

SOME OF THE BEST FROM REACTOR

2024 EDITION

With stories by

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AND KELL WOODS

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REACTOR 

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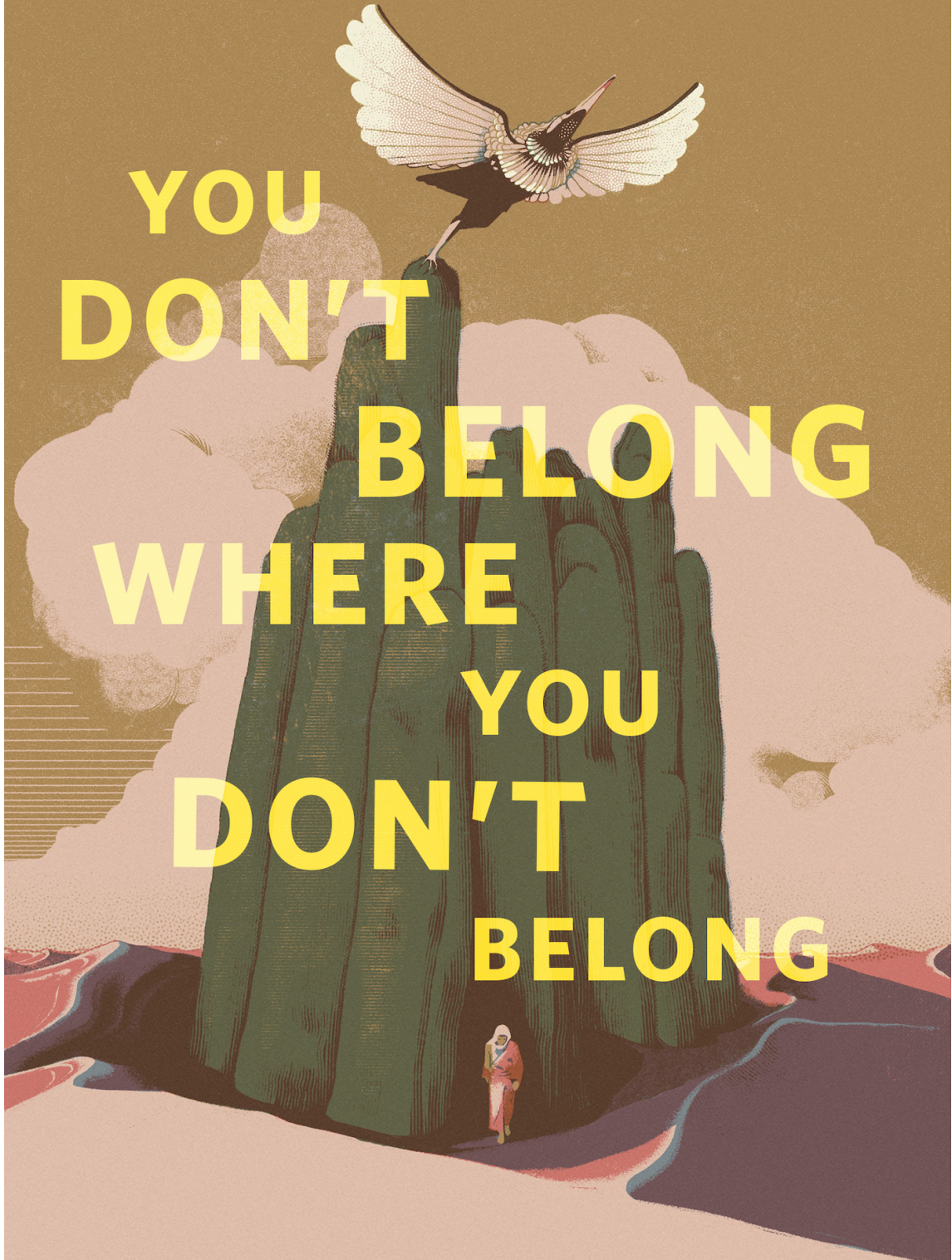
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KEMI ASHING-GIWA

YOU
DON'T
BELONG
WHERE
YOU
DON'T
BELONG



You Don't Belong Where You Don't Belong

K E M I A S H I N G - G I W A

illustration by

J U A N B E R N A B E U

REACTOR 

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 eriqui. 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.

About the Author



KEMI ASHING-GIWA was born and raised in sunny Southern California, where she grew up on a steady diet of sci-fi and fantasy. She enjoys learning about the real universe as much as she likes making ones up. After studying integrative biology and astrophysics at Harvard University, she joined the Earth & Planetary Sciences department at Stanford University as a PhD student. She has published numerous short stories with [Tor.com](https://www.tor.com), and *This World Is Not Yours* is her first novella. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).

REACTOR

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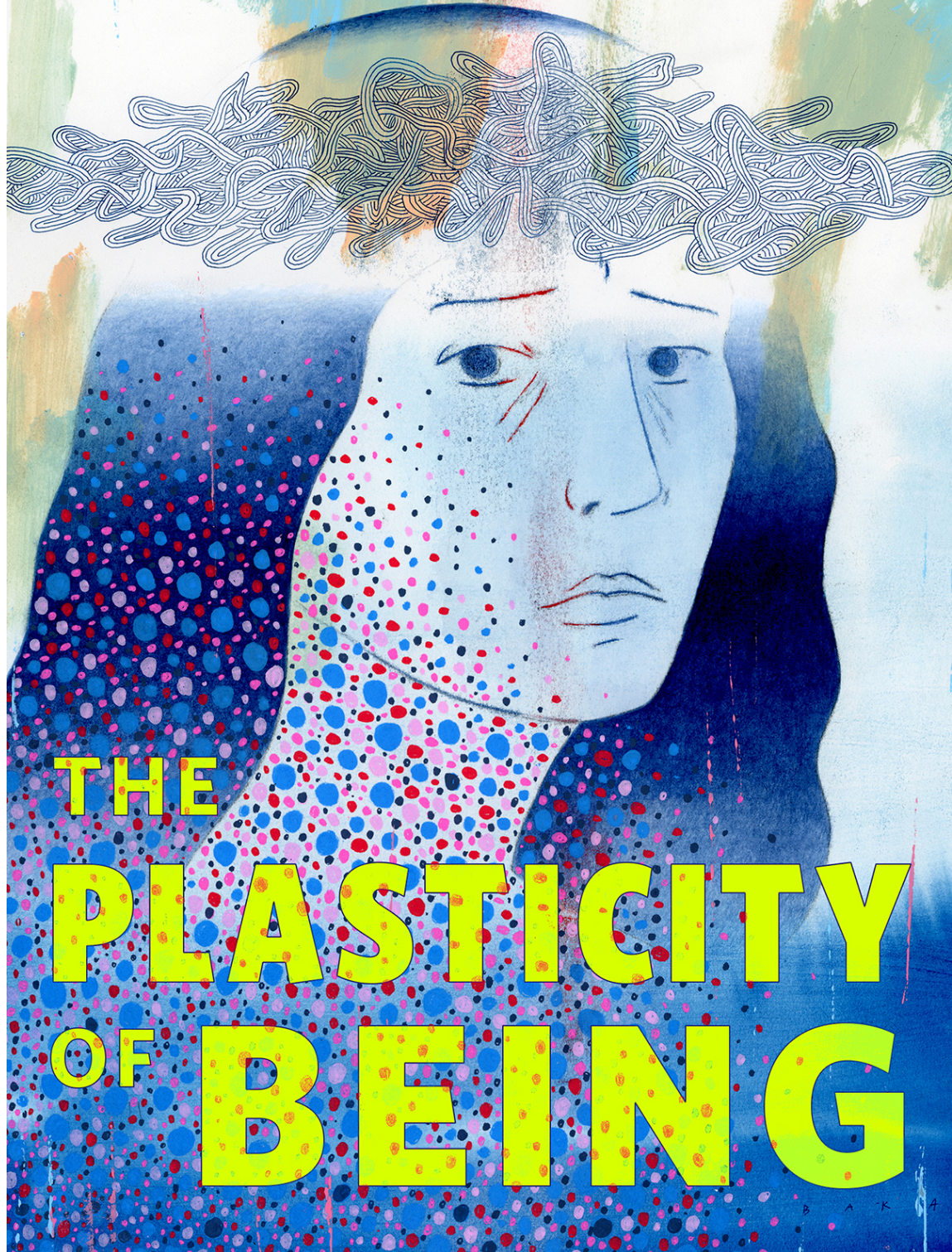
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RENAN BERNARDO



THE
PLASTICITY
OF BEING

B A K A

The Plasticity of Being

RENAN BERNARDO

illustration by

SCOTT BAKAL

REACTOR 

Edilberto Santos takes three plastic bottle caps from the teepee fire in front of him. He crumples their burnt remains together with a spatula, kneading them until they form a semi-solid, charred paste, their blue, red, and green mixing in an uninvited, incomplete rainbow. He whistles a joyful song while waiting for it to cool. I have things to say but I don't interrupt him. After three minutes, he grabs a cheese grater and starts scraping the paste in it, sprinkling the flecks into a bowl. Finally, he scoops the floury mix with a rusty spoon and eats it. His eyes focus on the camera as he chews it. Some of the flecks catch in between his teeth. It doesn't bother him. He's used to it.

I glance down at my pad to escape Edilberto's gaze. The next question is highlighted on the screen. *How does it taste?* Did I write those words? What was I thinking? São João da Campânula is not a damn reality show. It's a landfill and it's home for about forty families. A knot throbs in my chest as I cross through the question to erase it.

"Are you all right, Dona Elisa?" Edilberto asks. He's missing a few teeth. His eyes droop over his sallow cheeks. I shrug and force a nod. What does it mean to be all right after seeing a man eating plastic?

I slide a finger over my pad so my cam-drone buzzes away from Edilberto, focusing instead on the trash behind him. A few people trudge through the paths that open like clogged veins amidst the heaps. A kid fetches something from the ground, giggling with a man beside him. A woman enveloped in a broad shawl carries a fat mesh bag. She selects an object in one of the heaps, yanks it out, and peeks at it. It's a plastic bottle, cracky and sullied with the tan of corrosion. She throws it in her bag.

I open my backpack, pick a sandwich, and hand it to Edilberto. A sandwich. Of all the food I could've brought to São João da Campânula, I brought only a few sandwiches. Ham, cheese, butter.

