough to be asked to sign those agreements yet."

"I think — " Jacob swallowed. "I think I'd like to try Duka Stories, if you have it."

The manager smiled. "Of course. Supporting the local economy, local artists, local products, that is one of my business goals."

Consolata's game turned out to be a simple duka simulator. Jacob had to clear the ground, hammer the corrugated iron sides of the shop together, and stock its shelves with what he blindly guessed might appeal to the neighborhood. The art was hand-painted, probably by one of Consolata's friends, the music easy and old-fashioned. The grandmothers who stopped by for spices pinched his cheeks and told him in quavering voices how glad they were to have him there, only couldn't he make an exception for them on the prices, everything being so expensive these days?

By the end of his first day in business, an hour into the game, Jacob was bankrupt and rapt.

Six hours later his business had been flattened twice, once by a student protest, once by askaris demanding protection money. Each time he built it up again, making brightly lettered promises to his worried customers. In the meantime he sent his painted children to school in uniforms with books and pens and crayons, an accomplishment that turned his heart to sugar. The game lacked the gloss that he was used to, but he had met the person who had created it. All of this, from three women!

An impossible thought arose in him. He refused to look at it directly. No, never. Maybe for money. Enough money. And only for a while.

"Boss," he said, emerging from the cube, "you said your brother runs a game studio?"

"He does," the manager said.

"Would he give me a job, do you think?"

"You should ask him yourself." The manager closed the game of bao he had been playing on his ancient iPhone, a bashed-up brick of third-hand tech, and pulled up a number.

"Yes, I have a young man here, regular customer, plays all the new games, wants to know if you have a job for him." He turned to Jacob. "He says go ahead, send him your portfolio."

"My portfolio?"

"Yes, art, music, design, whatever it is you want to work in. He says he doesn't have a portfolio. Hm? Okay. My brother says you should take courses in those things, whatever interests you, and come back when you can do something." He set the iPhone down.

“Thanks,” Jacob said, because there was nothing else he could say. He slouched out of the Black Nile, brow furrowed with thought.

Since there was nowhere else to meet, he invited Ann and Chao to visit his spruced-up duka, where they stood around sipping virtual sodas and blocking customers from their programmed paths.

Chao said, suspicion dripping from every syllable of his Southern drawl, “Run that by me again.”

“I’m going to take some university courses so I can get a job, and then when I have enough saved up for a VR rig of my own, I’ll quit and game full-time, twenty-four-seven.”

Ann said, “I think the only person you’re fooling is yourself.”

“Don’t be like that. You have no idea how much a rig costs in Nairobi. It’s not like the U.S., where, what, one-third of your monthly stipend buys one? More like two years’ stipend for us. I want to game, but I also need to eat.”

“If you say so,” Ann said.

“Plus they’ve banned me from all Japanese-owned servers for a month, and other major regions for the next two weeks. This way I can do something.” Hearing his own words, he stopped.

“So these courses,” Chao said. “They’re in... management? Administration?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s right.”

“Okay. That’s almost as good as not doing anything. I wish you’d said something earlier, though. We could have crowdfunded you a console, as a guild.”

“My parents would never let me live that down.”

“We’re going to miss you,” Ann said abruptly. “I mean, Robbie, and now you...”

“Hey,” Jacob said. “I’ll still be online. And I’ll still game with you, once this ban is done.”

Her character hugged his. “Don’t let the Doers get you.”

“I won’t.”

“If you see Rob — ” Chao said.

“Yes?”

“Never mind.”

It was, in fact, on a gleaming skybridge of the Chiromo campus of the University of Nairobi that Jacob next saw Robert, two thick textbooks wedged under his arm. Rob walked quickly, with purpose, in the flood between classes; then, with a start, his eyes met Jacob’s, and his face broke into a pleased and embarrassed smile.

“You caught me,” Rob said.

“What are you studying?”

“Astronomy. I wanted to discover a planet, as a kid. Somehow I forgot. Then somebody reminded me.”

“You and Consolata — ”

“Still together.”

“Good for you.”

They stood there awkwardly, toe to toe, as students streamed past.

“So what brings you here?” Rob said eventually.

“Intro to Programming.”

“What? Here? You?”

“And some art classes.”

