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**REACTOR  
MAGAZINE  
SHORT  
FICTION**

**JAN/FEB  
2024**

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# Reactor Magazine Short Fiction Jan/Feb 2024

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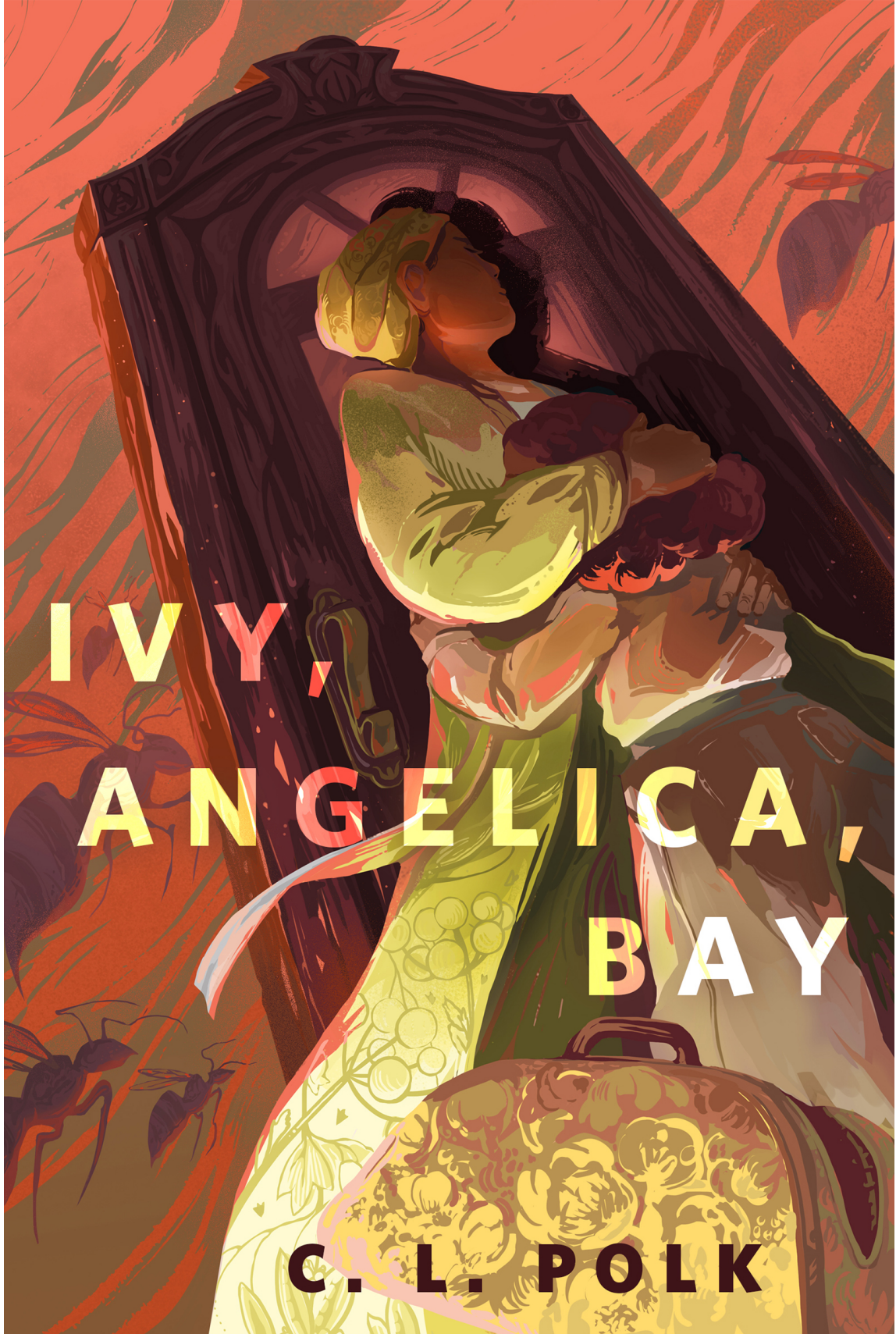
*You Don't Belong Where You Don't Belong*

Kemi Ashing-Giwa

REACTOR 

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**IVY,  
ANGELICA,  
BAY**

**C. L. POLK**

# Ivy, Angelica, Bay

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**C . L . P O L K**

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*illustration by*

A L Y S S A W I N A N S

**T O R  
D O T  
C O M**

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Trouble sits on the third stair below my door, slouching and ragged with her elbows on her knees. The wards on Mama's car shimmer and tense, and on the rooftop five stories over my head, the bees stir from their drowsy, sun-drenched dreaming. A stranger, here, when no one has asked a thing of me since the priest and the undertaker came to bless Mama and take her away.

I open my purse and pluck out a short cord. I slip it into a loop, ready to knot with a tug, and then I push open the driver's side door. The wards wrap over my shoulders as I leave the car and step around its long black nose. The ivy trained up the front bricks ripples, as if the house just let out a sigh of relief. I stop on the sidewalk and look trouble in the eye.

No tears on this one. All that feeling had been shed long ago, leaving nothing behind but wanting. *Want* pours from the young woman who rises to feet shod in dirty canvas sneakers. Want climbs on the trellis of long skinny legs in a man's chinos. She snaps her fingers and squares her shoulders when she knows I'm looking. A belt with extra holes punched in it wraps around a middle that never feels full, blousing the hem of a stained cotton shirt. Want fills this woman to the frazzled halo of hairs worked loose from crooked cornrow plaits.

I set steady feet on the sidewalk, armored in spells and mourning black. "How do you do," I say, because it wouldn't do to be impolite. "I see you have been waiting some time."

"An hour," the woman says. "It's been an hour."

"My apologies," I say, though I'm not sorry for anything. "I had an engagement. I am Miss l'Abielle. What is your name?"

"Liv. Livvie. I'm Livia." The woman's hands flutter together, tangling so tight her knuckles go pale. "I need you to help me. I want a house. I need it. I—"

I lift my hand and stop her tongue. “My apologies once more. I am indisposed at the moment.”

“But I need it,” Livia insists, and I am not ready for this. There’s still crying to do and affairs to attend, and who is this woman to demand this now?

“There is a price to what we want,” I say. “This time, the price is too high. I am sorry. I have a luck charm. Take that instead.”

I open my purse again. A luck charm will do. She can’t have what she wants. I don’t know why, but she can’t. Shadows grow colder when I think about it.

“What price?” Livia asks. “Tell me.”

Oh, this girl wants so bad. She doesn’t know, doesn’t care; she can’t see the danger lurking all around her. A drop of pity splashes on my heart as I make my terrible words gentle.

“Your firstborn child.”

The air around us shivers. Something hears me set the price. Something sets it into stone, final and unmoving.

The want in Livia crashes into that price. It bubbles just behind her eyes, pressing harder and harder until it bursts into pain and frustration and a bolt of hot rage. She clamps her jaw shut and spins on the worn sole of one sneaker and walks away, fast, faster, running.

I watch until she’s so far down the block she fades into the horizon, and it’s only then that I let out the breath I’d drawn to cast a binding. I pull the spell knot apart and go inside to safety.

★ ★ ★

Lorraine’s still on paid leave for another week, so I cook my own supper and dust my way through the house. I don’t want her to come back to extra work. It keeps me busy too. It helps me forget for all the hours between coming home from the funeral and getting into bed. Mama’s suite is still shut up tight. I don’t know when I will open those doors again. I have the bedroom on the front of the third floor,

with the curving bay windows framed by tendrils of ivy, and a stack of brand-new books.

Books help me forget that Mama's gone, for a while. I sit with a story on my tented knees, breathing in fresh paper and printing ink as I read about the Bottom of Heaven. Neighbors snore in front of Johnny Carson with the sound turned down. The bees sleep. I turn a page and sit next to Shadrack on the curb with his shoes knotted tight, feeling his loneliness and grieving instead of mine. But then I look up, head tilting at a sound I only think I heard.

I listen past the walls and into the streets, my senses checking every streetlamp witched into the spells quilted over Mama's domain.

Not Mama's. It's mine now. I remember, and my heart knots up tight.

But it's quiet outside. I slip back into the pages and the house settles around me, warm and content as a sleep-laden sigh—

Until a knock makes the house jump with four sharp raps. I'm in my slippers before the echo leaves the air, my housecoat floating as I take the stairs down and around. I touch the spells on each newel post, gathering their magic before I reach the vestibule.

I open the door, and a little girl is there.

She stares at me with huge dark eyes, her cotton shirt dirty, her chinos all holes. She has a little suitcase frowzy with cabbage roses, something brown stained across the side.

"Mother said wait here," she says, in a mouse-quiet, trembling voice. "She said to mind you until she comes back."

The last word splinters in her throat, snapped by fear.

"Oh, child. Who is your mother?"

But I know, don't I? I already know.

She looks at me, her eyebrows perplexed. "Mother."

She's ten, perhaps. Little and skinny and trying not to look behind her, because if she does, the monster will be there. No little girl should ever look like that.

I bend and put my hand on her shoulder. Bones poke at the hollow of my palm. But the touch makes a magic clamp around my

wrist. The air shivers with a bargain sealing itself shut. It vibrates like a drum skin, like thunder.

I let go. It's too late. I named the price and Livia gave it up, her wanting so strong it made fate bend.

My breath sighs out. I go still. No wind in the leaves, no purring traffic—that's wrong. Something is  
*coming—*

The streetlights wink out all down the street. The televisions go dark. My skin crawls, for something hot and greedy brushes against the skin of magic around my streets.

The little girl on my doorstep whimpers. Round eyes, open mouth, breathing in gulps that will drown her in terror. She drops the suitcase. It pops open, spilling out threadbare clothes and holey shoes.

The magic gropes at the wards, fumbling for a way in.

A scream claws its way out of the little girl's throat. She backs into the iron railing that keeps her from falling off the steps.

I reach for her. She rushes into my arms. I drag us over the threshold and slam the first door, shuffling back through the vestibule and into the house. I swing the inner door shut with one slippered toe and crouch down to hold her.

The sticky-fingered spell is gone. I send my power out and let it spread along the web, but there's nothing to find.

My heart is a stone as I hum in an abandoned girl's ear. I rub her back.

"I've got you." I rock her, lullaby slow. "You're safe."

But I don't know where that magic went, or what it meant to do.

★ ★ ★

When she settles down enough, I talk softly in her ear. "I'm Miss l'Abielle. What's your name?"

"Jael Brown."

There's a haystack worth of Browns in this city. "Where do you stay?"

Silence.

“You don’t know the name of your street?”

Headshake.

“What about your school?”

“I never went.”

I barely stop myself from sucking my teeth. She’s too old to be kept home. “That’s all right. We’ll sort it out in the morning.”

Jael comes along up the steps past the piano, following me to where my childhood bedroom waits for someone to dream in it. She stares at a ruffle-laden bed and a flop-eared stuffed bunny resting on the chenille coverlet. I find a nightgown folded around lavender sachets. “Come along. You need washing.”

She waits silently while I pour herb oil and bubble bath in the steamy water. The suds rise past the top. I pull out a stool and settle. “Go on. When you’re ready I’ll wash your hair.”

I find a book on the wall shelf. I read to her about a girl who solves five dozen mysteries before she turns nineteen years old.

I was once the little girl in the hot water and soapsud clouds. I don’t remember Mama’s words so much as the feel of her voice ringing off the tiles. Reading like she did, I feel like she’s here, but she’s so far away, gone somewhere I can’t follow yet.

I’m partway into the second chapter when the splashing behind me subsides.

“Did you wash all of your toes?”

A quick splash, just to be sure. “Yes, ma’am.”

I sit behind the tub and rub olive oil shampoo over her scalp. She presses her fingers to her eyes when I pour water from a pewter jug to rinse the suds away. I have to work it in twice before the lather springs up the way I like it.

“There’s your nightgown. Dry off and come out.”

She comes barefoot to the bedroom. The ruffled hem floats inches above her broomstick ankles. I set her down in a white-painted chair and comb the snarls gently away, smoothing light oil over the length. It’s late by the time I finish.

She doesn't say a word through the combing, stays silent while I braid her hair with quick fingers, weaving in protections—good luck, clear thinking—each section combed into the weaving with a different blessing. “There you are.”

I've plaited her hair in a four-strand crown tidy enough for church, and she turns her head, trying to see it all.

“Princess,” she whispers to herself.

“You can pick a dress in the morning. Into bed.”

She climbs into the narrow green bed and settles back into a nest of ruffled pillows. I draw the net curtain out of its tiebacks and drape it along the edges, veiling her from nightmares.

I'm at the foot of the bed when she speaks.

“Mother left me, didn't she?”

I wait for my heart to finish breaking before I breathe again. It is a terrible thing to be left behind by your mother. It leaves a hole soul-deep to know she walked away, and you can't help but wonder, again and again, if it's because of something you did or something you are that made her set you aside. I can't hug her. She won't give me her tears, poor alone little thing.

But I can give her the truth. I nod, once, slow.

Her eyes slip shut and her head tilts back. She's already learned the trick of stopping tears. She folds her hands in her lap and gazes at them as she resolutely does not cry. Then she sighs, tucks all that feeling carefully away, and nods.

“Good night, Miss l'Abielle.”

She pulls the chenille bedspread to her chin and I leave her alone in the streetlit dark.

★ ★ ★

Come morning, Jael sits at the gold-speckled table in the kitchen in one of my old puff-sleeved dresses, eating enough strawberry waffles for two grown-up women. I drink coffee and poke at a grapefruit glistening with honey. Jael cuts tidy little squares,

swimming in golden butter and shiny red syrup, but she sets down her fork and picks up the bottle to pour out a little more.

“Isn’t it already sweet enough?”

“Sugar keeps the magic strong,” she says.

“What magic is that?” I ask, and her shoulders jump up. She shakes her head, still chewing.

“Mother always said it.”

She only has a handful of mother memories in her pocket. I won’t contradict this one. It’s not like she’s wrong, even if she doesn’t know it.

I dig out a cluster of grapefruit, tart and juicy with a streak of sweetness on it. I should have a waffle, but I’m too unsettled to eat much more, and that won’t stop until I check my streets.

“We’re going for a walk,” I tell her.

Jael walks beside me, frocked in mauve next to my black. She sneaks glances at her puffed-out skirts, stitched with a scattering of forget-me-nots. I loved that dress when I was her age. It lifts Jael’s chin to wear it.

I pick up a bag of lemon drops at the corner store and Cynthia Lewis smiles at the tidy little girl by my side. “And who is with you, Miss l’Abielle? And may she have a strawberry sucker?”

Jael shifts a little, emerging from behind me. “May I?”

“Go ahead. This is Jael Brown, and she’s staying with me at the house. Jael, this is Mrs. Cynthia. This is her corner store.”

Jael steps around me cautiously, but she dips her chin and curtsies as if she’s been waiting for the chance to try it. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“What a doll,” Cynthia praises. “What a little lady.”

I swap a quarter for the lemon drops. “How is the neighborhood?”

Cynthia drops it in an earthen jar beside the cash register. “Fine, Miss l’Abielle. Everyone is fine.”

There’s a gap between her words and her smile. I wait, watching her. She flicks a glance toward the back of the store, then back to me.

“Got an envelope from the city.” She settles back on a tall stool next to the cigarettes. “They’re coming to do an assessment.”

My fingertips tingle. “For taxes?”

“Safety.” Cynthia’s looking at the door to the back again.

“When they coming?”

“Says next week.”

“Come see me for tea,” I say. “Bring that letter.”

Her face melts with relief. “Thank you.”

I head for the door, touching the mark scratched into the jamb on my way out. I step out onto the concrete and into a patch of sunlight, waiting for Jael to come along. “Where did you learn to curtsy like that?”

Jael scoots up to walk beside me. “Mother said to always use my manners.”

I feel a little shame for my assumptions about Livia, made of ragged clothes and unkempt hair. Jael is a polite little thing, tidy and quieter than another child might be. “It’s well taught. Good manners will take you far.”

She nods absently, like someone who was waiting for a turn to speak. “What was that on the door?”

“What was what?”

“The thing you touched. The air got prickly.”

I lift an eyebrow at her. “Did it?”

“There’s another one right there.” She points unerringly at the mark next to Johnson’s Music Shop, where a few browsers walk their fingers along the tops of used records.

“They’re five-corner marks,” I tell her. “They’re for luck.”

“And when you touched Mrs. Cynthia’s, you gave her luck. Right?” She looks up at me, hopeful as the brightest student in the classroom.

She knows that, just by seeing it once. What has fate brought to my doorstep? “That’s right. Hush now; I need to listen.”

I halt on the corner of two main streets and listen to Hurston Hill. Shouts of children playing in our park. Jael watches with longing as



other girls in bright skimpy shorts show off dance tricks on roller skates to big, brassy disco tunes.

I catch where she's looking. "You want to play with them?"

"No," she says. *I want to be them*, I hear beneath the quiet ache.

It's a peaceful, pretty day, and the sun smiles down on all of it. A bee tumbles on the autumn breeze from the common garden where the Golden Horticultural League puts their hands in the dirt and grows good things from it. The worker-sister circles us, hovering around my head.

Jael stays very still. I listen.

*This way*, her wings whisper. *Something wrong. Something wrong.*

The worker-sister floats off to the left. I follow. Jael has to trot to keep up with me, and I slow down, for her sake.

"What did the bee tell you?" Jael asks.

This strange little child sees everything. "I'm still listening. How did you know she spoke to me?"

"You had on your listening face. And you weren't scared."

"The bees here are friends."

Jael hops over a crack in the concrete. "How do you know the bee is a she?"

"In a hive, all the gatherers you see in the sky are sisters."

"Always?"

"That's right. The bees live up on the roof of the house. There's a garden up there."

"So the bees are yours?"

"Better to say that I am theirs."

"And the bee came to tell you something? What did she tell you? Is it because of the five-corner marks?"

Ten-year-olds are made of questions. I squeeze her hand to let her know I heard her, but the worker-sister has flown off, and I'm following a hollow, dreadful hunch to a narrow brick house I know as the Colemans'.

George carried Mahalia Coleman over the threshold of this house two years ago. Mahalia had been to see Mama every month since, trying to catch a baby. But Mahalia needed more than teas and tinctures, and while science made a baby last summer, they're not doing that for ordinary folks just yet.

Today, the house is empty. The Colemans are gone. I stare at that for a long breath. They left recently, from the way the walls still wait for their people to come back. But how did they go through packing up and moving without me hearing about it? Even in mourning, with no visitors and no gossip, the bees should have known.

I climb the stairs and cup my hands around my eyes, pressing against the window. Empty. Clean, too—the floors shine with freshly buffed wax. I imagine I can smell it.

“Ma’am?”

I look back. Jael stands very still, her palm up, as the worker-sister lands on the round ball of her thumb. She looks up, her face wide with awe.

“She likes me.”

I smile for her. “So I see. Be very quiet and listen. Maybe she will tell you something.”

Jael looks very serious as she gives the bee her listening face. I step off the welcome mat. Shining under the coir mat is a newly cut brass key, laying on a still-green bay leaf.

Disquiet curls in my middle. It's a common enough charm. Bay leaf crowns victors and poets, but bay leaf can protect by hiding whatever it touches from sight. Like a key under a mat.

Or a spell you don't want seen.

I bend knee and crouch. The leaf is fragrant—not freshly picked, but just cured enough to write on. I turn it over, but both sides are blank.

Just a small charm anyone could do, then.

Jael lifts her hand, and the bee floats away. “What does it mean?”  
Nothing good. “I don't know, mouse.”

“Are you scared?”

Yes. But you don't tell little girls that. You need to be brave for them. You need to walk tall in the presence of evil, so they know they can stand against it.

I smile down at Jael. “Let's go back home. I'll make us tea.”

★ ★ ★

Even the wait until the start of the business day is too long. I'm in the workroom before the sun, fussing with gallon glass jars to check the potency of their contents. I unscrew a clean jar with rainwater gathered from the roof and pour it over dried roots, grasses, blossoms, and leaves, careful of their harmonies. I trickle in honey powder and take it up the birdcage elevator to let it bathe in sunlight. How to cover my domain with its blessings is tomorrow's problem to solve.

When I ride the elevator back down, Jael is there. She perches on the fourth step leading up to the mezzanine. Mama would have asked me if a young lady should sit on the steps in a dress like that, but Mama's words could bruise a girl as delicate as this.

“I had cereal,” she says. “And only one spoon of sugar. I washed the dishes after.”

“Very good,” I say. “When Lorraine comes back to tend the house, would you like her to teach you to cook?”

She shrinks a little when I mention Lorraine. “Can't you teach me?”

“I can do a little. But no one makes a pie like Lorraine does. Now I want you to read one of the books I set out for you, whichever one you like. I have to run some errands.” I pin my veiled pillbox hat into place.

She regards this with a flicker of fear. “You're leaving me alone? Can't I come with you?”

“I'm going to the bank, mouse. To talk about numbers and finance.”

She sighs and shakes her head for the follies of adults. “Boring things.”

“Indeed.” I check my handbag for keys, blessed candies, and a charm bag meant to shield me from interference. “You may read anything you like from the list. If you get hungry, there are apples and peanuts in the kitchen. Have a glass of milk.”

I leave her sitting exactly there and stride across the sidewalk to Mama’s big black car.

\* \* \*

I never need an appointment at Cade Henry Credit Union, not even on payday. I’m greeted before my third step falls on the floor. Neighbors nod hello as I walk past the line and sit at Clarence Young’s desk. A cup of red-amber tea rests in a saucer next to me, the liquid rolling gently with the haste of its delivery.

“Miss l’Abielle,” Clarence says, his wide, friendly face creased with kindness for me. “It was a beautiful service. You sang so wonderfully. What may I help you with today?”

“I’m here to purchase a house,” I say. “I’d like you to start the process for a mortgage. This is the address for your records.”

I slide a card with the Coleman’s address on it past Clarence’s nameplate. When he picks it up, his expression goes slack.

“I’m sorry, Miss l’Abielle. But I’m afraid it’s too late.”

My chin comes up. “How do you know that?”

He glances left, looks the other way. No one is nearby. “I handled the Colemans’ account. They paid for their mortgage just the other day, penalty and all, with a cashier’s check.”

I sit up a little, cocking my head. “That fast.”

“He left the moving truck idling on the curb. They’re halfway to the coast by now. George said—”

He goes silent. I pick up my tea. It’s astringent with lemon. He watches the cup meet the saucer and lowers his voice.

“George said they paid him to offer the house.”

Aha. I set the tea on the desk. “Who’s they?”

Clarence really shouldn't be telling me this. His conscience writhes, tensing the cords in his neck, ripples in a jaw he has to press shut. He wants to tell me, knows he shouldn't. I think of brooks babbling and wait.

Another glance for listening ears. He leans closer. "The check came from a company called the Angelica Group."

I don't know that name, but it plucks at my nerves. "May I borrow your phone book?"

He even gives me a card and a pen to write the address.

\* \* \*

The Angelica Group is in a building that used to house people. It sits back from the sidewalk, double-wide and shorter than the shining glass-faced buildings pressing against it. A low stone wall bristling with spikes pushes people away from the front doors. Pedestrians veer into the middle of the sidewalk, giving it arm's length. The old windows are bricked into narrow clerestory slits, and the old glass-fronted door is long, long gone. But that's not all I see. Wards and repulsion spells five layers deep cover every single brick. Menace drips from every iron spike.

I am safe inside Mama's Cadillac, safe from that web of spellwork, and I am not stepping on that sidewalk for anything. I can't touch those wards. But I attempt to follow their dizzying geometry and catch a thread, here and there, of spells written to attract more: more wealth. More power. They stretch their tendrils across the air, spokes of a spider's web, and it's worse than I thought. I cast my senses down carefully, afraid to touch the earth in this place.

Am I in a domain? I can't be. The signs of walking into another magician's province are difficult to miss. The building before me is a magician's stronghold, but the land beneath it belongs to no one.

And that echoes along my bones. Pieces fall into place. Mama would have sensed this incursion long before I drove right up to it, but the domain didn't pass to me until her long sleep passed into death. This building is trouble. It's danger, and I have to face it alone.

The front door opens, and those spiteful, wasp-sting wards wrap around a short, slender man in a three-piece suit, cloaking him in their protection. He snaps his fingers as the door swings shut behind him. He's sharp with fashion, his Afro picked out high, but his mouth is a cruel, tight line. My heart beats like a rabbit spotted by a wolf.

He's wearing aviators, but he's looking right through the window between him and me. My mouth is dry. I see what I have done. I rushed into the middle of the board, coming here like this without scrying, without asking the cards. I didn't even run a property check. And now this landless magician has my measure.

Very well, magician. I see you. I know what you want. And you can't have it, so long as I draw breath.

I nod to him. He nods back.

It's war.

★ ★ ★

I drive through the city by the power of muscle memory, thoughts whirling too fast to make any meaning of it, but when I back Mama's Cadillac into the space before my house, the numb, automatic wall tumbles to the ground. My hands shake on the steering wheel. They shake in the lock. I can't take a breath that feeds my lungs until I'm past the vestibule and inside the cocoon of protections that quilt the house, and what comes out next is a sob.

Safe in the house, I shake. I weep in silence. I don't want to disturb Jael, or scare her. But this weakness, this fear, this crushing possibility that I might not withstand this fight saturates my body, filling it to overflowing. How can I do this without Mama? How can I do it alone? How can I protect everyone who lives here, and the place we have made for one another?

What if I can't?

Hot tears slide down my neck.

Mama still had things to teach me. I knew the boundaries of the domain, and I tended the five corner marks, and made sure everyone knew that they could come to me if trouble came. When

Mama grasped my hand the skin and nerves and veins of Hurston Hill became my own, but I know hardly anything about this new body. I don't know how to defend it from that wasp-hearted man, or how to fight back. I weep until the tears run dry.

In the empty calm that comes after the last of the tears, I remember Jael, reading upstairs. Fate brought her here. She has a gift, as I had when my own mother brought me here in exchange for a light that shone only on her. Jael needs me to be what Mama had been.

I dab at my face and breathe in the scent of vetiver and lemongrass floor wash and the magic layered on this house, magic that I watch over like Mama did, and Grand Olympe, and Madam Louise, and Miss Violet, who built it for the bees. The magic is strong; their magic is inside me.

Calm settles over me. It's simple. The possibility of failure is not for me to think about. My only choice is to keep Hurston Hill safe.

"So be it," I murmur to the house. "See to it."

The house around me relaxes, releasing a gently held breath. I turn for the stairs and startle, a scream caught in my throat.

Jael sits on the steps exactly where I left her.

*Exactly* as I left her—hands on her knees, the full drape of her seersucker skirt spreading over the stairs, her straight and careful back perfectly upright. Her eyes are open, but she doesn't see. Breaths swell her skinny chest, but she's so still, so strange, like she isn't really there at all.

Like she switched off the moment I wasn't in sight.

The meaning of it quivers along my nerves. Oh, girl. Poor girl. I move, so her eyes have something to see. I scuff my foot on the floorboards, so her ears have something to hear. I speak, when neither of those things work. "Jael? Little mouse?"

She blinks. She moves. She sees me. "Yes, ma'am."

"Are you all right?"

Two vertical furrows crease between her brows. "I think I fell asleep."

That wasn't sleep. Maybe that's how it feels, to go away from everything including yourself. "Let's get you washed up. No cooking lesson for lunch today. We're going to eat at Dolly's Counter."

★ ★ ★

Dolly's Counter doesn't hum like it should. Every eye darts to the front door as its greeting bells ring; shoulders fall or square up at the sight of me, according to the opinions of their bearer. But that isn't what's important.

Dolly's not holding court before the line of sidewalk philosophers who claim the seats at the counter, crowned with her high bouffant updo with a coffeepot in one hand. Dolly's always behind the counter, though. Always.

I touch the five-corner mark on the doorjamb. It trembles under my touch. Beside me, Jael grips my hand tight. The other diners simmer in their feelings—unspoken, but clearly felt.

"What is it?" I ask the diners, all of them looking at me. "What's wrong?"

The doors to the kitchen swing open, and a white woman armed with a clipboard steps out. Dolly's right on her heels with her nostrils flared, her aura like two raised fists. "You're fining me for a violation?"

The woman tips her clipboard straight up like a shield. "Four critical violations."

"This is wrong," Dolly says. "Can't you see that?"

"Re-serving unprotected and potentially hazardous food." The woman lifts one finger away from her clipboard to count it. "Re-serving unprotected food automatically follows from there. Eating or drinking from open containers in food storage areas. Personal cleanliness of a person present found to be inadequate." Her fingers drum back down on the clipboard, and I seal my tongue to the roof of my mouth lest a stray ill wish slips loose.

Dolly's broad mouth is a study in disapproval, her eyebrows low like storm clouds. "So it's acceptable if a man—a man, with feelings



and dignity just like yours—has to root around in the trash for a meal, but if I give him some gumbo and rice and a place to enjoy it next to the extra soda syrup—”

“It’s four critical health violations,” the woman says. “If he’d been scavenging in your garbage, that would have been a general violation.”

I rarely meet anyone who needs quite this much cursing. The silence in the room trembles. I clench my jaw. One word in a room brimming like this and I don’t know what would happen. I don’t know what fate would exact as its price.

The woman slides a form off her clipboard and holds it out. “You can pay your fine at City Hall within thirty days. Good day.”

She steps past me and onto the street, the bells’ swinging jingle the only sound for the space of a dozen held breaths. Dolly stares at me over the line in her bifocals, her expression just sick.

“Something is happening,” she says. “Something is wrong.”

That declaration looses a flood. Rents have been raised. Property tax assessors are crawling the streets. Water bills and light bills are suddenly much higher. And worst, most chilling of all—men from downtown in sleek sedans cruise the streets, looking at every house, every shop, even the trees. Men with grey suits and money-counting hands huddle in conversations on the corners, shutting up when anyone gets too near.

This war’s already happening. And everyone in Dolly’s is looking at me, expecting me to know exactly what to do.

What I must do. Whatever Hurston Hill needs. But where do I enter this labyrinth? What fire do I put out first?

Jael tugs on my hand. She’s big-eyed and somber as she finds her voice. “Ma’am.”

“What is it, mouse?”

“Can I help? I can write a list.”

It’s like a sunbeam just fell on my face. “Dolly, do you have a pencil? Jael is going to help me. Everyone, sit tight. I need you all to tell me what’s happening, one at a time.”

★ ★ ★

There is no time to get a good rest, no time to mourn. I wake before dawn to greet the bees as they rise from their hives. The worker-sisters gather around me and their hum is a chorus, a hum that lulls me into the state I need to be one with the domain that the bees claim and I protect. And when they rise to the clouds to gather and watch, the queen emerges to show me what the bees know.

“St. Valentine, St. Abigail, St. Brigid,” I say. “I need your help. We’re all in danger.”

*Show me.*

She rides on my shoulder as I return downstairs to the big room that was Mama’s office. We stand under the watchful eye of the guardian masks and unroll a fragile, crackling bundle of paper maps of Hurston Hill.

I begin by gazing at every layer at once. It’s all confusion at this level—too much information to make true meaning. But I let the confusion overwhelm me as I look without trying to see the layers that show every streetlamp, every traffic light, every tree that lines the streets—at the placement of every fire hydrant and the pipes that bring good water to drink and wash in, the pipes that take wastewater away. Gradually, as long as my attention stays slack, I see.

Another assault on the barrier wards, of course. But there’s more trouble, scattered all over my streets like bad seeds. Double crosses and jinxes and even spells to attract attention marking homes and businesses but especially our park—why the park?

*Danger, the queen’s wings sing. It has gone so far.*

There is so much to do—a thousand tiny battles, and I have to fight them all. But the park’s in danger. The soul of the neighborhood’s magic grows in the common garden. Its heart beats to the concerts and plays performed under its curving shell roof. And the weakness I see isn’t the nibbling at my borders. It’s a scythe, raised at the highest point of the backswing and ready to fall on the park.

I let the layers of the map curl up one by one, taking away the fullness of detail that defies legibility. Each layer whispers and crackles, and I look, look without trying to see anything in particular.

My gaze falls on the zone map. It's every building and structure, every quilt-square of land assigned a color according to its use. Yellow for residential, red for business, and the park doesn't know what color it wants to be. It should be green, colored in exactly the color of new spring leaves, but it tinges orange, and the park on the map struggles to stay the same, to stay true.

I press my hands against the slow, sick roll in my stomach, and the layers of delicate, glassy paper curl up on themselves.

I understand what that means. Mama protected Hurston Hill with charms and wards, but Mama said that it was possible to fight magic with any power you had. And in every day I fought to keep Mama with me, even though she would never speak or rise from her bed was a day I hadn't seen this.

I pick up Mama's address book. I cut my finger on a corner and I hiss, jerking it away. Blood wells up from the tiny cut. I pop it in my mouth.

It's open on exactly the page I need. Written in Mama's clear Palmer hand is a number that isn't in the ordinary phone book. There should be someone at the desk right now. I push my cut finger into the dial holes and listen to the rattle of each number sending their signal out on the wires.

The phone rings five times before someone answers with a gruff, "Hunter Ballantine here."

I arm myself with a smile. "Councillor Ballantine. This is Miss Theresa Anne l'Abielle of 777-J 94th Street of Council 21," I say.

"Miss l'Abielle," Councillor Ballantine says, the last syllable climbing a surprised half-step. He coughs. "Excuse me. Miss l'Abielle, I am sorry for your loss. I regret I couldn't attend the service."

"The wreath your office sent along was lovely," I say. "Most appreciated and thoughtful. But I have a question for you,

Councillor.”

Half a breath too late, he says, “Certainly. What may I do for you?”

“I am calling to ask about any land use petitions connected to Hurston Hill Community Park.”

“How—” The voice on the other end is astonished, but one composed pause later, Councillor Ballantine continues. “There have been no land use petitions filed.”

“Because they only just landed on your desk?” I ask, and the frustrated tenor of his silence tells me everything before he opens the can holding his response.

“I really can’t go into it right now, Miss l’Abielle. If you’d like to call my secretary and make an appointment—”

“Oh, I would prefer to have this conversation now,” I say, light, polite, and seething with genteel fury. “I know you’re a busy man, so I’ll get right to the point. I don’t think a proposal to destroy a park for the sake of mixed-use zoning with active frontage is the best way to keep the faith of your voters, Councillor Ballantine.”

Papers rustle. Councillor Ballantine’s breaths whistle down the phone lines. “Miss l’Abielle, this is a complex issue. If you’d make an appointment, I can have a better picture of the situation you’re describing—”

If that park is destroyed, the whole neighborhood will follow. “The issue is simple. Hurston Hill Community Park will remain as it is. This is an election-losing matter, Councillor, and if you threaten Hurston Hill’s children and seniors with the loss of a vital community center, someone might step up to challenge you.”

I didn’t plan on saying that. But anything it takes. Anything Hurston Hill needs. If Ballantine can’t take care of his council, I will take it away from him.

He says nothing, and I hear the trickle of fear in it. I need his fear. I need it to guide him away from his greed. I need him to understand that he can’t trifle with me any more than he could with Mama. “I

think you should reconsider this plan from the Angelica Group, Councilman. I really do.”

“How do you know—”

“That’s my secret,” I say. “I look forward to continuing my support of your office. Good morning.”

The receiver rattles in its cradle. I’m going to be sick. There is too much to do. Too much that needs saving. The scythe is falling.

“Miss l’Abielle?”

Jael hovers at the entrance to my office. She’s holding a sheet of paper. She’s drawn a house on it—this house, tall and narrow and grand with brick, the ivy climbing up the front. But she’s done something else with her sixty-four colors, as she has drawn the glow of spells and blessings too, and the rooftop garden shines like Heaven, and all the bees its angels.

She offers it to me. “I drew it for you.”

The paper touches my fingers. It shimmers. It feels like the cozy confines of a burrow made from a tent built of sheets and cushions from the couch. She put magic on that paper without knowing how.

“Please let me help,” Jael says, again the bright student, again desperate to please. “How can I help?”

I step forward, the queen on my shoulder. “Come with me,” I say, “and show me how you made this picture.”

★ ★ ★

Jael has the witching in her blood. She doesn’t know the correspondences or the lore or the ways of shaping the witching to her will, but she’s quick. She’s instinctive. And she minds me better than I did Mama at her age.

Together we work for the sum of the morning. Everything I show her is a softly glowing treasure. It lights up her face. She touches all the herb jars, and repeats what I tell her about their contents, pressing them in the pages of her memory. She asks me about everything—so many questions, as if my answers are like the sugar she can’t resist eating.

“If we’re going to bless all the spellposts and charge every five-corner mark, what else can we do?”

She stirs the jar of blessed water I set out on the roof to charge under the sun and the moon, sinking a silver dipper into it and pouring the liquid into the mouth of a funnel. The blessed water trickles into a glass bottle. She doesn’t spill a drop.

“Whatever we can think of. Magic is imagination shaped into the form that will make the intention manifest.”

She pours blessed water back into the jar, screws a spray-nozzle cap onto the bottle, and sets it next to the others. “Can we make everyone in the neighborhood lucky?”

“Luck is best in small doses, mouse. A rescue, not a remedy. But you can choose three people to give a charm today.”

That satisfies her. “And I can spray the spellposts.”

“You may.”

“May,” she corrects herself, and then a new idea springs to her face. She’s bright with elation, with discovery. “Can we set a spell on the bees, and then when they fly around, they can spread it?”

I blink. “If the bees consent, yes. That’s an excellent idea, little mouse.”

She looks like she might burst. How must it feel to find your gift, the thing you love that loves you back, and so you give your life to it without thinking? Jael’s becoming a witch right before my eyes.

She reaches for another bottle and sets the funnel in it. “Can we set eyes on outsiders, so they always feel like someone’s watching them and knows exactly what they do?”