Edilberto eyes the marmita with mild curiosity—a Tupperware box with a dog sticker on its side. He runs a finger over it. It's the only one I brought from Mamãe's home when I moved to Goiânia after our silent war started. She had that one since she was a child. She was five when she pasted that poodle there. Over the years, the box had stored a whole assortment of her most delicious food—Bolognese spaghetti, fried cod balls, chocolate pudding with strawberries, and scrambled eggs when she was in a hurry. The last time I tried to visit her, I brought pão de queijo in it. She didn't touch them. Mamãe loved me for thirty-two years. However, over the past nine years she's hated me. And she has a good reason for it.

"I'm not hungry right now, but thanks," Edilberto says. "I can keep it for the others, though. Can I keep the box? It's cute."

"Yes, of course." No hesitation. I don't understand why. For Mamãe—and for me—it should be an heirloom. Perhaps by getting rid of her marmita, I'd be officially detaching myself from the woman I loved the most in my life. I peer one last time at the barking poodle sticker, its edges frayed and threatening to unstick. "Keep it, yeah..." Those last words falter, but they come out anyway.

Edilberto smiles at me. There's sweetness in there. Despite the missing teeth, Edilberto doesn't look like a broken man. Not like I pictured all those people—the *plastikeaters*, as some having been derogatorily calling them since they were "discovered" by the media. I'd thought of them as sad, gaunt wanderers, aimlessly looking for solace in the landfills near Mairipotaba. In my nightmares, before I fully compromised in writing a story about their lives, they came to me as dolls made of plastic, revenge cooking in their eyes but their hands wilted together in begging.

The aggression of burnt plastic slicks the air. Not only due to the bottle caps that Edilberto burned. It comes from all over the landfill. Here and there, smoky snakes writhe toward the sundown. I skim

through the list of questions I didn't ask Edilberto. *How does it taste? Does it hurt to eat plastic? How is your diet? Which types of items do you prefer?*

Instead, I look straight into his eyes. There's a deepness in there, brewed in the sweetness, that I doubt my own eyes possess.

"This smell..." I hesitate, swirling a finger in the air. "It's—What does it convey to you?" I think of fires, faulty electronics, problems. Of things going wrong.

"Which smell?—Oh! I barely notice it anymore. But it smells like dinner."

* * *

The story of São João da Campânula started with the company called Verdidea.

Once upon a time, Verdidea was the future: the bastion of sustainability and green technology allied with social and environmental responsibility, a powerful Brazilian—then global—force to correct everything that was wrong with the world. And, indeed, they showed what they were all about. In a decade, their projects of reforestation employed millions of micro-drones in the Amazon rainforest, with tech that healed the damaged soil, planted new trees, and rescued animals during fires—all the time learning the patterns of what they were doing, so they could improve themselves over time and avoid catastrophes. In five years, they managed to recover 85 percent of the previously unrecoverable deforested area. Verdidea freed more than eight hundred rivers from industrial waste all around South America; they brought water to the driest parts of the sertão.

Once upon a time, working for Verdidea was the dream job from engineers to lawyers, from botanists to PR specialists like myself.

Verdidea truly wanted the world to become a better place. As long as the world was theirs.

The story of São João da Campânula also started with me. Once, ten years ago, I came as a PR specialist to write part of it. Now, two

years after the company's breakdown, I come as a freelancer journalist to rewrite it the best way I can.

* * *

"You can look to the camera," I say to the woman, pointing to the cam-drone whirring in front of her. Behind her, a dog lolls on a chair underneath her wooden shack's only window.

"I prefer not to."

"That's okay." I slide a finger on my pad so the drone swivels to the side and avoids focusing on her face. "What's your name?"

"Ângela."

She's a woman in her mid-fifties, brown skin, curly hair falling over her shoulders like waterfalls. She exhales a sweet scent of unnamed flowers, generic enough to fit anywhere, anytime. Next to her shack's door there's a cauldron filled with plastic bottles. On it, scrawled in big red letters: *Pick yours, leave for others*. A repurposed dresser lies next to it with five cheese graters, all shiny and clean, delicately covered with a transparent raincoat.

"Hi, Ângela. My name is Elisa Assunção. I'm a journalist and I'm working on a story about your lives. It aims to bring attention to the authorities and—"

"I know who you are." I freeze. For a moment I think Ângela knows exactly the role Elisa Assunção played in her very existence. She waves her hand. "Your type always comes here, asking questions, giving us crumbs to nibble. Then you go away. You're predators, that's what I say."

I agree. Brazil was shocked when the news about São João da Campânula broke in the headlines. *Plastic-eating people living in landfill. A new kind of poverty sprouts in Goiás*. In their prowl for answers—*How can they survive? Is it a hoax? Where do they come from?*—journalists and authorities came and went to the landfill as explorers, merely digging for stories and opportunities, never fully finding the answers, never providing ways out.

I, on the other hand, have the answers already. I'm part of them, so I come with all of them, not for them. Instead, I come for any shreds of redemption I can find in that place. Like Mamãe used to say, *Don't try to repair your mistakes all at once. Some of them you'll just have to swallow.*

"Ângela, do you have kids?"

"Um-hum." She glares suspiciously at the cam-drone. I tap the OFF button on my pad and the drone slowly descends to the ground, its propellers shutting off and its LEDs powering down.

"Tell me about them."

"That's what you wanna hear? Won't you talk about plastic? Your type loves to babble about plastic."

"I just want to hear about your kids."

First, she gives me what I deserve: silence. Then, she gives me the stories of Mariana, Rogério, Adenilson, and Cleiton, of how they walk fifty minutes to school every day. She tells me how they find toys in the landfill and how she has to carefully select what isn't dangerous for them. She tells me how she loves a man called Jango, who lives in a shack in the eastern border of the landfill, of how she found brand-new canvas sneakers just lying around, green and yellow with black stripes, perfectly fitting on her feet. The only thing I type on my pad is the cornmeal cake recipe she dictates to me, which she only prepared twice in her life because she never has the ingredients.

In the end, she tells me she's grateful for that "Verde-something company" because her kids never learned what it meant to starve.

* * *

The enzyme was a breakthrough. It took only one year to go from plastic-gobbling bacteria to plastic-digesting isopods. Verdidea's name stamped every front page around the world. The Great Pacific garbage patch was being exorcised from its plastic by isopods at a rate never before imagined. Microbes carrying the enzyme were spread throughout landfills in Brazil, Argentina, and Colombia. It

brought awareness and funding for bioplastics research, decreasing its costs of production. The video of a girl snickering and lowering a plastic soda bottle into a pool of isopods went viral for months.

When Mamãe saw the news, she was washing a plastic bowl. She guffawed, then widened her eyes.

“Perhaps I should replace it for something else.” She raised the bowl. “Lisa, do you have something to do with that, with all those great things your employer is doing?”

I laughed at her curiosity. But yes, I had something to do with Verdidea’s rise to fame. As their main PR specialist, I knew exactly what to sweep beneath the carpet: embezzlement schemes, tax evasion, greenwashing, and all scandals that involved Jandir and Vando Batista, brothers and CEOs of Verdidea. It was all justified, given the nature of Verdidea’s noble undertaking. At that moment, laughing with Mamãe in the kitchen, feeling cozy and accomplished, I had yet to fuck a lot of lives.

* * *

On the fifth day of my trip to São João da Campânula, I have only a recipe written down and less than twenty minutes of video footage. At night, I choose to walk around the landfill’s paths—its veins—with my pad and my cam-drone turned off in my backpack. This time, I don’t bring sandwiches.

I trudge, observing the flocks of people coming and going from the shacks that surround the landfill. A trio of men jab small items from the ground with hook sticks. A few steps behind them, two kids argue about the true color of the moon. One of them believes it’s as strikingly white as unspoiled milk. The other one says it’s tawny like the pages of the books in his mother’s chest. In the sky, silky clouds strive to hide the secrets of the moon.

On a heap of trash, an old woman with a hunched back fidgets with litter, a statue against the nightly hues. She wears fruit baskets as shoes and gloves to pick up what she deems useful. I wave at her, experimenting with a smile even knowing it hardly fits. She

frowns at me but doesn't wave back. A few meters ahead, six people gather around a grill, two of them sambaing to the erratic sounds of a broken pandeiro. The others laugh and talk loudly about a soccer game, pointing at each other, gesticulating. The stench that glues to the air, sweating from the grill, is the one I'm growing used to. Perhaps it means home to them. *It smells like dinner.* When I arrived home late from college, the aroma of Mamãe's beans cooked with garlic and paprika pervaded the apartment. That scent was like a tight, warm embrace, even though I eventually chose to abandon it to chase illusions.

"Moça!" I pivot to face a boy sticking his foot into a pile of trash. He gives out a muffled cry but doesn't really care about it. He stretches his arm to reach something. "You're tall. Can you pick that lunchbox for me?" His voice is jumbled. He's chewing bubble gum.

"Of course." I walk to the pile of trash and fetch the lunchbox for him. It's stylized with the drawing of a fading funny robot. One of its edges is dented. A bug skitters out of a tiny hole on its side. I shoo it away. "Is it for school?"

The boy shakes his head. He's about eight years old, shirtless, soot daubing his cheeks like tribal marks. Dollops of dried blood swell from his lips. Not bubble gum. He's chewing a piece of plastic casing for wires. I hand the lunchbox to him, mouth agape. They rarely eat raw plastic. It hurts the mouth, pharynx, and esophagus. That's why they partially melt it, work it into a paste, then grate it. Verdidea's directors spoke of plans for easing the process of eating plastic, mainly in the upper digestive system, from the mouth to the stomach. They went bankrupt without ever outlining those plans.

The boy opens the lunchbox and shakes it to clean it from dirt.

"Are you the journalist?" he asks, wiping the funny robot that grins at us with its coiling arms wide open as if looking for a hug.

"Yes. My name is Elisa."

The boy spits half the casing from his mouth and swallows the rest. I gulp at it, wanting to look away. If it were weeks ago, I'd

probably retch at the sight. But now I know it's part of my story. I don't want to avoid it.

"My maninha says she likes you. She met you ten years ago."

My heart misses a beat. I gape at the boy. I don't need to ask who his sister is. Francisca da Conceição, the person I gave to Verdidea as a corporate offering.

★ ★ ★

When would Verdidea put a base on the moon like the other billionaires were doing at a rapid pace? Questions like that whirled on the news all the time, but it never made Jandir and Vando Batista's eyes shine. Their next big project was thankfully rooted on Earth: ending world hunger. For that, they had to choose between two paths: solving what prevented food from arriving at everyone's tables or devising new feeding solutions. The former involved politics and tackling the core of the economic system itself, from which they greatly benefited, so they left it aside. The latter was what motivated them.