“Art!” Rob laughed, his teeth flashing.

“I’m going to design games. Please don’t tell Mercy.”

“I’m not a monster.” Rob paused. “You’ll have to, though. Eventually. And if you’re serious, Ann and Chao — ”

“That will bite.”

“It will. Also, so you know, I would never say — ”

“I know.”

“We should play together sometime,” Rob said, punching his shoulder. “Consolata’s releasing her new game next month. It’s called Love and War: The Story of a Doer and a Don’t. There’ll be a party. You should come.”

“If the beer’s good, maybe. Maybe I will.”

The two of them knocked knuckles with half-embarrassed, half-conspiratorial smiles. The sun beat down hot and golden on the campus as they passed and went their separate ways, each chasing, in his own heart, down a twisting road, the dim and indeterminate beginnings of a dream.

# The Valley of Wounded Deer

Once there was a prince of Ruyastan who was born in secret and hidden behind a false wall with a nurse to hush her and soothe and give suck. The prince and her nurse lived in narrowness for ten years, reading and watching the world through a crack no bigger than a needle. During those years, the dowager queen hunted down and killed, for jealousy, every one of the prince's half-brothers and cousins, carelessly begotten in cities and villages and forgotten apart from notes in the royal genealogies.

But the prince's mother had died in giving birth, and the crabbed old genealogists who pried and listened never learned of it. So the prince's name was never written, and she survived.

After a decade of the Queen's hunt, the cities and villages of Ruyastan cried out over the blood spilled, blood of farmhands, shoemakers, and councilors who never dreamed of their noble parentage. A mob rattled the palace gates with cannon and scythes until metal bent and mortar cracked.

But the Queen knew the mazes of power better than the taste of her own teeth. Clad in ashes and cloth-of-gold, she emerged on the palace balcony.

Spreading her hands, she proclaimed amnesty and pardon for those guilty of descent from her dead sons. Cozened by her honeyed words, the crowd subsided and dispersed.

This was all the Queen desired, though she was careful not to laugh, for sweet words aside, death could not be undone.

But one year and one day after the Queen's proclamation, the prince's nurse gave the prince clothes without patches to wear, pinched her chin for courage, and led her out of hiding. They walked across the city, the prince open-mouthed and speechless, turning her head this way and that.

At the palace gates, the last coins in the nurse's pockets, applied to the proper palms, brought them into the presence of the Queen.

Before the amber throne, in whose depths floated husks of ancient insects, the nurse recounted the night that the Queen's youngest son had spent with the provincial governor's daughter. She presented a ring and a letter as proof.

But these were hardly needed, for the prince's eyebrows, drawn like bows, were the same as her father's, and his father's, and his.

The royal smile soured. The prince stood blinking at the brilliance of the still, silent court.

Then the Queen arose from the throne and clapped her hands, and all the court, thawing, acclaimed the long-lost prince.



She owed the nurse great thanks, the Queen said. From this day forward the court would have the care of the child, to raise her as a proper prince of Ruyastan, for she, the Queen, repented of her thoughtless war with blood and brood. Family was family; blood was blood.

Thus was the prince immured in the palace, a larger yet more stifling prison than her hidden room. She was given tutors and hawks and lily-white hounds and horses as yellow as beaten gold. The nurse had raised her wisely, with sighs and truth, and so the prince knew to expect death in every cup, in every dish, and every night, after she blew out the lamp and cried herself to sleep.

Sometimes the Queen showed her the condescension one shows to dogs, and sometimes the Queen giped at her clothing, or her countenance, or her character, as one kicks a dog lying in the way.

The prince's only solace was in hunting, when she could ride out fleeter and faster than the servants who followed her, and with the strength of her arm bring down a brace of ducks or rabbits for the palace cooks. She would ride as far as she dared, whistling down her hawks, until the palace looked as small as a stone set in the white crown of the royal city, and the woods closed dimly around her, loud with birdsong.

By law, since the Queen was a dowager and not of blood, the prince was to succeed to the throne on her sixteenth birthday.

That date approached more swiftly than anyone wished.

Four days before she turned sixteen, the prince brought three fat pheasants to the kitchens. The oldest cook stopped her with a floury hand and said, her voice breaking, "The Queen has commanded me to make halwa for your birthday dinner. Just enough for you, and just as you like it, with pistachios and cream." Then she covered her face with her apron and burst into tears.