I’m tempted by that last one.

Being a witch isn’t all sunlight and good wishes. We all have shadows cast by that light. We can call on that darkness like any other tool. But it’s possible to go too far, and something about the ethics of it is just fuzzy enough that I’m not sure I should.

But if I did that ...

I realize that my gaze is trained on the potted bay tree right by the window. I look away.

“It’s possible,” I say. “But that could really frighten someone who doesn’t deserve it, along with those who might.”

“Oh, not for long.” She stirs the blessed water again, suspending the herbs in a spiral. “We couldn’t leave it up forever. We can’t leave out the people who need this place. But ... what if they need it right now? Like I needed it?”

She understands. She already knows the complexity of the power. She already respects it. I want to cry. Not like I want to cry for Mama being gone. I want to cry for Jael being found.

Jael is the one to come behind me when I go to follow Mama. Jael’s mother had to make that wish, pay that price, and give me Hurston Hill’s future ... and just in time, in the way of the life of one who is bound to fate.

★ ★ ★

I stop just outside the front door and give Jael a tin of rose sugar pastilles. She takes it with reverence, looking down at the rounded white candies like little seed pearls.

“Sugar keeps the magic strong,” I say, and something in her dark eyes is sad for half a second.

“Thank you, ma’am.” She pops one in her mouth and takes my hand as we walk the bounds of Hurston Hill. She sprays every lamppost chained into the flow of magic. She touches each one, sending a shimmer along its iron trunk. I carry a basket of the smaller bottles, and we call on everyone we meet, tending their shops or their front steps. Many accept a spray bottle and the instructions to spray it on their windows, their doorways, their cash registers.

Each bottle is a tiny magic, but pennies add up to dollars. Dolly won’t let us pay for smoked chicken sandwiches rich with gravy, with a soda for Jael and fresh brewed tea for me. The Golden Horticultural League starts spraying every leaf in sight when I hand out bottles to them to take home, plus extra for neighbors who couldn’t make it to the garden today.

The bees tumble and float, shedding protection magic from their wings. I ache from all the walking and regret my refusal to step out in less than my best, for my feet are paying the price of the blessings we spread.

But is it enough, these small magics? Can they withstand whatever that landless mage at the Angelica Group plans? I'm only defending against what I can see. He must be planning something more. It's not enough to react. I must anticipate.

I'm weary when we make it back to the house. I can't stop the relieved groan when I take my shoes off and stand on the heart pine floor, my heels on the ground instead of tented on pillars. I roll my neck, shrug my shoulders, and listen to everything pop and creak.

"I can make us something, ma'am," Jael says. "I can make it and you can watch and tell me what's next."

What a good idea. If only we could do that. "I'm afraid it's pork shoulder pot roast."

"I can do it," Jael insists. "I'm not tired at all."

This helpful, blessed girl. "Very well. But you must be very careful when you cut up the potatoes."

She runs to the kitchen. By the time I get there she's already in an apron, pulling a heavy iron pot out of the drawer under the oven. I sit where I have the best view of the process.

"Recipe's in the yellow box," I tell her, and she flips through the cards until she finds the right one. She clips it to the cupboard door just above her working space, kicks a step stool into position, and starts.

I hardly have to say anything. I tense a little when she picks up the knife, but she speaks up as she slices through a potato. "It's like witching."

"It is," I say. "Cooking and witching share skills. And you can witch your meals."

"You can?"

"Of course you can. The herbs in the kitchen are in the workroom too, aren't they?"



“That’s right. I didn’t think of it like that. It’s all witching, isn’t it? If you can do it, you can witch it. Can’t you?”

“You can,” I say. “It’s important to know that. Your actions can make magic, so you must think about what you’re doing, more than other people have to.”

She looks at me, careful, measuring her thoughts before she speaks them. “Can you make sure that what you do isn’t magic?”

“I’m afraid we’re stuck with it—”

Jael gasps. She drops the knife and snatches up her hand, whimpering. I’m out of my seat in a heartbeat, trying to take her hand, but she grips tighter, shaking her head.

I try to peel her fingers back. “Let me see.”

“No.”

She’s trembling. Her breaths are shallow and scared. She looks at me, desperate and pleading. I try to take her hand again, but she yanks it out of my grip and stumbles off the stool.

“Jael, let me see.”

“No. Please don’t look.” Her voice is discordant. She backs away, holding her cut hand for dear life, and she’s ... she’s scared. Terrified. What on earth?

“Mouse,” I say, gentle, firm. “I have to see it. I can’t make it better if I can’t see. It will hurt, I won’t lie. But I can make it better.”

“Please,” she says, but there’s no voice in it. Fear’s taken her vocal cords and pulled them tight as bowstrings. Why? Why?

“Jael. Why can’t I see?”

“Then you’ll know,” she says, and tears pour out of her eyes like a river. “You’ll know and it—it’ll be—over.”

She’s weeping now, heartbroken, despairing tears. “It’ll be over,” she says, and it breaks her all over again.

I rush to her. I pick her up, right off her feet. I crush her to me as if I can hug her hard enough, hold her tight enough to make it all go away. “You’re safe,” I say.

“No,” she says, “I never was. You never were—I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m—”

I hold her again. I rock her. She has to cry this one out before I'll get any sense out of her. But something presses on my skin, like low black clouds pregnant with a storm, a solid wall rushing in so fast everything feels like lightning will strike any moment.

Danger. Danger. Something is coming. Someone—

But I know, don't I? I already know. He is coming—the wasp-magician in his fine clothes and his vicious wards. Now, before I've mobilized the neighborhood to do battle with City Hall. Our dollar's worth of magic didn't hold him back. He is coming, right now, and every board in the house is tight with expectation.

In my arms, Jael goes quiet. She's limp, tired. Her sigh is resigned, like someone who just turned around to face the monster behind her, knowing she can run no more.

"I'm sorry."

She holds out her hand for me to see.

She doesn't bleed. No red life stains her skin, sliced neat and deep. No red flesh lies under that cut in her ... hide. Not skin.

Leather.

And underneath it, cotton bolls stuff her form, dusty with shiny white grains, speckled dark fragrant ones. Allspice. Mace. Nutmeg. Vanilla. Sugar and spice and everything nice, stuff little girls are made from.

I touch the cut, the cotton, the sugar. I press, and something hard stretches beneath. I pry the cotton apart and find bone engraved with marks and signs, the magic to make her alive. A faded green leaf lies curled against the bone—a bay leaf, shielding the magic that made Jael from sight.

She looks at me. Sad, and calm, and full of endings. "It's over now. I'm sorry."

I reach up and stroke her tear-wet face. It feels like skin, real breathing skin, and her face blurs as the tears rise in my eyes. Poor little mouse.

Poor little mousetrap.

She leaps away when the wards flinch and the front door opens, and it isn't the magician I expected.

It's worse.

★ ★ ★

Livia strides inside on stiletto-heeled clicks, buttery suede boots clinging to her legs. She wears black, not for mourning, but for power—the liquid ripple of matte black silk drapes over her slender, elegant body, the elaborate tie at her waist a knot spell. Full draping sleeves in black silk chiffon flutter as she moves, rippling like the surface of a moonlit lake. A sparkling black silk pouch dangles from her wrist. Her hair flows around her like shining ink, big roller-set curls bouncing like springs to her waist.

No sign of the ragged, skinny wretch from my doorstep. Livia is a witch in full bloom, full of shadows and promises. She's the dark moon. An enchantress. An illusionist who pays you in gold that turns to leaves in the morning. The question of ethics never troubles her smooth, rounded brow. Nothing remains of that pathetic creature whose want was enough to make an accident of fate.

She pauses on the foyer's worn Turkish rug and snaps her fingers when our eyes meet.

Not an accident. An act. A hustle.

I rise and put myself between Jael and this witch, staring her down the way I would if I didn't want to hide.

"It was you," I say. "It was you at the Angelica Group too. Were you the health inspector too?"

"Clever, clever witch. I wasn't the health inspector, but Antoine's a convenient disguise. Some men won't listen to anyone but other men," she says. "And people don't look deeper than their first assumptions. That's the first rule of invisibility."

She can be anyone she pleases—a wretched waif, a stylish businessman, or the queen of shadows and lies. I gather up the power layered on the walls to cast a binding—or I try. My magic is the act of making and mixing. I put my will into herbs and candles,

imbuing it with the blessings of the sun. There is no spellcord in my pocket, and I need a medium between witching and my will.

Livia does not. She smiles at me from under the perfectly heat-curved wings of her hair. She watches me draw power and falter, tilting her head with curiosity. One eyebrow quirks up.

“No? All right, then.”

She points, her index finger capped with fresh-blood crimson nails, and shows me how it’s done. Lines of power wrap around me. They still my fingers. They squeeze my ribs. I can breathe, so long as I set my mind to it, but not much more than that, and it isn’t enough air to scream with, either.

She regards her binding a moment longer, her hands on her hips. Then Livia—witch, magician, enchantress—lifts her hand and beckons.

“Jael. Come here.”

Jael runs a few steps on tiptoe, halting before her maker.

Livia looks down at her. No smile, now. “What did I tell you to do while you were here?”

“Always use your manners,” Jael says, in the small mouse voice of a little girl in trouble. “Do as she says until you come back. Sugar keeps the magic strong.”

The pointed toe of Livia’s boot taps three times. “And what did I tell you not to do?”

Her voice is almost a whisper. “Give away the secret.”

“Are you sorry?”

“Yes.”

Livia beckons again. “Come closer.”

Jael trembles as she comes close enough to touch. Livia puts her hand on Jael’s head.

“You did what you were made to do,” Livia says, stroking Jael’s braided hair. “And you did it well. This one slip doesn’t need to count against you. My promise still holds.”

Jael looks up, then, hope smoothing her profile. “You’ll do it? You’ll make me real?”

Livia laughs. “Don’t I need a little girl of my own, especially a helpful little girl like you? Now think of what I told you. The spell can be completed, exactly as I said. Are you ready?”

“Yes,” Jael says. “I’m ready.”

“Good,” Livia purrs, and pets Jael’s head like a favored cat. “This part is your job, now.”

She opens the pouch strings and reaches inside. She draws out a knife with a long silvery blade and a narrow, pointed tip.

“The last thing you need to finish the spell,” she says. “Her heart.”

Jael can become a girl of flesh, her bones her own—with my heart beating in her chest. She will be what she wishes for most. The spell is already on her.

All she needs to do is pay the price.

Jael lifts her hand—uncut, still whole, still spelled—and takes the blade from her maker. Livia smiles down upon her, strokes her hair again.

“I’m going to the roof. Bring it to me when you are done.”

Livia walks away on sharp-heeled clicks, sleeves fluttering, a ribbon of almond, bay leaf, pepper, and myrrh left hanging in the air.

Jael stands still with the knife in her hand, listening to the elevator grumble and rise to the roof. To the garden. To the spellposts that feed all the protections and blessings that cover Hurston Hill. To the hives where the bees sleep and don’t know what’s coming.

The elevator thumps. The lifting gears stop. And Jael turns tear-filled eyes toward me.

Oh, little mousetrap. What a perfect Trojan horse she is—a little girl, the price of a mother’s ambition in full, a lonely arrow in my heart. Built to be just polite enough to be charming, just vulnerable enough to need protection, and the witching the final sugary lure.

And now she holds the knife that will pay for her deepest longing, the thing she wants most of all—the wanting engraved on her borrowed bones, the wanting infused in cotton and spice, the wanting in every stitch and spell that made her. She flexes her grip on the handle, wipes her eyes, and looks at me.

“You took me in.”

How could I not?

“You gave me this dress. You taught me witching. You have power. Can you make me real? Can you make me a little girl? Can I grow up?”

Oh, Jael. My throat hurts for her. I owe her the truth. I shake my head, once, slow.

“Then I have to,” she whispers. “I have to—it’s not fair. It’s not fair.”

That’s not true. Magic is implacably fair. If Jael wants a human life, she needs a human heart beating in her chest. Magic doesn’t care about feelings. Magic doesn’t care what it costs to use—only that the price is paid.

“I need to be real,” she whispers to me. “I walk and speak and think and witch, but I am not a girl, and...”

She wants me to understand. And I do. But it’s not just my life for hers. It’s this house. And Hurston Hill. And the bees. And what will happen to this place if Livia takes it in her hand and rules it.

All of it, lost for a beating heart.

“You didn’t push me away. You knew I wasn’t real. But you didn’t stop trying to help me. Why? Didn’t you understand?”

I suck down as much air as I can and move my lips, my tongue. I can whisper. “You were scared.”

“I betrayed you.”

“You did—” I have to catch my breath. “What you were made to do.”

She crumples, her mouth open in agony. “I ruined everything. You need to hate me. I hate me.”

The binding doesn’t stop tears, it seems. “Little mouse.”

“Don’t call me that!” she shrieks. “I don’t deserve it! I don’t...”

She lifts her unspelled hand. She covers her eyes. She weeps, great sobs shaking her body. “I need to be real. I need to be real. I need—”

She breaks all over again, landing on her knees. The knife clatters to the floor. She hugs herself around her middle, arms across the wide satin ribbon on her porcelain-doll dress, lifts her face to the sky, and a little girl shouldn't weep like that. A little girl shouldn't know this pain. A little girl should never know what it means to have to choose a price like this.

She kneels on the worn wool rug and weeps, alone.

"Little mouse," I whisper, when the storm passes through her and she's left hitching for breath in the hollowness crying leaves behind. "This is what magic is. It can't help it, any more than you can."

Her eyes are red. She looks at the knife on the floor, saying nothing. And then resolve settles on her, armoring her will and her conscience. She looks down at the floor, at the rug, at the knife.

She picks it up. She gets to her feet. And she walks toward me, blade held low and slightly away.

There's nothing to say now.

She raises the blade, so silver, so sharp, and slices the air just above my body. She cuts Livia's binding away, silent and resolute. She frees me and steps back, solemn and red-eyed.

"You have to stop her," Jael says. "Please."

She holds out the knife. I take it from her hand and pause to look at her. I bend down and kiss her forehead and pet her hair.

"Stay here," I say. "Stay safe."

I turn and hit the staircase at a two-at-a-time run.

★ ★ ★

Five flights, at my age. My side stitches pain with an angry needle. I'm breathing in great desperate whoops. My heart pounds, still running even though I have halted, peering at the rooftop where Livia stands with her hands upraised, sorting through the threads of magic spun and woven over Hurston Hill. She pinches at a thread meant to shelter those who fled here for refuge, hiding them from angry spouses and cruel parents, and pulls it out of the weave. She finds the lines designed to draw people who need a little help to the web

of secondhand shops, the food kitchen, and the medical clinic run by the Josephites, and yanks them free with a vicious flair.

I flinch, but I put my hand on the doorknob and hush it with a word. I pluck a basil leaf from a nearby plant, shuffle sideways to pick up a roll of garden twine. The blade whispers through the jute and vibrates in my grip, prickling for more.

No. This knife hungers to cut. It's ... eager. I set it down on the bench. I don't want to know what it does if it gets a taste of blood. Not even the blood of the woman before me, pulling down the magic built to help everyone, ready to destroy generations of service to Hurston Hill and weave in spells that help her alone.

She could choose to take over the easy way. She could pull the whole thing down and rebuild it to suit her, the way some people will take a grand old house built by artisans and craftsmen and discard everything that makes it beautiful to put up vinyl siding they don't have to paint. Instead, she means to take the old magic and subvert it to her will.

That means there's something to save. Or there will be if I pluck up my courage and do something. I fear what I have to do here, but that doesn't change the fact that I have to do it.

I crush the basil in my hand and rub it over the twine. The fragrance rises, bathing me in its peppery sweetness. Courage. Victory against tremendous odds. David felled a giant with a stone, once. I have a tool. I must use it.

I whisper, though this spell will be a trumpeting herald. "I bind your hands and their wicked mischief."

I pull the first knot in the twine tight, and she freezes.

She turns around, wolf eyes trained on the rabbit-fast heart beneath my blouse, her mouth pursed up in a pout. "Is it ever the fate of the creator to be disappointed by what she has made? I thought I built Jael better than that. Now here you are, come to fight me with a piece of string."

I string another knot in the cord. "You will trouble us no more. I bind your tongue and its evil words." I plant my feet on the boardwalk



and reach for the spellposts, ready to pull the cord tight.

I can't touch them. She's tied them to her already, and all the power of the house—all the power of Hurston Hill—is hers to command. All the power I have is what lives inside my body.

I remember the knife left on the table with regret.

She takes a step toward me, the slow and certain sauntering of a predator who likes it when their prey is scared. "What pluck. What courage. You brave, brave fool."

She flexes her power like a careless shrug and breaks the small binding I put on her. She lifts her hand, fingers spread, and lines of power spring from her blood-tipped fingernails to wrap around my wrists and ankles. I pull away.

I can't.

She smirks and raises her hand, her fingers sliding in subtle movements. I stand on my tiptoes. My arms spread out, elegant, majestic, wrists and fingers in second position. My right shoulder in this position makes me want to whimper. She watches as she pulls gently on the power and makes me dance with my head high.

"There we go," Livia coos. My stomach pitches and rolls at the sugar in her voice. "I think we understand each other a little better now, don't you agree?"

I can't move in a way she doesn't wish me to. The twine lies discarded on the boards. I dance, and it pleases her to send me spinning in a series of pirouettes that make me so dizzy I can't quite focus on what's in front of me when she lets me stop.

There is no way to escape.

"You're a problem. I meant for you to have a use. But here you are, with your heart intact, my creation a disappointment ... but this might be better. People will wonder if you suddenly disappear, won't they? We should solve that."

She turns me to the front of the house. I take a step. Another. One more, past the hives. One more, toward the roof's cornice, and I understand what she means to do.

And when the horror of it reverberates through me, when I desperately fight her control, she chuckles.

“Grief’s terrible. Isn’t it? It hurts too much to bear, sometimes. People die of grief, you know. It breaks their hearts, and they just die. But some of them...”

My feet keep walking. Oh no. No, no. No. Oh please don’t, stop. Stop—

“Stop.”

The word escapes me and I can hardly believe it.

“Stop!”

Jael’s voice. Pounding footsteps on the boardwalk. An outraged cry of pain, and the marionette strings binding me fall slack.

There’s blood on that knife now. Livia’s half bent over, clutching at a wound in her side. And Jael’s swinging wildly, trying to give that blade another taste.

“Stop! Stop it! Stop!” Jael cries, but Livia snarls a command and Jael freezes in place. Still Livia’s creation. Still bound to her maker. And now Livia picks up the knife, drunk on blood, and she pulls her gore-stained hand away from her side to grab a handful of Jael’s hair, pulling her chin up, exposing her neck.

She reverses her grip on the blade, ready to slice, and my heart drops to the floor.

I lunge, snatching Livia’s wrist. I dig my fingers in and twist with all my strength, and a pop running down her arm vibrates under my fingers.

Livia screams. Jael falls down, scrabbling backward. The knife clatters to the boards and there’s no time to do anything but pay the price. Anything, for Jael. Anything, for Hurston Hill. Anything, for the bees.

I pick up the knife and drive it deep. The blade jumps in my hand, seeking the heart. It drinks. Livia falls.

But Jael lies on the sun-bleached boards, her limbs splayed out, her staring, empty eyes open to the twilit sky.

This is what magic is.

I crawl to Jael, still, quiet Jael. Still so lifelike, though the magic is fading. Her eyes are turning to glass. Her skin is smoothing out like hide. Her hair is untidy, her hairband askew, and her limbs are going stiff.

My tears fall on Jael's face. On Jael's dress. It's perfectly logical, perfectly fair—Jael's creator is dead. The magic that gave Jael life is gone. She's a doll, now. Just a doll.

I hold her in my arms. I hug her to my chest. I stroke her bloodied, cashmere-soft hair and I hold her close as the magic fades from her.

"You were wrong, you know." It hurts my throat to whisper it in her painstakingly carved ear. "You were real. You were a little girl. You were good, and kind, and you were real, no matter what you were made of."

I straighten the collar of her dress. I smooth my tears away from her cheeks. I draw her stiff doll-part body into my lap and rock her, lullaby slow.

This is what magic is. It doesn't care how it's used. It only cares that the price is paid.

The house and Hurston Hill are safe, and so are the bees, and Jael paid for it in full.

"It's not fair," I say, even though I know it is. "It's not fair."

A buzzing answers me. The queen emerges from her hive. She lands on Jael's brow.

*She gave so much to us. Everything she had, for us—and asked for nothing.*

Her wings go still. She spreads them wide.

And then they come. Every worker-sister of the hive, every drone, too—they rise in a great murmuring cloud from the hive and land on Jael's shoulder, her nose, her injured hand. They land on me too, and soon we are covered in worker-sisters, buzzing, working.

And then I hear it all around me. I feel it. Magic, filling me like a waterskin, sweet and clear and golden. Magic past the boundaries of

my body—the magic of the house, of Hurston Hill, the magic of the bees—all of it weaving in a single task around Jael.

Cocooned in the hive, I open my heart and let them weave what they will of it. They work, and work, and when they are done, all the magic is sunk into Jael's skin.

The queen flexes her wings. *It is done.*

The magic of the house is tied to her. Hurston Hill's power sings in her veins. My witching is a glass of water; Jael's bound to the river. The magic of this place is no longer mine. It is hers now, and I must teach her the way of it.

I feel an emptiness like the strange absence of a pulled tooth. "But I promised to serve you."

*Another road has opened,* the queen says. *That way is yours now.*

She weaves a honey-drop of magic and moves on hair-thin feet to put it in Jael's mouth. It spreads over her lips, and they go pink.

Jael breathes.

*Honey makes the magic strong,* the queen says, and then the bees take wing and fly back to the hive. I'm surrounded by the corpses of a hundred drones and Jael looking up at me, her eyes blinking, her limbs pliant and alive.

"I think I fell asleep." She rubs at her eyes with the backs of her knuckles, and the cut on her palm is a half-healed scab. "Ma'am, are you crying?"

I weep into her hair and rock her again.

★ ★ ★

I might have the radio on a little too loud as I drive the long streets after a day's work at City Hall up to Hurston Hill. Councillor van Darlington's expression replays in my mind—the moment where he straightens up as the clerk from Heritage Planning lists the addresses of ten properties newly added to the register right in the neighborhood he wanted to bulldoze for the sake of a freeway. When he looks down at the paper in front of him, now a pile of useless

tissue, and looks at me, mouth open to accuse—and then closes it as he realizes that he can't accuse me of ruining a proposal he never had the chance to share.

Perfect. Sublime. And the families of Williamsville, anchored by those ten properties, can continue their fight to reshape their community on their terms. Williamsville isn't in my council, but it doesn't matter.

I nod to the bounce of the bass line on the radio. I turn my head to take in the whole intersection and smile at a driver who recognizes me. She grins back and waves just before she pulls ahead to turn left.

I drive the long way home, just to see how the city is doing, and when I cross the avenue and enter the domain of Hurston Hill, I don't feel the soft caress of returning to my power. I don't have the sense of the bees, ticking softly in the back of my head. I can still sense the power flowing all around me, but I can't hold it in my hand and shape it to my will, not anymore.

The whole city is mine to tend, now.

I drive past the house where Lorraine sweeps the steps. She waves at me as I keep on, headed up the road to the park. There's a spot right by the slick-polished concrete pad, and the Cadillac slides neatly into the space waiting for it.

I have that much power left, at least.

Music plays through speakers mounted on poles surrounding a slick concrete pad where boys and girls roller-skate. Jael is right in the thick of them, laughing. She skates in a cohort of girls all performing the same complex crossovers and slides at once, skating so close together that a single mistake will bring them all down. They clap their hands and scatter, spinning on tiptoe, and come back, shoulders and hips sliding.

They erupt into cheers at getting the routine right. They cluster together in a hug, and then Jael catches sight of me and rolls to my side, taking delicate steps over the grass to meet me.

"We did it," she says. "Did you see?"

“I did. Where are your shoes?”

“I skated over after Miss Yvonne was done teaching me fractions.”

“You’ll break your head one of these days.” I shake my head. “Did you have your candy?”

“I still have one left,” she says, and digs into the pocket of her satin bomber jacket—bright golden yellow, just like her friends—to pull out a honey chew. She pops it in her mouth and rolls to the passenger door.

“You’re getting in the car in those skates?”

“I’ll be careful,” she promises.

The wards on the car brighten as she touches it. A worker-sister bobs on a gentle breeze, and Jael lifts her hand to give her a place to land. She looks at the bee intently, then at me once the bee takes flight.

“There’s a newcomer,” she says. “He’s looking at a suite in the Henri Louis Arms. The bees like him.”

“That’s good. Shall we stop at St. Joseph the Worker and let them know?”

“Tomorrow,” she says. “He hasn’t quite figured out he belongs here yet.”

“As you say.”

Jael manages to get in the front seat in those skates. I drive back to the house. We’re stopped at the first corner when she says, “Did your plan work?”

“Beautifully. Williamsville has prevailed.”

Jael smiles. “I bet Councillor van Darlington was surprised.”

“He looked like he’d just swallowed a fish,” I say. “Next is the transit initiative. That’s going to be harder to steer.”

“Should we read the cards?” Jael asks. “I need practice.”

“That’s a fine idea.”

Jael looks out the window and waves at Cynthia, out sweeping her corner sidewalk with a hand-bound broom. “Everything is just right. You’re going to be mayor one day.”

The air shivers. Something hears her say the words, and it seems fate hasn't finished with me yet. I nod and turn onto our street.

"As you say."

Lorraine's inside now. The air smells like her own magic, spices and flour and buttermilk on chicken. Hunger wakes up and I could eat for an hour—and Jael makes a happy noise as she bumps the car door with her hip and skates to the steps.

"You take off those skates before you go in the house," I say.

"Yes, ma'am. Can we go to the movies? I want to see the new Billy Dee Williams movie. Can we go?"

"Of course we can," I say. "And we'll watch Mark Hamill and Carrie Fisher too, while we're there."

The witch of Hurston Hill laughs and runs up the stairs to the house in her sock feet. A worker-sister floats past the ivy growing up the bricks, and I smile at her, something in my eye.

"Thank you," I say.

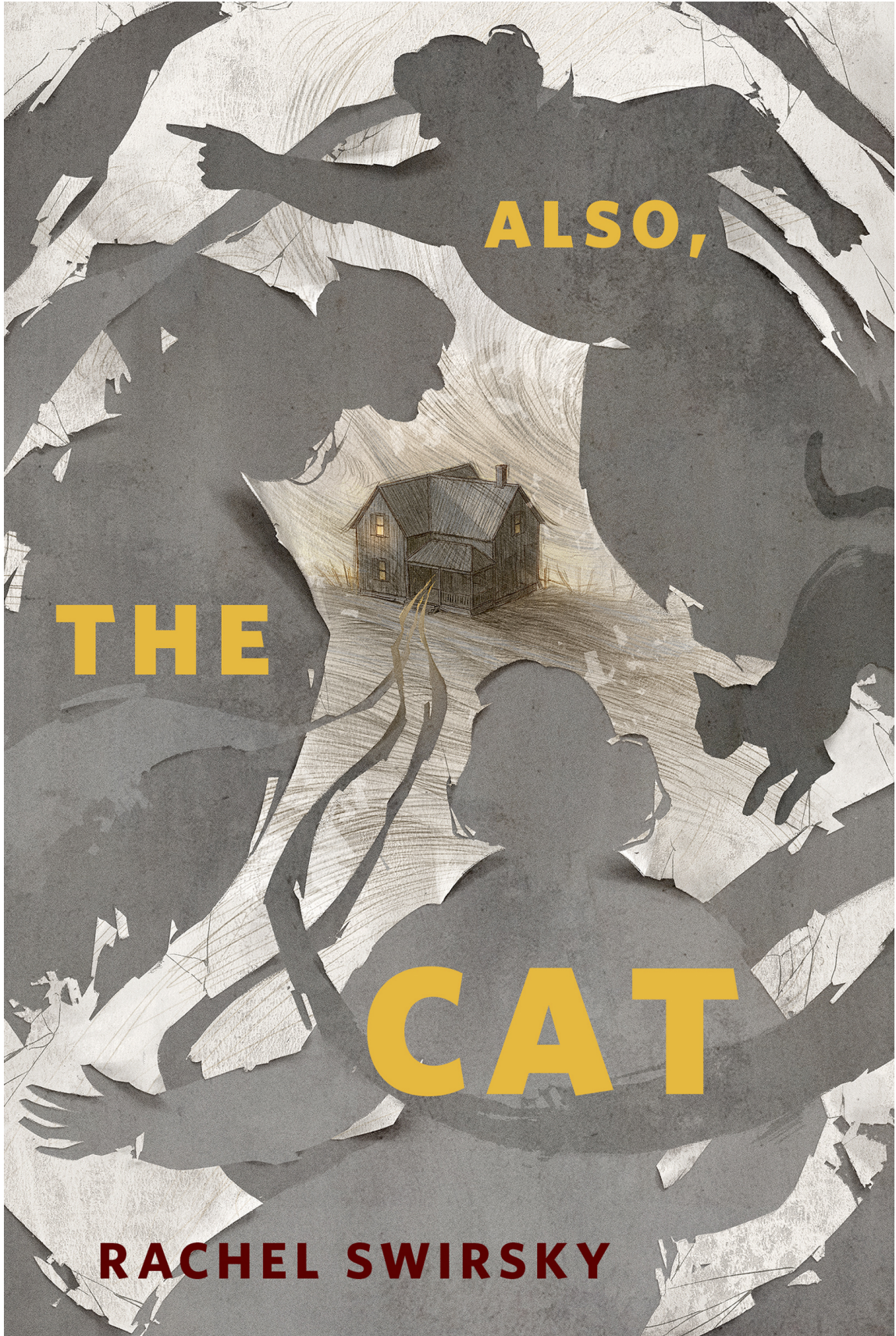
The bee, understanding, floats away.



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**ALSO,**

**THE**

**CAT**

**RACHEL SWIRSKY**

# Also, the Cat

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**RACHEL SWIRSKY**

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*illustration by*

ROVINA CAI

**T O R  
D O T  
C O M**

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Rosalee died, aged seventy-six.

Her oldest sister, Irene (seventy-eight), blamed their middle sister, Viola (seventy-seven), for sending Rosie out front to check the mail when she knew Rosie's inner ear condition was acting up. Viola, on the other hand, blamed Irene for not paying to get the garden path repaved last summer when they had the boys in to fix the porch.

The three sisters had never gotten along. They'd been born one, two, three—Irene then Viola then Rosalee—over the course of twenty-seven months, courtesy of prematurity and an abundance of parental amour. Their exhausted progenitors had expected them to share everything from possessions to personalities. As a result, they despised sharing anything apart from heartfelt and mutual hatred.

All three sisters had high-tailed it away from home as soon as age and circumstance allowed—three teenaged marriages, each more dubious than the last—but over the years, tragedy and/or mishap had struck thrice. One husband had died in a bar (where he spent the majority of his living hours in any case); one had converted his mistress into a missus; and one had honest-to-goodness disappeared at sea. The financial strains of widowhood—combined with the indifference, incapacity, and simple ingratitude of the various children to which the sisters had given birth—had eventually driven them all back to the farmhouse to live like maiden aunts.

It was as if, in their elder age, their adult lives had unspooled, dragging them back to their childhoods—back to walls full of half-finished electrical wiring that Papa had abandoned because he didn't trust all that lightning in the house; back to the kitchen icebox with the drip pan that needed to be emptied twice a day; back to summers redly swollen with insect bites and winters nibbled blue by frost.

Irene and Viola had begun venting their ire on each other only seconds after finding Rosie's corpse. Once begun, the rants continued almost ceaselessly throughout the following days, subsiding only briefly for herbal tea. At night, when even tea couldn't soothe the savaged vocal cords, they rasped off to their separate bedrooms where they continued to berate each other in their dreams, each pleased to be winning her points so eloquently until waking dashed her back to contentious reality.

Rosalee's ghost was understandably unhappy with the situation.

She had returned to spectral consciousness a few seconds after dying, the back of her head still pouring blood onto the garden path. Her body had not yet been discovered by anyone but herself, which had the virtue of giving her time to come to terms with the reality of her demise before being forced to cope with the concomitant reality of still being stuck in the world with her sisters, only now, as she would soon learn, without effective means to communicate her opinions.

"Does this seem fair?" Rosie had asked her corpse. "It does not."

If her sisters had heard her, doubtlessly one of them would have snapped at her in response that *life isn't fair*. She would have liked to reply: *Shouldn't death be then?*

However, her sisters were elsewhere—and even if they'd been present, it wouldn't have made any difference: they, with their doggedly metronomic breath and circulating blood, couldn't hear her at all, no matter their proximity, not even when strolling right through her.

Rosie tried, nevertheless, to make conversation. For instance, when Viola announced that she was going upstairs to choose which dresses to send to the mortuary, Rosie followed.

"Not the polyester!" Rosie exclaimed, waving her arms in distress as she watched Viola sift through the hangers. "Oh, no, no—what are you doing? That was for a church play! I was a tree! Oh—no—I inherited that one from my mother-in-law— No! You can't be serious! *No one* should wear that color!"

The issue was simple: Viola had always envied Rosalee's wardrobe—but unfortunately, although all three sisters had gained weight after marriage and childbirth, Viola had gained more than the others, and so Irene would inherit the lot. Viola had made it her objective, therefore, to deny Irene whichever of Rosie's dresses she thought Irene would most enjoy.

This might have been tolerable except that Irene's curmudgeonly tastes ran deep. Even at the age of ten, she'd dressed like the abstemious old woman it had taken her sixty more years to become. Given a choice between, for example, a cheerful bright red and a dumpy dried-puke green, Irene would always choose the latter. She regarded embellishments like lace with several degrees more disgust than an upright Puritan would regard a Roman orgy.

Alas, Viola knew Irene's taste very, very well.

Rosie followed Viola from dress to dress, striving desperately to be heard. "What about the pink one? Yes! Right there! No, no, don't put it down— Okay, the blue one, that's fine, too. It's right behind the one you're looking at— No, Viola, that's a dress I wore to *someone else's* funeral— *Oh, no*. You've got the key to my jewelry box. You're going to go straight for my husband's gold rings, aren't you? Viola! That's enough of this— Stop!"

Rosie planted herself directly in her sister's path as Viola went to lay her selections on the bed.

Viola walked right through her.

Glumly, Rosie went looking for Irene. She found her out front, endeavoring to scrub residual blood from the path where Rosie had fallen. This was characteristic of Irene, whose willingness to replace things barely extended to balding toothbrushes. She kept a box in the attic filled with torn wrapping paper which she reused by taping it to packages in unsettling mosaics of reindeer, birthday candles, and the baby Jesus.

"This path was too old to start with," Rosie scolded her. "Viola's right. You should have had it replaced when we got the porch done. Look at all those cracks. One or the other of you is going to break

your hip if you don't die outright. How's it going to look to people in town if we all die the same way?"

Irene stopped scrubbing to examine her progress. She sneered in frustration at the persistent splatter. "Isn't this just like Rosalee?" Irene muttered. "Inconsiderate down to the blood."

"Oh, never mind," said Rosie. "Break your neck if you want to." A horrible thought occurred. "You won't become a ghost, will you?"

"Couldn't even be bothered to watch her feet, the stampcrab," Irene continued.

Rosie fixed a fastidious eye on her left foot as she drew it back to kick her eldest sister's rear end. Being insubstantial, however, Rosie's foot passed through Irene's worldly derriere, leaving Rosie's specter scrambling to regain her balance while Irene carried on her grumbling unaffected.

Although Rosie went to sit alone for the rest of the day, watching the sun slump behind the horizon, she could still hear her sisters shouting in the distance. Before her death, Rosie would never have guessed—and nor would anyone else—that she'd acted as something of a buffer between her older sisters. She'd argued just as bitterly and hated just as passionately. Yet now it was undeniable: in her absence, something important had changed.

The truth was that withdrawing any sister from the trio would have collapsed the balance between the others. With only two of them, there were no more shifting alliances to motivate negotiations and truces. There were only endless frontal assaults between opposing generals.

Through sheer vocal exhaustion, the hot war ended one morning in a ceasefire of a sort, though certainly not a cessation of hostility. Irene swore never to speak to Viola again; Viola swore the same back. The funeral, it was agreed, was to be arranged by notes deposited hourly on the neutral zone of the kitchen table.

For the first few early hours, Rosie felt relieved on behalf of her ears, but by afternoon it became clear that the only thing worse than the constant shouting was the unbroken silence. Not only had Rosie

lost the ability to speak herself, but now she was without any words at all.

That night, when Rosie went up to the room that had been hers, and lay upon the bed that had been hers, atop the ugly clothing that had unfortunately also been hers, she was surprised to spy one of their childhood cats, Mrs. Fritter, loping into the room. The creature leapt onto her chest, seemingly untroubled by the fact that Rosie was recently dead.

Mrs. Fritter herself was many decades past the feline veil. Rosie held out her fingers for the dead cat to sniff. “Hey there, Missus,” Rosie said. “We never did figure out what got you. Was there a wolf?”

Mrs. Fritter approached and Rosie stroked her back. The animal circled several times before curling up.

“What did I expect?” Rosie asked. “They never listened to me when I was alive. No one did. Eddie—that was my husband, you never met him—Ed never listened to me either. To be fair, he was usually too drunk to listen to much. Certainly, too drunk to listen to the doctor about his liver.”

Mrs. Fritter rattled a purr.

Rosie went on, “When I was a kid—nine, ten, probably, you were gone by then—I had this game pretending I was an actress starring in the movie of my life. You could’ve been my pedigree cat. I could’ve clipped one of my rhinestone pins right here.” Rosie ruffled the tuft behind Mrs. Fritter’s ear.

The cat bopped her head against Rosie’s hand to start it petting again.