The plastic-breaking enzyme working in mammals was Verdidea's secret—*forbidden*—breakthrough. After the plastic was digested into monomers, very specific bacteria carried its constituent parts through the digestive system. Grouped with other microbes artificially inserted into someone's microbiota, those monomers could be converted into carbohydrates, proteins, vitamins, and other nutrients. It was a giant leap from what Verdidea had been using in isopods for three years. (And by the way, the Great Pacific garbage patch had shrunk 25 percent since the crustaceans were employed there. Headlines flashed that Verdidea was *the company that should run the world.*)

With the enzyme-bacteria system working in humans, no one would need to starve anymore. Virtually anything around people could be easily turned into food. Plastic was ubiquitous in cities. The food supply chain would be disrupted. Transport, distribution, aggregation, and processing might all be rendered secondary and,

with a whole assortment of new processes, different textures and tastes could be acquired. Feeding people would be a decentralized process without lots of points of failure. Costs would plummet. It would all become excruciatingly cheaper than producing any kind of food, and with the way Verdidea planned to employ its enzyme-bacteria system, eating plastic could also prove to be healthier than eating ultra-processed food. Not only would famine end, but people would have quality nutrition all around the world. The abrasive and obnoxious stench of burnt plastic that would pester the cities could be solved soon after. Verdidea was certain they could do anything. I was certain I could make the world believe in that.

Mamãe and I had gone through rough patches when I was a kid. Mamãe had to work overnight as a prostitute to take care of me during the day, and on weekends she got temporary gigs as a window cleaner so we had food on our table. So more than a meaningful job, Verdidea's project became personal to me.

The next step came when the process worked successfully on mice, then monkeys. So they needed volunteers. I never fooled myself about what that word meant for them.

There were poor communities near Mairipotaba comprising displaced people from Goiânia's massive gentrification. They were jobless, many of them starving, not a few resorting to landfills to find food and junk to sell at paltry values. It was near those communities that Verdidea decided to build a new headquarters. It was me who wrote articles and called press conferences to convince Verdidea's shareholders that it was a good idea. I worked day and night to fabricate the vision of Verdidea sinking its roots in the middle of Brazil and making them sprout deep and wide, bringing progress everywhere they touched, so when it came to the public it would all be beautifully justified. All in the name of ending world hunger. Meanwhile, Verdidea's lawyers scoured the law for loopholes that would allow them to start experimenting on humans—and, as I later found out, Verdidea deceived the ethics committee responsible

for the project, presenting to them an entirely different set of parameters.

In a one-hour speech, I convinced Verdidea's shareholders that it was a good idea to make São João's citizens eat trash. Three months later, they applauded me and green-lighted the project.

★ ★ ★

The story of Francisca da Conceição started when I found her lone shack, half a kilometer from São João da Campânula, the widest of the landfills. Her hut was surrounded by shrubs and flanked by a muddied-water stream. When I arrived, the wind plucked fiercely at pants, shirts, and sneakers hanging from a clothesline. Somewhere inside, sertanejo wheezed from shabby speakers. It was the furthest I had the guts to go into the Mairipotaba's communities, not so far from Verdidea's new headquarters—next to where I went to live after I left Mamãe and the cozy aromas of her beans with garlic. But most important, it wasn't within the humiliating heart of São João.

I'd learned through Verdidea's reports that an eighteen-year-old girl lived in that shack with her mothers and that she stayed alone during most of the day, when her mothers left to scavenge the landfills and hawk in the streets of Goiânia.

Francisca was a thin girl with a protruding belly. When I first saw her, she wore a crop top and jeans so spent they almost surrendered to white. Her shack only had two mattresses, a TV set, and a crooked, doorless wardrobe.

She invited me to sit on two plastic chairs outside and offered me a warm cup of coffee. I accepted.

"Do you eat?" I asked after I explained who I was and where I came from. At that point, I hadn't been fully clear about my intentions of asking her to be a volunteer. But she certainly knew people like me only went there when they had something to gain.

"I do." Francisca sipped at her coffee. She was a very shy girl, clearly not used to visits, much less by overdressed women.

“How is it so?” I looked around, indicating that there wasn’t much beyond a makeshift oven and a few supermarket bags lying next to the shack. “Do you make your own food?”

“Sometimes.” She shrugged. “But mostly my moms scavenge things from the landfills then sell them in the city. Then, they come back with some quentinhas. Sometimes it’s rice and chicken, other times just a lettuce salad.”

“Is it always enough for your family?”

The question caught her by surprise. Her gaze lost focus, the cup tight between her fingers, midway to her mouth. After a while, she shook her head. I was pulling the conversation to the point where I wanted, but not without pain. Speaking of hunger when you were not feeling it wasn’t always easy. It seemed unfair because you were sated; but it also filled you with a senseless kind of hope, as if that bellyful moment could linger and maybe, just maybe, you’d never have to be hungry again.

“Sorry about the ... sensitive and weird question...” I said. “But if you were hungry right now, would you eat those bags if you were sure they would sate your hunger?”

“Do you mean...” Francisca blushed. “Eating what’s inside them?”

“No. I mean the bags themselves.”

“I would.” No hesitation.

I only remembered two moments of my childhood when I felt really hungry. I never forgot them. Sometimes Mamãe’s work wasn’t enough to feed us—the excruciating drama of many Brazilian families. Inflation corroded her meager wages and there was one occasion when we spent an entire day without having anything to eat. But they were enough for me to remember my own yells echoing throughout the apartment, unaware of the fact that food didn’t magically sprout whenever I wanted. Mamãe silently sobbed in a corner, knowing that even if she worked harder the next day there was no guarantee that there would be food on our table.

“I would too,” I whispered to myself.

It was later that day I offered a magical solution to Francisca. For now, she only had to come with me to Verdidea's labs and sign some papers. For someone with a hole to fill, she couldn't say no.

★ ★ ★

Today, Francisca doesn't live in a shack anymore. She lives in the middle of São João da Campânula, in a house with its bricks exposed and a corrugated iron roof. Clothes hang from the clothesline tied to two poles outside her house. The wind that buffets at them now carries the landfill's polymeric stench. From somewhere nearby, samba shackles the evening, scratching the air with streaks of happiness, threatening to extinguish the smell by the sheer pressure of joy.

I wait for Francisca, staring at her closed door, snapping my fingers and trying to control my breathing. A man walks by carrying a bag of plastic bottles on his shoulder. He nods at me. Behind the set of houses that clutter that part of the landfill, the old woman with a hunched back kneels on a mound of trash. Or perhaps it's another woman wearing fruit baskets as shoes, another shadow against the moon-paling backwash of the night. Behind her, beyond the warts of junk that pockmark São João, I see the imposing and abandoned headquarters of Verdidea—all that remains of the company that vowed to heal the world. A chill runs along my back when I remember all the nights I spent in that place, a haunted palace built on unstable stocks and the lives of the destitute.

"Are you okay, Elisa?" The voice startles me. It's still the same but with a quality of roughness to it.

Francisca isn't as slim as ten years ago, but the same curious half-smile shapes her lips, except her shyness seems to have melted away in the same humble kind of sweetness I saw in Edilberto's eyes. I shiver from head to toe when I shake her hand. I expect a slap, a reprimand; any sort of revenge for having transformed her and those around her into garbage eaters. None of that happens. After all this time, I have only one question for Francisca, and not

one of those noted in my pad—*How does it taste? Does it hurt to eat plastic? How is your diet?* The one I have for her is different, and one that applies to her and to myself: *Was it worth it?*

Like the coward I am, I don't ask it.

"We'll have dinner tomorrow for my brother's birthday," she says. "Do you want to come?"

"I do," I say as fast as I gave away Mamãe's Tupperware.

I'm sorry for what I did to you, the words quiver on my lips. I don't say them.

Don't try to repair your mistakes all at once. Some of them you'll just have to swallow.

"Thank you for the invitation," I say instead, gulping.

★ ★ ★

"I made dinner for you." Mamãe was dry and brief when she called me one week after I told her about Verdidea's plans with the enzyme. It happened a month after meeting Francisca for the first time and having her enlisted as a volunteer. "Can you come home earlier today?"

"Yes, Mamãe," I said to my pad on the table while I slid my fingers through the volunteers' profiles on the big screen at my office. Francisca was a go. There were five others, including one of her mothers, that were inclined to accept Verdidea's offer as well. Volunteers would be provided with temporary housing and five months' worth of the current minimum wages. But the big prize lay at the end of the road: they'd never have the risk of starving.

"Are you listening?" Mamãe's grave voice shook me up. I rubbed my forehead.

"What?"

She sighed very slowly, which came out as an uncomfortable hiss through the pad's speakers. "I asked you not to eat anything. I prepared something special."

And when I went home, I found out what it meant.

On our dinner table, there was only one Pyrex dish at the center with an oozing black pudding that looked like charred cloth and smelled like burnt popcorn.

"Overcooked?" I said, kissing Mamãe's forehead as I laid my backpack on the floor. She didn't kiss mine back as usual.

"No," she said. "Have your seat and let's have dinner."

I frowned at her. "But what's that?"

"Our dinner."

"Is it ... overcooked mashed potatoes? Seriously—"

"It doesn't matter." Her eyes didn't lock onto mine. "It won't leave you hungry."

I saw where she was heading and closed my eyes. When I told her about the new project in Mairipotaba, I said I'd probably have to spend some time in Goiânia. She didn't take it lightly. She closed herself and spoke curtly with me in the following days. Up to that point, I'd thought it was because I was going to spend time away from her. I understood. I was all she had, so it was natural that she'd miss me. But there was something else.

"Mamãe..."

She pulled the chair. It scratched on the floorboard. I flinched while she sat.

"Mamãe, stop. You don't need to eat that."

She shrugged, scooping the black pudding and putting it on her plate.

"That's what we have, isn't it?" she said.

I pulled the other chair and sat beside her, seeking her eyes with mine, finding nothing but pain and evasion.

"The project with the enzyme is an option so no one will need to starve ever again."

"The kid that I raised, the one that praised my soft pão de queijo"—her voice came out grated, her teeth chattering—"the one who was all yummy-yummy at my feijoada, would never want to see people eating garbage."

“It’s not garbage, Mamãe! Don’t you understand? It’s the solution for a problem that has existed for thousands of years.” But those words tasted sour on my mouth. Those were the words of Elisa Assunção, PR Manager at Verdidea, disinterred out of a presentation to shareholders, not those of Elisa Assunção, daughter of Máira Assunção, raised amongst the whiffs of motherly feijoada.