The prince kissed the part in the cook's iron-gray hair and said, "I thank you for it — I would rather no one else."

In the morning the prince arose and saddled her favorite horse, who was pale as butter and swift as sunlight, and rode until the horse's flanks were feathered with foam. Then she lay in the shade of a sycamore to eat the mulberries in her bag.

"Here, you, give me some!" said a voice in the tree.

An old man sat on a branch above her, swinging his legs and twisting his beard. The prince tossed him the bag of mulberries, and he caught it and ate handful after handful, spitting the stems into her hair.

After a courteous silence, the prince inquired, "How did you wind up in this tree?"

"I climbed," the old man said, around a mouthful of mulberries. "Here I fish for the carp of vengeance, which swims through these waters every twenty-five years. Those who've seen it say its scales flash red."

The prince spied a fishing rod balanced among the branches, an unbaited hook dangling from its line.

She said, "I wish you luck with your fishing."

“And who are you to wish me luck, O Prince Who Weeps? You have none to give away.”

“You may know I am a prince,” she said, “but who calls me the Prince Who Weeps?”

“Your hawks hear you,” the old man said, “and hawks talk, and pigeons gossip, and finally a sparrow tells it outside my door.”

“It is true,” she said, “although I am sorry it is widely known. Then again, it will not matter much in three days.”

“What happens in three days?”

“If I live, I turn sixteen. When I am sixteen, I may claim the throne. But on the eve of my birthday I am to be poisoned with a dish of halwa.”

“You have good reason to weep,” the old man said. “I must admit that I myself occasionally indulge.”

“And who do you weep for, good father?”

“A wife and children.”

“You’ve lost more than kingdoms.”

“I have. But there are better remedies than weeping. Fishing is one, and so I fish. Riding is another. So you must ride.”

“Where shall I ride?”

“Half a day farther,” the old man said, pointing with his fishing rod, “to where the earth cleaves in two. That is the Valley of Wounded Deer, which is a wonder worth seeing before you die. Here is a pill that will uncover to you the language of animals for an hour. Use it well.”

He tossed the bag down to her, and in it the prince found a round black pill that reeked of bitter herbs.

“Thank you, kind father,” she said. “May all my luck, little as it is, go with you and your fishing.”

She rode onward through the dimming forest, until her horse tossed and shied at the brambles braided black before them. Then the prince dismounted, hobbled her horse, and proceeded on foot, pushing the thorns back with bare hands and dagger.

After hours of struggling through thicket and thorn, the trees seemed to suddenly part before her, their interstices filling with stars. The prince had but a moment to notice the starlight before her footing gave way, for in her weariness she had not attended to where she was going, and she tumbled down a steep slope on a billow of scree.

At the bottom of the slope she unfurled into a heap, groaning. Then other cries of pain rose out of the darkness.

“Who’s there?” the prince said.

No one answered.

In the dusty starlight she perceived great shapes among the trees, shifting and sighing, and her blood ran quick and cold within her. But as the stars turned, and no wild beast stalked her, and no teeth tore, her heart settled and slowed, and finally, exhausted, the prince slept.

When she awoke, bruised but whole, the sunlight that broke through the trees showed her a small valley rich with moss and brown bones.

Three deer dark as leaves in winter lay grievously wounded beneath the trees. Their breaths came forth in soft white clouds. One had bloody gashes along its side that scabbed and cracked and opened to show bone. One had seven arrows buried in its flanks. And one had a golden collar around its neck and a marvelous tree of silver and gold, finely wrought with fruits and flowers, set between its antlers. The weight of that wonder pinned the deer's head to the earth.

The prince stared, then recalled the old man's gift. The black pill's taste was loam and silence, and its odor filled her nose and mouth.

The bleeding doe raised its head as she approached.

"What kind of place is this?" the prince asked the doe.

Its voice cloudy and confused, the doe said, "This is the Valley of Wounded Deer, where we whose deaths are unfinished come to die. No one enters without a wound, and by the bones you see, no one departs in the same form. Only as seeds and birds and songs do we pass from this place. But you are not a deer."