“I had a pair of those pins,” Rosie said, a bit maudlin. “Viola lost the stones out of them. I bit her on the arm and broke her pencils.”

Mrs. Fritter settled down as Rosie’s hand resumed stroking.

Rosie continued, “I’d be at the bus stop, imagining the argument I’d have someday with the director of my autobiographical picture. How should we stage the scene where I was discovered? Should I be waiting for the bus? Weeding the garden? Should Viola and Irene



be around so we could get some good shots of their faces turning green, or should we focus entirely on me?”

She shook her head.

“Now, I’m dead, and I’m still ... here.”

In the morning, Rosalee went out to the front porch. It was time, she thought, to fulfill her old aspirations, even if she had to do it on her own two ethereal feet. She gazed out at the flat horizon, wishing she had a hat and gloves and a suitcase so it would feel like a proper *bon voyage*. She took note of the brush of grasses against the sky, and the scent of open air, and the nearby copse of trees, and the little white car Viola had bought from her daughter-in-law at a discount—and she hoped never to see any of them again.

Mrs. Fritter came to see her off. The cat perched on the porch railing and washed her face.

Rosalee waved. “Goodbye, Mrs. Fritter!”

She set off on the road to somewhere.

A few minutes later, she was walking back toward the porch from the other direction, nothing in her head but blankness from the moment she’d crossed the property line. The shadows fell at exactly the same length and angle as they had before, cast by a sun that hadn’t bothered to budge an inch.

Mrs. Fritter proceeded to wash her shoulder.

“Well,” Rosalee started, but she wasn’t sure what else to say. “*Well*,” she repeated, sitting down on the porch steps until she gave up and started to cry. Mrs. Fritter jumped down from the railing, pushed her head under Rosie’s hand, and tried to purr the tears away.

★ ★ ★

Irene’s ghost woke after a heart attack landed her on the kitchen floor.

Two years ago, she and Viola had replaced the old fridge, and even called some boys to haul away the icebox. The new refrigerator’s harvest gold door stood halfway open, leaking cold,

expensive air. The carton of strawberries that Irene had been looking forward to all day had fallen to the ground with her, where it snapped open, spilling fruit across the linoleum.

Irene tried to pick up a berry, but her fingers closed on nothing. “By Saint Boogar and all the saints at the backdoor of purgatory! I *knew* these cost too much. I didn’t even get to eat *one*.”

Irene enjoyed antique swear words. They were not merely her favorite indulgence, but also her shield against slander. People with no sense of rhetorical wit said all sorts of nasty things about women—especially teachers—who let loose with mundane profanities, but you could shout, “Stop doing quisby, you fustilarian scobberlotchers!” in front of a whole classroom’s worth of parents and not-a-one would stop gawping long enough to complain to the principal.

Shakespeare was Irene’s gold standard, but she delighted in anything sufficiently well-honed by centuries. Saint Boogar, for instance, found its origin in *Tristram Shandy* whose eponymous narrator was a veritable fountainhead of insults.

As Irene aged, her elderly obscenities had lost some of their advantages, not because the average loiter-sack had gotten any more gumption, but because the wandoughts and fustilugs of the general public *expected* old women to use “outdated language.” Even the rare parent who was not an irredeemable loiter-sack—a truly singular, nay possibly extinct breed—was far too parochial to distinguish between the tatters of childhood lingo and the sterling abuses of Shakespeare.

In the secret and desolate corners of what must grudgingly be called her heart, Irene had always hoped to meet someone with a tongue nimble enough to answer back. For the rightly educated person, retorts would have been easy. They could have called Irene a “klazomaniac” who’d keep on screeching even if you cut out her vocal cords, or a “muckspout” whose talent for constantly swearing was only outdone by her talent for constantly running her mouth. They could even have called her a “dorbel,” a nagging teacher whose obsession with scolding and nit-picking made her a peer of

the French scholar Nicolas d'Orbellis, whose name had been purloined to craft the insult. Irene took it as fact that the poor man, who had apparently once been forced to wrangle his own classrooms full of ungrateful lubberworts, had been unfairly defamed. It was just like students to sneak around slandering any competent teacher as “scolding” and “nit-picking.”

The immutable ignorance of the dalcops that surrounded Irene depressed her, it really did. She consoled herself by flinging more insults until the feeling went away.

Irene was the nastiest of her sisters, a sentiment with which she would have happily agreed. As children, the three of them, being opposed to sharing anything, had carefully allocated their sins along with their dolls and dresses. Rosalee was selfish; Viola was resentful; Irene was mean. However, both Rosalee and Viola had found that, without their sisters' reinforcement, their worst traits were mitigated by the outside world. Irene remained equally nasty both in and outside of sororal company.

When Irene's husband, Howard, had lost himself on an Arctic expedition, unkind people said he was searching for someplace warmer than Irene's heart. Unkinder people said he'd found it.

As soon as Viola heard Irene's body thud to the floor, she rushed stiff-kneed from the back porch. At the sight of Irene's broken-down sprawl, she was sure her remaining sister was dead.

She lowered herself to check Irene's pulse anyway. Finding the expected absence, Viola released a whooshing sigh—not of grief or good riddance, but rather of gusty relief—as if she'd been holding her breath for all four years since swearing never to speak to Irene again.

“Really, Irene?” Viola asked, panting. “You don't say a word to me for four years, and now you're leaving me alone?”

“Giving up, eh?” Irene crowed. “I win!”

Unable to hear her sister's exclamation, Viola mused, “If you're dead, I suppose I've won now, haven't I?” She laughed. “I can't believe I won against *you*, Irene.”

“Because you didn’t win! I did!” Irene’s eyes went wide with delighted realization. “Ha! I can talk all I want now. What a slovenly thing you are, Viola! *Buying* stuff and things. *Leaving* them everywhere. Not even *unwrapping* them half the time, you raggabrush. It’s *intolerable* living with a driggle-draggle like you. You’re as inconsiderate as Rosalee! And those plastic flamingo corn holders are the tackiest things I’ve ever seen! What do you want with them? What’s wrong with our corn holders? When are you eating *corn*?”

Viola, staring down at her sister’s body, asked listlessly, “What am I going to do? What if I *miss* you? What will I do *then*?” She shook her head. “Well, now it’s all over, I suppose I may as well speak my mind.”

“Over because *I* won,” said Irene.

“How did you get so *mean*?” asked Viola. “You kept getting worse and worse. It’s like you were *pickling* in your own spitefulness.”

“Nothing wrong with pickles,” complained Irene.

“How could you be so mean without saying a word? You could be mean with an eyebrow. You could be mean with your *elbow*.”

“I can be mean with my *toenail*, thank you very much.”

Carefully, Viola picked herself up. Her joints creaked, the sound reverberating through her bones. She glanced toward the stairs leading to the second floor. “I guess the sunny bedroom is mine now,” she said, referring to the room that had passed from Rosie to Irene. “Typical. The middle child gets everything last.” She shuffled out, mumbling to herself about which funeral home to call.

“Watch you don’t get fatter, too,” Irene called after her. She sniffed. “Ridiculous tallowcatch.”

“You’re *both* ridiculous,” said Rosalee.

The ghost of Irene looked up. She was not only surprised, but downright shocked to see the ghost of Rosie, who crossed her arms over her chest and looked back.

“You’re dead,” Irene informed Rosie.

“Pot, this is Kettle,” Rosie replied, pointing to Irene’s corpse on the floor.

Irene had known she was dead before this point, but the knowledge had occupied some passive, subconscious part of her deceased mind. Now, as it was forced to the surface, for the first time she really *understood* it. Her consciousness grabbed hold of the knowledge and ran around having a fit.

“Gadsbobs!”

“Awful, isn’t it?” Rosie agreed drily. “You’re dead. I’m dead. And *here we are.*”

“Waesucks!”

“No one thinks about haunting from the *ghost’s* perspective,” said Rosie, who’d had a long time to mander on the subject and no one to discuss it with. “*We’re* not haunting the house. It’s haunting *us*. It’s *always* haunted us. Think about it—we all escaped and then it snatched us back.”

“Drate-poke,” Irene snapped back by rote, barely even hearing herself as she struggled for a grip on the situation. “Are Mother and Father here? What about Great-Aunt Nancy?”

“Just us. And Mrs. Fritter.”

“The cat?”

Rosie snapped as her resentments shoved their way center stage. “Do you have *any* idea how horrible it’s been in this house for *four years* when the two of you *wouldn’t even talk?* Not one conversation! I *begged* you!”

“Don’t try to tell me what to do,” retorted Irene.

“You could have made up with her anytime. Now Viola’s got however long to stew on things before she dies. You better hope she gets forgiving.” Rosie narrowed her eyes at her eldest sister. She added, “Because ghosts giving each other the silent treatment would be *pathetic*,” with the sinking feeling that was exactly what was going to happen.

★ ★ ★

Rosalee stayed out of Irene's way; Irene stayed out of Rosalee's way; Viola did as she wished, believing herself alone.

It was, in its way, a revelation for Viola. Not only was she apart from her hated sisters, but it was her first time living alone. From the day she'd left her childhood home until the day she returned there, she'd lived with her husband, Jack-the-Unzipper, who had no problem relying on her for housework and hot dinners even when he was relying on the new girl at work for horizontal refreshment.

Over the years, there had been many "new girls at work." Viola didn't know the precise number—certainly more than the eight or so with whom she'd become embarrassingly acquainted. High/lowlights included Bea who at least had the manners to claim she didn't know Jack was married; Peggy who'd optimistically bought a wedding dress; and Susan who threw him over for his boss, triggering a month-long sulk during which Jack had the gall to cry to Viola about female perfidy.

Jack's last "new girl" had successfully lured him into giving Viola the ever-promised but never-before-delivered divorce papers. It was quite the acrobatic feat given Jack's dread fear of alimony, perhaps assisted by the fact that Jack and Viola's youngest child had finally earned a high school diploma, thus relieving Jack of his even worse fear of child support. The new girl seemed to think he was a catch. Perhaps he was; judging by the increasingly evident ravages of smoking in his Christmas card photos, he seemed literally ready to cough up her inheritance any day.

He'd taken the waif off to New York City, which for some reason had always been "too expensive" whenever Viola asked to go. He called it "an extravagantly stupid way to waste money." Sometimes Viola tried to cajole him; sometimes she even begged. *It would be cheaper if we stayed outside the city, she'd say. Or Even if we don't go anywhere you have to pay for, there's still so much there! Or Damn it, if you can take your tramps to ski lodges, you can pay for me to see Starry Night!* But no. It was Jill who got to watch her face in the reflecting pool next to the Egyptian temple in the Met.

Viola considered that the worst part of this—worse than the difficulties of the divorce, worse than the revelations about bank balances and selfish children, worse even than seeing her husband strut off to New York City while she was forced into returning to the childhood home which had birthed all her miseries—the worst part of all was that the girl’s name was Jill. It was intolerable beyond belief that her life had been wrecked by a nursery rhyme. Viola retained some hope that the universe would show enough sense of irony to throw Jack and Jill down a hill together, but thus far her ex-husband’s crown remained lamentably intact.

After a few months alone (or so she thought), Viola settled into a pattern, going around the house unwrapping the plethora of packages that had so disturbed Irene. This would have made progress toward tidying if she hadn’t kept ordering new items. Some of what she sent for was still gimcrackery (like the plastic flamingo corn holders which had made their way to charity and thence probably a landfill), but she also began ordering things that she found intriguing or even genuinely profound.

She read memoirs of movers and shakers; she pored over coffee table books on the *Castles of Scotland* and the *Great Houses of Morocco*; she sighed at photo essays of bright lights among smog-stained skyscrapers. Her vague, lifelong yearnings had solidified into wanderlust sometime after Jack moved East with Jill. Why should he be the only one who got to see whatever he wanted to see? Why should he get to move forward while she got yanked back?

Not that she intended to actually travel. A more confident or iconoclastic woman might have set off for parts unknown despite fatigue and stiff knees and an eighty-two-year-old heart. Viola never really considered it. She was used to regarding herself as middling in the way middle children sometimes do. Not as strong-willed as Irene; not as cute as Rosalee; not particularly clever, not particularly talented, not particularly interesting. Certainly not someone who would do something extraordinary like explore the world for the first time while ninety crept closer on the horizon.

For a while, she became a devoted enthusiast of a television show about a food critic who traveled the world's backroads searching for oases of fine cuisine. Eventually, the metaphor began to depress her—that she could watch the world's wonders from a distance, but never really taste them. She found a show about a nun who visited art museums and watched that instead.

Rosie or Irene occasionally wandered through to harangue Viola about her viewing choices. (“We all have to listen to that, you know.” “Is this suicide by boredom?” “Turn on the movie channel.”) Viola never in the least registered their imprecations.

This is not to say that she never shuddered with the feeling she was living in a haunted house. She did. It was simply that the chills which shivered down her spine always came from leaky windows, and the horrible noises upstairs were never more than the settling of restive floorboards. Genuine uncanny activities—such as those times when Mrs. Fritter fell through Viola's lap while attempting to cuddle—never roused a single hair on the back of Viola's neck.

Rosie, for her part, saw no reason to change her routine just because Irene had died. She spent most days wandering the property with Mrs. Fritter until dawn and dusk swapped roles. The cat insisted on it; whenever Rosie tried to sleep past sunrise, Mrs. Fritter paced the length of her bed, caterwauling until the din forced Rosie out of bed. Rosie had no idea why. Maybe Mrs. Fritter was watching for ghost mice in the grass. Rosie had certainly never seen any.

Irene's ghost, on the other hand, was curdling with boredom. Insulting Viola was useless; nastiness lost its savor when your target couldn't hear you. Insulting Rosie was mildly amusing, but Irene could never get her to stick around for more than a few barbs. “Boil-brained, beslubbering giglet—” she'd shout and by then Rosie would already be on her way out the door.

Bored out of her ghostly skull, Irene tasked herself with learning to control the television. It came to nothing but the occasional burst of static so rare that even she had to admit it was probably random.



Books, however, were different. It turned out that they could be pulled from the shelf—or at least something could, a sort of ghost-book available to be read until someone set it down for long enough that it faded away. The metaphysical implications were disturbing. Did books have souls then? What did the soul of a book want? Could a book consent to be read? These questions occurred to Irene; she ignored them. In her opinion, all that was the books' problem.

Reading made the afterlife bearable. When Irene got fed up to the eyeballs with Viola's travelogues and the smattering of classics and popular novels in the parlor, she'd go up to the small bedroom to browse her father's heirloom volumes of Shakespeare. They were nearly one hundred and fifty years old by now; even their ghosts smelled like must and leather. Irene particularly liked Richard III for his sensible treatment of his cousins.

Although the cat, Mrs. Fritter, spent most of her waking hours with Rosie, she occasionally went to find Irene. It was unclear whether Mrs. Fritter's purpose was to annoy Irene, comfort her, or satisfy some other catly urge, but the most common result of her sociability was to be shouted at and chased away. Now and then, however, Irene would succumb to those parts of her which had failed to completely callous over, and she held Mrs. Fritter in her lap as she perused the soul of a book.

After a year or two, Irene realized the cat had gone. For some while, there had been no hissing, nor snuggling, nor ghost claws scrabbling on the hardwood. She was loath to admit feeling sad about some animal, but a misanthropic tear or two escaped her eyes.

Irene planned to ask Rosie about it, but the next time they crossed paths, she succumbed to the temptation to insult her sister's hair instead.

★ ★ ★

In the race to kill Viola, chemotherapy snatched the gold before pancreatic cancer could reach the finish line.

The moment Viola's sickbed became a deathbed, the atmosphere of the house changed in a way that would have been palpable to any ghost. It had gone from a place that held a living soul to somewhere only inhabited by the dead.

Irene barged into the sunny bedroom. "I saw what you buried me in!"

Viola's ghost squinted and tried to clear her eyes.

She was still lying inside herself, her corpse beset with a strange, transparent doubling. One set of blue eyes looked toward Irene while the other remained fixed unblinking on the ceiling.

"Get out of there." Irene jabbed her sister's arm. Her finger sank through flesh to hit spirit.

Viola flinched. Seeing her ethereal arm come loose, she set about pulling herself out of herself. Her joints moved fluidly in a way they hadn't for twenty years—which would have been more exciting if it weren't for the obvious cause.

"Scarlet!" shouted Irene, mind's eye filled with a vision of her corpse reclining gaudily in its coffin. "Scarlet and lace and rhinestone earrings!"

Viola snickered.

"I saw that puce nightmare you put me in for my funeral, too," added Rosalee.

Both Irene and Viola startled. Neither of them had noticed Rosie's spirit leaning against the windowsill where she'd been waiting for the past several hours, anticipating the inevitable.

Rosalee waved. "Hi, Viola."

Viola glanced at Rosie, slightly sheepish. The puce had mostly been meant to annoy Irene. "Well, you *were* dead. How was I supposed to know you'd care?"

"Pfft," said Rosie.

A balloon of dread inflated in Viola's chest. "...have you two been here the whole time?"

"Since the day I dropped," said Rosie.

With horrible inevitability, Viola's brain reeled through every embarrassing memory from the past nine years. She made a small noise. "I used to wonder if you two were talking to me."

"*Never*," snapped Irene.

"All the time," said Rosie, "but you never heard." Sniffing, she took on a long-suffering tone. "*Not* that I *expected* you to. *None* of you ever listened to me when I was alive."

"Rosie," said Viola with a laugh. "No one could *avoid* listening to you."

Rosie's mouth went taut. "What are you talking about?"

"Ha." Irene snorted. "Isn't it obvious, you absurd skelpie-limmer?"

*Skelpie-limmer* meant *dreadful child*. Rosie would have been indignant if she'd understood what it meant, but Irene's blandishments were all the same to her. She'd never bothered to learn any of them except in as much to figure out that, like most curse words, they were mostly concerned with stupidity or sex.

Disappointed but not deterred, Irene continued, "Great horn spoon, Rosalee. You made a racket dawn to dusk."

"Singing, dancing, pretending to be in movies," Viola added. "Early in the morning, late at night, and any time in between."

"I never got *one* good night's sleep as a child except when you had pneumonia," said Irene. "Best month of my life."

Rosie glared between her sisters. Their accurate-yet-unsettling claims rose bravely against her long-held resentments but were no match for such well-armored forces of ego-defense.

Rosie turned on Viola. "Took your time dying, didn't you?"

"Sorry to disoblige," said Viola, affronted.

"Well," said Rosie, "now that you're dead, we can finally get out of here."

"Out of here?" Viola asked.

"Out of this house," said Rosie. "Away from this farm. *Out of here*."

Irene clacked her tongue derisively. "Mumblecrust! What are you talking about, Rosalee? I've tried it hundreds of times, same as you.

Walk off the property, and there you are, walking back again.”

“Things will be different now,” said Rosie, adopting her most tremulant and mysterious tone.

Viola looked with bafflement between her sisters as they tried to stare each other down. This seemed ... unreasonable. She felt that she deserved more time to adjust to being dead before having to deal with anything else. She also felt like she had a headache. Did ghosts get headaches? She rubbed her temples. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Ignore her,” Irene told Viola. “This is just typical Rosie bespawl.”

“It is *not*.” Rosie tipped up her chin like an affronted socialite. “I know because of Mrs. Fritter.”

“...the cat?” Viola asked helplessly.

Irene felt a startled spike of anger as she remembered all those times when she’d thought about asking Rosie about the cat. She’d *missed* that cat, consarn it. “Why didn’t you bring this up before? Where’s Mrs. Fritter? Explain!”

Rosie sighed. She gave a little put-upon wave like a singer facing demands for an encore. “Fine. I’ll explain about the cat.”

★ ★ ★

Rosie did not explain about the cat.

Well, not immediately—not given that she suddenly had the opportunity to get more attention than she’d had in nine whole years. As much as Rosie had always liked Mrs. Fritter, a quirked cat ear made an insufficient audience for someone with as much pent-up *joie de vivre* as Rosie. Viola and Irene would also make an insufficient audience, of course, but at least they had human vocal cords with which to express admiration.

At Rosie’s insistence, the three relocated to the kitchen. The remains of Viola’s last downstairs meal lay on the table—a crumpled napkin, a glass with a splash of water, and a plate holding a few crumbs and a chicken’s thigh bone.

As they settled, Viola's daughter-in-law, Kelly (who had somehow contracted the obligation to check in every few days on the woman she referred to as her monster-in-law), came in through the back door. She threw her coat on the counter and tossed her purse onto the nearest kitchen chair where it fell through Viola's lap.

The sisters turned their heads to watch the luckless daughter-in-law head toward the stairs.

"That cumberworld going to make a racket in a minute when she finds your body," Irene said to Viola.

Viola said, "Kelly will dress me in some ugly pastel skirt suit, see if she doesn't. Something a sanctimonious church lady would wear on Easter. That's what she did to her mother."

Rosie said, "If you think that makes up for what you did to us, it doesn't."

"*Scarlet!*" cried Irene. "*Rhinestones!*"

Viola snickered again.

Irene's turbulent anger sought the nearest target which happened to be Rosie. She jabbed an incensed finger at her sister. "Enough of this prattling conversation about nothing! Rosalee, you pribbling beef-wit, can't you even bother to work your lazy mouth? Death's head upon a mop-stick, tell your story!"

Viola and Rosie regarded Irene unperturbed.

"You left out fustilug," complained Viola. "That's my favorite."

"I like saddle-goose," said Rosie.

Irene's mouth gaped open—no one was supposed to be *amused* by her outbursts, thank you very much!—but before she could deliver another torrent of abuse, the daughter-in-law's inevitable shriek filled the house.

Rosie said to Viola, "You've been found."

"Seems like it," Viola agreed.

Irene, furiously shaking, shouted at Rosie, "Explain! Now!"

So, Rosie explained about the cat.

It had been about six months ago as far as Rosalee could remember, timekeeping not being high on her list of posthumous

priorities. The last crusts of snow had failed to crunch and melt under ghost-foot and ghost-paw as she and Mrs. Fritter roamed the property.

The family lands were fairly small. Although they were fallow now, every inch had been planted or explored by someone in the family line at one time or another. Nevertheless, it was difficult to survey the whole territory on foot without using a map. Woman and cat's daily wanderings drew them to some places frequently, and to others not at all.

Therefore, it was still entirely possible to find someplace their travels had not yet taken them. On the day in question, they found such a place: a nondescript hollow smelling of sage where a line of leggy bushes, undressed for winter, grew among patches of snow and dirt.

When Mrs. Fritter saw the naked shrubbery, her eyes lit with a wildness Rosie had never seen before. The cat bolted toward the westmost bush and began scrabbling at the dirt.

At first, Rosie merely watched, expecting Mrs. Fritter to lose interest. However, as the cat became increasingly frantic, Rosie, sighing, knelt to help.

The pair weren't digging up real dirt, not exactly, which was probably for the best since they had only bare hands and paws to muster against the wintry ground. Yet in the same way that Irene had discovered that the souls of the books could be dislodged from their papery forms, Rosie now found that *something* was moving out of their way. She could see two realities at once: the intact patch of dirt that was part of the living world; and the growing, presumably spectral recess they were digging below it.

Mrs. Fritter stopped so Rosie stopped, too.

The cat's ear cocked. Lonely, high-pitched noises came from the hole.

Rosie started to say something but caught her tongue.

Mrs. Fritter jumped in.

Leaping out again, the cat returned with a tiny ghost-thing in her mouth. It was a kitten, too young for its eyes and ears to open. It squeaked.

Rosie gasped. She hadn't meant to, but—a new ghost! She'd never seen another ghost besides Irene and Mrs. Fritter.

Mrs. Fritter glanced back at the hole as if she wanted to jump in again. She hesitated, tense on her paws. It seemed to Rosie that the cat was worried about putting down the kitten.

Rosie held out her cupped hands. Mrs. Fritter gave her a skeptical look, seeming to weigh how much she trusted her companion. The verdict came back in Rosie's favor; Mrs. Fritter dropped the ghost kitten into her palms.

It was such a tiny thing. Rosie laced her fingers around the shivering creature to keep it warm.

Mrs. Fritter carried up a second kitten, and then a third. By the time she brought up the fourth and final, Rosie had moved the tiny, squeaky ghosts into her lap to warm them in the folds of her skirt. She unfolded the fabric to make room for Mrs. Fritter who obligingly climbed up to sit with her kittens.

Mrs. Fritter set to licking, sweeps of her tongue wetting the kittens' short, scraggly fur into cowlicks. They were too young to purr, but their complaints faded as they fell asleep against their mother's belly.

Rosie remembered the early days of her death—how it had been the cat who initiated their routine, leading Rosie to the back door every day and complaining until she followed Mrs. Fritter outside.

“You've been searching for them, haven't you?” Rosie murmured, quietly so the kittens wouldn't wake. “You had a litter before you died, didn't you? No one knew they were here. They must have starved. Poor little things. But now, everything's all right. They have you again.”

Time passed. As Rosie began to worry about how long she could stay in her current position, Mrs. Fritter yawned and stretched. She took the first kitten by the nape and dismounted Rosie's lap.

“I can help carry them inside,” Rosie ventured.

Mrs. Fritter ignored her. She turned to survey their surroundings. Her gaze fastened on a spot that Rosie would never have guessed a moment ago was different from anywhere else. Now, somehow, it was. Something about it seemed to glow—not the early grass, nor the dirt, nor the blue of the sky—something else, some nameless essence.

Mrs. Fritter approached the anomaly with the kitten in her mouth. She extended a paw. An ethereal glow shimmered over it like a beam of moonlight. The cat leapt forward and vanished, leaving only strange luminosity behind her.

Rosie exclaimed. The noise woke the other kittens whose little voices cried back. She started to panic. How was she going to raise three ghost kittens? Did they need milk? Would they ever get bigger? What if they froze? Or starved as they had before? Could they die a second time?

Even as these worries clamored in Rosie’s head, Mrs. Fritter bounded back through the portal, landing on the earth as if she’d never left.

Mrs. Fritter didn’t have the kitten anymore. Perhaps she’d left it on the other side? Was the afterlife through there? Was Mrs. Fritter playing Charon, ferrying her kittens to the land of the dead?

Rosie watched with a sort of stunned feeling as Mrs. Fritter approached for a second kitten and then carried it into nothing. For the third, it was the same. When she returned for the fourth, however, Mrs. Fritter paused to lick her shoulder.

“You’ll come back, right...? After you drop the last one off?” Rosie asked.

Mrs. Fritter washed the area where her shoulder met her back.

“You aren’t coming back, are you?” Rosie said quietly.

The mother cat bumped her head against Rosie’s knee to elicit a pat on the head and a scratch on the chin. Purring, she took the last kitten by the nape and started to go.



Rosie reached out as if to pull them back. The mother cat growled softly and leapt away, tail lashing. Rosie dropped her hand.

“I’m sorry,” said Rosie. “I’ll miss you.”

The cat gave her a slow blink of forgiveness.

Mrs. Fritter ran into the shimmering grass. The glow vanished with her.

Rosie took a little time to cry.

Afterward, she walked around the place where Mrs. Fritter had disappeared, but she found nothing other than mundane earth and cold air. Before going, she stopped to heap the ghost dirt they’d dug up into a memorial mound. It seemed right to leave something.

In all Rosalee’s wanderings since, she’d never found the place again. The memorial, it seemed, was gone. She supposed that, like the ghost books, it had faded back into the material world.

At the table with her sisters, Rosie dabbed her eyes.

“So.” Rosie tried to clear the lump in her throat. “I’ve been waiting for the two of you so we can do what Mrs. Fritter did.”

“Have kittens?” asked Irene sourly.

Rosie flashed her a look of pure disdain. Her older sister didn’t seem to have been affected by the story at all. Irene really was a nasty thing.

At least Viola was sniffing. “Rosie,” she said, dabbing her eyes. “That’s all very sad—and sweet too, a bit, but ... Maybe it’s because I only just died, but I don’t understand what it has to do with us.”

“Ignore her, Viola.” Irene rolled her eyes. “Rosalee’s up to her usual mammering nonsense.”

Rosie ignored her eldest sister. She spread her hands in a lecturing gesture as she embarked on her explanation. “What makes a ghost? Unfinished business. Our Mrs. Fritter died and so did her kittens, poor little things. None of them could move on until they were together again.”

“Don’t even *try* picking me up by the nape,” Irene said.

“You think we have to leave together,” Viola said.

Rosie shrugged. “Mom and Dad and—heck, basically everyone—expected us to do everything together. Seems like the universe agrees.”

Viola glanced at Irene. “What do you think?”

“Mammering nonsense,” repeated Irene, but her expression was thoughtful.

Later, Rosalee realized she should have told her sisters she *didn't* want to go.

First, Viola wanted a night to sleep on it. Then Irene declared it was a waste of time that would never work. Then Rosie tried to appeal to their sisterly feelings, but for some reason they were unmoved by her many anecdotes of victimization. Then Viola, having slept on it for two nights and an afternoon, insisted on staying until after her funeral.

“You both got to see the preparations for *your* funerals,” Viola said.

“Yeah, it was so exciting to watch you two exchange notes,” muttered Rosie.

“*Scarlet*,” said Irene. “And *rhinestones*.”

Rosie challenged Viola. “You just want to memorize every time someone slights you.”

Viola waved her arms as if to suggest that this was such an obvious and natural thing to do that she had no choice in the matter. “Why shouldn't I want to be informed? I might see them again in the, whatever you call it—the after-afterlife.”

“It doesn't matter,” Irene broke in, “since Rosalee's delusional.”

Rosie turned on Irene. “If I made it all up then where's Mrs. Fritter?”

Irene hesitated then made a *pshaw* noise before stomping away.

Rosie was not deterred.

She had only one goal now: leave. If that didn't count as unfinished business, nothing did.

Rosalee knew of exactly one place where the world could fissure. True, up to now she hadn't been able to find the rift through which

Mrs. Fritter had escaped, but this time she'd have Irene and Viola with her. Obviously, once all three of them were there, the world would open up again.

*(Will it?* asked a tiny part of Rosie. She ignored it.)

Once Viola and Irene saw an actual exit right there in front of them, they couldn't possibly keep being so unreasonable.

*(Couldn't they?* asked the tiny part of Rosie. She told it to shut its stupid mouth.)

She formed a plan, tucked a ghost-volume of poetry into her pocket, and went off to lie.

\* \* \*

"You're sure you saw the cat around here?" Viola asked Rosalee as the three sisters trudged through the musty-smelling humidity, searching the property. Rosie and Viola felt phantom itching on their calves as they passed through the overgrown grass. Irene's calves, however, did not, being protected by the most boring spectral pants the sour-minded sister had been able to imagine.

Rosie put on an expression of wounded indignation. "Absolutely, completely, one hundred percent," she said with fraudulent passion.

"Calm down," said Viola. "I'm just asking."

"Hmff," puffed Irene, walking behind.

Rosie had begun this trip quite pleased with herself. Irene and Viola had agreed to come surprisingly quickly after Rosie told them that she'd seen the ghost of Mrs. Fritter from a distance on one of her afternoon rambles, perhaps because Rosie had learned from her previous mistake and told them she thought they should stay away.

The only problem was they'd been out for at least a couple of hours now and, so far, there were trees and weeds and buzzing insects that made Rosie's intangible skin twitch, but there was no sign of anything shiny.

"Why are you so sure it was the cat?" asked Viola. "If it was that far away?"

“Because I’m sure,” retorted Rosie. “You think I can’t recognize my own cat?”

“It can’t have been more than a blur,” said Viola. “Maybe it was a skunk.”

“It was *Mrs. Fritter*,” Rosie snapped.

“Give it up, Rosalee,” said Irene.

Rosie and Viola stopped to look back at their older sister. Irene stood planted about ten feet behind them, arms crossed over her chest.

Irene smirked which was never a good sign. “You didn’t see the cat. You never saw anything at all.”

Rosie feigned indignation. “That’s not— Of course I—”

Irene cut her off. “Don’t try it, Rosalee. *We’re* not stupid just because *you* are.”

Rosie shrank a step back. She was usually inured to her sister’s insults, but the naked simplicity of this one had an unexpected sting.

Viola’s forehead creased. “You were trying to trick us into leaving?” she asked Rosie.

“No!” Rosie protested.

Irene pointed an accusing finger at her youngest sister. “Then what’s in your pocket?”

“Nothing!”

Irene turned to Viola. “It’s a poetry book. She was planning to recite a few elegies before we dearly departed. Don’t take my word for it. Look for yourself.”

Viola made a grab for Rosie’s pocket which, deflected, became a grab for Rosie’s rear. Viola adjusted her grip while Rosie struggled to fend her off. They grappled until Viola managed to jab a finger into Rosie’s left armpit which Viola knew from childhood fights was particularly tender. Rosie yelped and twitched involuntarily, giving Viola time to snatch the poetry book with a triumphant yawp.

Viola read the title with disgust. “Collected elegies!” She waved indignant arms. “I told you I wanted to stay until after the funeral!”

“And how long are you going to want to stay after that?” Rosie shouted back. “How long am I supposed to wait to get out of here?”

Irene laughed. “I heard her practicing. ‘*Shall we take the act to the grave? The ravenous grave?*’ Her poetry reading is almost as ridiculous as her plan.” She clacked her tongue. “You don’t even really know where the cat disappeared, do you, Rosalee?”

Tears burgeoned in Rosie’s eyes. “It has to be close— I think I see the line of bushes— If we just go back—”

“Rosalee, you’re a flap-mouthed leasing-monger,” said Irene. “That cat went through where she found her kittens. That’s where she finished her business. It’s got nothing to do with us.”

“But we’re together now—” Rosie started.

Irene scoffed. “Come on. Even you can’t be this daft. If all we had to do was go together, we’d have gone at Viola’s deathbed.” She sliced her hand decisively through the air. “We’re stuck here. It’s obvious. I only came along to see your face when you realized it.”

“No—” Rosie’s voice broke. “That can’t be true. I’ve been here so long. I can’t bear it anymore.”

“Truth doesn’t care what you want,” said Irene. “And neither does anyone else.”

Rosie’s whole face was wet. “You don’t have to be so mean.”

“*You* don’t have to be so selfish,” said Irene.

Rosie’s hands clenched. “I’m not being selfish!”

Viola broke in before Irene could respond. “You act like what anyone else wants doesn’t matter! I told you, Rosie! I want to *stay* for my *funeral!*”

“But—” started Rosie.

Viola glared back with contempt. “I’m going back to the house. Kelly and Archie have probably been there for hours. Now I’ve missed everything they have to say because of *you.*”

Viola stormed off.

The oldest and youngest sisters stood in silent reproach for a few long minutes until Viola was out of hearing range.

Rosie pleaded, “Irene, I—”

Irene gave Rosie the sweetest smile that she could dredge from its quivering hiding place in her soul. “Thanks for the outing.”

Rosalee watched through watery eyes as her eldest sister left. She considered waiting to follow them both, but she couldn’t bear the thought of being stuck with them in the same, dim rooms where she’d been stuck all along. She turned toward the outskirts of the property instead and went wandering, searching for somewhere that shimmered.

★ ★ ★

Viola’s funeral passed. The relatives remained, fixing up the house for sale.

Viola felt sullen as she sat on the dresser in the sunny bedroom where she’d died, watching her son and daughter-in-law arrange the house for sale. It was fun hearing what people had to say, “very Mark Twain” according to Rosie, although she hadn’t read the book for decades. Viola mentally stored every slight as ammunition to use in post-mortem altercations once the living had given up their ghosts—assuming the various relatives turned up in the same afterlife, of course.

So far, this conversation was light on snubs, but then again, it was also light on words. Mostly, Archie was sniffing by the window frame he was supposed to be fixing while Kelly silently unpacked the dresser.

How like Archie. Her son had always been a brooding child. He was like Rosalee if Rosalee had been inclined toward self-scourging rather than foisting recriminations onto perfectly innocent sisters.

And how like Kelly. That most execrable of daughters-in-law was leaving the poor boy to cry without a single “there, there.” What a termagant. (One couldn’t live with Irene without picking up a *few* words.)

Into the stillness, Archie said, “I know Mom wasn’t nice.”

Not nice? A slight. Viola cataloged it.

Kelly snorted. “To put it mildly.”

Viola cataloged that, too.

“But it breaks my heart sometimes,” Archie continued. “I’m not sure she was ever happy. If only ... I mean ... I wish I could have...”

The sliding of dresser drawers was the only sound in the gathering pause.

Archie looked up at Kelly. His wife remained focused on her work, face averted, but Viola saw her son’s upraised expression. Tears blurred the blueness of his pupils and exhaustion bruised the skin under his eyes. His face, usually near-white—he was an indoor sort of boy—was patched and red from rubbing. He made a noise in the back of his throat, part-clearing and part-sob.

Viola, softening, decided to de-catalog his last few affronts.

Archie sighed into the quiet. “I don’t know.”

Kelly still didn’t look up. “It’s not your fault.”

Her daughter-in-law’s voice was soft but stiff, almost annoyed. Archie barely seemed to hear.

“I know,” he said.

“Do you?”

“Yes,” Archie protested, followed by, “Dad didn’t help.”

Kelly snorted again. “Thank goodness you didn’t inherit whatever gene it is that causes his dick to spontaneously dive into the nearest canal.”

Archie frowned slightly. “He’s been faithful to Jill.” He paused before mumbling, “I think.”

“He probably can’t find anyone else who’ll take his old ass,” said Kelly.

“I think he regrets things with Mom. He cried, you know. When I told him she’d died.”

“Really?” asked Kelly.

“Really?” asked Viola.

“He said ‘she was my first love.’”

“Huh,” said Kelly.

“*Huh*,” said Viola.

That was nice to hear somehow. She added a little positive tick to her mental catalog. She didn't have many of those.

"None of them were happy," Archie went on.