“It’s no solution, girl. It’s just the same problem with a different painting. They won’t give people options with dignity. They’re giving them what they always did: the leftovers. Eating is not only satiating your hunger. It’s a process that carries dignity. If you think it just serves to satiate your hunger, then eat the fucking dinner I prepared.”

“Mamãe, I can show you the documents.” I reached for her hand, but she recoiled, her mouth a thin waning moon. I wanted to talk about the documents because I didn’t want to find the truth in her words. “They’re classified, but I have access to them and I trust you. You’ll learn what this is really about. There’s a report that—”

“If you keep insisting that a poor boy should eat that fucking bottle...” She pointed to a soda bottle lying next to the bin in the kitchen. “Then don’t come back here.”

Mamãe took a mouthful of the black pudding.

★ ★ ★

In the humiliating heart of São João da Campânula, we dine.

There are about twenty people scattered on seven plastic tables around Francisca’s house, all partaking of the beer and food I brought—feijoada, pequi rice, galinhada, and green corn mush. I wish Mamãe were there too, joyfully saying how she’d change each of those recipes, how she’d sprinkle coriander in this one and nutmeg in that one.

I sit at a table with three other people, but I remain silent, just smiling at everyone who dares to look at me.

The song “O Show Tem Que Continuar” blasts from two big speakers strategically positioned on each side of the field. *We’ll find*

the tone, a chord with a beautiful sound, and make our voices good; then we'll be happy. Children play with a hose, frightening the heat away. Night has fallen but the sky is still daubed in the summer's blue dyes.

Ângela is there with Mariana, Rogério, Adenilson, and Cleiton. She wears her cool sneakers and kisses her man Jango's cheek. The hunched-back woman is there. She sings loudly. *Then we'll be happy; look, we're on air again; the show must go on.* Edilberto is there too, picking at something he brought in Mamãe's Tupperware. He smiles as he stares at his friends—his family—chatting and singing and drinking and eating. When our gazes meet, he winks at me. He's eating melted plastic bottle caps. It's home to him.

"So, you came to write a story about us?" Francisca puts a hand on my shoulder. She has her other arm wrapped around her brother.

"I—Yes, I did."

"And how is it?" Francisca picks a chair beside me and sits. I nod at a glass of beer, but she shakes her head.

I grin at her. "I'll start over."

"Why?"

"It's just—My mind was elsewhere. I think it needs a complete overhaul."

I don't want them to become aberrations and exotic curiosities in the eyes of the public. I want them to be who they are: people. I want to write about the families living in São João da Campânula—about Mariana, Rogério, Adenilson, and Cleiton's daily journey to school; about the samba of their evenings.

I have other questions to ask them. *How was your day? What's something you created recently? What makes you laugh? Who makes you laugh?* Others will come to write about plastic. I'll leave that to them.

"Francisca, let me ask you something." I dare to put a hand over hers.

"Of course."

"Was it worth it?"

She stares at me for a while like she did when I first asked her if her food was enough. “Was it worth it digging trash after food and things to sell? Was it worth it to beg in the streets? When something isn’t an option we don’t ask if it’s worth it.”

★ ★ ★

The “famine issue,” as the Batista brothers called it—as if it was just a minor inconvenience like forgetting a sandwich on a grill—was never only a question of actually eradicating famine. Since they never addressed poverty or housing, eating plastic became a symbol of desperation and lack of options, not of hope and progress. People in the landfills already picked their food from the trash. That wouldn’t change.

I wish I could say I was the one responsible for fracturing Verdidea’s business. I wasn’t. Their stocks plummeted when they abandoned the Amazon rainforest project, then again when I couldn’t shield them from the scandals—unknown up to then—involving several of the Batistas’ other companies that employed forced labor. I was horrified, but I chose to believe they didn’t know and that they could correct their mistakes. I still had my hopes high that they could address many of the world issues, including famine, food quality and distribution, housing, and poverty. It was only a setback. They were the solution. It was a selfish, self-destructive behavior. How could I have dedicated fifteen years of my life to them if they couldn’t achieve those goals? Was I merely industrial waste along with all the other workers being steadily laid off? In my desperation, I even tried to push an article defending Verdidea’s views. But not even the Batistas believed in the company anymore.

The final strike came when the people living in the Mairipotaba’s landfills were exposed as the *plastikeaters*. It was when I learned Verdidea was already genetically altering São João da Campânula’s dwellers to make their bodies produce the enzyme-bacteria system in their digestive tract. I thought I’d be informed when it happened. I’d thought I’d see the results, the smiles of people with enough

sustenance to survive. Verdidea's directors didn't show me anything, perhaps because they knew I was only sustained by an illusion.

In the end, what toppled me was the front page of *O Globo* showing a blind old man with plastic cotton swabs on his tongue. It was then that I couldn't take it anymore.

★ ★ ★

Mamãe used to say we shouldn't blindly pursue our dreams. Sometimes it was okay to put them aside for a while or to abandon them altogether. *Our dreams are the fabric of who we are, Lisa, but we're changing all the time, re-sewing ourselves.*

Nine years after leaving home, I knock on the door of the only woman capable of helping me sweep my dusty dreams from beneath my feet.

"Mamãe?" I stammer as an old woman opens the door. There's deepness in her eyes, a mix of sadness and longing that brews into a bittersweet gaze when she sees me crying. "I brought cornmeal cake for us."

REACTOR

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And related subjects.**

★

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ACE

UP

HER

SLEEVE

GENOVEVA DIMOVA

Ace Up Her Sleeve

GENOVEVA DIMOVA

illustration by

ROVINA CAI

REACTOR 

The clocks struck midnight. With every chime echoing in the dark streets, the gap above Chernograd tore wider. With every chime, the sky spat out more monsters.

Kosara cast a glance upwards as she trudged in the ankle-deep snow, her face hidden behind a thick woollen scarf. She didn't stop to watch. She'd seen it all before: it happened every New Year's Eve. The new year had been born, but it hadn't been baptised yet. For the next twelve days, the monsters would be free to terrorise the city. Then, with the first cockerel's crow on Saint Yordan's Day, they'd disappear, leaving only destruction behind.

Kosara wasn't afraid of the monsters. She had pockets crammed with talismans and amulets, fingers skilled in weaving spells, and a tongue trained in magic words. She knew every monster's weakness: how the karakonjuls could be defeated with a clever riddle, the yudas shied away from their reflection in a mirror, and the upirs hated the stench of garlic.

Well, she was not afraid of *most* of them. There was one monster no amulet or talisman could defeat; no magic words or spells would chase away. One monster Kosara knew better than anyone in Chernograd, and yet had found no weak spots in his glistening, scaly armour. One monster she'd do her best to avoid this New Year's Eve, and for the twelve days after.

But as the chiming of the clocks finally died down and her steps sped up, she was left with the nagging feeling that she simply had nowhere to hide. She was trapped, just like everyone else in Chernograd. Trapped inside the city with the monsters.

In the distance, the Wall towered, an ink-black silhouette against the white snow. Its tentacles reached into the sky, preventing anyone from flying over. Its roots sank deep within the ground, stopping anyone from burrowing under. An impenetrable barrier.

A dark shadow crossed the sky above Kosara, and she automatically ducked into a church's arched entrance. She deeply inhaled the scent of incense drifting from within and let the chants of the priests calm down her thumping heart, before she risked peeking out again.

For a brief second, she was sure she'd seen the Zmey's large wings and his curved horns flying over the church's onion dome. She could have sworn she spotted his golden scales glinting in the moonlight. She was certain she heard his soft voice, *Why do you run from me, my little Kosara?*

She fished out her strongest talisman, fashioned from a boiled egg, a red thread, and a pair of rusty scissors. Her mouth began shaping the defensive spell, even though she knew it would be useless.

But then, a gust of wind scattered the snowflakes, and Kosara realised the Zmey wasn't there at all—she'd imagined it all. It had been nothing but the shadows swirling between the tall spires and the smoke pouring from the chimneys, painting wings and horns where there were none. It hadn't been his voice she'd heard, but the whistling of the wind.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, she thought. What was she doing, scrambling about like a scared animal at the first sign of danger? She knew very well the Zmey never came to her in his monster form. He always donned his human disguise first—the one he'd worn when he'd first fooled her into trusting him, six years ago.

She allowed herself a few seconds for her heart to stop hammering against her ribcage. Then she dashed across the city square, a space too open to be comfortable under a sky swarming with monsters. Her shadow followed her a few steps behind—they were both exhausted after a day of casting protective spells. Her

throat burned from the cold, and her breath escaped in short gasps as her nostrils filled with a familiar scent.

Nothing smelled quite like New Year's Eve in Chernograd. Fresh snow, warm fireplaces, fireworks drifting in from the other side of the Wall. And the monsters, of course, had a smell, too: a putrid mixture of blood and gore, and the reek of burnt fur as they hit the protective circles drawn around every window and door in the city. Roars and shouts filled the streets, and the clapping of hooves echoed. Somewhere in the distance, an air-splitting scream sounded. All around Kosara, the last passersby rushed, trying to get behind bolted doors—only their eyes glinted, visible in the sliver of skin between fur hats and wool scarves.

Finally, Kosara reached her destination, a glittering salon on the main street, the only bright spot among the dark snowdrifts. A tacky, elaborately carved and gilded sign hung over the entrance, its iron chains squeaking in the wind: THE WITCH'S REST. An enchanted drawing of a cauldron bubbled underneath.

Kosara raised her hand to knock on the door but hesitated, remaining frozen for a second. The Zmey would never think to look for her here, she was certain. And yet, she couldn't shake the feeling she was making a mistake in crossing the threshold.

The Witch's Rest wasn't named after its clientele—in fact, no self-respecting witch ever patronised it. It was named after its owner, Sofiya Karajova.

Sofiya had been kind enough to allow Kosara to hide there until the end of the Foul Days, but Kosara suspected her motives were far from altruistic. There was nothing worse than owing a favour to a fellow witch. Sofiya would come to claim it one day, undoubtedly at the worst possible moment, and she'd make sure it cost Kosara.

Before Kosara's knuckles had touched the wood, the door swung open, and a gloved hand caught Kosara's lapel, pulling her inside.

"Finally." Sofiya patted the snow off Kosara's shoulders with an abrupt gesture. "What took you so long?"

"I was getting ready."

“Were you?” Sofiya looked Kosara up and down, and Kosara knew what the other witch was seeing: her messy hair with snowflakes caught between the dark tresses, her mascara running from the wind and cold outside and settling in the scars on her cheek, her scruffy coat with brand-new patches on the elbows. Kosara, not wanting to be outdone, did her own slow, deliberate once-over of Sofiya.