"I am weary and hunted like a deer," the prince said. "This valley is lovely and would be a fine place to die."

"But you are not a deer," the doe said again.

"I am a prince and can judge for myself," the prince said. "You are badly wounded — how came you by this harm?"

"Men," the doe said. "Hunters like yourself, with dogs. They were slow and stupid, but not slow and stupid enough." Its eyes were deep as wells and gleamed with sorrow. "Princeling, hear me. The ways of wolves are kinder than the ways of men."

It turned to lick its ribboned flanks, as well as it could, and spoke no further.

The prince came to the deer transfixed by arrows.

"From whose quiver did these come?" she said.

"Hunters like yourself," the hind said. "Their aim was poor, but not poor enough. So you see me now. Listen, princeling. The ways of ravens are better than the ways of men."

And the hind said no more, but looked at the prince with reproach.

The prince walked on, thinking on what she had heard, until she reached the buck that wore a golden tree.

"Beautiful one," she said, "how came you to this place?"

The buck could not move its head, though the muscles of its neck strained and shivered, and tears pearled in its eyes.

"I lived in a king's parkland, and it was his pleasure to capture and ornament me thus."

"Then you know the injustices of kings and queens," the prince said.

"That I do."

"Like the others, you have suffered through no choice of your own."

“On the contrary,” the buck said. “I could have hooked the king’s eyes on my horns and torn them out. I could have fled farther than men could reach, rather than dwell in his demesne. But I bent my head to him, because the ways of men and the ways of wolves and the ways of ravens are cruel, but the ways of God are perfect and beyond our understanding.”

“Does a creature like yourself know God?” the prince said. “I have had tutors and mullahs and before them the simple faith of my nurse, which was more persuasive to me than all of these, but even now I am not certain that I know God.”

“In every mouthful of green, in every drink of cool water, in the velvet of our antlers and in our deaths is the name of God inscribed.”

“Well,” the prince said. “God or no God, all I want is a peaceful and private death, far from the jeers of my enemies.”

“You will not find your desire here. God gave this valley to the harmless things. It is not meant for you.”

“Then what is meant for me?” the prince said.

But the buck only gazed at her, dumbly and without comprehension, for the hour of language had come and gone.

Wondering and amazed, the prince picked her way out of the valley. She found her horse grazing among the trees. For a long moment, holding the bridle, she looked back.

“I could strike the Queen first, with my dagger concealed on my thigh,” the prince said. “Some of her courtiers would come to my aid, for their hearts are full of hate. I could take the throne by force. And that is the way of wolves.

“Or I could flee as far as this good horse could carry me, and wait for her people to revolt. Then we would return in triumph to trample her bones. And that is the way of ravens.

“But what is the way of deer?”

The prince considered the matter, her heart as heavy as chased gold. Then she mounted her horse and spurred it toward home.

No tears wetted her face, but with a cold cheer she rode through the wood and through the city. All who marked her passage thought her brave, and they grieved in their hearts, for they knew their Queen.

It was evening when she reached the palace, where all the lights burned hectic with final preparations.

“How good of you to come back for your birthday,” the Queen said, her eyes cold. The prince saw that the Queen had hoped and feared that she would flee — hoped, for then the throne would be hers without question, and feared, for the prince might then someday return.

The prince bowed silently and went to her chamber, where she did not sleep but knelt all night in prayer. And in the morning there was lightness as well as sorrow in her heart.

She walked in the garden and admired the flowers as if she had never seen them before, bid a pleasant morning to the cooks at their fires, and fed and made much of her horse and hawks and dogs.

“There is beauty in this place,” the prince said to herself. “But it was never meant for me. God gave it to the great and powerful, and I am neither of those things.”

Soon, too soon, the appointed hour arrived. The prince bathed and dressed and was escorted with fanfare to her birthday banquet. Every kind of dish that the realm could produce was spread before the court: rice studded with sultanas and jewels of meat, spitted larks and stuffed nightingales, fish in cream and fish in wine, skewered goat and boiled geese, boar and venison and lamb.

“All of this is in your honor,” the Queen said, waving her ringed fingers over the repast. “Tomorrow you shall be crowned, but today you are still a prince. So tonight I have the privilege of spoiling you.” She tore off a leg of swan and drained her cup, then gestured toward the prince. “Go on, eat — eat!”