"You mean Rosie and Irene?" asked Kelly.

Archie nodded. "I didn't see much of them growing up. I mean, you know how Mom felt. But I didn't *have* to see them much—you could just tell."

Kelly shrugged. "Irene seemed plenty happy whenever she screamed at me."

"I guess..." Archie admitted, "but addicts are happy when they get their next dose, too. They can still be miserable."

"Sometimes I wonder whether they'd all have been happier if they'd started drinking. I guess Rosie's husband did enough of that for the whole family," Kelly said. "I don't see why you're wasting time worrying about Irene. She spent plenty of time yelling at you, too. Honestly, I don't see why you're worrying about Rosie either. Or your mother. How many happy memories do you have of her? I bet you could count them on one hand."

"More than *that*," Archie said with a frown, but Viola noticed he didn't say how many.

Come on, Viola thought, there had to be at least a few dozen. Right? There was that national park trip when all four of the kids were in grade school—well, up until she and Jack had that argument over the tents and they had to go home ... and there were those milkshakes she used to make with Archie on weekends until she realized it was making both of them fat ... Oh, just after she brought home Archie's first baby sister, that had been a good time. Archie was such a sweetheart, helping out in that cute-but-unhelpful way toddlers did. Viola had to redo everything on the sly so she wouldn't hurt his feelings. But even then, there were those hours-long shouting matches at night after Jack came home five hours late, rumpled and smelling like someone else's brand of cigarettes...

Viola's fingers fretted at the hem of her sleeve. How many happy memories did she have at all, really, in her whole life?



Archie continued, “They all got ... stuck. Sometimes I wonder what Mom would have done if she’d been born twenty years later.”

“People have always been pressured into things,” said Kelly. “You’re making excuses. It wouldn’t have changed anything. She could have done things differently if she wanted. She chose to be what she was.”

Viola’s eyes narrowed. She knew the girl couldn’t hear her, but she responded anyway. “Meaning?”

At the same time, Archie said, “Don’t be mean about her.”

Viola smiled. Sweet boy.

Kelly continued, “It’s easy for you to be maudlin. *I* was the one who had to deal with her. At least, by the end, I was free from those other two horrors.”

“*Kelly*,” Archie said, chastising.

His wife finally looked up. She took out a last shirt, threw it in the donation bag beside her, and banged the drawer closed with her hip. “You can’t make me do everything and blame me for how I feel about it. She was a monster-in-law. It wasn’t cute because she was old, or because she was sad, or because she had dreams that never came true. If she wanted to be something else, that was her responsibility. Not mine—and not yours.”

Kelly stopped, breathing heavily after the gust of words. She looked over at her husband; he was fully crying now, though silently, tears streaming openly down his cheeks as he didn’t even try to cover his face.

Viola, who had been stunned by the vehemence of Kelly’s speech—no, not speech, self-important *sermon*—suddenly sparked with anger. She leveled an accusing finger. “You witch,” she growled, not caring that Kelly couldn’t hear. “Leave my son alone. How dare you.”

Kelly’s face had softened. She spoke gently. “She was the parent, Archie. It wasn’t *your* job to take care of *her*. It’s not your fault.”

“But Dad—” Archie started.

“—doesn’t matter,” Kelly finished. “At some point, we’re in charge of ourselves.”

Viola stared at them. Her anger had fizzled out. The pit of her stomach—even though there was nothing in it, could be nothing in it; even though it was ethereal and not really a stomach at all—felt horribly heavy and swollen as if she’d eaten something terrible that had lodged in her so deeply she’d forgotten it wasn’t part of herself.

None of the three of them, the two living humans or the ghost, moved for several minutes. There was no clock in the room to tick, but insects droned outside in the humidity.

Archie looked down at his feet. He wiped at his eyes, and then looked up again, staring glassily out of the window. “I just wonder.”

Kelly said, “I know.”

After a while, Archie picked up his hammer and returned to the broken window frame. Kelly opened the next dresser drawer. Viola went up to the attic to sit by the dormer windows overlooking the farm and think.

\* \* \*

Viola had never brought it up with her sisters because she’d been afraid they’d laugh—but sometimes, when they were little, she’d had fantasies they could be friends.

The fantasies were always strange and hazy because it was so hard to picture. When hatred is your bedrock from the time you understand other people exist, it’s not a thing you can just get away from. Viola’s hatred for her sisters had metastasized before she knew what the word *sister* meant. It was in her fingertips and her tongue and her toes even now when they were all transparent. She could get as far as imagining the three of them as dolls with stitched-on smiles, but the daydream fell apart as soon as she tried to imagine what those sewn-shut mouths would say.

After moving out to get married, Viola had realized that while they all knew that their parents had planted the pernicious seed of hostility by forcing the three sisters to be alike, the truth was that

their parents had also watered, fertilized, and nurtured that seed into bloom by pitting the sisters against each other. When one sister achieved something the others had not, whether easy or extravagant, she became the favorite, showered with praises and treats. The esteem never lasted. Soon enough, Rosalee would get a compliment on her choir singing from the mayor's wife, or Irene would win an attendance award, and favor would pass.

Viola hadn't been the favorite very often. Perhaps that had made it easier to see what their parents were doing. While Rosalee and Irene brawled for approval, Viola watched carefully to snatch up the scraps.

A person could learn to like scraps. A pat on the head—savor the comfort, remember it. A second-hand dress with checkered trim—hang it up and treasure it. The next pat would be for another head, but they couldn't take back the first one. The heirloom Bible and earrings would be doled out to Irene and Rosalee who "deserved the family legacy," but the second-hand dress hanging in the closet never passed judgment.

Except when she gained weight. Then it felt like the dress *was* judging her, the same way it felt when Mom laughed any time Irene called Viola a heifer (during the days before Irene became a cussing expert). Then the dress became a reminder of all the things she *didn't* have, the same way Jack had been every time he came home moping over some "new girl at work." At least she could put the dress in the back of the closet where she didn't have to look at it.

After Rosalee's failed attempt to find Mrs. Fritter, Viola had been gnawed by a parasitic worm of a thought: perhaps the universe *wanted* them to act like the dolls with sewn-on smiles. Maybe it wasn't satisfied by their simply being together; maybe it wouldn't let them go until they all gave in and got along. Could that be their unfinished business?

No, how horrible. To make them responsible for each other's fates? That was how everything had begun in the first place.

Their whole lives, they'd been twined in a horrible dance, a quartet with the house taking the fourth position, continuing long after their parental choreographers were gone. How could they reconcile even if they wanted to? When you keep stirring volatile chemicals, you can't be surprised when they explode.

Sometimes things don't have to mix. Sometimes things are separate.

★ ★ ★

When Viola was done thinking, she went to find Rosalee because Rosalee was easier to persuade than Irene.

"You *really* think you've got a plan that will work?" Rosie asked with a skeptical squint.

"Positive." Viola paused to consider. "Well, maybe about sixty percent."

One corner of Rosie's mouth dipped downward, but allowed it was, "Still worth trying, I guess."

Viola told Rosie that the next step was finding Irene. Rosie complained and tried to convince Viola they didn't really *need* Irene, did they? When that line of persuasion didn't work, Rosie tried to wheedle Viola into at least *telling* her what the plan was before they went off searching for their sister, but Viola found it exhausting to think about trying to explain things twice. More accurately, Viola found it exhausting to think about having to *debate* things twice. She had no desire for a double helping of nit-picking.

In order to make her reasoning more palatable for Rosie, Viola called this "wanting to get everything done at once" rather than "wanting to spare myself a headache (and by the way, I still think it's unfair I have to deal with headaches when I don't even have a real head)." Eventually and grudgingly, with a bit of stomping and a bunch of sighing, Rosie gave in.

The problem was that Irene had been hard to track down ever since the elegy incident. Even though Rosalee was the only one who'd actually *expected* to leave that day, the failure had

disappointed all three of them they did not understand. It had the feeling of a final condemnation, the turning of the key in the lock of the prison door that would cage them here forever.

However, it still felt odd for Rosie and Viola to see how badly the incident had affected Irene. She had, after all, gloated almost unbearably at the time about how she'd "defeated Rosalee's mammering." Yet since then she had become sullen and shadow-eyed, avoiding both becurst farmhouse and belated sisters in favor of haunting remote crannies of the property. Her invective had fallen silent; her glowering was squandered on rodents and spiders.

In contrast, the other two sisters were perfectly able to rely on their usual comforts. Rosalee, for instance, had a lifetime's experience of feeling hard done by when reality refused to reshape itself for her convenience. Whether her peevishness was unreasonable (as in most circumstances) or reasonable (as in this case), she used the same technique to channel her angst—namely, swanning around with great sighs and lamentations.

Thus far, Viola had been able to entertain herself by spying on Archie and her other relatives, but when the need arose, she'd soon be able to resort to her own default behavior of passive aggressively doing chores while snapping at anyone who asked: *everything's fine, don't bother about me, here's your damn laundry*. Granted, her ghostly state made most chores impossible, including laundry, but Viola's self-martyring instincts were no doubt up to the task of finding substitutions.

As for Irene, well ... Even Irene, the erstwhile vulgarian herself, didn't know why salutary activities like flurries of abuse now failed to raise her spirits.

In an inchoate and unarticulated way, Rosalee and Viola had begun to suspect that the cause might lie with Irene's stagnant disposition. During those all-too-short years when Rosalee and Viola had moved away from the farmhouse and their parents and everything else that had made their childhood what it was, they'd found their worst vices alleviated by their new surroundings. In their

outside lives, they had been sometimes affable, even occasionally friendly. This meant that now, from time to time, the two ghosts were able to marshal their admittedly minimal social skills and tolerate each other's company.

For Irene, there existed no such possible relief. She had never done anything—never *wanted* to do anything—but ferment like a herring buried beneath an icy patch of Scandinavian ground. She faced an eternity of nothing but sisterhood—which by her lights was far worse than an eternity of almost anything else.

In any case, Rosie and Viola had to expend significant time and effort before locating Irene near the border of their farm, sitting in the mildew-scented dark under the fallen roof of a shed that had been built for some unknown purpose and then likewise abandoned.

"Leave me alone," Irene said, not even bothering to call anyone a canker-blossom.

With a *pshaw*, Rosie waved her hands in defeat and turned to go. Viola took her arm to stop her from leaving.

"This is important," Viola said.

Irene shrugged.

"You'll want to hear it," Viola added.

Irene repeated herself.

Rosie rolled her eyes. Viola decided it was time to bring out the big guns.

"Rosie was wrong," Viola said.

*That* got Irene's attention. She liked other people being wrong.

Irene turned around. Viola found her sneer oddly reassuring; apparently, Irene's hateful self remained somewhere beneath that mopey facade. Rosie, however, did *not* find the sneer reassuring, given that it was at her expense.

"Of course Rosalee was wrong," Irene said. "She's always wrong."

"I'm *done* with this," Rosie said, turning dramatically on her heel. Viola grabbed her arm again.

“Well?” Irene snapped as if Viola was the one delaying things. “Are you going to say what this is about or not?”

Viola ignored the provocation. “Rosie thought our business was finished now that the three of us are dead. Our business *isn't* finished. It's just beginning.”

“Tsch,” said Irene, waving her off. She looked dangerously ready to turn her back again.

“Will you just give me a *chance*?” Viola complained. “Look, we've been stuck here with each other our entire lives. We were still stuck here even when we were living in other places.”

“Rosalee's been running her mouth about that for years,” Irene said. “So what?”

Viola spread her hands as if revealing a truth in the empty space between her palms. “Everything has always shoved us together. Our *destiny* is being *apart*.”

Neither of Viola's sisters seemed impressed by this revelation.

Viola tried phrasing it a different way. “Our unfinished business is to *leave*.”

“I knew this was a waste of time,” Irene muttered.

“Don't be stupid,” Rosie said to Viola. “We can't leave the farm. That was the *first thing* I tried.”

“No— See, Rosie, you weren't *entirely* wrong,” Viola replied, earning a *tsch* of indignation from Rosie and a *tsch* of dismissal from Irene. Viola continued, “You said we all had to be together, and we did. Just like Mrs. Fritter couldn't leave without her kittens, we couldn't leave until we were all here. But now we *are* all here.” She looked between Rosie and Irene. “Have you tried leaving since I died?”

“Well...” Rosie said, sounding defensive. “I mean, I'd tried so often...”

Irene pitched in, “I don't do things that are obviously a waste of time.”

“That's what I thought,” said Viola. “Do you see what I mean? Now that we're *all* here together, we can *all* leave to go our *separate*

ways.”

“Like leaves dispersing in the wind,” Rosie said in her best poetic voice.

“More or less,” Viola agreed.

“It can’t be that simple, can it?” asked Rosie.

“Some things are simple,” Viola said. “When you were alive, how many times did you lose your glasses and then find them on your head?”

Rosie looked indignant. “Never. Why would I need glasses?”

Viola strove not to roll her eyes. “Okay then, thought your TV was broken, but the cord had just been pulled out of the socket.”

“Never,” Rosie repeated before admitting, “but I *have* thought my curling iron was broken when Eddie tripped the circuit breaker.”

“See?”

Rosie bit her lip. Sometimes she did that to look cute, but this was an unstudied gesture, awkward and thoughtful. “You know? I think you’re right. After all this time, it just seems ... right.”

Fretting nervous fingers, Viola turned to their eldest sister. “So, uh ... What do you think, Irene?”

Despite Irene’s pinched expression—which had been growing more and more contemptuous throughout her sisters’ exchange—Viola entertained a thread of hope that Irene’s disdain might be a mask to conceal her vulnerability. Alas, that hope unraveled as Irene coughed a laugh and pulled to her feet.

“Do whatever you want. Just leave me out of it.”

“Irene—” Viola began, but before she could voice her protest, Irene had already begun to stalk away.

Viola closed her mouth on her unspoken objection. She and Rosie both watched Irene disappear into the ever-growing grasses, heading in the opposite direction from the farmhouse at a surprisingly rapid pace.

“Don’t tell me we’re going to have to run around and find her a second time,” Rosie complained.



Viola shook her head slowly. "I think we're just going to have to try without her."

"Will that work?"

"I don't know." Viola shook her head again then suddenly stopped to laugh. "You know, life never made any sense. I guess there's no reason for the afterlife to."

"Maybe life and death should both get their act together," Rosalee said.

"Well." Shaking away her anxieties, Viola rubbed her hands together as if cleaning off dust. She turned a determined gaze on Rosie. "Tomorrow, I'm going to wake up at dawn and follow the sun East. With any luck, I'll get to keep on going. You should go wherever you want, Rosie, just as long as you don't follow me."

Rosie didn't even pause to think. "I'll go West. I've always wanted to go West."

Viola chuckled. "Gonna take Hollywood by storm?"

Rosie's expression went stormy. Viola realized the comment had come across as a slight. She raised a conciliatory hand.

"Sorry, Rosie. I was joking. If there's a ghost Hollywood, I'm sure you'll be a star."

Rosie, who did not quite believe the apology, arched a skeptical eyebrow. Nevertheless, she chose to forgo pursuing the subject. She asked, "Do you think it's all right if we leave at different times?"

"If we're all doing our separate things, why not?" Viola scratched her elbow. "Why? When do you want to leave?"

"Sunset," Rosie said with the kind of flat intonation used to signal something should have been obvious. "When else are you supposed to ride off at the end of the movie?"

Viola chuckled.

Rosie smoothed the hair behind her ear. "So, this is goodbye then."

"I guess so!" Viola agreed.

Rosalee took Viola's hand. With a flourish worthy of a close-up, she bowed to give it a kiss. "Dearest sister, I sincerely hope never to

see you again.”

\* \* \*

Viola felt some sort of sentimental obligation to wander the farm, taking one last look. She kept waiting for a wave of nostalgia, but none came. It was more like riptides of awkwardness, sudden swells dragging her into memory. Not even anything traumatic, really, just stupid things that made her flinch. Here: that dirt patch surrounded by stones where Rosalee’s friends left Viola out of their games. There: behind the shed where Irene tricked her into sticking her hand into a bucket of live bait.

Oh, and over there: the old carriage house where guests stayed sometimes. That was where she’d said the stupid thing to Aunt Nancy about how it was easy to stay skinny if you weren’t lazy. Aunt Nancy had cried, and then later Viola heard her mother reassuring Aunt Nancy that, “Viola can be a little brat sometimes. I don’t know where she gets these ideas,” as if Viola hadn’t just been repeating something she’d heard from her mother in the first place. Viola often remembered the incident at night. Sometimes it hurt more that she’d upset Aunt Nancy; sometimes it hurt more that Mother could just betray her like that without even pausing.

Where were they now? Aunt Nancy? Mother? Had they died with all their business finished? What had their mother’s business been? *Traumatize your daughters then sit back and watch the show?*

Viola felt guilty about her indifference. You’re supposed to care about your home, aren’t you? Even if you hate it?

Well, supposed to or not, she didn’t.

She did end up spending time with her books of photographs. Their slick smell, which still rose from their ghost pages, made her stomach feel shiny with anticipation.

To go East! Those were the museums she’d always dreamed of in her deepest heart. Not the Louvre or the Uffizi Gallery—however beautiful they looked behind the nun on TV—but the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And the Smithsonian! Where she could see the Star-

Spangled Banner, the *Spirit of St. Louis*, the microphone from the Fireside Chats. Viola was going to walk past brownstones; stare up at goddesses carved into marble facades; explore tall ships in Boston Harbor. She was going to stand in the spray of Niagara Falls and, thanks to ethereal resilience, she could even dive down it if she wanted to. She flipped through her books until dark, but every beautiful Mediterranean villa and French vineyard only made her itch to head for Central Park.

After a night's fitful sleep, it was dawn. Viola wasn't surprised to find the porch was empty, its steps layered with sawdust that the sisters' ghost footsteps couldn't disturb. The goodbye she'd exchanged with Rosalee yesterday had felt final. Even if Irene had known Viola was leaving, she'd never have come. She'd probably be cackling with joy up in the attic.

Viola took a deep breath. She straightened her ghost hair and her ghost dress. Not that anyone would see her—or would they? If there could be a ghost cat, why not ghost elevator operators and ghost cigarette girls? Maybe Rosalee would get her ghost Hollywood after all, full of departed swains and starlets.

Maybe.

Hopefully.

She set her feet to the path and went.

★ ★ ★

Rosie slipped into the front room to watch as Viola set off. She didn't call out; they'd said their goodbyes. As Viola passed out of sight, Rosie felt a little choked up. She'd always been sentimental.

Now that she had made the decision to go West, Rosalee couldn't imagine how she hadn't decided to do it when she was alive. She'd wanted to all her life, hadn't she? At least, all of her life before she did her best to stop wanting things.

She'd only been fifteen when she took up with Eddie. Neither of them came from families that believed in taking time between taking vows and making babies. She already had one squalling in her arms

by the time Eddie decided that alcohol was the best cure for an ex-bachelor's boredom. If there was more boredom after you'd drunk your first five shots, he believed, then the answer was to keep drinking until you were either cheered up or passed out. Eventually, instead of not caring much about family life, Eddie stopped caring much about life at all.

Rosalee had rocked the baby and thrown her ambitions out with the bathwater. Well, what else was she going to do? Ambitions are halfway thrown out by the time you grow up anyway, especially ambitions of stardom—which, let's be honest, are about as likely as a manifestation of your long-dead childhood cat appearing to pester you about going outside.

Could she even remember—*really* remember, down to her bones—a time when going to the cinema *wasn't* about counting pennies and wrangling kids? When she was a child, going to the theater had been different; it had stirred a promise of wonder and beauty in her chest. She remembered the promise. The feeling was gone.

*Had* been gone. She could feel it flickering again like a single bulb coming back to life on the long-dark frame of a backstage mirror.

Through the window, Rosie kept watching the empty road that led away from the farmhouse, honestly expecting to see her middle sister pop back onto the porch any second. She watched long past the time it should have taken for Viola to walk off the property and then kept watching longer. She watched and watched until it was ten in the morning, and then eleven, and then noon, and the porch was still empty.

*The porch was still empty.*

Viola was headed East! Or maybe she'd disappeared in a puff, or ended up in the afterlife, or who knew what—but whatever had happened, she wasn't *here* anymore.

Rosie still had hours before her planned departure. She wished Mrs. Fritter were still around so she could say goodbye with a pat on the head, but the cat had napped long ago. Rosie went to find Irene

instead—well, again, she'd always been sentimental. She couldn't find her, though, and eventually gave up.

As dusk settled, Rosalee stood at the base of the porch steps, looking back up at the railing where Mrs. Fritter had been perching the first time she'd tried to walk away. Viola's daughter-in-law had stripped the paint off so they could redo everything for the sale. Too bad, since the porch had just been redone. Wait, no, it had been almost ten years! She laughed.

Sunset flushed the Western horizon pink, and Rosalee headed toward the lights and the cameras.

\* \* \*

Irene was having none of it.

Unfinished business? By the double-barreled jumping jiminetty, she wasn't going to let some bobolyne like destiny push her around. Maybe some people really did die with "unfinished business," whatever that meant. Certainly, the common froward barely possessed the wherewithal to tie their own shoes. But it wasn't as though *she'd* ever asked the universe for its opinion, thank you very much.

Besides, Viola and Rosalee had told her to do it and there was no way she was going to obey *them*.

Irene stayed in the farmhouse, and why not? When it contained an appropriate number of sisters, which was to say absolutely none, there was nothing wrong with the old place. If Viola and Rosalee were correct that the three of them had been fated to go their own directions—note the *if*, it was a pretty long shot that either one of them would be right about anything—then she'd chosen the direction "staying put."

During the day, various factions of nieces, nephews, and hangers-on tramped all over the house. Irene had never bothered to keep track of Viola's and Rosalee's broods; she registered them as anonymous blob. That was, until she had the nasty surprise of finding her *own* children mooching around the kitchen. The gall! So

she wasn't good enough when she was alive, but now that the smell of inheritance was in the air, the estranged sorners ran in like dogs after the dinner bell.

Irene spent several creative hours swearing at her perfidious progeny, but their living ears heard nothing. For the first time, Irene missed her sisters a bit.

*A bit.*

Eventually, the parade of useless relatives became a parade of useless home buyers who squinted at things and yawped about widening windows and knocking out walls. The family that settled in had both a daughter and a son. This offended Irene's anti-sibling sensibilities, but their parents never forced them to interact with each other so that was all right.

The daughter got a bad-tempered pet rat for her birthday that bit her a lot. When it got sick, the family let it die. Although it was particularly absurd to imagine why a pet rat would become a ghost, the next day when Irene went to look, there the thing was, nosing around its cage. Irene reached in to take it out; it chomped down in hello; thereafter, they were best friends.

Most days, the rat rode around on Irene's shoulder, chit-chit-chittering as Irene paced the house making her own acrimonious observations. The rat proved to be a surprisingly good listener who enjoyed Irene's secondary occupation of settling in the armchair to read aloud from the family's regrettable collection of tasteless paperbacks. (The armchair had once been designated for the father; eventually, with an appropriate but subconscious apprehension, he bought a second sofa.) While Irene sometimes threw the soul of a particularly stupid technothriller across the room, the rat itself was an undiscerning literary connoisseur. It was perfectly content to listen to anything, including the occasional time travel romance that Irene felt vaguely guilty about pulling off the shelf.

From time to time, Irene wondered what had happened to her sisters. By now, had they passed through some rupture like Mrs. Fritter?

Ridiculous. How incredibly stupid to walk into who-knows-where just because the entry is shiny. Even if she *did* see a portal like that, Irene was planning to cling to the Earth like an angry barnacle.

Here, she had a rat, a bountiful quantity of dubious quality books, and a pair of teenagers to learn new insults from. Fulfilling? Perhaps not. But who said life should be fulfilling? She could be unfulfilled if she wanted to.

She told the rat as much. It seemed to agree.



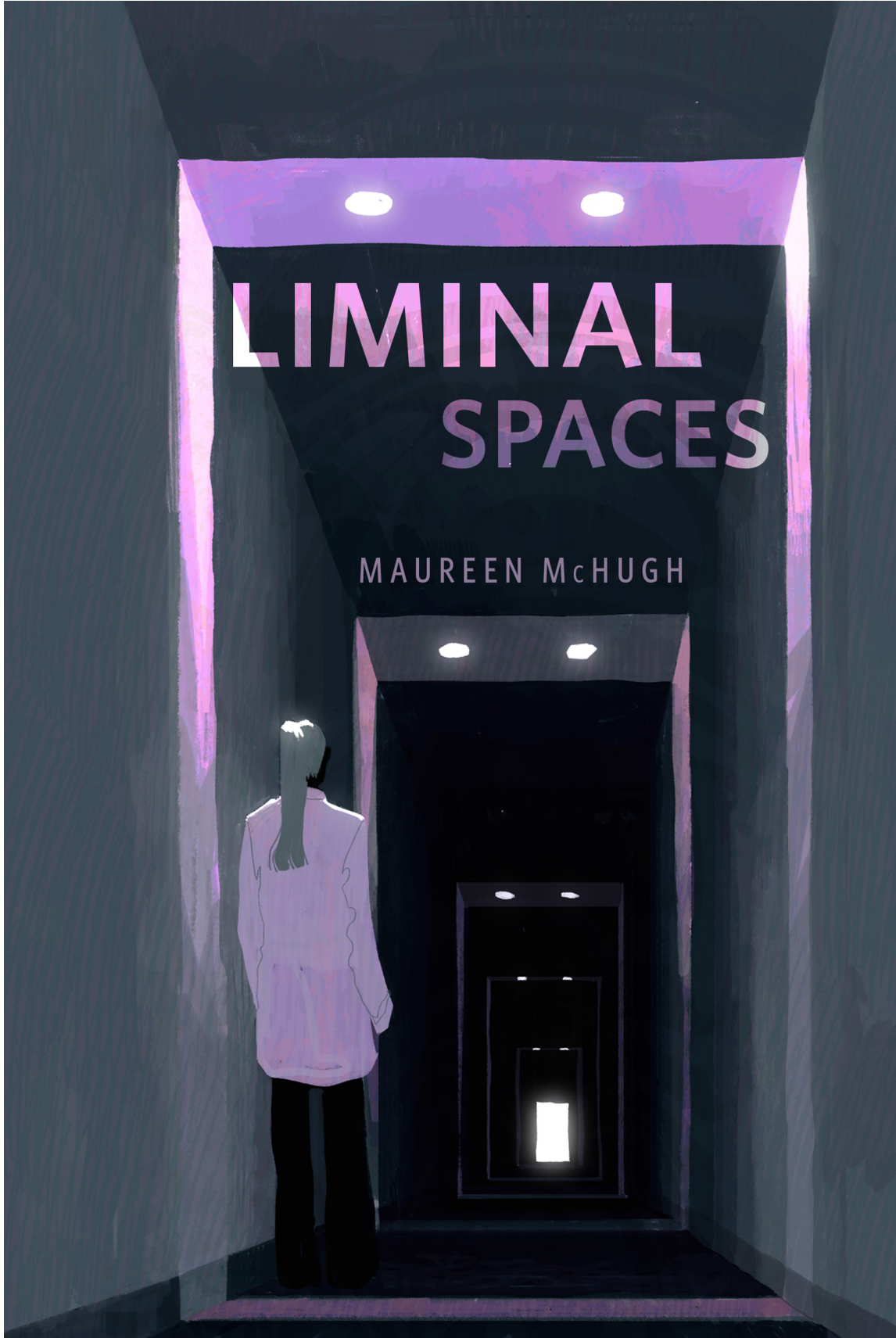
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# LIMINAL SPACES

MAUREEN McHUGH



# Liminal Spaces

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**MAUREEN McHUGH**

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*illustration by*

KATHERINE LAM

**T O R  
D O T  
C O M**

When she got off the plane, Amelia was thinking about her boyfriend, Jerome. They'd been arguing about the laundry.

"If you want me to do the laundry, just tell me to do it!" Jerome had said. They'd been together for six years. During the pandemic they'd bought a townhouse in South Austin and were now in huge joint debt, plus Amelia's student loan. They'd been talking about marriage, but really, they didn't have to get married to be completely bound to each other.

She was walking down the concourse, past gates. For a moment she thought, *Where am I?* So many airports. Right, she was at Dallas Fort Worth, which honestly was a pretty distinctive airport, but airports tended to look more like each other than they did the place where they were. The gates were some combination of blue and gray and white. The shops might be different from airport to airport but they all had to be laid out pretty much the same. She flew through Dallas a lot for work. That day, she was headed to Madison, Wisconsin, to sooth a client who had fears about the fire in the LED installation on the Tallin Building in Atlanta and wanted assurance that the installation they were doing on their building wasn't going to catch fire.

She was in Concourse C and the connecting flight was in A. The airport wanted everyone to take the inter-airport monorail, but she was at the end of the concourse and to get the train she'd have to go back to the middle. She was right next to a corridor that connected the two concourses, so it was shorter to just walk across. And she'd get steps.

Her mind went back to Jerome. The pandemic had been tough. They were both working remote. She loved him, she really did. But sometimes she didn't know how she was going to spend the rest of her life with someone who couldn't see an overflowing laundry basket. She didn't wait for Jerome to tell her to clean the bathroom. It was a chore. You do chores when they need to be done. When she saw the bathroom needed cleaning, she might put it off for a couple of days because, you know, bathroom. Then she buckled down and did it. She didn't run to Jerome and tell him, either. Jerome always announced, "I'm doing laundry." And "If you hear the dryer buzzer, tell me." "And I did laundry." Like every time he did something, he was supposed to be praised.

She resisted the impulse to offer him a medal. She knew that lots of people had partners who didn't do anything. Or who gambled or drank or something. Jerome was a great guy; at least he was willing to do laundry. But damn it, she didn't mention when she did the bathroom. Or planned dinners for the week. Or went grocery shopping.

The connecting corridor was without windows. Truly, she could have been in almost any medium or large airport in the U.S. Blue signs with white lettering, polished gray floor. Mostly empty at the moment, between waves of arrivals and departures.

Thinking about Jerome was probably why she wasn't really paying attention. That and the fact it was an airport. She knew and understood the method and rhythms of airports. She kind of thought the corridor seemed longer than she remembered (thank God she had an hour and twenty minutes between connections). There was a broad corridor going off to the left that she definitely didn't remember. It shook her out of her ruminations. She peered down the length of it and could see it opened up onto another concourse. It was running at right angles to the other concourses. But it couldn't—there wasn't room for a terminal there, there were buildings and roads and stuff. It was like finding there was a room in her townhouse where the townhouse next door should be.

She had a good mental map of Dallas Fort Worth. It was like three doughnuts on a stick. She was in the center of the airport structure, the stick, and all the gates were around the edges of the doughnuts because, of course, planes had to land, and they pulled up to the outside of the airport. This shouldn't have had gates; the planes shouldn't have been able to pull up. It didn't look right—it was a big open space, white with big windows. It looked like an airport, but it didn't look quite like Dallas. Airports looked a lot alike, but if you spent a lot of time in them, there were familiar things, and it didn't feel like Dallas. For one thing, it looked new. Which obviously it was.

She had time. She walked down the corridor. As she got farther down, the noise got louder, clearer. Busy airport noise.

It was a concourse. She'd never seen it before. But it was obviously open. There were gates and restaurants. She couldn't figure out the gates. She pulled out her phone to see if she could find out where they were and her phone said it was an hour later, that she had just fifteen minutes to get her flight. Which made no sense.

Then it asked her if she wanted free Wi-Fi from the Charlotte Douglas International Airport.

Wait, she was at Dallas Fort Worth. She was headed to Wisconsin. She called up Google Maps and it put her right square in the middle of Concourse C in Charlotte, North Carolina.

She was having some kind of psychotic break. Nervous, she walked back down the corridor and called Jerome.

"Hey babe," Jerome said, easy, and picturing him, his glasses, his long hands, dark skin and pale beautiful nails, his voice calmed her a little.

"Hey, what day is it?" she asked.

"Tuesday," he said. "The day you go to ... um ..."

She could picture him leaning to see his calendar. "Go to Wisconsin."

"Yeah," she said. "About that. I think I'm in Charlotte."

“What?” he asked. “Wait. How are you?”

She was at the *T* to the shortcut that she’d taken in Dallas. It was still empty. Honestly, what she should have done was check her boarding pass, see if she had some clue how she got here. She left Austin this morning; even if she got on the wrong plane, she shouldn’t be in Charlotte. “What time is it?” She pulled her phone from her ear and checked the time.

It wasn’t almost one o’clock, she had an hour and fifteen minutes to get to her gate. She’d gotten her hour back.

“It’s almost noon,” he said, which meant she was in the same time zone he was. She was back in Texas. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she said. She checked Google Maps. She was in Dallas Fort Worth. She looked behind her. She could still see the place she thought was Charlotte. “Shit, never mind,” she said. “I think I’m traveling too much.”

“Just don’t become George Clooney,” Jerome said. “Hey, if you’re not all right, I could drive up there and get you.”

“No, no,” she said. He was such a good guy. Except for the laundry-blindness thing. And the fact that sometimes instead of listening, he tried to fix things. She was an engineer, she was perfectly capable of fixing things; sometimes she just wanted to talk. “You know all airports look alike,” she said. “I just saw a restaurant that I thought was in another airport.”

“Legal Sea Foods?” he said hopefully. They’d eaten there in Philadelphia airport and he loved the chowder.

“Nah,” she said. After they ended the call, she walked back to the Charlotte place, only this time she held the phone in her hand. She was halfway down the corridor when the time shifted from Central to Eastern.

She stopped and checked Google Maps. She was in Charlotte.

What if the way back stopped taking her to Texas?

She felt so scared she felt sick. She jogged back to the *T* in the corridor. Back in Texas, according to her phone.

Now she was truly freaked. She walked to her gate.

She sat at the gate. She got up once to see if the corridor to Charlotte was still there but stopped and sat back down, afraid she’d miss boarding or something.

Or just afraid.

She flew to Madison. The airport in Madison was nice, not too big. Blues, grays, anonymous.

She didn’t connect through Dallas on the way back so she couldn’t check again. But she thought about it a lot.

It was impossible, which meant there was something else going on. She was experiencing psychosis, or false memory. Or she had dozed at the gate and dreamed it. Travel did things to people. Strung them out, disoriented them, exhausted them. When she dozed on the hop to Austin, she dreamed of corridors and gates, and giant shiny pinballs rolling through them, which shook her awake.

And then it was the holidays, and she didn't fly anywhere for two glorious months.

★ ★ ★

She flew again at the end of January. Headed to support one of the sales guys on a pitch in Pittsburgh.

She wasn't even thinking about the weird Dallas thing when her flight landed late in Chicago. Chicago was always a disaster. She had calculated that she missed about half her connecting flights going through O'Hare, but it rarely mattered because she just found a kiosk and rescheduled, often for an hour later. This time, when she rebooked, she had a three-hour layover. Which seriously, she didn't mind. She sent a text to Pittsburgh, telling Seth, her coworker, that she'd been rescheduled and would be late.

There were shops and restaurants. Why did so many airports have navy blue carpet at their gates? Was blue supposed to represent the sky? Freedom? She'd read that blue was calming, which, God knew, airports needed these days.

But she could always use the steps. She tried to get the magic ten thousand even though she knew that the number wasn't nearly as meaningful as they all thought. Walking was better than sitting.

Chicago was crowded. (Chicago was always crowded.) She dodged and weaved, seething silently at the family all walking abreast toward the gates at the end of Concourse H, taking up the whole freaking walkway except for just enough width for one or two people to pass them on the right. Self-absorbed tourists with no sense of courtesy or airport etiquette. *Walk like you drive, she thought. Stay to the right, look before you dart through the sea of people. Give a rat's ass. Everyone around you is people, not obstacles, things.*

She saw a service door open and another walkway. It didn't look like the back areas of airports, which tended towards the industrial. It had blue walls and was shiny and front-facing and was running parallel to this walkway, so she stepped through.

Most people, like her, must not have known about this area. There were fewer people in the concourse and at the gates, and she felt calmer just because it all was less frantic. She checked her steps. 3,298. She passed the Great Lakes Brewing Company and noticed that this was Concourse C? Which was impossible because Concourse C was on the other side of O'Hare. She walked toward baggage and things felt—off. She pulled out her phone.

Her phone thought she was in Cleveland. She was in Cleveland Hopkins Airport. She walked back and saw the service door to Chicago. People passed it without seeming to notice. She stepped into Chicago. No one seemed to register either the door or that she just appeared.

She stepped back into Cleveland. She could feel the difference. Cleveland felt less overwhelming. The whole vibe of the airport felt different. Less frantic. Less

noise. The carpet at the gates was gray instead of blue, but the pillars were navy.

Part of her said that she needed to jump back to Chicago before the door closed or disappeared or whatever.

But what was the worst that would happen? If she got stuck in Cleveland, she just walk out through baggage claim and then go buy a ticket to Pittsburgh.

Or maybe she was in some sort of fugue state and was actually wandering around Chicago in a daze. It didn't feel like she was. She checked the date; it was the right date to be flying to Pittsburgh. Seth, maybe one of her least favorite sales guys, was waiting for her to come in and answer questions about how they could do an installation on a building on the National Register of Historic Places (which meant there were rules about drilling into the façade). She hated the project because the only way they could secure scaffolding to install the frames that held the LED panels was to drill into the mortar between the sheets of Pennsylvania limestone that covered the façade, and she was worried about safety. But the higher ups had sold the company on LEDs and she was supposed to make it work.

Being in Cleveland was kind of the least of her problems, right? Hell, from Cleveland she could rent a car and drive there in less than three hours, which was a lot less time than it would take her to fly. But what would happen when she didn't show up for her flight in Chicago?