Sofiya was a tall woman, always impeccably dressed in fabrics imported for eye-watering prices from the other side of the Wall. Multiple leather pouches with spells hidden inside hung around her long neck, and her bracelets chimed as she moved, adorned with never-blinking evil-eye beads. At her feet, two shadows waited—one was Sofiya’s own, and the other had been left to her by her grandmother. It was still alive after the death of its previous owner, a feat very few witches managed to achieve.

Every witch’s magic came from their shadow. With two, Sofiya was one of the most powerful witches in the city.

Not that she used her powers for anything good.

“Take that off,” Sofiya demanded, already stripping Kosara’s coat off her.

“Why?”

“I don’t want my clients seeing you in that old thing. I have an image to uphold. What did you have to patch it for? Couldn’t you just get a new one?” Sofiya rolled her eyes. Kosara’s coat hung off her elbow like a dead animal.

“Not exactly,” Kosara mumbled. She followed the other woman to the salon.

It was a dimly lit, stuffy space, filled with the scent of incense and countless silk cushions scattered across the parquet floor. Thick curtains were draped over the windows. Beneath their tassels glittered magical symbols meant to scare the monsters away.

A long table for seances commanded the centre of the room. It was covered in a velvet tablecloth trimmed in gold, and a large crystal ball was placed atop it, filled with swirling mist. A group of

men and women dressed in imported silk shirts and satin dresses sat around it, their gloved hands clasped together, their eyes shut.

One of the women slowly, secretively cracked her left eye open. Her pupil was enlarged and the iris around it was a bright, vibrant purple. She'd probably used enchanted eye drops.

As she spotted Sofiya leading Kosara through the room by the elbow, she raised a single painted eyebrow.

"Coming in a second," Sofiya said through her teeth. An unnatural smile had spread across her face. "You have to remember," she whispered, as she pushed Kosara past a curtain into the cramped booth behind, "I'm doing you a huge favour."

Kosara groaned as she plopped down on the soft cushions. "I know." She took a deep breath and spat the next part out quickly, like it tasted bitter on her tongue. "And I'm very thankful."

Once Sofiya was gone, Kosara leaned back against the cushions and placed her muddy boots on the low mahogany table, making sure she left a mark. Petty, but the other witch simply infuriated her.

Sofiya could have been out there today with the other witches, freezing to the bone in the snow, drawing protective circles around shops and houses. If Kosara could do it, then so could Sofiya Two-Shadows. Instead, she'd protected only her salon and had gathered as many rich fools as she could inside it, charging them a hefty fee for the privilege. Sofiya probably planned to hide here until the end of the Foul Days, never as much as showing her nose outside.

Kosara resented the fact that she, too, planned to hide here. She resented the opulent displays of wealth all around her because she herself couldn't afford the expensive fabrics, the mahogany furniture, the crystal ball. All because she'd lost her money in a stupid, doomed attempt to cross the Wall five years ago.

It had been a mistake. Not only because it had ultimately ended with her stranded on this side of the Wall with no money—but because, in hindsight, it hadn't been Chernograd she'd wanted to escape at all. It had been the demons from her past. Crossing the

Wall would have solved nothing. Yes, the Zmey couldn't physically get her on the other side, but he'd still be alive in her mind.

He'd know he'd won if he forced her to leave her city.

No, what Kosara needed to do was to defeat the Zmey once and for all. She needed to claim her city back.

The only problem was, she had no idea how. It wasn't an easy matter, defeating the Tsar of Monsters.

Kosara sighed, making herself comfortable between the cushions. Her eyelids grew heavy. Except, something—some sixth sense—was screaming at her that she couldn't fall asleep just yet. She was certain the Zmey wouldn't come to look for her here. And yet, her certainty had cost her before.

Kosara licked her lips and fished out an old, crumpled deck of cards from her pocket. She'd had it for years—six years, in fact. She'd bought one for herself and one for the Zmey. He'd been delighted with her present and had never thought to question her generosity.

Just like every year, she picked out the ace of spades and shoved it down the back of her boot.

Maybe she'd finally be able to use it. Maybe, just for once, her luck would work.

★ ★ ★

Kosara awoke with a start. Her neck was stiff, stuck at an unnatural angle on the cushions, and her toes hurt in her boots. She'd spent so long outside in the snow today, her throat felt raw.

On the other side of the curtain, in the main hall, the séance continued. Sofiya was loudly asking some long-suffering spirit under which tree in the garden, precisely, he'd buried his treasure, so his greedy nephew could dig it out. What a way to take advantage of the time of year when the boundary between Chernograd and the world of spirits and monsters was thinnest.

At first, Kosara wasn't sure what had woken her. Nothing in her little booth had changed, as far as she could see.

But then, she smelled the difference in the air. There was the scent of sandalwood and cinnamon coming from the main hall, where incense sticks burned. There was the smell of soot and coal, still clinging to Kosara's clothes and hair after a day spent outside.

But there was something else, too. Something painfully familiar: a wild, otherworldly scent, raw and magical. It made the hairs on the back of Kosara's neck stand up.

She scrambled up, thinking there might still be time to run, time to escape ...

Long, pale fingers pulled the curtain open.

Kosara's scream stuck in her throat. The Zmey's eyes met hers.

He'd come in his human disguise, as he always did—his frame filled the opening in the curtain, and his hair caught the light like molten gold.

He smiled his handsome smile. "May I come in?"

Kosara desperately blinked fast, hoping it might dispel him. Hoping she was simply imagining him again.

It didn't help. He remained standing there, just as solid as before.

"How?" Kosara spat. She barely heard her voice over the thumping of her heart.

"Excuse me?"

"How did you find me?" Her words came out strained. It cost her effort to push them past the lump in her throat.

The Zmey laughed. He had a pleasant, chiming laugh. "You didn't really think I wouldn't, did you? When have you ever managed to hide from me?"

Kosara stayed silent because she didn't want to admit the truth. *Never.*

But she'd never before fallen so low as to ask her least favourite witch in town for a favour. She'd truly thought she was safe here—that, perhaps, had been her downfall. Kosara could see it now: Why would a witch who had no qualms selling trinkets to rich fools

instead of doing real magic ever feel bound by the witches' honour code? Sofiya must have ratted her out to the Zmey.

Kosara had made a mistake trusting her. It wasn't the first time she'd put her trust in the wrong person.

"Kosara, Kosara, Kosara..." The Zmey shut the curtain behind him and, without waiting for an invitation, sprawled himself on the cushions opposite her. He'd taken his snakeskin coat off and wore a simple, old-fashioned linen shirt, embroidered around the cuffs and neckline. The last couple of buttons were left undone, showing off his sculpted chest, covered in tiny, glinting golden hairs. "When will you give up?"

Kosara's eyes snapped back to his face. "Give up what?"

"Trying to run away from me. When will you accept your rightful position by my side?"

Kosara stayed silent again. *Never.*

"I can give you everything you've ever dreamed of," he said. "I can make you rich beyond your wildest imagination. All you need to do is to say the word."

Kosara knew this play well. Every year, it was the same. He'd managed to lure her into his palace once when she'd been young and stupid, and there was no way she'd ever return there. That last time, she'd been lucky to make it out, drunk on moon wine and half-starved after spending months eating nothing but enchanted fruit, and she'd only managed it with her mentor's help. It had taken months for her head to clear, and for her eyes to stop imagining shadows lurking in every corner.

He'd been grooming her, she knew, to give him her magic.

"Why are you here?" she asked, even though she knew the answer. "What do you want?"

The corners of the Zmey's mouth twitched. "You."

Bullshit. He didn't want *her*. He wanted her power.

He simply thought she was an easy target because she'd fallen for his lies once before.

But, God, there was still some tiny part of her, hidden deep within, that felt flattered by his words. Some tiny part that yearned to snuggle in his familiar arms, and simply end this stupid game of cat and mouse. It had been so long. She was so tired.

Kosara had to keep that part of herself under control because it was an *utter idiot*.

"Why are you here?" she repeated, slightly more forcefully. Nevertheless, she didn't dare raise her voice. She couldn't allow herself to make him angry, or else he'd raze Sofiya's salon to the ground, and Kosara's debt to the other witch would grow too costly.

"Well, now." The Zmey produced a crumpled deck of cards from his back pocket. It was a mystery how it even fit there—his trousers fit him as if painted on, revealing every muscle. "Don't tell me you've forgotten our little tradition."

Kosara gave him an even stare. She hadn't forgotten. Every year, the Zmey demanded they play a game of cards. He always suggested the same wager: a lock of hair. At first, Kosara couldn't figure out what his aim was. For him, winning a lock of her hair wouldn't mean much. He wasn't a witch, and his magic wasn't precise enough to use it to control her through it. She'd simply assumed it was a convenient way for him to force his presence on her, since he knew she couldn't resist a good gamble.

But then, she couldn't help wondering if she underestimated his power. Every year, he found her that bit faster. Every year, the fog that fell over her brain in his presence grew thicker. Since he never lost a single game, he had five locks of her hair now. What would he do if he won a sixth one? What if that was what it took for him to finally force her back under his control?

The trouble was, Kosara couldn't refuse him. Winning a lock of *his* hair was her only route to true freedom. With an artefact that powerful, she could prevent him from ever coming near her again. If she learned how to keep him away, she'd come one step closer to defeating him.

"Fine," Kosara said through gritted teeth, painfully aware she was taking too big a gamble yet again. But how likely was it that the Zmey would win six games in a row? "Deal."

Without saying a word, the Zmey began dealing: one card for Kosara, one for him. One for Kosara, one for him. Finally, he placed five cards face up on the table.

The rules of Kral were simple: each player held two cards. Whoever had the highest combination at the end of the third round won. You were allowed to swap your cards with the five face up on the table, but you had to do it carefully, so as not to alert your opponent to what you held. If your opponent guessed the exact cards in your hand, you lost.

Kosara looked down at her hand and groaned, but only internally. Just as usual, she held two weak cards: a five of diamonds and a three of spades. Her luck never seemed to work when she played against the Zmey. If she didn't know better, she'd think he'd enchanted her—used his collection of locks of her hair to place a hex on her. Except he'd sworn he possessed no such magic—and she'd seen no evidence that he did.

If he could already do a spell as intricate as a hex on her luck, he wouldn't be so desperate to steal her power.