The prince took a moon of bread and ate a dry morsel.

“What, you won’t eat?” the Queen said. “So fastidious. So kingly. But I see that we lack your favorite dish. That must be remedied at once!” She clapped her hands, and the servants brought forth a single bowl of halwa.

The Queen smiled.

“My beloved prince, dearest and sweetest of grandchildren, say that you’ll taste what we’ve prepared for you!”

Up and down the table, courtiers flicked glances at each other, lips twisting with knowledge, amusement, and pity.

The prince looked at the Queen, bowed, and ate until the bowl was clean.

“If you will forgive me,” the prince said to the Queen, who was rubbing her hands together and chuckling, “it has been a long day, and I will withdraw. But do not let my absence trouble you or lessen these festivities.”

“Graciously said!” the courtiers cried. And they carried on feasting and roistering as if the prince had never been.

The prince returned to her chamber and stretched out upon her bed, waiting for death to creep over her. His touch would be cold, she thought, and painful, and then she would feel nothing at all.

In the morning, to her astonishment, the prince awoke.

She looked out the window at the sunlit city, then walked through the empty palace to the banqueting pavilions. The silk tents fluttered like flowers in the morning air. When the prince saw what was beneath, she was for many minutes unable to speak.

The Queen and her court sprawled among the broken meats, their tongues swollen and lolling. Half-eaten fruits softened and browned. Where wine had dried as black as blood, flies clustered and combed their claws.

“What’s this?” the prince said. “How could this be?”

The old cook rushed in and flung herself down.

"It was my doing," she cried. "Kill me, and me alone!"

Behind her came the other cooks, shuffling and whispering, eyes round. At last one of the scullions said, "She rallied us all. A shame and a pity to help murder the last prince, she said, and a waste of good food, too. And which of us has not felt the Queen's heavy hand? So we sauced everything with poison and put the cure in the halwa. If you kill her, you must kill all of us. And even that will be fine, because you will be King."

"We've already baked the pastries for your coronation," the old cook said, still flat on her face. "Only we told the Queen they were funeral cakes. So our deaths will not be an inconvenience."

"Enough," the prince said, pulling the cook to her feet. "Hasn't Death had his portion, and more? None of you will die. But neither will I be King."

"And why not?" the cook demanded.

"Because you would be a better King than I," the prince said. "Because I have no heart to rule over anyone, not even a beetle. And because the ways of God are better than the ways of men, better than the ways of wolves or ravens — indeed, they are the best of all."

She clasped the cook's cracked hand. "You've prepared the cakes for your own coronation. I will see you crowned, and then I shall take bread and mulberries and go out into the world."

"But where will you go?"

"Where God grants to me to go."

"And what will you do?"

"What God gives me to do."

Then the prince said no more, but bowed to her King.

The Queen and her courtiers were buried swiftly, with lavish honors and a minimum of grieving. By evening the cook sat upon the amber throne.

The prince in the meantime dressed in the cook's castoffs and set out on foot. She walked, light as a deer, through city and country, only stopping once, where an old man tended three graves by the road.

"Did you catch your carp, good father?" she inquired.

"I most certainly did. It was a feast fit — begging your pardon — for a King. Here, you can have your luck back."

"It seems I do not need it."

"Then I'll keep it. The luck of a prince is not given every day. Go in peace."

"May peace find you as well."

He looked down the line of graves, over which the ferns were beginning to grow. "Perhaps it will," he said.

Onwards the prince went. Time unbraided its stars, and the earth spun, and she was all but forgotten. But every few years, word came to the Cook-King of a beggar whose joy blazed like a meteor, or an itinerant teacher whose words fruited in the mind, or

a stranger who went gleaning and singing through the fields, and the King, who had few secrets, allowed herself a secret smile.

Many years later, in a nut-sweet autumn, there came halting into the Valley of Wounded Deer a hart hoar with age, muddied and scarred by living, its antlers pointed like a crown. The hart couched low on the yellowing grass and sang a soft, consoling note. Had you understood the language of deer, you might have heard it say: "The ways of deer are better than the ways of men, but the ways of God are perfect."

Then the hart closed its eyes, and the only breath in that valley was the wind's.

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