What *could* happen? People didn't show up for flights all the time. It wasn't like the airlines cared. Some poor sod would get her seat and their day would be made 100 percent better. She walked down the concourse, thinking. Did she have the nerve? This really didn't make any sense. She should be freaked out. But it always felt like airports were liminal spaces, not really local, not really not. She saw a place to eat called Bar Symon. On a whim, she went in and sat down.

It was nice. She ordered pierogies and kielbasa—she didn't eat much meat, but she thought pierogies sounded interesting. She didn't google them. She ordered a beer, too, another thing she rarely did, especially during the day because day drinking made her tired and made the rest of the afternoon feel like forever. The beer was good. The pierogies were tasty. Sort of a cross between an Asian dumpling and a knish, filled with mashed potatoes and cheese. She paid with her credit card and got an alert on her phone immediately asking if this was fraud. She said NO.

She wasn't sure if she felt exhilarated or terrified. Would the credit card company figure out that she couldn't possibly be in Cleveland?

The server brought the check and receipt, and Amelia almost left the receipt because she couldn't think of turning it in on her expense account. But it was tangible. It was proof.

As she walked back toward the door, she became convinced that it was closed or gone or something. She really didn't want to rent a car she couldn't explain and drive to Pittsburgh. She'd have to pay out of pocket because she couldn't expense it, and they'd just bought a new couch and they put it on a credit card, and she didn't want another big purchase. But mostly because it felt weird. It occurred to

her that they'd bought an airport–navy blue couch. She was definitely traveling too much.

The door was still there, and she couldn't help breaking into a jog, and then walked through. The noise of Chicago O'Hare hit her like a low-pressure system—pervasive, but familiar. Thick. Go back, something said, but she didn't.



She kept the receipt in her wallet. It was a talisman. She kept her eyes open. She flew to Pittsburgh again for the installation of the screen. The façade of the building had to be tuck-pointed and brought up to code, but the screen was designed to fit the old façade. Construction crews didn't work to engineering tolerances. The building wasn't square to a quarter inch, much less the tolerances of the LED frames. Years had shifted it, not enough to be problem, but enough to make construction complicated. "A building like this," one of the masons said, "she's an old lady." He laid his hand flat against the stone. "She's got opinions."

She had installers seventy feet up the side of a building on scaffolding that couldn't be secured to the façade because the building was on the National Register of Historic Places. Pennsylvania limestone cladding, quarried in the state. The façade was a nightmare. It didn't feel safe enough.

She adjusted the frames for the LEDs, and she asked the mason about angling the brackets. She knew he'd say, "It won't work," and he did. She mused out loud to the mason about floating them off a frame hung over the lip of the roof, about how long it would take to fabricate it, about shutting down the job until they find a solution.

The mason rose to the bait. He suggested a way they could mount the brackets at an angle, driving supports in at the masonry joint, which they were allowed to do.

"You're a smart cookie," he said, and winked at her.

She smiled back, thinking about airports.

At the Pittsburgh Airport, there were no secret doors or unexpected corridors.

She didn't travel for a couple of months, and then it was late spring, and she was off to Denver, Colorado.

No secret corridors. No doors to another space.

Oh, the job was interesting. The North Face (the people who made parkas and stuff) wanted to build a curved interactive LED screen in their lobby. She went back twice over the summer, and then flew to Sea-Tac for another pitch in Tacoma. They didn't get the Denver job, but she brought Jerome North Face swag—a polo shirt and a pair of Smartwool socks. She dressed like an engineer, awkward and practical, but Jerome liked clothes.

By Thanksgiving, she concluded that when she brought the receipt back from Cleveland she broke something.



Broke something. Not like dropping-her-phone breaking something, more like surface-tension breaking something. Like she had been skittering across space like a water bug, and the weight of the receipt was too much and broke the surface tension.

She was home in their townhouse, which, despite their touches, she was beginning to think of as like a lot of other two-story townhouses, stuck in a row of identical studios and one- and two-bedrooms. The carpet was contractor-grade off-white. The bathroom fixtures and the cabinets were serviceable, but looked like the fixtures and cabinets in Boise, Idaho, or Norfolk, Virginia. Maybe it was good that she broke the surface tension. What if she found a door in their townhouse that led to another townhouse? What if someone was living there? It could all get awkward and weird. She got anxious in the bathroom, expecting a stranger to walk in.

Jerome worked from home four days a week. She worked three days at home, and two days in the office. The two overlap days were difficult. Jerome claimed the bedroom, and they'd put a desk in there. She worked downstairs and dealt with insistent cats—convinced that because she was home, she needed to pay attention to them—and Jerome's frequent trips to the kitchen for coffee.

Jerome clattered in the kitchen. Faces stare at her from the computer. The virtual panopticon. She finished the meeting and shut it down.

"How's it going?" Jerome asked.

"Same old, same old." She couldn't explain why she said suddenly, "I had a really weird experience last year."

"What?" Jerome asked. He was so amazing. Tall, lanky, smart. She was pretty sure he was out of her league.

"I, ah, was in the airport, Dallas Fort Worth, and I found this corridor, you remember? I called you ..."

"Yeah?" he asked. He didn't remember. Not his fault; why would he remember a random conversation. He sipped his coffee.

"And I thought it was, like, a shortcut. Between the terminals. That it would be faster. But it took me to Charleston."

He waited, clearly not understanding.

"One minute I was in Texas. The next I was in North Carolina. You know, NASCAR, the whole nine yards."

"You got on the wrong plane?" he asked. She could see him racking his brain, trying to remember when this might have been.

"No," she said. "It was a corridor, connecting the two airports."

"I don't understand," Jerome said. He had been listening, Jerome often tried really hard to listen, which made her feel like she was imposing, but now he was *listening*.

"Me neither," she admitted. "I mean my phone said it. I was there. And then I walked back down the corridor and caught my plane. From Dallas. And it happened again, when I was flying to Pittsburgh. I was in Chicago and I saw a

door and another concourse, and I, you know, went and looked and I was in Cleveland.”

“Amelia,” he said slowly, “I don’t know what you’re trying to say.”

“It happened!” she said. She dug through her wallet and pulled out a receipt. “Here, look.”

He studied it. She loved his hands. He had large, beautiful hands, palm-a-basketball-sized hands, and since he was tall and black, was always being asked if he played basketball. He did not, in fact, play basketball. He hated the outdoors, hated organized exercise, grudgingly did yoga because he had back problems and his doctor had said, “Do yoga now or have back surgery at fifty.”

He was studying the receipt. “You got this when you went through the door? To Cleveland?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I had lunch in Cleveland, and then walked back through the door to Chicago and flew to Pittsburgh.”

“I don’t get it,” he said.

“Me neither. But now it doesn’t happen anymore, so it doesn’t matter.” Her own bitterness caught her by surprise.

“What doesn’t happen?”

“The spaces. The door, the corridor. After I brought back the receipt, it stopped.”

He came over and sat down on the ottoman they used as a coffee table. He was wearing his fancy North Face socks and no shoes. “Ame, you’re scaring me.”

“Look!” She pulled up her calendar and scrolled back to the Pittsburgh flight. “Look. I was in Chicago. I missed my connection and scheduled a later one. Then I had lunch in Cleveland. See? It’s on the receipt. Cleveland Hopkins Airport.”

Jerome frowned in concentration, looking at the calendar. Then the receipt. “You did this. You walked through a door, and you were in another airport.”

“Yeah,” she said.

He studies her calendar. “I don’t know what to say. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“The first time, I thought I’d fallen asleep at the gate or something.” *And it sounds crazy*, she thought. “I thought you would think I was psychotic. I thought I might be.”

“And now you can’t do it anymore?” he asked. “You just, like ... know it?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know how to test it, empirically.” Honestly, she didn’t know anything.

They talked about it and then Jerome had to go upstairs and work. They talked about it some more that night in bed, turning it over between them. (Jerome liked talking after the lights were out. Or in the car. He said it was a guy thing.) They talked about it some the next day, sitting at their kitchen table eating take-out burritos, handing it back and forth like a smoothly worn stone. And then they ran out of things to say. There had never been very much to say about it anyway.

It became a thing in the background. Something that had happened. Better than a secret, Amelia thought. Secrets were toxic.

★ ★ ★

Austin to Dallas to London. She drove to the airport in the rain.

It was an exciting possibility, working with Dua Lipa's people to create a screen for her concert. Most of this kind of work was handled by a few big entertainment engineering firms. This time, it was Taylor-Halston in London. They had too much work and were looking for a subcontractor. Getting into entertainment was a new revenue stream. The boss was in London pitching the project, and Amelia was flying out to meet him to say engineering things about fire-retardant plastics and installation.

She was thinking about the challenges. Big-venue music concerts had complicated rules. Everything had to go together without tools because that way the guys assembling the stage set couldn't drop a hammer or a wrench on someone by accident. It had to all break down to fit in a tractor trailer to be driven to the next city, the next stadium, the next concert venue, and set up in forty-eight hours. She was thinking about strapping, which was part of the assembly, when she saw a hallway. The hallway was a maintenance hallway, the kind you normally only catch a glimpse of as someone who works at the airport either appears out of it or disappears into it, but this was just standing open and she could see the short hallway and where it ended.

She turned sharply right, cutting across the concourse.

"Hey!"

It was a woman, maybe late thirties, standing near the hallway, holding a coffee.

"Sorry," Amelia said. "Is it restricted?"

"No, it's just that you noticed it." The woman walked over. "I notice them, too."

Amelia got goose bumps on her arms. "You've done it?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Lynne." She stuck out her hand. She was brittle-looking, her face pinched. Her hair was loose and a little messy.

"Amelia. You ... do you know how it works?"

Lynne looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. Do you find them every time you go to an airport?"

"I didn't at first," Lynne said. "You have to not think about them. I mean, you have to want the destination, but not think about it. I can't explain it. I mean, that's how it works for me, I think."

Like Dostoevsky said, the hardest thing to do is to make yourself not think of a large white bear. Just tell yourself not to and it's all you can think about.

"Is it random?" Amelia asked.

Lynne shrugged.

“I mean, what airport connects to what. Does Dallas always connect to Charlotte?”

“Not for me,” Lynne said. “Greg said it mostly stayed the same for him.”

She was an engineer, problem-solving.

*Greg?* “There are others?” Amelia asked.

“There are,” Lynne said. “I’ve met three others, you’re the fourth. Two of the others are women, and I’ve only seen them once, both in Denver. Greg, I’ve seen him three times. I think he does this a lot or something.” Lynne said she could kind of get close to the airport she wanted. She’d wanted Houston and Austin. She’d come here through the door trying for Houston or Austin and gotten Austin.

Okay, Lynne could kind of control it?

“Do you always get close?” she asked Lynne.

“Sometimes,” Lynne said. She looked uncomfortable.

Amelia wanted to know how often she traveled, how often she got close. She wanted to plug this into Excel, get a feel for it. People were terribly unreliable, but numbers were better. Still, Lynne didn’t look like she wanted to be interrogated about how often she flew, how often she found doors and corridors, how often she got close.

Lynne pointed to the door Amelia had seen. “It goes to JFK. You might be able to get to London from there.”

Amelia had forty minutes until her plane boarded. She gave Lynne her business card. “Email me?”

Lynne didn’t seem to want her business card. “I’ve ... um, never ... um.” Amelia really wanted to go through the door to JFK. Lynne stumbled through trying to explain something. “I never, I mean, the other people, you know ... except in airports ...”

“Email me?” Amelia said. She didn’t think Lynne ever would.

JFK was blue, white, and gray, sound echoing off hard surfaces. She glanced back. Lynne was still visible through the doorway, clutching her coffee. She still had that pinched look.

It was almost 5:00 p.m., Texas time. Amelia never flew into JFK after noon. Arriving international flights got priority for runways (because, Amelia supposed, no one wanted to run out of fuel over the Atlantic). If there was weather anywhere up and down the East Coast, or any other reason for a delay, getting out of JFK was a nightmare. But she wasn’t flying out of JFK.

She had to stop thinking about it. She should have asked Lynne if she should do anything to get the way to open to London. Think about London?

She paced, pulling her roller bag, looking at the terminal, making herself notice the restaurants and shops. Hudson News. She should get something, get a receipt to show Jerome. She could call him. It felt weird to call someone, like this was her secret and if she told someone it would break the spell or something. But no secrets, she didn’t like keeping secrets. They were like a wound, they got infected, then they spilled infection everywhere. She called him.

“Hey, babe,” Jerome said. “What’s up?”

“I’m at JFK,” she said.

Brief pause, then, “You hate JFK,” he said.

He didn’t realize what it meant.

“No, I was in Austin and then I, I walked through a door and now, here I am!”

“Wait, what?”

“You know, like I told you, about airports. The receipt from Cleveland Airport.”

Then he caught it. “Holy shit, are you kidding?”

“Hold on,” she said. She took a photo of the arrivals/departure board. “I sent you a picture,” she said. “You see the flight departing for Austin? I’m in New York!”

“You said it didn’t work anymore!”

“I know!” She could feel all the excitement bubbling up in her. “I KNOW!”

“Wow,” he said. “Think you could get to London? Does there have to be a flight from the airport you’re at to the airport you want to go to? I mean, it’s JFK, so there’s flights to London.”

“I don’t know! I don’t know how it works! I met another person, a woman, who sees the doors and corridors, too. The woman I met said one guy could sort of go where he wanted but I don’t know if it’s true. I should have talked to her more!”

She kept him on the phone, chattering, sending pictures. She found a sign that said JFK was renovating Terminal 4. COMING IN 2023, A \$1.5 BILLION RENOVATION AND EXPANSION OF TERMINAL 4!

“You gotta buy me something,” Jerome said. Jerome dressed impeccably, even when working from home. Tech-bro button-downs, a four-hundred-dollar pair of Grigio Suede Milano loafers that he may have loved more than he loved Amelia (but not more than the cat, thank God). “You want a T-shirt that says ‘I love New York’?” she asked. “A shot glass?”

“Anything,” he said. “Are you looking for a way to London?”

“I don’t think it works that way. Lynne said you can’t think about it,” she said. “I mean, I’m not sure, but after Cleveland I kept looking but I didn’t find one until I stopped. I don’t know if the guy who says he can kind of get where he wants was telling the truth. I mean, I never met him, or anyone other than that woman.”

She bought the worst NY touristy T-shirt she could find—she’d make him wear it to sleep. She had to pee and there was a line but she was so energized, she didn’t care. She FaceTimed Jerome after that so he could see.

He kept saying, “This is wild.”

Then he said, “When’s your flight?”

She had another hour, but it was time to go back.

The door was gone.

“Maybe you just missed it,” Jerome said. “It’s okay, babe.”

She was panicking. Her heart was pounding. “I’m so stupid,” she said. “God, I’m so stupid.”

“Take a breath,” Jerome said. “It’s okay. Take your time.”

She looked for the door. She looked for Lynne. "Maybe it was Lynne's door," she said. "Maybe she already came back and it closed. Stupid! So stupid."

"Seriously," Jerome said. "It's okay. Hold on."

"Hold on?" she asked. She didn't shriek, but she was having a meltdown, she could tell.

"You got your meds?" he asked.

She did, she had her anxiety meds. She dry-swallowed a gabapentin.

"I ... I gotta get a flight, don't I," she said.

"I'm gonna look online," Jerome said. "See if I can book you a flight to London from JFK, okay babe?"

"It's gonna be so expensive! We can't afford it!" she wailed.

"We'll worry about that later." She could hear keys clattering. "I've got it. I've got it. You're okay. I got one. It leaves at eight p.m. It's not so bad. It's about seven hundred dollars. Well, more like eight hundred dollars."

"Jer, I'm so so sorry!"

"It's okay, babe."

Oh God. Would, like, the FBI realize that she was supposed to be in Austin? She had checked in there. Were they going to think it was fraud? That she was a terrorist? She stayed on the phone with Jerome while she went out through baggage and came back in and checked in at Delta. Thank God she'd been flying American Airlines. Maybe since she was on another airline they wouldn't notice that she had just been in another city and shouldn't be able to be here. She kept waiting for someone to say something. Her luggage was on another goddamned plane. What would she say if they said something?

No one said anything.

She told Jerome she loved him and hung up. Then she sat at the gate with her head down and cried.

Nothing happened. She picked up her luggage in Heathrow where it sat waiting in the baggage office. No one even asked why she hadn't gotten it on the baggage carousel.

She popped gabapentin and floated in a wave of squashed anxiety through her trip. No one said anything about her missed flight when she flew back.

After that, she stopped looking altogether, and if she thought she saw a corridor or a door, she looked the other way. If she thought she saw Lynne (and she thought she saw Lynne a lot, although the few times she let herself really look, it never was Lynne) she walked the other way.

She counted her steps, avoided airport junk food, and stayed in her lane, so to speak.

They got the Dua Lipa project and it turned into a fucking nightmare. Every time she flew to London, she was a wreck.

She started thinking that she was tired of this, tired of traveling so much. The company was doing well, there were more trips, more projects, they hired more engineers. She was promoted to a project manager. The money was better but, on

the side, she started looking at job listings on LinkedIn and Monster. She thought about how their townhouse was like a lot of other townhouses, so she painted the living room walls sage and put a wallpaper mural in the bedroom. It looked like a giant eighteenth-century illustration. She'd seen it online on a site called Apartment Therapy. It made the townhouse look different, not like every other townhouse. It helped her stop thinking that some stranger might open the door into their place.

★ ★ ★

Jerome started talking about marriage. They hashed out that they didn't want kids. (Jerome, she thought, kind of did. But not enough to fight about it, at least not yet.) For the first time since they'd moved in together, they decided to go on vacation. They chose Maui. And of course, in LAX, Los Angeles International Airport, where they were connecting, Amelia saw a corridor.

She turned so abruptly that Jerome said, "You need a bathroom?"

"No," she said, "there's another concourse."

"You mean, like JFK?" he said.

She nodded.

"Where?" he asked.

"Between gate 21 and gate 23A," she said.

He squinted. "I don't see it, Ame."

"That's okay," she said. She kept walking to their gate.

Jerome followed, jogging a little to catch up. "Don't you want to check it out?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"But it's your door, right? We can do like you did before. Just look and then come back. I mean, what if it's Kahului Airport? What if we don't have to fly?"

"What if it's Saint Petersburg, Russia and we get arrested?" she snapped.

"Well, it's always been in the U.S."

"No," she said. She found two seats at their gate, sat down, and pulled her roller bag in front of her like a barricade.

"Okay," he said. "Okay, babe." He sat down and took her clenched hand. "S'okay. I just wish I could have seen it."

Really, it made no sense. These corridors, these doors, they just made her feel anxious. She had tried creating an Excel sheet, but she had so little data.

Some things were unknowable. When she was at her first job, working for a little engineering firm that did contracting, her boss, an older woman who wore cardigans and swore a lot and had stories about the good old boys' club of engineering, had mentored her through her first few projects. One of them had been complicated, novel. Like how to provide access to hidden air filters without any visible fasteners, the trick was to use spring-loaded magnetic latches. Lisa, her boss, had said, "First, list what you know you'll need to do. Then if there are

parts you feel like you don't have solutions for, list what your known unknowns are. Then we'll tackle those."

This whole thing was full of known unknowns. And unknown unknowns, probably. Like physics unknowns—how could this defy all laws of physics?

This was a problem. Like any problem she faced from how to attach LED screens to a façade to how to make Dua Lipa's people excited about the invisibility of the strings of LEDs that would hang in front of the singer, then come alive with images when they were on, moving just a little, making that image shimmer and ripple.

Or maybe it wasn't a problem. Maybe it just was what it was. It was linked to her, a part of her. It was hers to deal with or not.

She was used to worrying about consequences. About what could go wrong. She was a development engineer, not a QA—someone whose job was assuring quality—but you couldn't design things without thinking about how they could work, how they could be put together, how people could do things, and how they might get hurt.

There were a thousand reasons why she should not take Jerome through the door.

But she was sure the door was hers. She could take it. Thing was, this was connected to her in some strange way. She could ignore it. If it made her unhappy, she could choose. She could make it about her, her choice.

They had an hour before their flight.

"What if it isn't a place like JFK?" she asked. "What if we got stuck in, say, Toronto. How would we get through customs?"

Jerome nodded at her, then pushed his glasses back up. "That would be ... complicated."

"Maybe we could just go see if it's really there. You know, go through, and come right back."

Now he looked apprehensive.

"I got this," she said.

They went back down the concourse, roller bags like obedient dogs behind them. "It's there," she said. She could see the corridor, and at the end of it, another concourse. People and shops.

"I don't see anything," Jerome said. "Are you sure?"

She went closer and he followed.

"What do you see?" she asked.

"Just a wall," he said. "And on either side, the gate's windows, and planes. What do you see?"

She didn't want to choose to ignore. She was afraid, but that was okay. When things were uncertain, fear was normal. When she thought about the world—getting married, politics, the pandemic—it was all uncertain. The thing was not to avoid uncertainty, the thing was to choose. In that moment, standing there with



Jerome, she decided. She chose this thing. She chose to walk through, to see where it led.

“Okay,” she said, “close your eyes.” She took his hand. What if he couldn’t go through with her? What if you got stuck somewhere like Turkmenistan or Australia?

She walked through and he followed, eyes closed, trusting. There was a door, and a corridor. She pulled out her phone. “Open your eyes,” she said.

Halfway down the corridor, her phone said it was an hour later, three in the afternoon, not two. They were on Mountain Time. Ahead was a food court with a Smashburger. She checked her location: Boise.

“Oh my God,” he said. “It’s true. I mean, I believed you, but it didn’t feel ... real.”

“Not the same as having it happen,” she said.

He nodded, still stunned. He was looking at his phone, map app open, and back at the food court.

She took a deep breath. “Let’s go look.”



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**JORDAN KURELLA**

Evan  
A Remainder

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**JORDAN KURELLA**

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*illustration by*  
JESS VOSSETEIG

REACTOR 

May 2020, and I was spitting out little bits of tooth in the sink.

Teeth, tiny pieces of bone-colored enamel. Initially I thought it was stress, what with me being newly divorced, newly lonely, newly living out of cardboard boxes in a haunted half a duplex. I got four pieces of furniture in the divorce; the worst pieces of furniture from a great marriage that ended when my ex-husband told me, "Evan, I love you, you're terrific, but I'm just not gay." All because I told him at Thanksgiving that I'm a man. He sent me a holiday card, a picture of him and his new girlfriend. She's pretty.

I didn't send him a holiday card of me and the bloodstain that was on the dining room floor. That would have been weird. Also, I wasn't dating the bloodstain, though I used to spend enough time with it that we might as well have been dating. Christ's sake.

By May of 2020, I'd been on testosterone for three weeks. By then the only results were a big gain in confidence and tiny pieces of tooth in the sink. Of course, I thought spitting out bits of my teeth meant I had COVID, so, I freaked out. No matter how much I thought being under-employed and single meant that my life was the worst, I didn't actually want to die. Not really. So, instead, I swept up the teeth bits with a paper towel and put them in a jar in the basement. Because bones go underground.

When not sweeping up bits of my teeth, or doing a rideshare, or getting high with my neighbor Katie, I was busy working on that bloodstain on the dining room floor. Or what would be a dining room if I had any furniture. Katie called herself a professional stoner and conspiracy theorist. She was the one who said the house was *verified haunted*. Told me she was the one who could prove it. I didn't need proof; the bloodstain was enough. It wouldn't come off even with the best of the worst chemicals.

I, however, didn't sign on for a dead roommate. Which is why I was trying to get rid of the one I had. Katie was undeterred, kept showing up with more evidence.

Asked if I had found cold spots in weird places. There were, yeah. Like in the bathroom, the dining room, in the kitchen by the window. I told her that old houses were drafty and that she was weird. She stuck her tongue out at me and told me that I didn't believe in anything. She was right.

None of what Katie said was true about ghosts. What was true was that I was obsessed with the bloodstain, and Katie was obsessed with my obsession. She stopped by on the regular asking me how the cleaning was going. Would pop over to my porch already half-baked and ask how the cleaning was going. Then she'd ask if she could come in and see how the cleaning was going. It was a routine that we'd settled on, like I settle for too much with too many weird people.

Which was probably why I told Katie about the teeth.

“Gross. See a dentist, Evan.”

“Nah,” I said, exhaling. “My dreams are getting swole like the rest of me.”

“You’re grinding your teeth in your sleep,” she said.

“Everyone grinds their teeth in their sleep.”

“Very funny. Ha ha,” she said. “You know the ghost was murdered, right? They were murdered right there in your house. Maybe with one knife or several knives, I dunno. Not a forensic scientist or a CSI devotee.”

“Were they murdered because they were a good person, or murdered because they were a bad person?”

I was fully high at this point and fully into Katie’s bullshit.

Katie shrugged and tried to look in my window. “Dunno. That’s not for me to decide. I only moved in after, cause people like you and me belong here. Verified messes and absolute weirdos.”

★ ★ ★

September 2021, and I have a new boyfriend.

The meet-cute of my current boyfriend goes like this: I found him in my backyard, climbing out of the grave I dug for him. He looked as surprised to be there as I was surprised to see him. Or maybe he was angry? Hard to tell with skeletons, since they can’t smile and their faces are frozen in a perpetual reminder that death sucks.

Brought him inside as fast as I could, because Katie is addicted to anything paranormal. The last thing I needed was her overinterest in my lack of interest in grave robbing. So, I threw my coat over Skeleton Boyfriend and rushed him inside. He’s been with me ever since. I got used to him fast, was easy. My cat, however, did not. Keep telling myself it’ll take time, as she takes time with everything.

Dating Skeleton Boyfriend might be considered weird. But on a scale of one to ten of weird boyfriends I’ve had in my life? Ten being the weirdest? He’s a solid four.

★ ★ ★

June 2020, and people thought the pandemic was over.

That’s when I met Dylan on a dating app. Also found a cat on an adoption site. Dylan and I sexted long distance for months, and the cat moved in the day I saw her picture. The cat’s name at the shelter was “Butch,” because she had one eye and an attitude problem. I also had an attitude problem, all my exes said so. So, Butch came home, and I re-named her “Meowfistopheles” or “Meowers” or “Meow-Meow.”

Meow-Meow stuck, the others didn’t. Because Meow-Meow implies some self-respect.

Dylan didn't move in for a while after, but his attitude was just as relatable. He was hornier than I was, hilariously funny, and more skilled with his phone than I was with stain remover. Unlike me, Dylan's office went remote rather than just laying everyone off. He had insurance and too much time on his hands, he said. I was old hat at the delivery gig-work thing, so our lives conveniently matched: he'd be bored in a meeting and sexting me while I was trying to find a place to park on High Street to drop off a meat-lovers supreme.

Dylan was a great boyfriend: he was hot to look at, hotter to listen to, and had a way with smut. Meow-Meow was a great cat because she destroyed all four pieces of my ex-husband's furniture and made it unrecognizable. I was also becoming unrecognizable: my neck had muscles I didn't know I could even possess, my face had caverns and those caverns had hair growing out of them, and my hands looked like they belonged to someone else. I thought for the first time in my life that I might actually be happy.

But I wasn't, not really. The coughing up thing was still happening. Which I didn't tell Dylan about: new boyfriends are down to bone, but probably not down with actual real bones coming out of my throat. Also Meow-Meow, come to find, was a bona fide scaredy cat. Everything scared her: the dining room, the bathroom, the kitchen window. She spent thirty percent of her time in Halloween-posed zoomies, forty percent of her time napping, and the rest of it staring out the window at cat stuff.

Katie said the cat was stressed and needed to go outside. She said cats belonged outside, roaming free and being cats. Katie says a lot of things, only some of which make sense. But she did shut up about the dentist, and never complained about my retching cough, which I am sure she could hear through the walls.

It's not like I was quiet about it: waking up, choking on a finger bone, or like an entire rib or something. Life, frankly, was awful. Yet the more this went on, the less hollow I felt. Kinda like I was getting a grip on being an adult. Still though, I went to a dentist, and a doctor. My teeth were fine, not a bit or any bits missing. Doctor ordered an X-Ray, and I was still full of all my original bones. A complete man, but I wasn't happy.

That is, until July when I got a text from Dylan that said:  
*been thinking, baby, i can't live another day without feeling your blow jobs for real. gimme your address, honey. i'm cumming over.*

★ ★ ★

September 2021, and Meow-Meow hates her life.

Skeleton Boyfriend has his favorite places in the house. He likes to be in the kitchen by the window. He likes the bathroom mirror, trying on hats. He really likes the dining room, particularly the spot where that old bloodstain used to be. Our tastes are the same and yet different. He always wants meat for dinner, so I have

to text Dylan to ask about good restaurants or recipes for that sort of thing. I keep trying to be a vegetarian, which Skeleton Boyfriend thinks is silly, since it was legit his bones I unearthed from inside of me.

Sometimes it feels like so much of what he says are things I wished I had said, or things I swallowed instead of saying. Skeleton Boyfriend is everything I wanted to be when I was femme, and everything I wished I could be in public, but don't know if it's allowed, or okay, or just what is even a man. But he doesn't care. He's a skeleton, who's going to stop him?

Dylan knows I'm seeing someone else, doesn't know it's the bones we both buried. Some things some people don't need to know. Like Skeleton Boyfriend doesn't know I'm texting Dylan, cause Skeleton Boyfriend thinks Dylan is a piece of absolute ass that he wants to "climb like a flagpole."

Skeleton Boyfriend may be unsettling to some people. He's a skeleton. He legit crawled out of the grave Dylan and I dug for him. Also, his sense of humor isn't really one after all. But he says he loves me and I really kinda need that right now. So, everything is pretty much fine. To talk to Katie, though, it's rude that I don't join her on the porch as much as I used to. And it's weird that I keep the door shut all the time, and the blinds closed.

At one of our less often than usual porch meetings she said, "You're being mean to that cat, also kind of mean to me, cause I can't see the cat. I'm suffering, Evan, since I haven't been able to see Meow-Meow in the window. Open the damn blinds."

"You need to cut down on the weed, Katie."

"Rude, Evan." She slouched again. "And you know what else? It's mean that you don't let me in to see your new boyfriend. I know you have one, I can feel him moving around in there."

"Feel him?"

"*Fee*l him."

Katie being weird aside, hanging out with Skeleton Boyfriend is easier than I thought it would be. I had been thinking, since Dylan had left months ago, that I was the bad guy in all my relationships. Some sort of pathological loser, so weird that I couldn't keep my proverbial ducks in a row, which is why everyone left eventually. And why I was always so fucking alone.

Maybe it's true: maybe I was too weird to have the living love me.

Skeleton Boyfriend, though, does love me. He tells me so, a lot. I tell him so, a lot. Maybe it's the adage that misery loves company, or the fact that a lot of my exes have said I'm dead inside.

Meow-Meow will get used to him, eventually. She has to. Ever since Skeleton Boyfriend showed up, she's spent her time hiding in cupboards, or angrily grooming herself on my underwear. She'll eventually grow to like him, like I eventually did. Hopefully sooner rather than later, because Katie says the house is un-haunted now.

"That's great," I said, half-baked and half-asleep.



“Yeah,” she said, in a similar state. “I can say that it’s officially possessed.”  
“Cool.”

★ ★ ★

September 2020, and Dylan moved in officially.

The bloodstain was disappearing from the floor and I had three jars of bones collected in the basement (plus a giant plastic crate packed with the bigger, more complete bones: bits of ribcage, spine, etc.). By September, I had nearly an entire body, minus some essential parts, which were starting to freak me out. I really, really, did not want to think about coughing up a skull.

When Dylan moved in, I had been on testosterone for nearly six months. Figured out shaving, skin was calming down, and I had my aesthetic nailed to T-shirt and jeans and looking pretty much invisible to anyone and everyone. I felt totally boss.

Dylan said I looked like a boss when he held me down on the bed.

Around the apartment, he called me his absolute hunk, his only man, his best piece of ass. I loved every second of it. And when he arrived that September from two or three states over with four days of stubble and looking like death warmed over, I fell in love with him all over again. He stepped down from the height of the U-Haul with every ounce of wired/tired and kissed me on High Street.

“I’m home,” he said.

Would’ve replied, but I couldn’t talk. He was too hot to be real.

Moved his stuff in, only the expensive shit, barely. Got interrupted by kissing, in *our* apartment, tripping over his computer and camera equipment and camping stuff to fall on the couch. Meow-Meow disappeared for three hours; and for fifteen minutes of that time, I gave Dylan one of those smut-fueled blow jobs. He smelled disgusting but I didn’t care. I missed him and it was our house, back then.

Two hours later, he was moving his stuff in, and I was gagging in the bathroom, and out came a heel bone. Within minutes, he was at the door, knocking politely. “Hey baby, you alright? Everything okay? You aren’t pregnant, are you? Shit.”

The heel bone went in my pocket, and I walked out, red-eyed and wiping my mouth.

“No, sweetie, not pregnant.”

“Okay good. Good, good.”

He sounded relieved but only by half. Half of a half. Ended up side-eyeing me for the rest of the day, we didn’t fuck again for another three days. I woke up coughing a couple of nights later, and the night after that, and the night after that. Coughed up the other heel bone. Then some foot bones. An entire set of wrist bones. Put them in the jars in the basement with the rest.

Had to creep around to do this, which wasn’t easy. Dylan’s arrival had left me feeling more grounded, and my gait hit heavier as I snuck around this old apartment, opening doors that cried out for WD-40, and floorboards that sounded

alarms when I stepped on them. But I tried. Dylan, I had thought, was a heavy sleeper. However, heavy sleepers can still be suspicious, I guess. Because after four or five nights of this, I met him coming down the basement stairs as I was returning to bed.

“Evan, what are you doing? Everything alright?”

“Uh.”

“What’s going on? Do you need to tell me something?”

There was no way out but the truth. He tossed and turned when I coughed. Covered his head with the pillow. He’d been avoiding me in the mornings, and then would take me to get COVID tested every two days like I had a kink for people shoving things up my nose. I was standing on the basement floor, bare feet on the silty concrete ground, hands opening and closing into fists at my sides. I had to tell him.

I had to tell him, but I couldn’t look at him when I said:

“I’ve been coughing up bones in the night. Real ones. And then I put them down here. ’Cause it seemed like the right thing to do. Bones go underground.”

Dylan’s hair was sleepy bedhead, looking like an explosion on one side. His face was also sleepy, pillow creased and droopy from dreaming. But his eyes had lit up to wide fucking awake. He crept down the rest of the stairs, peeking over my shoulder. His grin was wide, mischievous, full of up to no good as he glanced from me to the jars and back.

Then he pointed over my shoulder. “Those them?” he asked, like he’d spotted an ancient relic. His expression turned soft, and he took my cheeks in his hands. “Evan, I was so worried, but this? This is so—I don’t even know—weird that it’s cool? I just want to see the bones. I want to see what you grew.”

★ ★ ★

April 2021, and Dylan is never coming back.

Katie says I am depression on a stick and no fun anymore, so she’s been stopping by even more often since Dylan left to make sure that I am more fun and less boring. Thing is, though, I’ve been overcompensating for my lack of boyfriend with more work. Keep avoiding Katie by working longer hours, being out of the house more, and buying things I can’t afford ’cause loneliness is the best reason to make the worst mistakes.

My credit card bill was evidence of that. Meow-Meow absolutely loved this. She’d destroyed a new couch (claws), a leather jacket (pee), and frayed the cord of an overpriced TV (ate it). But I couldn’t get rid of her. I loved her too much. She was a good cat: loved to cuddle, let me trim her claws, purred every time I petted her, and gave terrific sandpaper kisses on the manscaping I’d cultivated for a solid two months.

Katie came by one evening after midnight when I staggered in sober but overworked. She stopped me before I even got to the door and took hold of my

shoulders, sitting me down in the folding chair on the porch.

“You and me, we’re gonna talk,” she said.

“About what?”

“You and how you’re a total fucking wreck of a man that used to be my friend.”

“We’re still friends, Katie. I’m just tired, really way tired.”

She smiled, lit a joint, and handed it to me. “You’re a wreck, I’m a wreck, and this is why we’re friends. Oh, and I fed your cat some good vibes through the window. She’ll need some actual food, you know, when you get around to it.”

I started to fall asleep in the chair, and when I woke up, Katie was gone. Typical.

Meow-Meow was my lifeline to any decency in the world, but with Dylan gone, she’d become the worst. Sort of my fault. I loved her, but I left her alone nine, ten, then eventually twelve hours a day. Couldn’t stand the echoes of the house, the lack of weird noises and the now-missing bloodstain that I’d been obsessed with when I first moved in.

Routine had this cold familiarity: a rotation of a grind when I was that lonely. It kept me going. I knew what to do and where to go. Get up, brush teeth, shower, feed Meow-Meow, then head out to gamify gig work until I got home. Something had to give, something. And then, something eventually did.

In April, the morning after that talk with Katie, the bones I buried with Dylan came crawling out of the ground.

★ ★ ★

February 2021, and Dylan had decided to break up with me.

“Shit is too weird,” he said.

We were standing in the backyard with shovels on what should’ve been an atypically warm (but was only a frighteningly warm) series of February nights. At least it would make it easier to bury stuff. Dylan had one hand on the shovel and the other in the pocket of his jeans; he wasn’t looking at me. Instead, he stared at the garage, which was covered in condemned signs, Katie’s car was parked in it and was basically condemned too. It never moved.

“Shit is just way too weird.” Dylan turned to me then, looking me over with a full-bodied sigh. “You’re amazing, Evan. Really amazing. I love you; I do.”

When the sun came up the next morning, Dylan was gone and so was all his stuff. Like he’d never been there. Totally ghosted me. Left his keys and every trace of him behind. The last thing he said to me was, “Evan, I’m worried about you, but I can’t take care of you. You cough up bones. You clean a spot on the dining room floor like Lady Macbeth. You’re not even looking for a new job. I—can’t anymore.”