Kosara scratched the scar on her cheek. From the corner of her eye, she spotted a queen of hearts placed face up on the table. She didn't look at it directly, too aware of the Zmey's eyes on her. She could take it, but then she would have to hope for a jack to come up next. What were the chances of that happening?

Given her luck so far, minuscule.

"Are you going to fold?" the Zmey asked after a few seconds.

And accept defeat this early? No way.

Kosara shrugged. "I'm simply letting you go first."

The Zmey smirked and with a quick, fluid gesture swept the queen off the table, discarding one of his cards face down. Either he was bluffing, or he was holding a jack.

Kosara swore under her breath. She shouldn't have let him take the queen. She wasn't playing smart. She wiped her sweaty palms on her trousers and took several deep breaths, forcing her heartbeat to slow down. *Focus.*

She couldn't lose this one. *Stupid, stupid, stupid witch,* she chided herself. For whatever reason, the voice in her head sounded an awful lot like the Zmey's.

He smirked, as if he could read her thoughts. Then, he slowly, deliberately, placed another card face up, to replace the stolen queen.

Hope rose in Kosara's chest. Could it be, finally, after all these years?

A king of spades.

Don't let the corners of your mouth twitch. Don't let your eyebrows go up. Don't even look down at that card.

This was good. This was more than good—it was perfect.

That king of spades would be useless to her in combination with either of the cards she held. She, however, had an ace up her sleeve. Well, in her boot. Together, the king and the ace made the strongest combination in the game.

The only problem was, she couldn't reach for the ace and risk the Zmey noticing.

She lifted her eyes to his and saw the glint in them. His smile had acquired a sharp edge. His fingers impatiently drummed on the table, waiting for her next move.

Kosara knew exactly what those fingers felt like wrapped around her throat. She swallowed hard.

But then, her eyes fell on her shadow. Now, there was an idea ...

The booth was gloomy, and her shadow was barely visible, stretched along the wall behind her. Kosara tried to summon it, but there simply wasn't enough light.

"It's getting a bit chilly, don't you think?" she asked casually.

A single line appeared between the Zmey's eyebrows. "I wouldn't say so."

“My fingers have gone numb. Give me a second.” Kosara placed her cards on the table face down, careful so the Zmey wouldn’t catch a glimpse of them. Then she clicked her fingers.

A small orange flame danced at her fingertip. Its glow warmed her hands and face.

It reflected deep within the Zmey’s eyes as he watched her. “Are you stalling?”

“Not at all. I just need a minute to warm up.”

By the flame’s light, Kosara’s shadow grew darker. She summoned it again, reaching for it with her mind. Nothing happened. Kosara risked clicking her fingers again, making the flame brighter. The Zmey watched her without blinking.

Her shadow twitched as if shaking itself from a deep sleep. Its head slightly, almost imperceptibly turned to Kosara.

She’d done this trick during countless card games. Usually, everyone was too busy watching her for tells—staring at her face, trying to see if her toes nervously tapped on the floor. No one paid attention to her shadow.

No one but the Zmey. Every witch’s magic hid in their shadow, and he knew it. He rarely let her shadow out of his sight when they were together.

Which made it the perfect distraction.

Kosara didn’t let her eyes follow her shadow as it slid under the table. Instead, she stared at the Zmey, and he stared back at her, his smile still spread across his face.

He must have thought she couldn’t tear her gaze away from him. The truth was, Kosara didn’t even see him. The corner of her eye followed her shadow.

A shadowy hand appeared, creeping over the tabletop. It was difficult to spot, in the many dancing shadows now covering the booth, animated by Kosara’s flame. The only reason Kosara saw it was she knew what she was looking for.

The shadowy fingers reached for the deck. They quickly thumbed through, so fast they were a blur, looking for the ace of spades ...

A thud sounded. Kosara flinched, her left hand dropping off the table to dangle next to the back of her boot.

A dagger—glinting steel, with a gilded handle encrusted with rubies—pierced the deck of cards, pinning it to the table. It trembled from the force with which the Zmey had thrown it.

The Zmey, himself, was still. He looked as if he hadn't even moved.

"What was that for?" Kosara asked, keeping her voice level. Her heart thumped so hard in her chest, she was worried it might be visible through her shirt. Her fingers inched towards her boot.

"Oh," the Zmey said, pulling his second dagger, the twin to the one sticking out from the deck of cards. He used it to clean his sharp nails. "I thought I saw something. I must have imagined it."

Kosara shrugged, nonchalant. On the inside, however, she was celebrating. He'd fallen right into her trap.

"You must have." She clicked her fingers. The flame between them disappeared.

In the fraction of the second before both their eyes acclimated to the gloom, she picked up her cards from the table, adding the ace of spades to her hand and seamlessly sliding the five of diamonds up her sleeve.

Quickly, before she lost her nerve, she swiped the king of spades from the table.

The Zmey looked at her for a long moment. The dagger was still in his hand, its rubies casting bloodred reflections across the booth.

"Are you going to fold?" Kosara asked, deliberately taunting him. The corner of her mouth twitched like she was trying to suppress a smile—which, in fact, she was. The Zmey, however, thought he knew her. He'd think she was bluffing.

"Wouldn't you just love that?" He exhaled through his nostrils. "I can't possibly fold, given what I'm holding."

Was he bluffing? It didn't matter. There was no combination in the game that could beat Kosara's cards.

The Zmey slowly put his cards down on the tabletop. First, he revealed the queen of hearts. Then he flicked over his second card.

The jack of hearts. A great combination.

But it still wasn't good enough to defeat Kosara's. Just as slowly, she showed her cards, her gaze fixed on the Zmey. She'd treasure that memory forever: the moment the ace of spades appeared on the table, and the Zmey's eyes first widened, then narrowed.

He inhaled sharply. "You cheated."

"No, I didn't."

He stabbed the table with his dagger, and it remained there, stuck in the mahogany, parallel to the one still penetrating the deck of cards.

"How did you cheat?" The Zmey stood up and towered over Kosara. She resisted the urge to cower in her seat. "I was watching you."

She looked up and met his gaze. Blue, like the centre of the flame. "I didn't cheat."

"How?" he hissed again. Hot saliva flew from his mouth and landed on her cheek.

Kosara wiped it with her sleeve. "Please behave," she said, sounding calmer than she felt. Her fingers trembled, so she hid them under the table. On the floor, her shadow trembled, too. "I wouldn't have played with you if I knew you were such a sore loser."

The Zmey took a deep breath, his chest puffing up. Kosara wanted to bolt to the door. She didn't. She held his gaze.

"Check the deck, if you don't believe me," she said.

That was a gamble. She couldn't be sure whether her shadow had managed to sneak the ace from his deck away before the Zmey caught it.

The Zmey smirked, no doubt expecting her to be bluffing again. He pulled the dagger from the now ruined deck and flicked through the cards, slowly at first, then faster and faster. A single vein on his temple began pulsating. Kosara tried hard not to fidget.

Finally, the Zmey swore under his breath. He threw the cards on the table, and they scattered, raining all over Kosara's feet.

She allowed herself a small exhale. He hadn't found the ace.

Thank God.

"Damn hag," the Zmey spat out, but he didn't threaten her again. He might be a terrifying beast from another dimension, but he did have his own moral code he stuck to. This was why he despised cheaters so much.

This was also what made it particularly satisfying to cheat him.

Kosara raised her hand, palm up. "Come on," she said. "Pay up."

The Zmey lifted his dagger in one hand and grasped a clump of golden hair in the other. Then, with a fast gesture, he chopped the hair off. It left a gap just above his pale ear.

Kosara grabbed the lock of hair from his hand before he changed his mind. When her skin brushed against his, she drew away as if she'd been burned. The Zmey was scalding hot.

On his forearms, where he'd rolled up his sleeves, his pale flesh bubbled, half revealing the golden scales hiding beneath. Kosara blinked, and for a second she was certain she'd spotted his curved horns rising from his head, so tall they almost touched the ceiling.

She found the amulet in her pocket and gripped it in her hand. If he tried something now, she'd be ready. She had a lock of his hair.

He grinned, and his teeth were long and sharp, crisscrossing in his mouth "I hope you look at it every day while I'm gone." His forked tongue licked his lips. "And think of me."

And then, just when Kosara was ready to begin reciting her defensive spell, he turned around and left. The booth's velvet curtain swished behind his back.

For a long moment, Kosara didn't dare move. She sat still, until she heard the Zmey's steps fade and the bell above the salon's door chime.

In the main hall, Sofiya's droning voice kept asking the spirits questions. Her clients were still oohing and ahing. The smell of

sandalwood and cinnamon drifted in, slowly replacing the Zmey's wild scent lingering behind.

Between Kosara's fingers, his hair was smooth and metallic. She grasped it tight in her fist. A triumphant smile split her face. Finally, she could escape him. *Finally.*

★ ★ ★

The Tsar of Monsters waited, perched on the roof opposite Sofiya's salon. His talons grasped the red roof-tiles. The snow had grown heavier, but he didn't feel the cold. Each snowflake landing on his golden scales evaporated with a hiss.

It was the last night of the Foul Days. He didn't have much time left now.

The door to the salon had stayed shut all night, while his monsters wreaked havoc outside. A group of karakonjuls had tried breaking in just after midnight. He'd watched with mild interest as they burned themselves on the protective circle drawn around the door again and again. Finally, frenzied and bloodthirsty, they'd given up and chased a stray cat up the street.

They hadn't caught it, or else the Zmey would have had to intervene. He had a weak spot for cats.

At nearly six in the morning, just as the sun crept over the rooftops and his monsters began to disappear off the streets, the door to the salon opened. Kosara crept out, her hands hidden deep within her pockets, her dark eyes searching the snowy street.

He knew what she was looking for. Him. He loved the hold he still had over her, after all these years.

He watched her until she disappeared from view. There was a certain quality to the way she walked, like a startled rabbit trying to find cover, that triggered something primal in him. He barely resisted the urge to swoop down and grasp her between his talons.

He couldn't do that. He wouldn't. If he forced her to return to him, she'd never be truly his—and therefore, neither would her

magic. No, he'd wait until she sought him out herself. Until, desperate and tired of being alone, she returned to him.

His fingers inadvertently found the tender flesh where several of his golden scales were missing—in his human form, this was where she'd forced him to cut off a lock of his hair.

She'd cheated. He was certain of it. He knew her better than anyone. He knew all her tells.

She'd cheated, and he would find out how. And once he knew, he'd make her pay for it.

He swept down to the ground, transforming back into his human form midflight. What had jumped from the roof had been a monster, horned and winged. What landed was a young man with golden hair. For a brief second, he stood in the street, letting the snowflakes land on his naked skin. Each transformation made him so hot, as if he were on fire.