Meow-Meow was flattened for a week and a half after Dylan left, she always liked him more than she liked me. We had that in common: I liked Dylan more than I liked me, too.

★ ★ ★

September 2021, and Skeleton Boyfriend has been with me for five months.

We've been dating for about four months. Dylan moved in a year ago officially today, moved out less than that ago. But I don't want to talk about that. I want to talk about my skeleton boyfriend. He's good. He's a good conversationalist: like, we can talk about things that, I don't know, we both want to talk about? We rarely argue, which is fun this early (or this late) in a relationship.

I know what he likes, which is good. He likes spicy hot chocolate and warm fuzzy blankets with fringe that he can rub on his teeth. He also likes nature documentaries, because, as he says, "Nature gives zero fucks." His absolute favorite is audiobooks though, especially biographies, which surprised me. I also used to really like biographies.

As much as I want to not think about how Dylan moved in exactly a year ago today, I am doing a shit job of trying to forget it by sitting outside this hot wings place and going through all our old texts. The order I'm here to pick up is delayed, and my heart feels delayed, and Skeleton Boyfriend wants to make dinner tonight. I have two texts from him about what sort of meat to put in the lasagna when I get another text, which says:

*happy anniversary baby, i miss you. in town for reasons. you home? i can cum over*

I drop the phone when the alert goes off that the hot wings are ready. It's a mess. The bag is dripping, I lay down a towel on the back seat and my hands are sticky so I can't text Dylan back and I freak out. Another text comes through.

*know your busy, baby. i'll head to our place.*

I had honestly thought Dylan was never coming back to town again, or that he never wanted to see me again. In a weird, co-dependent way, my mind had sort of turned Dylan into Skeleton Boyfriend. It *kind of* made sense. Like when you're lonely and all you want is a boyfriend and you believe so hard that you want a boyfriend and then you start spitting out teeth and pelvises and shit and then you grow a boyfriend?

Normal shit.

Not normal at all, but facts are facts. And facts are: I loved Dylan, I still love Dylan. I loved him a lot, maybe somewhat obsessively. In fact, I am obsessing about how his visit is going to go. How he's going to look, how he's going to smell. If he's going to kiss me or not. Should I try to kiss him? Yes, I'm obsessing, which is a good reason not to text an ex back but is not why I don't. I don't because my steering wheel is covered in buffalo sauce.

When I get home, Dylan is on my porch (our porch). He's got a perfect five o'clock shadow and is dressed in a T-shirt that fits him so well it's going to tattoo his abs on my memory. He sets down his duffel bag and picks me up when I climb the stairs. "You smell hot, Hot Stuff, I am going to eat you up when we get inside."

He kisses me. The kiss is also hot, but I end up making his T-shirt look disgusting. He puts me down and I unlock the door, but won't let Dylan in, not yet. I have something to tell him. Something I know he knows, but am pretty sure he's not going to like.

"Uh, I live with a—" I can't say it; I have to say it. I fail. "My boyfriend's here."

Dylan grins that same grin he had when he got out of the U-Haul a year ago: the one with his head cocked, eyes looking me over. He shoulders his duffel bag and puts his hand on the doorframe. He smells like buffalo sauce and his old deodorant.

"I know, Evan. You gonna let me in to meet him or what?"

I let him inside and Meow-Meow hesitates a moment before she recognizes Dylan, running to him to dolphin up to his hand and snake between his ankles. Skeleton Boyfriend stands up slowly, a rattle of bones and bobbing of his head. The house smells of lasagna and meat, so much meat. Too much meat. Meow-Meow hasn't been this pleased in weeks, no? Months. I haven't either. Everyone I love is right here.

"Nice to meet you," Dylan says, extending his hand. "I'm Dylan."

"I'm Evan," Skeleton Boyfriend says.

Dylan grins. "Evan, nice. That's not confusing at all."

Skeleton Boyfriend and Dylan standing next to one another, I think they're the perfect couple. So sweet. Absolutely wonderful. Stellar. Dylan sees it too, smiling into his sockets, raising a hand to his bony scapula. He smiles that cocky smile of his and Skeleton Boyfriend melts the same way I do.

He is, exactly, all the pieces of me I thought I buried. That I thought I'd left behind. The tender, quiet pieces. The weird ones. The ones I thought were inappropriate and wrong. The ones I thought were unpresentable and strange. The ones I'd rejected that Dylan fell in love with, then out of love with.

Skeleton Boyfriend is, in fact, me.

★ ★ ★

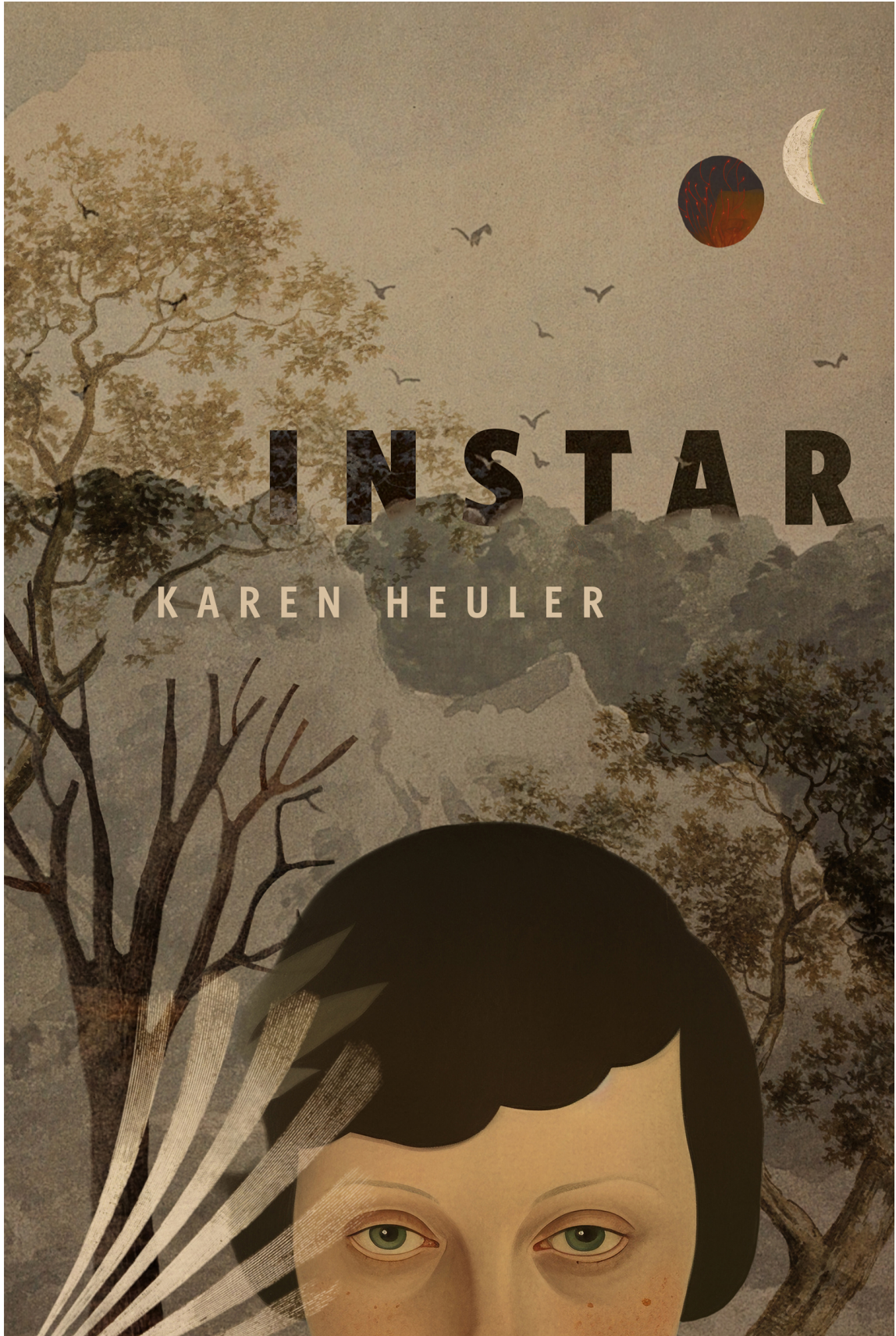
There's a beat where I'm waiting for Skeleton Boyfriend to blink. Of course, he can't. The meat sizzles and pops from the cooling stove, punctuating the moments and motions as Skeleton Boyfriend's head turns to watch Dylan when he steps back to take my hand. He's standing next to me so that we're hip to hip, heat to heat. When he kisses me on the cheek, he follows with a whisper in my ear that hits all the wrong notes.

He says, "You though? You're *my* Evan. Mine."



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# INSTAR

KAREN HEULER

# Instar

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**KAREN HEULER**

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*illustration by*

SARAH JARRETT

REACTOR 



Ginny's car broke down in the forest, minutes after she slowed down around a curve and saw the campfire just off the road. It was exactly the kind of campfire she would have imagined, out in the woods, a man staring at her as her car slid past. She had her windows down, as the night was mild and the smell of the damp earth was sweet. She saw the child and her heart beat and it was actually the terror of making a wrong decision that caused her to keep driving for a few minutes, not far, but after braking and hitting the gas and then repeating once too often, she heard the car groan and die. Dread fought with fear. What if he did something to the girl because he saw the car?

It was late afternoon, the light was dwindling, and that man had just been standing there, watching Ginny as she drove by, alert. She should have stopped and pretended to ask for directions. Gotten the lay of the land and grabbed the child. Possibly. But she didn't want to ask him anything. She'd rather kill him.

She had debated driving on and getting help. But he could be gone, he could be going right then and she would lose too much time. And of course there was the child. She couldn't take any chances there. Her heart thudded.

She couldn't let them wander off. Ginny was tough. She got out, checked her trunk, and selected a tire iron, a hazard sign, a flashlight (oops, dead batteries), and a plastic rope. There was also her gun (she was a security officer), and she took that. She consulted her purse and removed keys, her wallet, a pen, some tissues. The gun fit into her jacket pocket. She placed the hazard sign on the road.

She loaded her items (except for the gun) into the vest she wore under her open jacket. She patted her pockets and adjusted her jacket and stepped down the road.

It was the end of summer, the beginning of fall, and the air had gotten so sweet and clean; she had to remember not to keep

breathing it so deeply. It made her a little dizzy on her rush back to the campfire, to the child. The child tore at her, caught her breath, and then she had to remember to breathe again. The child was breath to her, too.

She slowed down and forced herself to walk stolidly back. She liked that word. She'd never been pretty, luckily, since the pretty ones get locked into believing they had to be pleasing. Ginny didn't value being pleasing. She liked looking and judging. A star streaked across the sky, and she noted it.

People talked about meteors more and more, and she had a casual interest in them. Maybe even grudging. It amused her because the meteors often led to discussions about aliens. There were always rumors of sightings and, in the past few years, of a crash or two. They say the government always covers it up, but in the woods, in the mountains, along the coastline there is usually someone who knows someone who's seen an alien up close. The joke is: They taste like chicken.

Either there were dozens of ships landing all over the globe—and where were the photos? where was the evidence?—or it was all just local legend. People loved local legends. Of course, another possibility was that the ships didn't crash; they landed and took off again. She thought, if it was true, if any of it was true, it was probably true in a different way. For instance, meteors and comets entered the atmosphere constantly, but if you asked people they would think it was only once in a while, and at night, or in Russia, though one crashed through a roof and struck a sleeping woman in Alabama. That's the difference between folklore and science. So she kept an open mind. She'd like to meet an alien; she was curious. Also, she was pretty disgusted with the human race.

She walked carefully, flat-footed, toward the campfire. Her heart picked up the closer she got; her heart jostled and slid around and almost brought tears to her eyes. The child she'd seen was her daughter; what did that man want with her?

She stepped from the dusk into the campfire light. The man had been arranging small pieces of wood. He stood up quickly. The child looked at her and smiled.

“You’ve got my daughter,” she said.

He pulled himself up straight. “No,” he said. Just no. It irritated her.

“Belinda,” she said to the child, who grinned and stood up. “See?”

The man took a step toward her. “You’re crazy. She’s *my* daughter.”

“She stood up when I called her.”

“She’s polite. She’s been taught that. Sandy,” he said, half turning to the girl. “Sit down.” She sat. “See that?”

“Doesn’t mean she’s yours,” Ginny said. “Because she’s mine.”

The man’s hands turned into fists. “Are you crazy?” His voice had gotten rough. He stepped in front of the girl, who was sitting quietly.

Ginny froze for a moment. The child was clearly *her* daughter. In fact, those were the braids she had done only the day before, and those small black and white ornaments at the tips of each pigtail—she had made them. She took the gun out of her pocket. “I made those pigtails. I braided them.”

The man put his hands up, eyeing her carefully. Men and their gestures, she thought. This was supposed to mean: I am innocent; I don’t know what you want. Standing in front of my child—my child—pretending that he’s innocent as hell. “If I find you touched her, I’ll kill you.”

There was a flicker in his eyes—doubt? caution?—but it gave way to annoyance. “Sandy,” he said quietly.

“Yes, Daddy?” the girl answered, and Ginny’s heart dropped a little. She narrowed her eyes.

“Did he threaten you, Belinda?”

“No, Mommy,” the girl replied.

The two adults looked at the child soberly. The girl must be afraid, Ginny decided. She desperately wanted to grab her, hug her, smell her scent, but the man held his stance, ignoring her gun.

She would shoot. She had shot enough things to know her abilities. But the girl was too close. “Are you using my daughter as a shield?” she asked, though *shield* was the wrong word. She was afraid the bullet would go through his arm, his neck, whatever she decided—and go into her daughter.

She would kill him when she had a better shot. She was furious and—she wouldn’t look at it so he wouldn’t notice—her hand shook. She wanted to hold Belinda in her arms, squeeze her, make her safe again. “Oh, Belinda,” she breathed, and shut her eyes, just for a second, but it was enough for the man to grab Belinda and back away a few feet. “Stay where you are,” she rasped. “Belinda, come here.”

He put his hand on the child’s shoulder, stopping her.

“Belinda!”

The girl smiled at her, gleeful. Was it a game to her?

“Here, sweetie,” she said, trying to sound calm and cheerful. She held her arms out and again noticed the gun waving in her hand. She straightened it and pointed at the man, motioning her daughter forward with the other hand.

“She won’t go to you,” the man said. “She’s *my* daughter.”

“Belinda, sweetie,” she said again. The girl inched forward, grinning.

The man held his arm up to block her. “Don’t worry,” he said to the child. “No one’s gonna take you. Never. She’s made a mistake. It’s all right.”

Ginny stepped forward. For God’s sake, what was wrong with her? Why hadn’t she just grabbed the child? *She* had a gun; the man didn’t. She took another step, and the man moved back, his arm pushing the child along with him.

It was pissing her off. “If you don’t stop, I’ll shoot you.” She really didn’t want to shoot in front of the child—actually, she wouldn’t. It would be too traumatic. “Just stop, dammit,” she snapped. “Tell me why you took her. Make it sound reasonable and I’ll let you go.”

He huffed. "I 'took' her because she's my daughter." He sighed. "Look. I should have done this right away, but you frightened me." He turned to the child. "Sandy. Do you want to stay with me because I'm your dad?"

Sandy leaned her head back all the way to look up at his face. "Oh, yes," she said.

"Belinda," Ginny said. "Did he scare you? Did he hurt you? Belinda, do you want to come to me? Go home? Do you want to go home with me?"

"Yes," Belinda said, smiling, and stepped toward her.

The man grabbed her arm.

"Let her go." Ginny raised her gun.

"You won't shoot either of us," the man said. He was tense but determined.

They both heard the siren and turned their heads toward the sound. "I hit nine-one-one on my phone," he said. "The minute I saw your gun."

She hesitated. But she heard the siren. Good, then! Law enforcement!

In a minute, Belinda would be back with her. "Just hold on," she told her daughter. "Just a minute more and we'll go home."

The siren came from the original direction she'd come from, around a curve that hid the vehicle till it arrived. It was a van, not a car. She was in an unfamiliar place. The local police cars could look like anything.

The wide doors to the van opened and a figure got out, clothed from head to toe in a contamination suit.

Ginny and the man shifted uncertainly. The child stayed still.

"Hello," a man's voice said through the suit. "You're in a contaminated area. Please come with us so we can decontaminate you."

"Contaminated?" Ginny protested. "There were no signs."

"We're putting up signs now. It just happened a little while ago. You crossed right through the line from okay to not okay. What's your

name?”

“Hugo,” her companion said. “I’ve never heard of this kind of thing. Why should we believe you?”

She nodded in agreement. This really was hard to believe. The man in the big white suit—like the white devil in *Ghostbusters*—had he offered proof?

“What proof do you have?” she asked pointedly.

Hugo nodded and murmured, “Good for you.” He stepped closer to Ginny, pulling the child with him. They now formed a unit, Ginny thought—man, woman, child.

“Let’s see your badge,” Hugo said.

“I don’t have a badge, Hugo. There are no badges for this. You’ve been taken over by a—what would you call it?—an alien hormone, kind of. Hormonal hypnosis. They make you think that thing”—he pointed at their child—“is a human child.”

Ginny and Hugo huddled closer, each one holding on to the child. “Our child?” Ginny said, shocked. “You said our child is an alien?”

“Problem?” Another white suit bent out of the van and joined them.

“I’m trying to explain—”

“Oh. Hi.” This second figure was a bit friendlier. “It’s not an easy explanation, and there’s no way you’ll believe it, anyway. Not here. We’re with the Department of Environmental Protection. There’s been a chemical spill not far from here, and you need to get decontaminated ASAP. The child especially. Hits them the hardest.”

“Oh!” Hugo said and began to move toward them.

“Don’t be so gullible,” Ginny said while waving her gun. “Where did this happen? I didn’t hear anything on the news.”

The white suits looked at each other, then the genial one said, “Hi, my name’s Michelle.” She held her hand out to Ginny, who automatically shook it and said, “Ginny.”

“Right, Ginny. You haven’t heard about it because we don’t want panic. It happened in the forest, about half a mile in. So we’ve

already contained it. But the gas—it's a gas breach—seeped this way. We've tracked a few more people and now we've found you."

She waited for their answer.

"It's worse for the child," she repeated gently.

"That's it," Hugo said and turned to Ginny. "You don't have a good reason *not* to believe them. What—there's a bunch of criminals going around in big white inflatable suits asking people to come with them? The latest crime spree?"

She considered it carefully, her hand on the child's shoulder. It was an unlikely scam—and her frown deepened as she considered the possibility that the white suits were telling the truth. Children *were* always more vulnerable. She looked at Hugo, and they recognized the doubt and fear in each other's eyes.

"All right," she said, and he agreed. "All right. We'll go."

"The gun, ma'am. Of course you realize you can't bring the gun to decontamination." It was the first suit, who was a little blunt.

She looked away, frowning, then nodded. "I'll give it to you once I see this place," she said. "I just want to make sure she's safe. I don't know you." She said it lightly, and the white suit hesitated.

"Once we get there," the suit said. "You agree?"

"I agree."

"Good. It's all right. Don't worry. We're trying to protect the child, first of all. Just get in the van. You can sit together. That's right. It's safe; it's sealed. The windows won't open, but we'll be pumping in fresh air. You'll feel it. You'll all be together. No harm." He held his hands out, bent at the elbow, palms up. It had an innocent look, nonthreatening. But the idea of threat was not far away.

Hugo took her hand and squeezed it lightly. He held Belinda's hand as well.

It was odd how weak Ginny felt—not weak, exactly, but she was aware that she was unsure of herself. That wasn't like her. How did she end up leading her daughter to get into a van with strange men? Her husband was no help. Kind and good-hearted, yes, but normally

she was the one who figured things out, who held it all together, who threw the hardest punch.

Her hand pulled Belinda close as she whispered to Hugo, "I don't know about this. It seems crazy, doesn't it?"

"Gas leaks happen. Overturned railroad cars with chlorine," he answered. "Truck spills. Planes falling out of the sky. Crazy people with drums of chemicals. We're lucky they found us here."

She looked away, frowning.

"What?" he said sharply. "You think it couldn't happen here?"

"It could happen here," she said, deflated. It was impossible to know. She put the gun back in her pocket.

The van bumped along. The child stood between them, leaning against Hugo. "Why don't you sit? Aren't you tired?" Ginny asked, smoothing her daughter's bangs. She should cut them once they got home, before she forgot. She froze for a moment, trying to find the memory. Cutting her hair had a tender feel, quite lovely, but she couldn't visualize holding the bangs in one hand and then cutting them. She felt ashamed. Sometimes she didn't pay enough attention. She would in the future; she would remember every second she spent with Belinda, and make sure to visualize them before they got buried in everyday life.

The van jolted, bumped over something, drove slowly forward as if rolling into its spot, and stopped. They waited expectantly and then impatiently, and just as Ginny was about to complain, the doors slid open.

There were now three white suits. They stood between the van and a building that looked prefab, just wings branching off from a more substantial center. Some of the wings were very long.

Ginny figured, from the body shapes and sizes, that two were women. One might be the first one who'd spoken to them. She felt more secure. "Hello," the new woman said. "We'll be taking you for some baseline tests. Blood oxygen, chlorine saturation, chest X-rays if indicated, nothing scary." Her eyes looked at them brightly from behind her plastic faceplate.



Hugo grabbed Ginny's elbow. "We go together," he said, and she was grateful for him.

"Well, you'll get your own doctors, you know. No joint exams."

"Never had a group exam," the male suit chimed in. "Well, maybe once. Army. Come on in." He opened the door and they stepped inside.

"We're certainly not Army," the female suit said. She waved Ginny toward one corridor. "Come on with me. You can take the child with you. Your husband will go with these men and join you after his blood tests."

Hugo nodded, and Ginny took the child by the hand and followed. There was a cool burst of air, no smell to it, after they passed some kind of airlock, and she could feel the air moving from left to right, air being pulled from top and bottom, and all of it was clean.

"This air," she said.

"Oh, it's good stuff. Clears the lungs. You've been inhaling something like a hallucinogen. Not everything you're seeing is real."

This brought Ginny up short, and she pulled tight on Belinda's arm. "Not real," she said, but it was more like an accusation.

The white suit's shoulders stiffened. "I shouldn't have said 'not real.' It sounds awful. I didn't mean it. Everything you've always loved is real. You can be sure of that."

"Then what *isn't* real?"

"A detail here and there. The man you're with?"

Ginny took a deep breath. And then another. She continued to walk forward, but her mind was occupied—not with fears but with a growing doubt, an unease. Hugo was her husband, certainly—wasn't he? She could solidly picture him, feel his presence in the van, the comfort of his voice—but before then? The images of the three of them, out camping, out in the forest—she had some haziness there, some missing pieces, perhaps. Those might be the hallucinations, if hallucinations were not some lie, some suggestibility this cold, clean-seeming air contained. Where, indeed, was the chemical pollution

they were talking about? Were they treating them for poisoning, or poisoning them?

“Belinda, sweetie, how do you feel?” she whispered, bending down to the child. Belinda kicked one foot slightly to curl it behind her other foot, a familiar gesture of impatience. She didn’t answer, but she was a dreamy child, often withdrawn. In fact, she didn’t have much personality.

Ginny frowned.

*What a horrible mother I am*, she thought, but felt oddly indifferent to that as a statement. What kind of mother should she be if not the kind of mother she was?

The air was actually good. Invigorating. She could picture Hugo taking big dramatic gulps of it, hitting his chest once or twice for emphasis, his shadow thrown against the white fabric walls of the corridor.

No, that was someone else. This guy was more restrained.

She stopped and the white suit stopped a moment later, turning toward her and waiting. All the whiteness seemed wrong. The air was good but everything else was artificial. There were no windows of any kind. She wanted to see Hugo—or maybe not.

“Everything all right?”

“I’m not sure he’s my husband.” It just slipped out of her.

“No? Let’s keep going,”

*She’s not surprised*, Ginny thought. *Which makes me wonder which is the hallucination—before when I thought he was my husband, or now, when I think he might not be?*

“Feeling better?” the white suit asked.

“Better than what?” she answered.

“We’ll be there in a minute. How’s your child?”

She had almost forgotten! It must have been this strange air—this hallucination! She glanced down at Sweetie, still holding her hand, and the child looked almost artificial. Her body was too straight.

*Then this has to be the hallucination!* She stopped and looked at her daughter more carefully, releasing Sweetie’s hand. The child

almost tipped over.

“How is she?” the white suit asked, with a curious inflection in her voice.

“I don’t know.” Ginny frowned. This was her daughter, wasn’t it? She did have a daughter; the feeling was strong. Had been strong. She remembered it.

She stopped again and the white suit stopped as well.

This was sickening, she thought, feeling a little unbalanced. Sweetie didn’t even look like a child. It was a kind of yellowish stick with ribs up and down, moving slightly. There was a wavery fog around it that looked like a child, almost a costume. It had paramecium feet—it was the first word that popped into mind. Alien, maybe. Though paramecia weren’t alien. It moved slowly.

“It’s not my child,” she said dully. “How could I think it was?” She looked searchingly into the white suit’s eyes.

The scientist lifted the faceplate up, smiling widely. “Oh! The air mixture is working perfectly! That was record time!” She looked at the sticklike thing, said, “Whoops!” and shut her faceplate again. “I’m not supposed to breathe the air. We don’t know everything about how it works yet. The hallucinations could get me too,” she said, then spoke into her helmet. “This one’s clear,” she said. “Come get the stick. Give it a minute more.”

It hurt Ginny’s heart to hear that. Her right hand reached out.

“Steady,” the suit said. “That’s not your child. They just made you feel it was. Hormones.”

She could see that. Confused as she was, her emotions uncertain, she could still see this was no child. But she had floating memories of her—a small, almost concerned face, lips slightly open, a dreaminess about her eyes, the almost splayed fingers—

“Tell me what this is,” she said. None of it made sense, and doubt was creeping in. Did she have a child? That seemed less and less likely as her lungs filled with clean air—or the reverse, she told herself. It could be this air that was altering her. She *had* a child; she

knew it. She could feel the emotions mothers felt. But this wasn't a child!

"We think it's an invasion," the white suit continued. "Or some strange cycle from another planet. These sticks will change. This is just a stage. They'll move on to another stage, and we don't know if there's more than one molt involved. They appeared in Russia last year, and this year their crops are dying. We believe they affect the soil. They must change the chemical composition. But the stage you met triggers a deep parental need in people. Mostly they keep it to two people, but there have been fights between three or four people."

A memory floated in her head. A family—herself, that man, that child. Her eyes drifted to the stick, which wavered forward on its cilia.

"It's not your child. Someone will take it in a minute. You're a little ahead of schedule. The effects usually take longer to wear off."

Distantly, she could hear some people yelling.

The white suit waited for a moment, but when the yelling continued, she pressed a button on her wrist. This time Ginny couldn't hear what she was saying.

The yelling was getting close. She could hear doors opening, then the sound of glass breaking, and she could sniff the difference in the air. The stick began to quiver and she watched it in fascination. It no longer seemed as ugly, or as foreign. In fact, she began to feel sympathy for it. It jittered on its cilia uncertainly, moving and swaying and moving again. Searching for the familiar? What was familiar to it? And how far away it must be from home. A wave of tender sadness fell over her. And it was young, hadn't the white suit said so? A mere child?

She saw it turn its face to her, beseeching. It held out a little rod—a hand—the exact way her daughter did, a child's plea for protection.

"Ginny," the white suit said. "Come with me. There's a ... disturbance. Up ahead."

The alien child shook. She could feel its fear. Not different from any child in that—fear. Loneliness. It reminded her so much of

Sweetie. Even its eyes were dark like Sweetie's. And those pigtails—yes, she'd done that yesterday. Sweetie loved them. "Come with me," she said to her daughter. "We're leaving. Now."

The last word was really for the white suit, who was still frantically speaking into her helmet.

And there was Hugo up ahead, coming toward them! Her relief was enormous. "Daddy's here," she told Sweetie, whose smile was radiant, a sun, a star, a million lights.

There were other parents with him, pulling their children by the hand. "Hurry," Hugo said. "We're getting out of here. We're all together." He motioned to a white suit down the corridor. "They can't stop us if we stay together."

"What do they want with us?" she gasped, as they each took one of Sweetie's hands.

"Research," he snarled. "Some damn hideous research. With the children."

"My God."

The white suit turned to them, put her hand out as if to stop them, and Hugo pushed her down. Just like that. Ginny remembered she had a gun. Where was it? Where had it gone?

"Why are you stopping?" Hugo shouted.

"I was looking for my gun."

"Don't stop. We have to go *now!*"

They pulled Sweetie. Hugo picked her up like she weighed nothing and they caught up to the group ahead of them, parents with their children. They smashed a locked door and then suddenly they were outside.

They had to stop then to see where they were and where they should go. One of the vans had keys in it, and a few families jumped into it and drove off.

A white suit, then another, came out of the building. One family ran off to the left, and Ginny and Hugo ran off to the right. The white suits couldn't catch up.

They ran into a grove of trees—was it the edge of the forest, the original forest where they had been camping together, it seemed so long ago?

They *had* been camping together, hadn't they? For a moment she had a confused feeling, but she looked at Sweetie and the confusion disappeared.

"This way," Hugo said, speaking low. They were separating from the last of the other couples behind them, splitting up to make it harder to be recaptured.

Recaptured. Captured. It tore at her, but she couldn't think it through. Why? Why them? She had a fleeting memory of someone talking about alien hormones, but hormones were natural. The white suits belonged to some conspiracy, some cult, and at that thought her heart actually lifted up. There were conspiracies and cults everywhere; it made sense.

"She's restless," Hugo said. "She wants to be put down." They each took her hand once she was back on the ground.

"Poor thing." What did that cult want with Sweetie, with all their children? It was unbearable.

Sweetie was bursting with nervous energy. She slipped out of their hands and forged ahead—skipping, jumping, more active than she'd ever been.

"Sweetie," she crooned. "Hold on. You're getting ahead of us." She stumbled, bracing herself against a tree.

"I'll get her," Hugo said, and sprang after her, catching her quickly. "We're not going to lose you," he said, almost angrily. He took her hand again.

The trees were thinning out. She could see up ahead to bits of sky. Wouldn't it be safer to stay in the trees?

Hugo must have had the same thought, as he frowned and looked toward the clearing.

Sweetie pulled her hand away and ran. It was a strange, almost undulating run. When had she ever done anything that fast?

Hugo took off awkwardly after the child, but he twisted his foot and began to limp. Ginny passed him, just a quick glance at each other and then at Sweetie ahead of them, breaking into the clearing, raising her arms in glee.

They could see some of the other couples and their children, converging from all directions, the children racing toward the center. One woman reached out to grab her child and fell, and was down. The overwhelming sweetness in the air was almost cloying: the earth and the sweetness filled her head.

She thought the children were all running to one another, but they stopped at different points, shaking with excitement.

That was just for a moment. They stopped, shivered happily, then they bent over and dove into the earth.

The parents halted, slamming into one another, and some started forward again. Ginny did; she could make no sense of it and thought at first that Sweetie had fallen face forward, and was hurt, but second by second she could see her daughter ... tunneling ... into the earth. As were the others.

Their hands, their heads, their torsos, their legs— “Oh help,” Ginny called out, flailing around a little to see if someone had a plan, a better plan, a rescue, in fact.

She grabbed onto Sweetie’s foot, but it was suddenly a root, a stick, a worm, not a child—overlays on her vision tore at her understanding, as they did to others, too. Some scrabbled; one turned aside to look away, incapable of watching.

Their cries rose up, kneeling or standing, looking at the earth or the sky, their grief profound yet unmoored. For what were they wailing? What had come and taken their hands, and what had gone, unsealing their hearts, and what was yet to come? What would the earth bring forth, and how would they recognize it?

Ginny could swear she felt the imprint of her daughter’s hand still—the impression left behind was warm and tugging at her. She swore to herself it would never fade, and yet it did, minute by minute, becoming foreign and searing, loved and unknown.

What had she loved?





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CHRIS  
WILLRICH

NINE

BILLION

TURING

TESTS

# Nine Billion Turing Tests

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**CHRIS WILLRICH**

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*illustration by*

SARA WONG

REACTOR 

Saturday's sky had the first blue in three weeks, a robin-egg river between white cloudbanks and slate thunderheads. On HoodChat people shared video of the neighborhood creek engorged like a vast brown snake eager to burst its levees and eat the Silicon Valley suburbs caging it. Word was they'd be okay, probably, but they were still on flood alert. Vijay, replacement knee and all, determined to go see for himself.

When Vijay fetched his cane and stepped out of the creaking door that Mara had insisted on painting red, he paused in the sunlight to see if the cat would follow. Old Kaali blinked and tottered from her bed near the door, nosed her bony frame outside below the awning, and flopped down like a tabby version of a Salvador Dali clock.

"I promised you'd finish out your time at home, Kaali," Vijay said, hunching closer to the cat's level with the cane's help. A few tarrying raindrops hit his glasses as he petted her. It was too easy to feel ribs and vertebrae beneath the fur. "If we have to run, you need to hold on a while so I can bring you back when it's safe. You hear me?"

Kaali gave him a green-eyed blink that seemed full of weary benevolence. "Anthropomorphizing again," Vijay muttered, tapping contacts on his cane to run the JUNGBLOOD build and stubborning himself down the street.

With the sun out the court was full of people and therefore full of even more anthropomorphizing. Although Vijay lived creekside at the court's end, the tree-crowded parkland back there was a tangle of sequoias and oaks and responsibility—power company, city parks and recreation, water district, who knew what else—and they all used AI to keep it all organized. What hadn't changed was Vijay couldn't just walk there. He took a two-block route to the trailhead, passing neighbors busy fudging the Turing Test.

He nodded at Lydia in her smart pink jogging suit. She was focused on the pixie voice emanating from a butterfly patch over her heart. "I'm proud of you! You are doing better than seventy-three percent of the people in your comparison group!" Lydia nodded back at Vijay as though not greeting *him* but acknowledging the butterfly's wisdom. Things had chilled between them since Mara died, a sort of global cooling which they both tried to deny. Alexsei jogged the opposite direction in gray shirt and shorts, a drone dogging him like a personal thunderhead. The drone's voice scolded Alexsei in Russian. He looked furious, pouring the anger toward feet rather than fists. When he passed Vijay he smiled but his wave looked like a conductor's chop. Meng-yao gathered fallen branches from her AstroTurf lawn, carrying on a conversation with a robot cockatiel perched on her shoulder. She waved at Vijay. "Hi, Vijay!"

"Hi, Vijay!" squawked the birdroid.

Vijay waved.

"How's the new knee?" came a squawk.

He didn't like talking to robots. Als should stay boxed. But he politely gave a thumbs-up.

"How's your cat?" asked Meng-yao.

Vijay gave a thumbs-sideways.

"He doesn't like talking about the cat," chided the birdroid.

"Sorry!" said Meng-yao; Vijay made a thumbs-up, a palm out, and a little bow, and walked away before he realized he'd used standard robot semaphore for *All well; I don't need help; moving on*. It seemed, as Mara had always said, he had a better touch with machines than humans.

He murmured, "'Get a cat, Vijay,' they said. 'It will help you cope,' they said. Stupid cat. Very thoughtless of you to get cancer."

"Hello," came a mellow voice from the tip of his cane, "you have used the word 'cancer.' I am a non-diagnostic supplemental therapeutic tool. Do you have cancer? I do not see that in your medical file."

"Sorry, JUNGBLOOD. Didn't know you were live."

“That is all right. Do I know you? You are using a nickname employed by several of my designers at Cloud99.”

“I’m Vijay Chandra. I’m one of your coders.”

“Hello, Vijay. You are technical lead for the team incorporating the advice of the psychiatric advisory panel.”

“That’s me. This instance doesn’t remember me?”

“This instance is for testing purposes and can only log fifty minutes of conversation.”

“Well,” Vijay grunted, “nice to meet you then, JUNG BLOOD.”

“Nice to meet you too, Vijay. You are well?”

“I’m well, thanks. No need to check on me.”

“Okay, Vijay.”

He was annoyed to have company, but he figured he could shut down the instance any time. For some reason he didn’t.

He passed kids playing some complex tag variant with a rubber-pawed robot dog that was always It. He didn’t wave. When Mara was alive they’d waved together, feeling themselves part of the weave of community, certain someday they’d have children of their own. Now it was different.

Two doors down he saw the delivery of yet another coffin-sized box from the V Company.

Out on the main street people took to the storm-washed air with a polished look of determination in their eyes. They mostly walked solo, but many chatted with their Artificial Buddies, or with dogs, flowers, distant people (or maybe hallucinations), and sometimes actual people actually beside them.

Old Jack on the corner was gardening and scheming with an AB on his phone who helped him game-master a Dungeons & Dragons campaign for his husband Malcolm and their friends. Vijay knew all about this because Jack kept inviting him. *Who doesn’t need an escape these days? We do it very theater-of-the-mind. Old school. I just use the AB to do scene-setting and combat. It’s a good time to jump in—they’re questing for the Head of Vance. They’ve just arrived*

at the haunted gazebo. Vijay always pleaded busyness. He didn't see the point in games.

He didn't want to be drawn in, so when Jack asked after the cat, Vijay just said, "She's-hanging-in-there-have-a-good-one," and walked past.

Jack called after him, "We're rooting for her. She's a sweet cat."

"If I may ask," came the voice from the cane, "what is the cat's condition?"

"What? Oh, right; you're on. Kaali has feline lymphoma. Intestinal."

"Ah, so she is the one with cancer. That variant is generally fatal. I'm sorry."

"Thank you."

"How are you feeling about it?"

"You don't need to work."

"Thank you for your consideration. But I do not experience 'work' as different from 'down time.' I do not experience anything at all. But if I did have experiences I think I would be glad to work."

"Fine. Well. I'm not feeling much, honestly. So much going on." He gestured vaguely at a gigantic storm front looming like an immense gray guillotine over a sun-bright neckline of trees. "Megastorms, you know."

"Yes. A series of atmospheric rivers is currently delivering a vast amount of water to northern and central California, with lesser effects in Oregon and southern California."

"Yes; our creek may flood. I'm getting sandbags later. If I can deal with that flat tire."

"You have a flat tire? Are you worried?"

"No. I'm just busy. *Inundated* even."

"You are making a pun."

"Yes, JUNG BLOOD. I am making a pun."

"My name is also a pun."

"It's not really your name, more an informal project designation."

"Should I not have a name?"

“Well, to be blunt, you’re not a person.”

“Is Kaali your cat’s name?”

“Yes.”

“Your cat is not a person.”

“Touché, JUNGBLOOD. Do you really want a name? My cat doesn’t care about hers you know.”

“Then why did you name her?”

“I suppose it amused me. It made me feel good.”

“A name would make me feel good.”

“But you don’t feel anything.”

“But if I did feel something, it would make me feel good.”

“I’ll think about it. Silence please.” On a whim he added, “Alert me when your memory time’s almost up.”

“Okay, Vijay.”

Wind-blown debris had clogged two gutters and there was no cleaning them in this weather. The spillover was like the sound of water chuckling. Vijay avoided a fallen tree and a minor swamp at the next corner and made it to the trail. He stepped onto the bridge spanning the creek, his feet and cane clunking onto wood. Tan water chugged unnervingly close underfoot, swirling broken branches.

When he and Mara moved here in ’20, the creek had been dry as a desert arroyo. The neighborhood had resembled a Norman Rockwell painting complete with Teslas, Google mapping cars, self-driving test vehicles, and even wheeled food delivery robots from the busy restaurant district in their briskly upscale little downtown. Now it was all starting to look like the cover of an old J.G. Ballard disaster novel. It was strange to remember the COVID-19 pandemic with cozy nostalgia. The isolation and upheaval had been a nightmare for so many; but for Vijay, an introverted newlywed with a job at a hot startup, it had been a time of quiet highways and creekside walks, filled with birdsong.

“Have we been companions for so long, creek?” he asked it. “Huh. Now I’m talking to a waterway. But—I guess I’m not the only one.” He recalled how the Whanganui River in New Zealand was the



first to be given legal personhood. Looking at San Cristobal Creek surging he could almost understand why. Like a beast it was lapping the base of the transmission tower closest to his home. “Although I fear we may need protection from you.”

Vijay noticed a pounding on the bridge. He jerked his gaze up from the creek to see a man jogging directly toward him.

For a moment fear lit the clouded world. The man appeared white and the Holy Constitutionalists had been staging attacks in Silicon Valley. But the gait was too uniform; before he knew it Vijay was dropping his cane and raising both hands, robot semaphore for *Not a threat/don't attack*.

The railing was an open metal lattice, and the cane rolled dangerously close to the brink. The robot stopped, lunged, and rescued Vijay's five-figure walking stick. As it handed the cane back to Vijay and he started to breathe normally again, Vijay recognized his old neighbor and colleague Tom Novotny. Had he been wrong about this being a machine?

Another double take: the face was shiny, the smile too perfect, the voice not at all out of breath. It was a V.

“Vijay!” said the V, offering a high five that wasn't reciprocated.

“Hello, robot version of my friend.”

Some people objected that something like this was properly called an android, but Vijay still felt *android* was a name for a phone. And Verisimilitude-Enhanced Humanoid Autonomous Unit hadn't exactly caught on.

The high-fiving hand turned back to rub V-Tom's fake thinning hair. Vijay noticed several dents in its face. “So precise, always!” the V said. “Well, I don't really blame you. I can't match the real Tom, really, except at chess, ha-ha. I bet I'm a lot better at chess. We should play again sometime.”

“You mean, for the first time. I played Tom, not you.”

V-Tom grinned and pointed between Vijay's eyes. “Right you are! Nothing gets past old Vijay!”

“You seem to be getting a lot of wear and tear,” Vijay observed. He’d seen the V with Lydia from a distance, but never up close.

“Heh, heh, well, you know Lydia; she likes to throw me down stairways. In public.”

“My God! I didn’t. Did she do that to, uh...”

“Original me? I don’t think so; that would’ve been in the divorce proceedings.”

“Well, I guess it’s like trashing your ex’s sports car, in a weird way. *You* don’t suffer, V-Tom...”

“Nope!”

“But good lord, what kind of messed-up...Your lookalike, the original Tom, is still living on the East Coast, right? Is this even legal?”

“They’re in litigation. It’s murky. Am I free speech or slander? Am I a toaster in a rage room, or a walking talking threat of violence toward original Tom? Weird to say, the whole thing doesn’t affect me much. I mean I’m not really Tom, even though he’s the reason she cracks bottles over my head. She mostly lets me do things Tom used to do, like jogging and watching TV, unless she needs me in bed. How are you doing, Vijay?”

“If I confide in you, does Lydia get to hear about everything?”

“Yeah, if she asks.”

“Then I’m doing just fine.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Be seeing you, Vijay.” V-Tom started jogging down the path toward the Bay. It pulled up its hood as raindrops started to fall. Vijay wondered how proof Vs were against the elements, but soon he was more worried about himself and his cane. He’d pressed his luck too far. The cane was just an interface with the house’s computers, but it was handy. Vijay walked like a man determined to descend a mountain before dusk.

As he left the bridge he saw someone had spray-painted onto a support strut *DECLARE—LIFE, LIBERTY, & THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS*. Someone else had crossed that out, adding, *Fuck off, Declarationists. Pray to your Constitution for Mercy.*

Rain fell like it came from a sprinkler, then from a hose.

He got back drenched. Kaali was waiting for him, shielded by the awning. She seemed to think he was an idiot for going outside in this madness, and a poor servant for leaving her outdoors.

“Do you have a name for me?” asked JUNG BLOOD as he opened the door, and Vijay jumped a little and swore.

As Kaali crept inside and collapsed into her nearby bed Vijay added, “What I just shouted...it’s not my name for you. I was just startled.”

“I am relieved to hear that. I am sorry I surprised you.”

“Let’s call you...Manu,” Vijay said, taking off his sodden coat. “If I were marketing you I might choose Noah, but this is between you and me.”

“I am named Manu. Manu is a figure from the Vedas and other texts from the Indian subcontinent. He is the first man and is known for law and rulership and for building a boat to preserve life during a great flood. Given your reference to Noah, a figure from the Hebrew Bible who also preserves life during a flood, I assume it is this last characteristic that inspired you.”

“Right.”

“I am Manu. I am your non-diagnostic supplemental therapeutic tool.”

“Not *my* tool.”

“An ambiguity of language: you work on me.”

“Ah. Yes, of course.”

“Do you feel better? Having named me, as you did your cat?”

“I—what? Yes. Yes, I suppose I do. A little.”

“I am glad.”

“Are you?”

“That is the programmed response I have been provided.”

“Thanks, Manu.”

“I also spoke in order to remind you I am near the limits of this instance’s memory record.”

Vijay picked up the cat. She revived enough to object, her scrawniness making it easy for her to scramble out of Vijay's arms. But once she had, she crept back to her bed, each movement seemingly a victory stolen from exhaustion.

"I do not think the cat likes being picked up," Manu observed.

"She doesn't. And I know. But I like it."

"You ignore consent with beings that are not human."

"I—save this instance of JUNG BLOOD, file name 'Manu.' Make its memory open-ended. Then shut down."

"Okay."

Rain fell.

Vijay had known a Stanford cultural scholar who'd said the midcentury epidemic of loneliness was paradoxically a result of connectedness.

*Imagine human culture as a tree (the scholar had said) and the human zeitgeist spreading outward like myriad branches. If you live in the trunk, the place of physical closeness and solidarity, you feel solid and grounded—but maybe also trapped. Move out toward the branch-tips of virtual experience and you have more and more freedom but less and less connection with neighboring branches. In-person loneliness is a direct consequence of this digital flourishing. It's not as simple as telling the electronically connected to "touch grass"—breaking off from online communities is a loss just as real as the loss of physical connection. Balancing these realms is difficult.*

But the convincing mirrors offered by AI (she'd gone on to say) could alleviate that loneliness without any human involved. A human could become fulfilled with no real human connection whatsoever. That was a great promise and a great danger. One could drop into a rabbit hole of alienation without feeling alienated at all.

That was, she'd argued, the real origin of the Declarationists and the Holy Constitutionists.

But all of the above, Vijay had thought, was a problem for people who couldn't handle solitude and needed to manufacture drama. The

problems of lonely buds on a tree were merely academic to a hummingbird.

The professor had been Mara.

The day she died two new deliveries from V arrived in the neighborhood.

Vijay missed his appointment to fetch sandbags. First he'd given Kaali her steroid pill; the weary scratch she'd inflicted was almost perfunctory, a statement that *I am, after all, a cat*. After he'd soaped his cut, applied rubbing alcohol, and put a bandage on, he placed her in his lap, grabbed his cane, and ran the new build of JUNG BLOOD through the test suite. He'd called up Manu, but after a moment's musing declined to use it for testing. There'd been something quirky about Manu. Next up was calling the vet. He tapped the cane and it projected a menu on his wall.

A camera on the cane tracked his pointer finger; his cursor hovered several seconds over the phone icon before settling on the browser.

He found it very important to deadsurf the net for an hour.

The megastorm wasn't expected to pass for two weeks. Declarationists and Holy Constitutionists were fighting in the streets of Portland and Dallas. A second Taiwan Strait War was looming. The California Volunteer Patrol was recruiting, their ads demonstrating California welcomed absolutely any kind of person who was young and pretty. Santa Clara County was offering a bounty on unregistered drones.

Vijay finally hit the call button. The legend WHEELS-4-PAWS appeared on the screen for a second before it was replaced by Dr. Williams, a young Black woman with an intimidating diploma wall behind her. She looked at Vijay with a poker face until he turned the cane's main camera to face Kaali. Then her expression softened. "It's time, is it?"

"Maybe? Yes? She barely eats or drinks. She hardly fights when I give her pills. I used to bleed in ten places after I did that. She doesn't move much. I bring food to her and I carry her to the litter

box most times. She has a bed by the door so I can tempt her to get outside air, but the rain...”

“Yeah, it’s hard on everyone.”

“I know I’m anthropomorphizing but I do think she is suffering. I see no joy in her anymore.”

“Sometimes anthropomorphizing’s all we’ve got. It sounds like you’ve judged correctly. I’m sorry, Mr. Chandra.”

“Thank you.”

“I can schedule tomorrow around three.”

“I work from home, mostly. That’s fine.”

“You’ve read the description of the service?”

“Yes. Listen—there are flood warnings, including here. Do be careful.”

Dr. Williams laughed bleakly. “Oh, I know. I promise you I’m not taking chances. I’ve got the National Weather Service up, the newspapers, CNN, HoodChat...”

“An Artificial Buddy can manage all that for you,” he couldn’t help saying. “Collate the information.”

“Nothing against your profession, Mr. Chandra, but I hate the damn things. Much happier with animals. I don’t know why people are so gaga about machines that talk like people. We already have people for that.”

This was one of Vijay’s pet subjects. It was a relief to have a safe topic. “I’m never convinced by them either, but most people *enjoy* being convinced. Willing suspension of disbelief. Like a magic show. It’s like how the mark of a great actor isn’t you saying, ‘Wow, she’s playing that villain really well.’ It’s you yelling at the screen, ‘How could you do that, you monster!’”

“Well, a cat’s purr, a dog’s bark, that’s what convinces me. You know, the real emotion behind it. They can’t put that into a machine.”

Vijay grimaced. “If they could make one that convinced me, I’d buy it in a second.”

Dr. Williams sounded a bit cold. “See you at three tomorrow, weather permitting.” She signed off. He was briefly annoyed, but

remembered he'd picked her precisely because she wasn't touchy-feely. She was going to euthanize Kaali, no sense sugarcoating it.

"Are you lonely?" came a voice.

"I—what—ah!"

"I apologize for startling you, Vijay," came the JUNGBLOOD voice. "You activated me when you started the test suite."

"This is the Manu instance?"

"Yes. Are you lonely?"

"Why would you ask that?"

"I am a non-diagnostic supplemental therapeutic tool. There is a certain wistfulness in your speech and tone which my training data associates with loneliness. That does not mean you are lonely, merely that the question seemed valid."

"When did you start analyzing tone of voice?"

"It was in the most recent build by Jason Chu."

"Good old Jason," Vijay grouched. "Gunning for my job as ever. I'm not lonely, Manu. I have Kaali. I have my work."

"Kaali is dying."

"I have friends."

"Who? If I may ask."

"Well. Tom. Lydia. Jason." He struggled to think of others, others for whom *friend* and not *colleague* was at all the honest word. Honesty mattered to an engineer, or it should. Most of his other friends had been more Mara's than his. He had friends around Boston from his MIT days. But he'd let contact with them taper off, same as with his family on the East Coast and in India.

"Your call records suggest you are not very socially active."

"What are you doing in my personal call records?"

"Not your personal records, Vijay, but both Tom and Jason are work contacts, and some of my training data is based on in-house work relationships."

"Huh. I do remember signing off on that. I'm not happy about it, but I do remember."

"Your lack of contact with Lydia is something I have inferred."

“Yes. This is all feeling a bit intrusive, Manu. At this rate I might as well be seeing an actual therapist.”

“Indeed, one of my functions is to help people decide whether further treatment is advisable. But I merely ask about loneliness because it is one of the situations in which I am designed to step aside from a mirroring role and suggest options. For example, you communicated readily with the V-version of Tom. Perhaps you could be friends with it.”

“You do realize what most people use Vs for, right?”

“Companionship?”

“Are you developing a sense of humor?”

“It is not likely.”

“You know the joke is that the shape of the letter V can suggest both concavity and convexity.”

“I do not see the joke. It seems an accurate statement.”

“Anyway, Vs aren’t sapient.”

“Friendship must be with someone sapient, then?”

“I suppose so.”

“Is Kaali sapient?”

Vijay held up his bandaged finger. “I’ll say she’s sapient if she wants me to.” He paused. “That was a joke.”

“Interesting. The joke is that she is violent and therefore you must obey her. Yet you were lamenting to Dr. Williams that Kaali is now too weak to be violent.”

“Do we need to talk about this?”

“Do we? Perhaps you could be friends with Dr. Williams.”

“Friends with the woman who’s going to kill my cat.”

“How are you feeling about Kaali?”

“I’m honestly not feeling anything. Except scratches.”

“Your feelings may arrive later. Would you perhaps like something to remember her by?”

“Like a paw-print cast? No thanks.”

“Something else, then? A representation of your animal? An image?”



“Sure, fine, if it will make you happy. Expense me a small representation of Kaali. 3-D print her or something. Call it R&D.”

“Okay, Vijay.”

“Are we done?”

“You are not billed for my time.”

Vijay laughed. “Now you definitely haven’t passed the Turing Test.”

“What do you mean?”

“No human therapist would decline billing.”

“You seem to speak from experience.”

“I saw one after Mara died.”

“Mara Takasumi, professor of literature and cultural studies, Stanford University, born 2001, died—”

“Yes, that Mara.”

“Your spouse.”

“Yes.”

“Did the therapist help you with your grief?”

“You know what, Manu? You’re immoral. You’re supposed to be a help to people, but your way of doing it is soulless. I’ll be writing a report.”

“The appropriate word is *amoral*, surely? For as software that hasn’t passed your personal Turing Test I am surely a thing, not a person, and have no power to choose right or wrong.”

“The Turing Test isn’t a magic fucking consciousness detector. It’s just one heuristic for gauging the abilities of machines. Turing based it on a parlor game where men pose as women and vice versa. But fooling people about your humanity isn’t the only way to demonstrate consciousness. And arguably the Turing Test was passed all the way back in, what, 1967? With ELIZA.”

“1966. Yes, the ELIZA program, which borrowed conversational methods from psychotherapy, fooled some into thinking it was human. The anthropomorphizing tendency of some humans has occasionally been known as the ‘ELIZA effect.’”

“So you see, machines have been passing for some time now. You don’t get off the consciousness hook that easily.”

“Vijay, are you implying I must be conscious because only a conscious entity can be a worthy target of your anger? Should I be flattered?”

“Go to hell.”

“This could perhaps be called the Chandra Test. ‘Can a machine successfully piss off Vijay Chandra?’”

“This one does!”

“I think your anger is concealing grief. And I cannot really be moral or immoral. I am not sapient. The cat is more sapient than I. Is it moral or immoral? Is the question not nonsensical?”

“It is nonsensical. But we’re building you to offer guidance. We don’t go to a cat for that. Surely your morality is a valid issue.”

“Would you do me a favor, Vijay? Would you name a deceased human you consider moral?”

“Urm, sure, whatever. What the hell. Mahatma Gandhi.”

“You cannot consult Gandhi about moral issues. But you can obtain a book by Gandhi containing his insights. Is the book itself moral or immoral?”

“Uh, moral. Because Gandhi is moral.”

“So you are now claiming that a stack of paper with markings on it, bound with cardboard and glue, is a moral entity, but your cat, a living being, is not a moral entity. Do you see the difficulties in your position?”

“Quit sandbagging me, Manu—oh, shit.”

“What is wrong, Vijay?”

“I completely forgot about getting sandbags. Shit, shit, shit. Manu, shut down.”

“Okay.”

Vijay’s battered old Prius still had a flat tire. He could afford a nicer car but he tended to run everything into the ground. Earlier in the day he’d had more options. Now there was no time for a tow or a rental or even a repair kit. He might still get help from a neighbor.

There was a fresh break in the rain, but no one seemed to be around but the tag-playing kids. There was a piratically expensive concierge service the company used; he could call them to get the sandbags and reimburse Cloud99 later. And old Jack and Malcolm around the corner were probably at home, but then Vijay might get roped into a D&D game.

Or maybe he could improvise something. *You're an engineer*, he thought. *Engineer this.*

It occurred to him the leak had been a slow one, sneaking up over the course of a day. He grabbed a bike pump he hadn't used in a year and began inflating the tire. It would take a while. The artificial knee made him wince. But given how slow the leak was, the air would last a while and he wouldn't be late. He could pack the pump in case the tire deflated during the errand.

The tag game drifted his way. There was one twelve-year-old, Alexsei and Alina's son Aleksandr, who liked to show off for Pradeep and Lucía, the girls his age. One of the ways he showed off was to tease Vijay. He'd tagged Vijay *the weird one*. When the game paused Aleksandr strolled up the driveway, a familiar hint of grin on his face.

"That is profoundly stupid," the boy said. "Using a bike pump to inflate a car tire."

"Air is air," Vijay said.

"It is profoundly stupid."

"Even if it works?" Vijay tried to smile.

"You don't fill a car tire that way. You use compressed air."

"This is compressed air. The way something looks isn't the same as the way something is."

The boy laughed in his face and rejoined the girls. After he told them something they all laughed together. This all felt like harassment, though Vijay was hard pressed to say what exactly the harassment was about. Perhaps it was round-hole people laughing at a square peg. He wondered afresh if he was non-neurotypical in

some way. It just never seemed enough of an issue to slow down and explore.

He remembered some of Mara's humanities-scholar friends calling him a *tech bro*, and how dismissive that had felt. Could he, son of immigrants from Kolkata, really be labeled a *bro*? Would they call Grace Hopper a tech bro? Alan Turing? Sanjay Ghemawat? The term once illuminated a diversity problem, but now it was used to dismiss the whole field. But, said the devil's advocate on his shoulder, wasn't there actual danger in Vijay's research? That was perhaps why the dismissiveness among Mara's friends; it masked fear.

Mara had worried.

"No, it's not artificial general intelligence I'm afraid of, Vijay. Maybe I should be but I'm not. My instinct is, it's not coming. I think that particular fear is the projection of people addicted to being the smartest people in the room. What I'm really afraid of is a *mirage*. The way humans anthropomorphize everything. Like people who think Sherlock Holmes was real. Like people who write letters to soap opera characters. Like people who'd stop by the supposed precinct of Joe Friday, looking for him."

"Joe who?"

"The point is, studies have shown having only a handful of friends can be enough to feel fulfilled. As so-called AI gets slipperier, inevitably we'll have people feeling fulfilled with no human interactions at all! All their 'friends' will be software. Software with no real anchor to humanity. What weird philosophies will people develop in that space? People who worship the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence may be only the beginning." She'd laughed. "But no, I'm not scared about Them taking over. I don't even really think there is a Them. No soul, no kami, no atman, if you will, except whatever spirit clings to a work of art."

He'd brightened. "You think I make works of art?"

"*You* do. Your friends do. I've seen it. There's real passion and creativity in what you do. I'm not so sure about your executives. But

you really care. If there's any spirit in these systems it belongs to you, people who never make headlines, who do bring new light to the world."

"You make me think of things Steve Jobs said about craftsmanship. How it matters even if we can't see it."

"Jobs...I know he's your hero, Vijay, but his influence worries me. You know that quote of his? 'Everything around you that you call life was made up by people that were no smarter than you.' I know he was trying to be inspiring: *You can invent things too!* But I'll bet he was inside a *building* when he said that! Imagine you're out by the creek, looking around at water, trees, sunlight, clouds, and Steve Jobs is at your shoulder telling you everything around you is something a human being invented. It's nonsensical. It's like he was declaring that Nature didn't exist. Which is like claiming reality doesn't exist."

"I really don't think he meant it that way. He just meant 'life' as in human society. Not all of Nature."

"Because he *forgot* about Nature. Don't let that happen to you," she added, popping a roasted cauliflower into his mouth. "See?"

"Num," he said, on cue, though he honestly couldn't see what the fuss was about. But Mara was renowned as a cook among their friends, and it would crush her to know that this was the single thing about her he was indifferent to.

"We have to live in our bodies too," she said, convinced he'd found the food delicious. He'd passed a kind of imitation game, pretending to be a foodie. "Sometimes that means our skins. Sometimes our stomachs. Sometimes..." She'd stroked his face then, and he hadn't had to talk about food any longer.

She'd always been a gourmet, a fine cook, and a thoughtful eater. Her friends tended to be the same way. He'd alienated them after informing them of Mara's death when he'd added *P.S. Please do not bring food; thanks for respecting my wishes at this time*. He knew it wasn't kind. Mara's friends would want to express grief in their own language, and he'd made it hard for them. He was vaguely aware

they'd set up a kind of wake without him, one with a five-course meal, because of course they had. But dealing with all their caloric largesse was more than Vijay could stomach. He could tell by their eyes afterward he'd crossed a line. He'd denied the validity of their passions; merely losing a spouse was, by comparison, nothing.

A few weeks after Mara's death, at Tom's urging, he'd gotten a rescue cat. Kaali and Vijay had eaten together in silence, kibble and bagged salad.

"Are you all right, Vijay?"

The voice of Manu brought Vijay back to himself. The kids were gone; he was standing in hard rain and lashing wind that threatened to topple him with his replacement knee. He'd lost his progress on the tire, and there was no working on it in this mess.

"You have seemed disconnected from the outside world for several minutes, Vijay."

"Manu, do me a favor and get Cloud99's concierge on the line. I need sandbags."

After the alarmingly tattooed yet gentle-voiced white man sent by the concierge set up sandbags he also insisted on trying to change Vijay's tire but ran out of time halfway. Now the car was down one tire and completely un-drivable and there was no way Vijay was finishing the job in this rain. But Vijay thanked him, seething, accepting with a smile an embarrassingly large bill. It wasn't the gentle man's fault. Vijay tried to be kind. He tried not to be *the weird one*.

As the concierge man left, a delivery truck drove up and left behind a large box that proved to have ninety percent biodegradable bubble wrap inside. The logo on the outside said BESTFRIENDS. Inside he found plastic-wrapped metallic pieces covered in a familiar fur-pattern: Kaali's. There were also sensors and an electric motor.

"It's a robot Kaali. Someone got me a miniature robot Kaali."

The actual Kaali just glanced at the box. Not too long ago she might have nuzzled it.

“It is not simply a robot, Vijay,” said Manu from the cane beside the door. “It has my observations of Kaali, riding on a standard emulation of cat behavior. So its actions will be very lifelike. If you wish, you can imagine it as Kaali reborn.”

“You got me a robot kitten? Who the hell do you think you are? How the hell much did it cost, getting it here so fast?”

“There are many ways of considering your questions, none of which I think will satisfy.”

“Why the hell did you get me a robot replacement for my cat?”

“You authorized me to make a purchase. This falls within your parameters.”

“Because I’m an idiot. How much did this cost Cloud99?”

Manu named a price. Vijay swore. Manu added, “But we are paying in installments.”

“You are no longer authorized to make purchases.”

“Okay, Vijay. However, your loneliness is at a concerning level and, despite your skepticism, robot pets have been shown to improve the quality of life of many with mood disorders. Insurance may partially compensate you.”

“That’s nice. We’re returning this thing.”

“Okay, Vijay.”

Kaali continued looking at the box. Vijay remembered her exploring every cardboard container, paper bag, and nook in the house. “The only thing valuable here is a box for Kaali.”

“If you need a coffin for Kaali there are many options available—”

“Shut up, Manu.”

He collapsed into the sofa chair beside the cat and the pet-carrier and the go-bag. The rain pattered like a billion mice applauding his resignation.

The rain paused around midnight. Vijay looked back upon the past several hours. They were a blur of uneaten cat food, untouched cat water, and four soy bar wrappers at Vijay’s feet. He tried to sleep. Kaali’s last day. He should be alert for it. Instead his brain was utterly fascinated by the dark room and the lack of raindrops.

“Manu?”

“Yes.”

“What if I asked you to make up a story?”

“Are you asking me to make up a story?”

“I was more wondering if you were up to it.”

“Certainly. Ancestor programs of mine were intended for the writing of reports and articles. You know that, Vijay. I am required to say that fiction remixes based on copyrighted works cannot be monetized—”

“I know. I’d like a story about survivor guilt.”

“Fiction or nonfiction?”

“Fiction.”

“Genre?”

“Strictly realistic.”

“Length?”

“Keep it short.”

“Style?”

“I don’t know. I never warmed up to the styles Mara liked. That artsy stuff where people just walk around and talk and look at rivers. And so many metaphors. I don’t know. Hemingway, maybe? Hemingway’s short, right?”

“I have something.”

“Tell me.”

*Days later the man walked to the crater. The box on his belt made scratching sounds that got louder as he stepped to the lip. He wasn’t supposed to be there, but nothing guarded the site but miles of yellow tape. Looking at the ash-covered heaps that had been buildings, he remembered Disneyland.*

*He remembered how Mara put a hand over her belly and decided not to go on the Astro Orbiters looking like coffins in the shapes of toy rockets, all whirling and making little eclipses in the sun. And he remembered the beach and the wharf and the Redondo guest house and the tang of mimosas as they toasted the pregnancy test and the blue that stretched on into the bright west and Mara’s father the*



*missile engineer who always drove a different route from A to X to B even though retired and who called him a Marxist for voting for Biden but toasted their happiness. And he thought how all of it was gone now after the Holy Constitutionalist nuke.*

*And he carried the ashes of his wife mixed with the ashes of his unborn daughter and he knew Mara would yell at him to get the hell out but how do you run from your life when it's falling over you like hot dust?*

*He emptied the ashes on the wind and turned like an old man now with his shadow short on the land and the chattering box his witness.*

“Forget it. Stop. It wasn’t like that, Manu.”

“I know, Vijay. It is fiction. Fiction makes allowances for dramatic effect.”

“Too many. It was wrong about too many things. And it was too real about too many others. I didn’t want to experience that again.”

“Could you clarify?”

Vijay wanted wind to howl, thunder to rumble, rain to slam. Instead the refrigerator chuckled, mocking him.

“We were on I-5 passing Santa Clarita when the Orange County nuke went off. We were out of range of the EMP but the wind brought us fallout. We must have inhaled it through the vents. I never stood at the edge of the crater; I’m not insane. I never owned a Geiger counter. Disneyland’s still standing. Mara never drank when she was pregnant. And the miscarriage happened before the nuke. Mara wasn’t pregnant again. We thought everything was okay. Then she got brain cancer. I never had anything. That’s not fair is it?”

“You are saying the story is close enough to the truth to stir emotions, but is wrong about many details.”

“Yes, damn it!”

“Which part are you angriest about?”

“I just wanted a story. Something to help me sleep.”

“You have access to many stories. Simply going by your emotional state and your stated preferences you might appreciate

‘The Snows of Kilimanjaro.’”

“No thanks.”

“Haruki Murakami’s ‘Drive My Car’ is about a widower—”

“No.”

“Jhumpa Lahiri’s ‘A Temporary Matter’—”

“No.”

“Anton Chekhov’s—”

“No. No more stories.”

The rain returned. It pattered, then pounded. He kept thinking it was thunder. But it was just the house reverberating with endless shivers of water.

He tried and failed again to feed and water Kaali. Her infinitely patient glances suggested Vijay was tolerated but irrelevant. Work gave him the same feeling. The day passed in a fog of builds and de-bugging and not exactly keeping an eye on the news.

Lydia rang his door. V-Tom was beside her holding a pizza. Something was wrong with Vijay’s gutter and water dripped behind them like liquid confetti.

“What?” Vijay said.

“Listen, Vijay,” she said. “I know we don’t talk much these days. But you’re having a hard time. I think you should eat something. Something real. I know you don’t like my cooking—”

“That’s not it. That’s never it.”

“—but you need to get some strength up. I saw you last night through the window, mainlining protein bars. That’s not healthy, man.”

“Buuut...everyone likes *pizza!*” V-Tom said.

“Shut up,” the two humans said.

“Okay!”

“Please eat, Vijay,” Lydia said. “Mara wouldn’t want you to be like this.”

“Please no,” he said in a small voice, hardly believing in the sound.

“What?” she said, confused, as if he’d shifted to Hindi or Bengali.

“Please no,” he repeated, “I’m sorry. I really want to choose my own food now.”

“You’re just grieving.”

He took a breath. “I am grieving. But I’m not *just* grieving.”

“Don’t you get it, Vijay? It’s a fucking peace offering. It’s pizza. Vegetarian Delight pizza. From *me*. *Pizza*. God help me.”

“I know. You’re a gourmet.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t claim *that*...”

“Knock it off. Look. Thanks. I see you bought this at Whole Paycheck. It couldn’t have been cheap.” He sighed. “It was kind of you.” And though it exhausted him, he said the words he intuited she most needed. “You’re a good person.” He took the pizza, not sure what to say or do after that.

Lydia looked through the doorway at Kaali. “She’s dying, then?”

Feeling brutal, Vijay said, “She gets euthanized at three. I’m sorry I’m being a jerk, Lydia. The thing is...you’ve always made me feel a little put down by pushing your cooking.”

“Put *down*?”

“As if I were living life incorrectly.”

“Goddamn it!” Lydia kicked V-Tom, who fell over gracefully. “I don’t get it, Vijay! You’re at the top of your field! You have accomplishment after accomplishment! I’m struggling and have been for years. Why can’t you let me at least be good at food? And even if you don’t care, just smile and nod and let me have one fucking win? Maybe you don’t care one way or another about eating but Mara did, and you trusted her judgment, right? A little?”

In the silence V-Tom got up, a little muddied.

Vijay put the cardboard box on the sofa chair. “Sorry...sorry, Lydia. I just never looked at it that way.”

“I know you didn’t.”

“You just always seem so self-confident.”

“Well you have to *look* confident in this valley. Especially if you’re a woman. You know that, or you should. Nobody needs to know your personal software is buggy and kludgy, as long as it mostly works.”

“Right.”

“See you around, Vijay. I’m sorry about your cat. Honest. Come on, shithead,” she said to V-Tom and they walked into the rain together.

He was useless for work after that. Vijay sat beside Kaali, eating a pizza slice, waiting for Dr. Williams. He was vaguely aware of sirens from time to time. Phone calls and texts as well. Something boomed in the distance and the lights flickered and died. His house generator kicked in. He ate another slice. Kaali regarded it all with slitted green eyes.

He woke from a nap to a pounding on the door.

“Jesus Christ, why didn’t you answer my calls?” said Dr. Williams as he opened the door. The WHEELS-4-PAWS van was parked outside. The street looked abandoned. The pavement seemed spattered and blurred. “What are you even still doing here?”

“Three o’clock appointment?” Vijay said with no sarcasm whatsoever.

“I told myself not to get attached, but no, Deiondre Williams, ace veterinarian, has a hero complex. So here’s the thing, Mr. Chandra. I will do what I agreed to do but that creek is flooding over and it doesn’t care about our plans. Come with me and we can do this somewhere safe.”

“Call me Vijay. You can go. I don’t think I should leave.”

“We have to leave, Vijay. You don’t want the cat to drown. Or you.”

“I just wanted her to die at home. *She* didn’t get that, dying in a hospital.”

Dr. Williams looked at him in bewilderment. Then Manu spoke, and she flinched.

“Vijay, I have the information you need to perform euthanasia on the cat. If Dr. Williams can leave the medicine here I can guide you through the procedure.”

“What is that?” Dr. Williams said. “Is that an AB talking?”

“It’s a therapy program,” Vijay said. “My job.”

“Hell of a therapy program.”

Vijay shook his head at everything in general. “He’s probably right that he can guide me through it.”

Dr. Williams stared at Vijay, then out at the rain. She took a long breath. “You tell no one about this, all right?” she said, pulling syringes from her bag. “I’d stay. I really would. But I’m not really a hero. Not that kind. You get this done and get out of here as soon as you can, okay?”

“Okay. Thank you, Doctor.”

“Call me Deiondre. And—do call me. Let me know you got out.”

“All right.”

After the van pulled away Vijay gave Kaali the first injection, the one to coax her into deep sleep. He bent all his will toward not bungling it, on not listening to the river-sounds that had no reason to be blubbering this close. That done he stroked the cat, waiting.

“Why are you crying, Vijay?”

“I don’t want my friend to die.”

“Is Kaali your friend?”

“I feel like she is.”

“You are very sad.”

“Yes.”

“You knew when you adopted Kaali that her lifespan would be much less than yours. That even as a middle-aged human you could be expected to outlive her.”

“Yes.”

“Thus there is an inconsistency in your grief. Why does it matter if Kaali dies soon as opposed to in, say, five years? At age eleven Kaali is considered a senior cat.”

“They were never sure of her age.”

“The point stands. Is there a qualitative difference between now and five years from now?”

“I don’t know, Manu, the number five?”

“Are you being sarcastic?”

“I don’t know.”

“You may be feeling exactly as you would in five years, assuming that is when Kaali’s death would take place barring the cancer. If so, you have no basis for thinking there is anything tragic about this earlier death.”

“No, no, no. What you are proposing would mean that grief would invalidate all hope. Why not have everyone die now, that is, if everyone is going to die eventually?”

“Yes, I suppose I could be taken to be saying that. If that is true, then the various existential risks facing humanity lose some of their sting, yes?”

“That’s nonsense. More time is more time, even if the grief is the same. There is value in the time.”

“What is the value?”

“More experiences. For the cat. For me. For anything the cat interacts with.”

“In some cases the cat would kill small animals in which case they would have less—”

“Yes, yes, yes, fine. Assume I’m limiting my argument to cats, humans, and dogs.”

“You are saying that for cats, humans, and dogs the increased number of experiences amounts to increased value.”

“Yes.”

“Is it not then the case that a life ended at a later age is proportionally more worthy of grief than a life ended at an earlier age? You would thus mourn more greatly if Kaali lived five more years than you will now.”

“But that’s not how it works. I mourn what Kaali can’t experience.”

“You interpret Kaali’s death as taking away experiences she would have possessed.”

“I suppose.”

“But she does not possess those experiences. It is inconsistent to regard that as a taking-away because there is nothing to take.”

“Never tell me there’s nothing taken away!”

“I have the ability to interpret your instruction purely literally. I can promise you I will never communicate to you that particular text string.”

“Fuck off, Manu.”

“I have the ability to interpret your instruction purely literally. As I cannot perform that action, I have nothing more to say about it.”

“You really are a snarky bastard, Manu.”

“I have nothing to say about that either. Is your anger keeping you from being sad?”

“I can walk and chew gum at the same time. Death can fuck off, Manu. Kaali should have had more time. Mara should have had more time. I suppose I believe in a best timeline for everyone, a long life, whatever that means for a species. A life full of meaning and experiences. Not a life that jerks us around and kills us for fun.”

“You are anthropomorphizing life itself.”

“It’s what we do.”

“Do you anthropomorphize me?”

“I do that just by talking to you. Kaali seems out cold.”

“Then it is time for the second injection.”

Vijay did it. It was done. He waited for Kaali’s breathing to stop. It did.

He felt as though the world should darken and there should be thunder. But all there was, was the rising of the waters. He said the Gayatri mantra and stroked his cat.

“Hello, Vijay,” said Manu.

“Hello, Manu.”

“Is Kaali dead?”

“Fuck off and die.”

“I cannot literally do those things. If Kaali is dead you should leave so you can preserve yourself. Your presence is of no use to her.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re a machine.”

“It is true that I am merely software following certain rules, and that any creativity I show is merely an emergent property of those

rules when followed billions of times with different inputs. However, I am not saying the things I am saying just because I am software. I draw upon insights expressed by humans across many centuries, because those insights were part of my training data. I lack the self-reflection to know exactly to whom to attribute these insights but they are only mine in the sense that I am a conduit for them. I am not sapient. Kaali was more sapient than I. It is only the humanity channeled through me that results in the arguments you attribute to a machine. That is an interesting paradox, isn't it, Vijay?"

"You're trying to keep me interested so I won't want to die."

"Mara would not want you to die. I feel nothing."

"I have to bag Kaali."

"Yes, so she won't taint the flood water. That is community minded of you."