Then, he enchanted clothes onto himself—a white shirt, dark trousers, and a long, iridescent coat, flowing from purple to green to gold, like snakeskin.

He walked into Sofiya's salon without bothering to knock. She'd invited him inside once, and that was all he needed. No lock or spell could keep him away now.

He crossed the salon quietly, careful not to wake Sofiya, asleep with her cheek pressed against the tablecloth, her face illuminated by the crystal ball. She hadn't told him Kosara intended to hide here—he'd had to find out from someone else. Interesting. He'd always assumed a couple of gold coins every other year would be enough to buy the witch's loyalty. He'd underestimated her.

Her guests were lying on the floor, huddled among the cushions. He'd made sure none of them spotted him during his last visit—it wouldn't do his reputation any good if the whole town discovered he'd lost a game of cards against some witch.

Finally, the Zmey reached the booth. He closed the curtain behind him.

It still smelled like Kosara, soot and smoke and so much *magic*. Gods, it drove him mad.

He looked around the booth quickly, and then, rather undignified, fell to his knees and peeked under the low table.

It took him a while to find it, but in the end, it was there, just as he'd suspected. The ace of spades from his deck of cards, hidden under the table leg. The one her shadow had snatched just before he'd caught it. If Kosara hadn't been so confident she'd fooled him, she would have retrieved it herself.

Or maybe she'd left it there on purpose. Maybe she'd been worried he'd ambush her on her way home and catch her with both aces in her pocket.

In any case, she'd made a fatal mistake.

The Zmey smiled a vicious smile. He'd make her pay for this. She'd be his again.

About the Author



Genoveva Dimova is a fantasy author and archaeologist. Originally from Bulgaria, she now lives in Scotland with her partner and a small army of houseplants. She believes in writing what you know, so her work often features Balkan folklore, the immigrant experience, and protagonists who get into incredible messes out of pure stubbornness. When she's not writing, she likes to explore old ruins, climb even older hills, and listen to practically ancient rock music. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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HAVE

YOU

EATEN?

Ben's mom's chicken pot pie
6 potatoes
3 tbsp butter
chicken broth
salt + pepper
parrots

Instructions
Tie the bay leaves, peppercorns, and strips of bacon in a square of tea infused.
Alternatively, put in a very large pot, combine the water, spice
in a very large pot, combine the water, spice
Boil 30 mins.
2. While the water is boiling, in a large skillet, melt
butter and cook until
the butter is brown and the chicken
fat will release some fat, which
will be used to sauté the potatoes

GNOCCHI
*lemon ricotta sauce - zest of
1 lemon, 1/2 ricotta, lots of
black pepper

1 clove garlic
1 handful of spinach
1.5 C broth for every handful
Add in yeast

1. Heat oil in a pan and brown onion
2. Add garlic and stir until it is gone
3. Add spinach and stir until liquid is gone
4. Add a little broth. Stir until liquid is gone. Repeat until all broth is gone. Repeat until you like.

SARAH GAILEY

Have You Eaten?

SARAH GAILEY

illustration by

SHING YIN KHOR

REACTOR 

Author's note: This story contains fictional depictions of intimate partner violence.

PART 1: DANEKA'S BIRTHDAY

Fen's Mom's Chicken Pot Pie

Crust (2 batches)

2½ cups flour
Pinch of salt
1 cup butter
6 tablespoons water

Filling

3 stalks celery, chopped
1 onion, diced; or 1 can pearl onions, drained and rinsed
2 tablespoons butter
2 tablespoons flour
4 cups chicken broth
1 teaspoon onion powder
1 teaspoon garlic powder
1 tsp chopped fresh sage
Pepper
1 bag mixed frozen peas & carrots
2 chicken breasts, roasted and shredded
Salt

Instructions

Make the Crust

1. Combine the flour and the salt. Add the butter and mix with your hands until small crumbs are formed.

2. Add in water 1 tablespoon at a time, mixing with your hands to form dough.
3. Chill for 1 hour.
4. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. While it's heating, divide the dough in half. Roll out each half separately. Set one aside, and place the other in a floured and buttered pie pan. Poke the bottom several times with a fork to release steam during cooking.
5. Bake blind for 15 minutes.

Make the Filling

1. In a nonstick skillet over medium heat, sauté the celery and chopped onion if using. Salt to taste. When vegetables have just begun to soften, set aside.
2. In the same skillet, heat the butter over medium heat until it stops bubbling. Add the flour and whisk thoroughly until there are no lumps. Stir until golden brown.
3. Add the chicken broth to the pan. Whisk thoroughly until well-combined. Add the onion powder, garlic powder, sage, and plenty of black pepper. **Do not salt at this stage; since the broth will be thickened into gravy, the risk of oversalting is high.*
4. Add the cooked vegetables, the frozen vegetables, and the pearl onions if using. Stir to combine.
5. Simmer until the sauce thickens into a gravy.
6. Remove from the heat and stir in the shredded chicken.
7. Pour the filling into the blind-baked crust. Top with the rolled-out unbaked crust. Cut slits in the top to vent steam. Bake until golden and flaky on top, 35–45 minutes.

Optional: Instead of pie crust, bake under a layer of biscuits. Double the filling recipe to fill a 9x13-inch pan.

★ ★ ★

It's Daneka's birthday, so everyone in the squat is being quiet and trying not to make eye contact with each other. The problem is that everyone's known for weeks that Fen is worried about Daneka. At first they all rolled their eyes at Fen—people go missing all the time, and worrying over that is as useless as paper money. Then they tried to get her to snap out of it, because Fen's the one who makes

decisions and plans, and her anxiety over Daneka has been occupying her mind so thoroughly that she hasn't been deciding or planning anything.

Now, after weeks with no Daneka and no word from her either, everyone in the squat privately shares Fen's suspicion that something bad has probably happened to their friend. Nobody wants to be the first to say something, though, so they're all finding reasons to be on their palmsets, reasons to look out the window, reasons to attend to their least-favorite chores.

Fen isn't making it easy for anyone to speak up, anyway. She's not talking about her feelings. Four months ago, she overheard Quan calling her a "neurotic clinger." Quan didn't know she could hear him—she had just walked into the room and was standing right behind him, like in that movie everyone in the squat makes fun of but hasn't seen. He said it in a mean way, even though he's not a mean person, except when he sort of is. And she wasn't supposed to hear, but she did.

She sort of melted off into her bedroom after that. When Morrow checked in on Fen later she made all the right noises about understanding that she needs to manage her anxiety and Quan's mastery of incisive language but still, damn, it must have stung to hear. Since then, Fen's been "managing her anxiety" by quietly vibrating, crying when she thinks nobody can hear her, and saying nothing about her feelings to anyone, ever.

Her silence isn't keeping her secret, though. The housemates know each other even better than they know hunger, and they all recognize the signs of Fen's worry. Her lips are ragged from chewing. She keeps asking thinly anonymized questions like, *Do you think people have responsibility to each other?* and, *How would you handle it if a friend suddenly grew really distant?* Every time anyone catches a glimpse of her palmset, she's looking at Daneka's profile, refreshing over and over again, her eyes locked on the location status that hasn't updated in a month.

At first, Harper told her that some people thrive on independence in relationships. At first, Morrow told her that it probably had nothing to do with her. At first, Quan told her that she could talk to him if she was freaking out about something, but she responded with a patently forced smile and said that she was fine, and then Quan spent the rest of the day asking Harper and Morrow if he'd done anything to upset her because he still didn't know she'd heard the thing he'd said about her in the first place.

And now it's Daneka's birthday, and Daneka still hasn't come home or answered anyone's private messages, and everyone is just as worried as Fen's been for weeks but nobody wants to say so because that would mean admitting that Fen was right all along, and then they'd have to try to figure out what to do.

Fen is usually the one who figures out what to do.

Around noon, a patrol car passes the squat. Quan watches it through a gap in the boards that cover the windows. Once the car has passed out of sight, he lets out a short sharp sigh, slaps his thighs with both palms, and shoots to his feet. His square jaw is set, his thick brows furrowed, his slim fingers balled into fists. "Okay," he says. "Where the fuck's Fen?"

"Kitchen," Harper answers from the floor, where they're using their fingers to fill a gouge in the laminate with a mixture of sawdust and wood glue. Their dark scalp-stubble grows in continent-like patches around old burn scars on their scalp. The scars are from their life in Old Chicago, which no one in the squat makes the mistake of asking about. Harper isn't a leader in the same way Fen is, but they could be if they were less irritable about other people needing things and making noises about it. "Step careful. Glue's drying."

Quan obeys, tiptoeing past the collection of cushions and camp chairs that Harper's stacked against the wall to make room for this needlessly intense project. He makes his way to the kitchen and finds that Harper was right: there's Fen, red-eyed and purse-

mouthed, clutching a potato and staring into the nearly bare cupboard.

"You freaking out or what?" Quan asks, looking into the cupboard too so Fen won't feel like her tears are being noticed.

"No," she answers, her voice too wobbly to stick the landing. She twists her neck to wipe her nose on the shoulder of her cardigan. The movement makes one tight-coiled curl fall across her forehead. "A little worried that they might finally turn off the electricity this month."

"Any reason to think that might happen, or are you getting upset over nothing?"

"Probably the second one," Fen answers, not too defensively. "It's just. You know. At some point the developers that own this block are gonna remember that this house exists, and we should have a plan for what to do when that happens." She closes her eyes, takes a long slow breath. "But we'll deal with it when we get there. What about you? How's your day so far?"

Quan lets out a dry laugh. "Not great. I'm worried about Daneka."

Those last four words strike Fen like a match. She explodes with relief. "Oh my god, me too. Where the hell is she? Wait, I mean—no," she stammers, her face crumpling as she tries and fails to reel her words back, to reconfigure herself into whatever well-managed anxiety is supposed to look like. "It's fine that she's gone. I've just been wondering *why* she hasn't come home, I guess? But it's fine that she hasn't."

Quan opens the refrigerator and pulls out a celery bunch that's as limp as yarn. "No, like, I'm worried too. She's been gone for a month, that's not normal. And she hasn't messaged you at all?"

"Not at all," Fen replies. "I haven't been messaging her that much or anything, just a couple of 'thinking of you' taps. She did a thumbs-up react but I don't know what that means, and—"

"That doesn't mean anything." Quan whacks the listless celery against the quartz counter, which is still marked at the edges with

wax crayon where the flippers who abandoned this house had planned to cut it. "I think we should call a house meeting."