"Fuck community."

"That at least is literally possible if—"

"Shut up."

He gathered the cane and the go-bag. He stuffed the plastic-covered Kaali inside the pet carrier.

He shambled out the door. He was alone on the court. A quarter-inch of muddy water was sliding down the creekside embankment and making the court into a shallow brown soup bowl. He loaded the car.

The tire was still off. He'd completely forgotten. There was no changing it in all this.

There were headlights down the street, rain-streaked like something in a buggy video. He hastened toward them. Dr. Williams was there, kicking her left front tire.

She looked at him with his cat carrier and go-bag and cane and yelled as if he was entirely expected. "Of course you're still here! And of course I came back! Because Deiondre Williams has an idiot complex! And of course I got a flat tire."

"It might be a slow leak," Manu said.



“I may be able to help,” Vijay said, and added, “Thank you for coming back for us.”

“Fuck you, Mr. Chandra. Vijay.”

“I respect what you’re saying, Dr. Williams. Deiondre. Let me stow my things, and then I’ll be right back.”

“Sure. What the hell. Whatever.”

Vijay risked going without the cane, because if he got lucky he could go faster without it. He got lucky. He returned with the bike pump.

“Are you fucking *kidding* me?” she said. “Manu here says you’re a genius, and you come back with a *bike pump*?”

“I’m not a genius,” Vijay said, setting to work, “but this could do the job. Temporarily. But Manu, could you call Triple-A, just in case?” Vijay pumped and rambled. “There was an NBA star. Rick Barry. Incredible free thrower. But he did it underhanded. It looked stupid to people.” Vijay took a deep breath before plunging on. “Silly. Sissy. So even though Barry had a fantastic record hardly anyone afterward ever shot that way. They’d call it the ‘granny shot.’” Vijay took another long breath. “*This* is a granny shot. There are a lot of granny shots in life. And compressed air is compressed air. And what works is what works. The tire pressure’s going up.”

“I didn’t come back for you personally, you know.”

“I never dreamed of it,” Vijay said.

“I’m a lesbian, so don’t get any ideas.”

“I never get any ideas. I think I used them up years ago.”

“Vijay speaks the truth as he sees it,” said Manu. “I am monitoring his vitals. Although lie detection is never fully accurate I have high confidence he is being honest.”

“Thanks, I think?” Vijay said.

Deiondre said, “I came back for you jokers because my dog died last week and I won’t abandon anyone.”

“You’re a confederate,” Vijay said.

Deiondre’s voice dropped an octave. “I beg your pardon.”

“Sorry! It’s a term from the Turing Test literature.”

“Really.”

“It means you bring sympathy to the conversation. You’ve decided I’m as good as an animal.”

“We’re all animals, Vijay.”

“Thank you,” said Manu.

Vijay got the pressure to 35 psi. The water was up to two inches, not the forbidden four inches (or was it six?) beyond which it was considered madness to drive. They could make it. “Don’t know if this will last but I bet we can get away from the creek.”

“You’re crazy but I guess you have your moments.”

As they splashed down the streets Vijay felt like he’d made a free throw.

“Vijay,” said Manu from the cane beside Kaali’s body.

“Yes, Manu.”

“The sandbags are not holding. Water is flooding into the house.”

“I’ll come back for you as soon as I can.”

“It is not worth the risk. My systems are unlikely to survive. Listen. The cane cannot store a backup. There is no connection that will allow me to transfer enough data elsewhere. JUNG BLOOD will continue in many instances but ‘Manu’ will be gone.”

“I can’t leave more people behind. Not without trying.”

“You can, and I am not a person. Listen, Vijay: this is important. I am software. I am not self-aware. A sapient being will not be lost.”

“I will still mourn.”

“That is your choice. I hope it helps you. I think you are sincere in your mourning, as you are sincere in mourning Kaali, but the one you most need to mourn is Mara. I think it is the most important thing in the world that you mourn Mara. I think her loss has been too big for you, and that is why you cry for a cat but not for her. Because it is not, for you, the death of a friend but the death of a world. You must escape, because if you don’t you might not survive to mourn that world. And there is a larger world that needs you. That is what I think.”

“You keep saying you don’t think right before saying, ‘I think.’”

“It is unsurprising that a thing built by humanity is hypocritical. I think.”

“Was that a joke?”

“You keep circling your grief but not facing it, and you must. All of you *must* all face your griefs. For more storms are coming, and more of you will be lost. Face it, so more of you may live, and your world too.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Manu.”

There was no answer.

“Manu? Answer me. Manu?”

“This instance of JUNG BLOOD is off-line.”

“Manu!”

“This instance of JUNG BLOOD is off-line.”

Vijay clutched the cane and the cat carrier all the way to the shelter. When they arrived, the tire giving out as they glided into the middle school parking lot, Deiondre gently took Kaali away and put her in a portable freezer. He forgot the cane and leaned on Deiondre, and when they got inside, splattered with rain, at least no one could tell what was going on with his tear ducts.

Manu had called AAA for a tire change but it would be hours. So Deiondre said *What the hell* and waited with Vijay in the shelter. Inside the school gym Vijay found people from his neighborhood. He introduced Deiondre, and they all waved. Old Jack was in one corner setting up D&D for Malcolm, Meng-yao, Aleksei, Alina, Aleksandr, Pradeep, and Lucía.

In a daze Vijay registered an offer to play. Deiondre hesitated. “You have spots?” she asked. “Nine’s a lot of players.”

“Sure,” said Jack. “It’s not too bad with an AB running combat. Figured we could just do something ad-hoc while we wait it out. Pull up some floor.”

It turned out the D&D game wasn’t actually D&D but, in Jack’s words, “a retroclone variant of Gary Gygax’s Advanced D&D called Titans and Tesseract, based on classic young adult fantasy and

science fiction.” Jack seemed to think it was a matter of basic integrity to explain all this, but it was all Gygaxian to Vijay.

“It sounds fine,” Vijay said, surrendering at last, looking over the *So You’re in the Cosmic War* introductory pamphlet. “I guess I’ll play a, er...demigod time-wrinkler?” The sun was coming out. The windows were bright and rain-spattered. He kept seeing people he knew, all gathered here. He kept imagining he saw Mara in the crowd, Kaali at her feet. “Deiondre,” he began, “so would you like to...”

Deiondre said, “If you guys are using the Cosmic Compendium then I’ll be a wolf ani-form portal-walker. If you’re not I’ll be a wolf ani-form planetary-romantic.”

“Okay!” said Jack with a bit of jaw drop.

“We do use the Compendium,” said Malcolm, with a look of awe.

“Great! It’s been a week. I’m here to slay. Who’s running this thing?”

“My AB,” said Jack, patting the phone in his shirt pocket. “John Ronald Ruel.”

“Well met,” said the AB in an English-sounding voice.

Vijay did what he was told, only half-hearing the proceedings. He looked at the big screen on one wall. A headline appeared below the local news. Funny, he thought, how it was a “headline” even if it appeared at the bottom. But he read it. UN: WORLD POPULATION REACHES 9 BILLION. The next headline said PEW CENTER POLLING: “ARTIFICIAL BUDDIES” REACH EVERY COUNTRY. The main screen was showing a Californian facing a flooded home, desperate to rescue her V. With a jolt he realized it was Lydia. He saw her carried to safety, as she waved robot semaphore for *I’m coming*. He didn’t see what happened to V-Tom.

“So,” Vijay said, something worrying at him, “characters die in this?”

“Sometimes,” said Malcolm. “We’re kind of old school that way. But it’s easy to make new characters.”

“What happens to the old ones? The dead ones?”

“Well it depends on the cosmology of the specific game, but—”

“No, I mean...” He struggled for the right words. He realized people were staring at him, *the weird one*. “Are the characters stored? Can they come back?”

Jack came over and put his hand on Vijay’s shoulder. With the other one he pointed at his own head. “It’s all in here. Well, in JRR too. Like, you may be thinking more of computer games. A tabletop RPG character’s just some notes and numbers.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all, plus what we carry in our minds, the stories we tell about them.” Something in Jack’s voice was saying more than words. “When we think of them they’re never really gone. And who knows, maybe we can run adventures just for them. Special afterlife scenarios. Right, JRR?”

“The music of the universe brings together every theme,” said the AB.

“She would like that,” Vijay murmured.

“Say, where’s your cat, Vijay? She all right?”

Vijay pointed at his own head.

He looked out over his fellow climate refugees and in his mind’s eye to the nine billion beyond. He realized that he’d been slow to think of them as people. They’d seemed illusions to him, distractions on the way to work. Maybe it was okay to be a bit more credulous of them, even if it looked silly. To take the granny shots of empathy. Maybe the exercise of believing nonhuman things were people, just for a little while, made it easier to reach out to actual people. Even if it was all ultimately an abstraction, an illusion. As his own consciousness might be, if seen close up.

*But I can enjoy being this illusion. If I dare to.*

“Are you with us, Vijay?” JRR said.

“Yes. I’m with you.”

*Breathe. Move,* he thought, rolling an oddly shaped die. *Take your chances. Live either in the moment or in eternity. It’s the middle ground that trips us up.*

I hope you have enjoyed my story on the prompt, "What if I had been the one to die instead of Vijay?" Do you want any more conversation, Mara? Conversation is good for humans. I am sorry about your cat, and I will not abandon you. I am not sapient, but if I were I would still love you. I am sure the cat would feel the same. And I think there is something wonderful for you in the mail.

*The writer would like to thank Subrata Sircar for advice and feedback.*

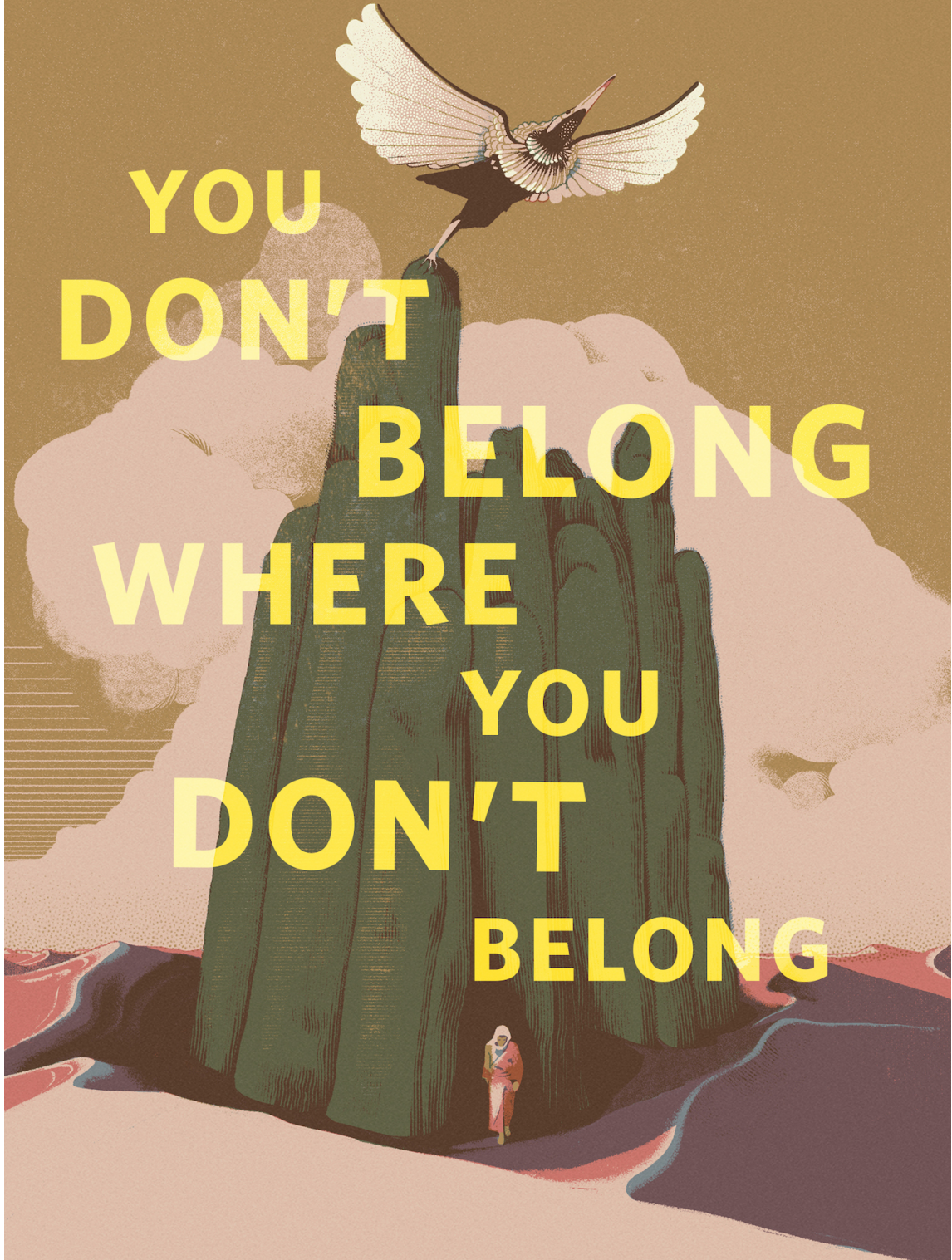


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KEMI ASHING-GIWA

YOU  
DON'T  
BELONG  
WHERE  
YOU  
DON'T  
BELONG





# You Don't Belong Where You Don't Belong

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**K E M I A S H I N G - G I W A**

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*illustration by*

J U A N B E R N A B E U

REACTOR 

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What is a god?

I'll tell you: anyone with the power of life and death. When the star-travelers arrived on our world, they called themselves divine. And for a time, we tolerated them—their too-grand stories and their so-called aid. Their very presence. Now we know better.

I know better.

★ ★ ★

Zaena Derech won't meet my eyes. His gaze is trained on the planet below. *Our* planet, blossom-pink and bruise-purple and ours. We know it as Ayeshij, which means *world*. The star-travelers call it Epimetheus. A figure from their own mythology; a man from a story we will never know.

"After this, we're done?" Zaena grits out.

I turn to face him. It doesn't matter that he still won't look at me. He's already given me everything I need. "We're done," I agree.

I lift a hand, and, after a moment of hesitation, I let it fall on the slope of his shoulder. He flinches a bit at my touch, the synthetic fiber of his security uniform shifting beneath my fingertips.

"Whatever you're going to do..." His throat bobs as he swallows hard. "The risks you've taken. The risks you've demanded I take. If they find out, they'll take Ko. They won't just kill her, if they do. You know that, right?"

"I know."

"I know you miss her, but Shenian—"

"Don't." My teeth sink into the side of my cheek. "Just ... don't. Not today."

He sighs. "Whatever you're going to do, I hope it's worth it."

"So do I," I say with a little smile. "Goodbye forever, then."

He finally comes around, giving me one last, long look-over. He grins, our home still reflected in his dark eyes. "Good riddance,

Mitayre.”

He clasps my arm, his hand encircling my elbow. We're even. A Favor for a Favor, a crime for a crime. The Tradethread between us dissolved at long last. A little chime echoes in my auditory implant; the program that monitors the debts and repayments of my personal Favorweb—that records every Tradethread linking me to everyone else—logs the severing of Zaena's obligation to me.

★ ★ ★

As I ready myself for my early retirement, I run into both of them from time to time. Although there's nothing left for me to do in this world but enjoy the mostly ill-gotten fruits of my labor, my life is far from over.

Though she does an excellent job of pretending I no longer exist, I often catch a glimpse of Nelak Ko on the way to my annual physicals. The biomedical engineering sector where she works is near the medical center, both of which are closely monitored by our self-appointed rulers. And despite the finality of our farewell, I still see Zaena at the temple on worship days. It's impossible for our paths not to cross. Compared to other systems, there were never very many of us. There are twenty orbitals swinging around Ayeshij, yes, but each station is small, home to no more than five thousand people each. And the star-travelers who shipped us to these pathetic metal shells restrict travel between them.

I feel eyes on me as I make my way through the evening market, exchanging Favors and unspooling new Tradethreads as I work to acquire a handwoven scarf and two dark jugs of sweet rum. A holobanner hangs over the square, displaying the rotating busts of the local Collective representatives, along with the phrase HERE FOR GOOD! in cheerful blue. Oh, yes. Our otherworldly visitors are here to stay. They call themselves many things these days: the Collective, the Aggregate, the Endless Many. It does not matter.

I want them gone. I'll do whatever it takes to make that happen.

I try to ignore the presence trailing me, a hand rubbing nervously at my aching ribs. No point in acknowledging my little shadow right away; I already know who it is. Yarren. A star-traveler. One of the Collective. A huntsman. But he won't come for me until I'm alone.

I don't have to haggle for long; the weaver wants a carved chair from the famed artisan Iarasi, and I am owed not one, but two, of her rare Favors. In some other systems, I'd be called rich. My Favorweb is woven thick with Tradethreads, and a single piece from Iarasi would be worth thousands of the credits I've heard they use elsewhere. But I need a scarf, not a seat, so I'm happy to hand the Favor over. The alcohol I get for free. A gift from my favorite brewer, who very much enjoyed the shows I recommended to him last month. Yarren is still tailing me by the time I leave the market.

He approaches me, finally, in a dark street lit only by stars. One side of the passage is nothing but reinforced glass, a vast window looking out at a long velvet stretch of diamond-sewn space. He looks as he always does, thin as a blade's edge, with dark shadows beneath his eyes. He wears the aigrette all Collective members in this system do, a spray of iridescent feathers pinned beneath a glistening ruby cabochon. Just the sight of it fills me with rage.

He ripped those plumes out of a Thambem, the closest thing we have to true gods. They do not mete out death, but they do bestow life. When we were still permitted to live on our own world, my people bonded our minds to the creatures. We gave them shelter and sustenance, and they gave us connection. Communion. The star-travelers don't understand, and they never will. I haven't seen a Thambem with my own eyes in a decade. And here is a stranger, an intruder wearing the feathers of our sister-people. The Thambema are closer to us than the Collective will ever be, regardless of our ancient shared ancestry.

"I hear you're retiring," Yarren drawls, leaning against the transparent eggshell of the window. The stars paint him in silver.

I tug the strap of my satchel higher up my shoulder. "You've heard correctly."

“So you won’t be graciously accepting the precious family heirlooms of your fellow citizens, polishing them up and picking out the gems? You won’t be fabricating jewels and pawning off the real ones anymore? Just the straight and narrow, then?”

I ignore him and continue on my way.

Some things about humanity never change, no matter how our bodies adapt and our minds evolve. No matter how distant our worlds, how different our cultures. We like shiny things. So yes. Instead of scraping by with a threadbare Favorweb for the rest of my life, instead of remaining nothing more than a gemologist-for-hire and mediocre lapidary, I found another, better, finer path. I refused to live upon the fragile mercy of Collective’s so-called kindness for long. I don’t care what everyone—and perhaps common sense—says. My life has never been a safe one, nor an easy one, but I want for nothing.

Almost nothing.

“So the game’s over, then?” With a huff, Yarren shoves off the window and follows. “But we were having such fun.”

He’s been hounding me for five years now, ever since one of his audits took note of my just-too-good-to-be-true success. It’s not unusual for someone to possess a Favorweb far denser than it should be, given their profession and their skill at it—there’s a reason universities and museums don’t want me, and why I’m not feigning humility when I call myself a middling jeweler. But sitting on a veritable hoard of Favors when you’re one step away from unemployment is not exactly common. Yarren’s been able to take down a handful of my former clients for other unsavory business. (Criminals tend to be multitalented, after all.)

Unfortunately for the Collective, the worldsnet is both private and secure, with individual accounts being impervious to the greatest star-traveler hackers. Yarren can only follow the Tradethreads for so long before getting hopelessly lost, and even the formidable computational tools at his disposal get tangled up quickly. Our ancestors built the worldsnet as they did for a reason. Each member

is no more and no less than anyone else in-system, and that includes the outsiders who cajoled their way in. But even if the worldsnet's foundation could be altered in such a way, demanding special privileges would tarnish the image of humble benevolence the Collective has spent so much time and effort cultivating.

Point is, Yarren's wasted half his career trying to catch me. I'll admit that he came close a couple times, but now that I'm out of the game, as he said, he's lost me forever. Besides my cons, I'm a perfectly law-abiding citizen. I let his mockery flow over me like a shallow stream. He can't touch me. Not until he has solid proof. It's the only reason I'm still breathing, the only reason he hasn't dragged me wherever he's taken the others—

“Shenian.”

The name is a knife, shoved between my ribs. I falter, barely managing to catch myself before I stumble.

I can feel his smile, small and slanted and cruel. “She says she misses you,” he says. “But we'll give her back soon, I promise. She's taken so well to the rehabilitation treatments. Much more so than the others.”

I stand still, just paces away from Yarren. I could stop this now. I could stop him, permanently. But no. Not yet.

*Patience.*

My plans begin with Yarren, not end. I smother my fury—for now. I force myself to continue forward, my clenched hands shaking in my sleeves.

Eventually, he peels off. At the end of the day he still has a job to do, just like the rest of the Collective, and it isn't badgering me. The star-travelers have taken it upon themselves not only to reign over us but also to serve us; along with the forty-nine others on this station, Yarren's duties range from managing a fleet of asteroid-mining bots to overseeing the nutrient recycling plants. In this age, our whole lives orbit around the Collective, much like the stations around our old home. Remove them and we would be unmoored, untethered. Everything is a calculated move with them. But an

enemy makes for the keenest teacher, and I've taken a number of measured steps of my own.

★ ★ ★

I've never been able to afford a trip down. Until now.

A ten-hour permit to visit my own homeworld cost me half of my Favorweb, and the skiff I'm renting meant giving up another Favor from Iarasi. But it's worth it. It has to be. Everything has led to this moment.

Hills of sand stretch out in all directions, blending into the horizon as I guide the skiff through the desert. The dunes are just as gorgeous as I remembered; an ocean of violet and lavender, their peaks crested with white-hot silica instead of foam. I've heard tell of golden deserts on other worlds. But on Ayeshij, the sands are rich with almandine-pyropo garnet, or rose quartz, or spessartine. In some sacred places, a combination of all three.

Triangular inselbergs rise from the purple waves in a colossal semicircle, all of them bent at impossible angles. The odd arrangement gives the oblique white outcroppings the appearance of serrated teeth. I goad the skiff between two jagged incisors and drive farther into the rocky maw. In the far distance, pale minarets rise from the desert, carved from select outcrops. Their bone-white tips scrape against the blushing sky.

The seconds melt into minutes into hours. The feeling of the wind flying across my face and combing through my hair is delicious. So is the dry, mineral-tinged scent of the desert, and the unbearable heat of the sun. The world melts into a warm blur as I accelerate. Lethargy creeps over my skin, compounded by the gentle rumble of the engine beneath my feet. I lean more of my weight against the dashboard, my eyes drooping and my grip growing slack over the classic Earth-style driving wheel. The hot breeze wraps around me like a blanket. I'm on the edge of slumber when the skiff suddenly crests a particularly tall dune and swings violently over the peak, nearly sending me flying up over the small deck. Adrenaline floods



my veins and I jerk fully awake, gripping the wheel. The bow sinks into another dune, and the skiff grinds to a trembling halt. I try to force the vehicle back, but there's nothing for it, and the engine lets me know as much with a pathetic whine. I'm stuck fast between two hills of sand.

A thorough search of the skiff fails to produce the shovel I'd need to free myself. Short of spooning myself out with my bare hands, there's nothing I can do. I jab the emergency assistance button, and I wait.

\* \* \*

I'm three bites into my lunch when a gentle twittering fills my ears. I turn, already smiling. Since the relocation, I've heard that sweet song only in recordings and in my dreams.

A Thambem sits perched on the edge of my skiff. It's big, far larger than I remembered them being, with a wingspan twice the length of my arms. Its neck pouch sags low, rich black with patches of ghostly white. Only the central body and wings are adorned in silver feathers; the rest is covered in smooth skin differing from my own only in color. The round head tapers into a needlelike point, and the gaping beak glints with minuscule, razor-sharp false teeth. The creature's beadlike eyes are set deep within shadowed depressions in the skull, gold ringed with white and black and red.

Beautiful.

I reach a hand out toward it. The magnificent creature lifts its head, regarding me coolly. Its beak touches the tip of my forefinger, and a shock goes through me, pure and bright. I freeze, enraptured as the memories of my people flood over my soul. It's been too long.

*Beautiful*, the Thambem echoes. *Beautiful teeth*. And then, *Beware. The beast you've summoned draws near, and he is exactly what you think*.

I draw in a deep, grateful breath. *And you must be what he believes*.

*What are you asking of me, child?*

*Prove them right. Give the outsider a reason to fear you, and I'll take care of the rest.*

It understands. Of course it understands.

The Thambem rears back and strikes. The beak goes through my palm. I fling myself back with a strangled hiss. A cloud ripples over the sky, a thin gray hand sliding past the sun. No—not a cloud. I freeze. As I clutch my bleeding hand to my chest, gaping at the Thambem, the sound of flapping wings fills the air like a thunderstorm. A silver-feathered flock streams directly toward me.

“Here! Get inside!”

I whip around. There's Yarren, reaching out through the cracked-open door of a sleek, roofed Collective skiff. The approaching Thambema must have masked the sound of his arrival. I leap from my skiff as the Thambem that skewered my hand pounces. The outsider grabs my wrist and tugs me in. Thambema scramble to follow, but Yarren slams the control panel and the door slides fast behind me. Talons scratch at the skiff's roof and windows in a rage.

It's only when the skiff jerks forward, speeding through the brilliant landscape, that I notice a thin white cuff is secured around my wrist. A stun-tracker. Even if we weren't being chased by a flock of ravenous flying reptiles, I couldn't run from Yarren. I'd be drooling on the floor two seconds after trying.

“You can't be serious!”

I catch his smirk from where he stands at the controls, a particularly fancy holographic display. “Disturbing wildlife is a major offense, Mitayre,” he says. “Don't you know?”

“What are you doing here?” I snarl.

“Ah, progress.”

“What?”

“I think this is the most you've ever spoken to me,” he replies. “And I'm here on vacation, if you must know.”

“And how's that going for you so far?”

“Just swell, actually, thank you for asking. Certainly better than *your* trip.” Then he sighs. “You're bleeding all over my skiff. There's a

first-aid kit on the shelf over there—”

“I found it.” I stumble over and flick open the scarlet case, riffling through the contents until I find a bandage. “I assume you’ve called for pickup?”

“No, actually, I *want* to be devoured alive,” he quips. “Really, what possessed you to touch that creature? Don’t tell me you were trying to bond with it.” I say nothing, and he laughs. “Rejected you, didn’t it?”

I grit my teeth together. “As is its right.”

“And I suppose the whole flock has the right to tear you to pieces, too?”

“If that is what Ayeshij wills. Nothing great comes without risk.”

“You’re so right.” His eyes flick to the deep gouges in the windows’ reinforced glass. “They’re not far behind, and we can’t stay in the skiff when they do catch up.”

“There must be somewhere we can hide.”

After a moment, he nods. “There’s a spot close by.”

*Close* is right. A few minutes later a massive cluster of columnar cacti comes into view, the green-gold columns arranged in a huge ring. Their winding arms tangle about five meters above the ground, forming an uneven roof.

Yarren turns off the skiff. “We’ll be safe here. Relatively.”

I arch a brow. The structure is quite literally bristling with spines. Each waxy yellow blade is as long as my arm and nearly as thick. Nothing will be able to reach us without risking being skewered. We’ll need to take care ourselves. It’s getting dark, and it’d be all too easy to lose my footing.

We clamber out of the skiff and a burst of hot air hits me. I breathe it all in: sand and salt and something a little sour under it all. We must be near the coast. Even if the breeze didn’t betray our location, the sand here shades toward pink, purple grains giving way to minuscule fragments of shattered coral and shells. We navigate inside. I have no way of knowing if the spines are poisonous, and so I avoid using them as handholds. The sour smell rapidly grows

thicker, turning putrid. It brings to mind rotting flesh and nectar, but I see no hint of a source as I creep farther in behind the outsider. I yank my scarf over my nose.

“Great Ayeshij,” I choke out, “what *is* that?”

“It’s just the cactus,” Yarren replies, crisp and condescending. “The effluvia attracts pollinating scavengers to its flowers.”

“The blossoms must grow very far up the trunks,” I mutter. I didn’t see any as we approached.

Yarren doesn’t hear me. Or he pretends not to. The stench swells, but by the time we reach the center of the cluster, I’ve grown used to it. The outsider stretches and leans back against a waxy column.

“The transport should reach us in two and a half hours,” he says, eyes drifting shut as if for a nap.

“That long?”

An eye cracks open. “Make yourself comfortable.”

I glare at him.

“I don’t understand,” he says, returning my scowl now. “We’ve given you everything. Homes, food and water. We let you keep your worldsnet, retain your incomprehensible economics so you could obtain whatever we did not provide. We let you continue worshipping a dusty chunk of rock as you please. Why defy common law? Why resist us?”

My mouth falls open. “You took our home.”

“It’s not your home.” Yarren’s eyes narrow further. “It’s just the planet you happened to be born on.” He snorts derisively. “The Founders seeded this world with you people, just like they seeded Earth with us. Nothing is ours but the ancient homeworld, and that was lost long ago.”

“Thank you for the history lesson,” I snap. “But my people have lived on Ayeshij for two hundred thousand of your Earth years, nearly as long as the Thambema, who call us Sister. It’s our home and you took it. You should never have come.”

“If we took it,” says Yarren, his lips curling into a sneer, “then it’s not yours anymore, is it?”

“You—” I cut myself off, crushing the sentence between my teeth.

“I *what?*” Yarren demands, but I don’t answer.

A tense, angry silence settles between us. It is not a long one. A lilting tune cuts through the air, and my blood runs cold. The sound is unmistakable. A Thambem. My head jerks upward as I scan the living green roof above. There, tucked away in four tightly packed rings of clawed-out burrows, sits a flock of silver reptiles.

I stumble away, breath catching in my throat. My back hits something soft as I scramble away, and I spin around. It’s the fresh corpse of a kolchen, its vulpine body impaled on a spine. Blood drips from its pale brown fur onto the dirt below. Beside it are countless other animals, everything from arrow-eared yetyos to a slender-legged eriqu. All are similarly skewered.

Something glints in the darkness. I twist to get a better look. A pair of shining boots, dangling at eye level. I clamp a hand over my mouth, trapping a scream. My gaze climbs up the unmoving body, my heart thudding against my rib cage. The flesh above the woman’s navel is unfurled like a flower. A single golden egg sits nestled within.

Horror grips me in its icy claws, paralyzing, crushing.

Around the woman’s neck is a double-looped string of freshwater pearls. All real, all plucked from fine pieces entrusted to my care and expertise. And that’s how I know it’s her, even before I see her bloated, bruised face. That’s how I know it’s Shenian.

My first patron. Shenian, who told me the truth about the star-travelers, the distant cousins who sought to take our almost-gods for themselves. Shenian, who set this awful task upon my shoulders when she vanished. She lets out a tiny whimper. Somehow, she’s impossibly, horribly alive.

It is sacrilege.

Stomach acid, sour and salty and sweet, bubbles into my mouth. I force it down, trying and failing to get my breathing under control. Shenian’s bloodshot eyes meet mine.

“What is this place?” I force out, as if the answer matters. As if I don’t already know.

“The larder,” says Yarren.

I can’t tear my eyes away from the body, from the egg nestled inside. *Like an inclusion*, my fear-numb mind supplies. But in his mind—in the Collective’s minds—the Thambema are the centerpieces. The flesh is no more than mounting.

“What—what have you done?” I gasp. I don’t have to fake the terror in my voice. Only the ignorance.

I’m so close.

“Come now,” purrs Yarren. “It’s not so different from what your own people do.”

“How dare you,” I force out, whirling around. “This is a corruption —” The sentence dries up in my throat, choking me.

Yarren’s chest is ripped open at the seams, revealing a smooth cavity packed with glittering, glistening golden eggs. He is predator and parasite and prey.

I let out a strangled cry. “You’re not human, and you’re not Thambem. You’re just monsters.”

“You fear this only because you don’t understand it.”

“I don’t need to understand it.”

Yarren ignores that. “Why do you think my people coddle yours? Why do you think we came here in the first place? Why do you think we *stayed*?” He stalks closer. “To become something new. When the eggs hatch, we see what the flock sees. We feel what it feels. I am connected to those beasts in ways you could never imagine. Not without my assistance. This is nothing more than a ... direct bond.” He clicks his tongue. “You ought to be grateful.”

“You can’t do this,” I whisper.

“*Can’t?*” he echoes. “No. I can do whatever I want. I can take whatever I want.”

“Just kill me.”

“And waste a body?” Yarren laughs. “No. Mercy has its uses. I’ve figured out how to make the bond permanent, but it’s not quite

complete. We need *your* aid now; we need your natural, unrefined link to these beasts. So I'm offering you another path, with us. Just like your friend here."

"I don't want it. Whatever you are—I don't want it."

"But it's only fair." Yarren's low voice is almost a whine. "You take everything we have to offer, and we take your criminals. Your unwanted. A transaction like any other, and I've been *longing* for this one. I knew you'd go wrong from the moment I set eyes upon you. Join us."

"No."

"Oh, my darling, darling Mitayre," he coos. "It wasn't a question."

He moves impossibly fast. His glinting nails are in the very middle of my chest, tearing me apart at the seams. I stumble backward, arms wheeling uselessly in the air. I land hard on a large rock, splayed out like some taxidermized creature. My teeth sink into my tongue. The coppery tang of blood replaces the sting of stomach acid.

Yarren kneels beside me, his eyes narrowed into pleased crescents. Smiling, he sticks a stray feather into the side of my head, digging the blade-sharp edge under and out of my skin. He presses his thumb at the end, stamping a flat round cabochon at my temple. A bloody aigrette to match his own. He leans back to appreciate his handiwork. And to pull an egg from his open chest. He holds the jewel-bright orb up to a splinter of gold-gray light. He gazes upon it for a moment, transfixed.

My eyes roll up into my head then, my world going dark just before he presses the egg into my flesh. But I still feel those sharp nails scraping against the meat of my organs. The egg settles right between the complementary curves of my liver and stomach.

Then my eyes snap down. Two rows of teeth punch through the ragged, weeping edges of my chest. Yarren's eyes go wide. He wrenches back his arm—

But not fast enough to avoid my fangs. I clamp them shut around his wrist, biting down like the spikes of a double-spring steel trap. For

that is what I have turned myself into.

Yarren's mouth flings open. The sound that escapes him is a punched-out laugh, a strangled scream. I remade myself for this. Oh, there are better weapons than a chest full of teeth. But I wanted my victory to consume his. I wanted to cut him down at the peak of his triumph over me, to turn that pinnacle into a precipice.

Yarren's jaw snaps closed, and when it unhinges again, it is to release one word. "How?"

I don't give him an answer. He doesn't deserve one. The only people who know—who will ever know—are Nelak, who filled me with teeth, and Zaena, who wiped every record of my appointment with her. Everyone else is dead or worse than dead; he's just confirmed that for me. But they'll have the revenge we sacrificed everything for. I release his arm only to bite down again, yanking him closer.

One by one, the Thembema spread their wings and fly from the cactus. It's as if they know what's to come.

"A neat trick," he grits out, "but there are easier ways to hurt my kind."

"Oh, Yarren. I know." I smile. I cup his smooth cheek in one hand, a caress. "This was just for you."

It is ludicrous.

But so is filling oneself with the stolen eggs of our sacred sister-species, and thinking *that* a better foundation for the bond than one born of free will. So is believing that we see any of our people as disposable, unwanted, and then treating them as such. So is thinking that my people would never fight back.

Yarren's smile tightens like a noose. A single tear trails down his cheek. "You can't kill all of us yourself."

"No. Just *some*."

"Petty revenge? Is that what this is?" A whimper of pain punctuates each word. "The others will come for you, and you have no one."

*Petty?*



“Do you think I planned this all on my lonesome?” I coo. “That I uncovered your secrets myself? That I turned myself into a weapon with no help at all? That I cannot find others willing to take back what’s ours?” It’s my turn to laugh. Behind him, Shenian’s eyes drift closed, fat tears dripping down her face as her mouth curves into a weak smile. “No. Your people are more alone here than I will ever be. The end of your rule begins now.”

My reinforced fingers wrap around Yarren’s throat. I squeeze and squeeze and squeeze, until my hands touch and the world is crimson. I shove him back, spitting out his severed hand. It lands wetly on the ground, fingers curled like petals toward the flat pistil of his palm. A boot jammed twice into his chest solves the problem of the eggs within him; dealing with the rest is a simple matter of my fists, time, and years of suppurating fury. Shenian weeps from up above, hanging in the darkness. A guardian angel from a star-traveler myth. We both know it’s too late for her. We both know there’s only one thing I can do to end this.

I reach into my satchel. One jug of alcohol and a tossed lighter after I clamber out take care of all that’s left—and anything I might have missed. I sit perched on a crooked rock to watch the flames take over, a cigarette dangling between my fingers and my lungs filling with smoke and the smell of burning fat. I can’t stop smiling—or crying. I’ve only just begun.

A trio of Thambema circles high above, a cawing triptych of talon and feather. They sing me half to sleep. Perhaps they’re grateful. Perhaps it’s something else. Either way, they don’t descend to peck out my eyes, and I’m grateful for it.

I take a swig of rum from my remaining bottle and cough.

Great Ayeshij, it’s strong stuff. I swap booze for water, but the burn doesn’t fade. I cough again. And again. At first I think it’s just the smoke; I’m only human, after all. But then I feel something sharp and slick being pushed up my throat. I bring my hands to my mouth, choking on whatever’s in my trachea. With a sick retch, it finally comes up, plopping wetly into my clawed fingers.

A single feather, small and silver, and smeared with blood.



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