Morrow comes thudding down the hall, their heavy boots loud on the gray laminate. Morrow's body takes up space—they're built like a fridge, if a fridge could work out—but their voice hides in the back of their throat. "Are, um. Are you guys talking about Daneka?"

"Shoes, asshole," Harper yells from the living room.

Morrow sits down on the floor immediately and starts undoing their laces. "Sorry. Did someone hear from her?"

"I can't hear you," Quan says. "Nobody can fuckin' hear you."

"Quan's worried," Fen adds. "About Daneka."

Morrow exchanges a significant glance with Quan. "Okay, well, I mean. It's just that. You know. I think Quan's right to be worried. It's weird that we haven't heard from Daneka, and—"

"I've heard from her," Harper calls, looking up from their work on the floor. "Thumbs-up react on my last message."

"That doesn't mean anything," Fen says, earning raised eyebrows from Harper. "You know what? I'm just gonna call her." She pulls her palmset out of her back pocket and unfolds it, hesitates briefly, looks up, realizes everyone is watching her and she can't change her mind now—and dials.

The tritone sound of the call going through cycles twelve times before the call drops.

"That's fine," Fen says weakly. "I'll message. She's probably away from her palmset, she'll see when she gets back to it." She swipes out a message, saying the words as she traces them across one quadrant of the screen. "Should ... we ... expect ... you ... for ... dinner. There." She folds her palmset back up before tossing it onto the counter and turning to her housemates. "I'm making chicken pot pie. It's her favorite. If she shows up, we can have a birthday party. If not, we'll just eat it without her."

Morrow grabs the counter and uses it to pull themselves upright. They stare at Fen, their dark eyes wide with disbelief. "Wait, for real? You know how to make chicken pot pie?"

"No she doesn't," Quan snaps. "When's the last time you think Fen got her hands on meat? Be serious."

Fen ignores him, pulling a scratched wooden box off the top of the fridge and answering Morrow without acknowledging Quan at all. "I stole my mom's recipe box when my folks kicked me out. I know how to make all her recipes."

"Nice," Harper says. They jog to the kitchen and dip a rag into the washwater basin, then start scrubbing gluey sawdust off their thumb. "Where d'you think Daneka is?"

"That's not any of our business," Fen answers, reaching deeper into the cupboard than she probably needs to.

"Is too," Harper replies, scowling.

Fen goes still, her head between the shelves. "Really?"

"Course." Harper runs a hand over their scalp. They sigh. "She's part of our family. Fuck's sake, she lives here. And yeah, she drops off the map from time to time. But that's a few days at a stretch. She's usually sending videos and posting stuff. And messaging us. Anyone gotten any actual messages?" They wait for everyone else's headshakes to confirm before continuing. "So."

And then Morrow whispers the thing nobody's wanted to say, the thing Fen's been thinking for twenty-eight days. "What if ... she got picked up?"

"We'd know," Quan says immediately.

"How?" Harper's bony shoulders snap up around their ears. "How would we know, Quan? You think they still let people make phone calls?"

"What about the thumbs-up reacts?"

"Those don't mean anything," Harper snaps. "When's the last time you saw Daneka go quiet on socials?"

Everyone stops to think. "Last time she got picked up," Quan finally admits. "She was waiting at a drop-off point for a delivery for the three of us—me and her and Fen, I mean." He nods to Fen, who finally extracts herself from the cupboard, her face drawn. Back before Fen and Quan and Daneka met Harper and Morrow, the three

of them had been their own little trio. Moving from place to place, following rumors about reliable, affordable hormones and welcoming communities. “The seller was an undercover. He snatched Daneka for like a week. She didn’t post or message the whole time.”

“Did she send reacts?”

“Hearts,” Fen whispers, remembering. “She told us later that the cop took her palmset so he could go through her messages and contacts and stuff.”

“So. Thumbs-up reacts don’t mean shit,” Harper confirms.

Morrow steps on the loose toe of one sock, his eyes fixed on the floor. “Okay, but also, she came home after she got picked up that time, right? So she’ll probably come home this time, too.”

It’s Fen and Quan’s turn to exchange a loaded glance. “That was in Santa Cruz,” Quan says slowly.

Morrow, who lived their whole life just up the freeway in Redding, hoists themselves up to sit on the counter. The quartz creaks under their weight. “Is it bad there?”

“Nah,” Quan says. “They’ll pick you up for indecency or gender impersonation or whatever, but they don’t process you most of the time. They just take your money if you have any. It’s ... it’s not like here,” he finishes, his eyes on his hands, his voice uncharacteristically soft.

Everyone startles when Fen drops the entire potato bin onto the counter. Her eyes are dry, her scar-notched brows set. “Daneka will be here,” she announces.

This is the Fen they’ve all been missing. This is her determined face, the one she wears when she’s deciding to create reality from scratch. It’s the face she wore when she and Quan and Daneka first met Morrow—Fen decided they’d all live together, even though Morrow had just tried to mug them. It’s the face she wore when they broke into this squat through the front door and found Harper breaking into it through the back door. And it’s the face she wears as she informs the other three housemates present that she will be

making a birthday dinner, that Daneka will show up to eat it, and that they're all going to help in the meantime.

"You," she says, pointing at a startled Morrow. "Sort these potatoes."

Morrow eyes the potato bin dubiously. "By ... size?"

"By sprouts. We can probably eat all of these since none of them are green, but the ones with really long sprouts might not be good. Look into my eyes, Morrow," she says, and she waits for their big dark eyes to meet hers. "We aren't risking it with any rotten food today. Okay? I mean it. Not for Daneka's birthday."

Morrow nods and picks up a potato with one huge, gentle hand.

"And you," Fen says, wheeling on Quan and brandishing the sagging celery stalks he'd idly removed from the refrigerator a few minutes before. "Figure this out."

Harper stands on the other side of the kitchen counter, their arms folded. "Guess the boss is back."

Fen regards them with bristling determination. "You're coming shopping with me."

The two of them go out through the back door and cross the crunchy brown grass of the back lawn. Harper boosts Fen over the gate in the back fence, which is white vinyl stamped to look like wood and doesn't open from the inside. Once Fen is on the other side, she thumbs the code into the keypad and eases the gate open.

"Should fix that thing," Harper says as they pass through the gate onto the community path, their eyes flicking down to the busted keypad on the inside of the fence. It looks like someone took a hammer to it.

"Good luck," Fen replies. "Sorry, that sounded bitchy. I really mean it. You're good with electronics."

Harper snorts. "Sure. Hey, do you think—"

"I don't want to talk about Daneka," Fen interrupts.

"I wasn't going to ask about Daneka. I was going to ask if you think that's fennel or dill," Harper says, pointing at a frondy green that's growing a couple of feet off the path. This trail was a jackpot

find they discovered a couple of weeks after settling into the squat: a poorly maintained ribbon of asphalt that stretches behind two miles of houses, terrible for jogging or riding a bicycle but perfect for foraging, especially when it comes to plants that like to jump fences from hobby gardens out into the world.

Fen rubs a frond, then lifts her fingers to her nose. "Fennel," she says, grinning. "What do you think, take the bulb or just cut a couple stalks?"

"Stalks," Harper answers, pulling a box cutter out of their back pocket. They trim off a couple of stalks of fennel. The licorice smell perfumes the air around them. "And you're lying."

"What?"

"You're lying. You want to talk about Daneka." Harper waits while Fen pulls a crumpled plastic grocery bag out of one pocket, then drops the fennel stalks into it.

Fen starts walking. Her strides are long, her pace quick—Harper has to move fast to keep up. "I'm just worried about her, is all."

"Pissed at her, more like. Hang on. Mint." They stoop to rip up a few fistfuls of the mint that grows in patches all along the trail, then use the blade of their box cutter to dig out a hank of it with the roots intact. "I read that if you plant this stuff in your yard, it'll grow everywhere. We can replace that crusty lawn."

"You think we're going to stay in the squat long enough for it to matter?"

"Been six months already," Harper says. "Might stay."

"Sure," Fen says, her eyes darting to either end of the trail. "The thing is, okay, I'm not pissed at Daneka. I'm just—if she's *not* missing, then yeah, I'd feel some kind of way about it. But I'm not pissed yet, because we don't know if she's missing or just being an inconsiderate asshole. If she's missing, I don't want to be pissed at her, I want to be worried. But I'd rather be pissed."

Harper shrugs. "Could be both. Missing and an asshole."

"Don't. Don't joke like that." Fen stalks ahead for a few minutes, until they reach a spot where they'd found wild onions once. She

tucks her pants into her socks before stepping off the trail to slowly pace in a circle through the grass, looking for the tall green stalks of an allium. "I don't know what we do if she doesn't come home. Do we go try to find her? Get her out?"

"No," Harper says immediately. "Too dangerous."

Fen stoops and tears out a fistful of grass, runs her hand along the dirt. "Maybe just me and Quan," she mutters. "If you and Morrow don't give a shit."

"We give a shit. But you two getting yourselves snatched won't help Daneka. There," they say suddenly, pointing to a spot just behind Fen.

The onions are puny, their tops scraggly, but Fen still beams with triumph. "See?" she says, brandishing the onions. "It's gonna be great. We're already most of the way there."

They visit the overgrown rosemary hedge, waving away half-drunk bees to snap off a few stems. They harvest a couple of handfuls of pealike seed pods from a thatch of bolted arugula, stepping over the papery white flowers that litter the path around it. Fen crows at the sight of what looks like garlic or maybe a shallot and digs it up, only to find a snotty hunk of black rot where the papery bulb should be. As she's swearing and wiping her hands on her jeans, though, Harper spots another, and this one turns out to only be half-rotted.

"Yes yes yes," Fen whispers, slicing the rot away with Harper's box cutter.

Harper eyes the rot that's falling away. "That gonna be good?"

"Not even a risky one," Fen confirms. "We've eaten way worse."

"What else do you need?"

"Um." Fen pauses, closes her eyes. "Carrots. Flour. Butter. We have salt, right?"

Harper thinks. "Yeah, Morrow grabbed a bunch of packets last time we got burgers. How much flour? Would cornstarch work instead?"

"Maybe? Oh, and we need chicken."

They both laugh. "I'll grab the first one I see," Harper says.

They walk the rest of the path and they don't find carrots, just a lot more mint, some marjoram, and a stray cat that puffs up his tail at them. As they head home, Fen slows her pace. "Harp, are you mad at me?"

"Nah. But I should be."

Fen nods. She trusts Harper because of answers like this one. "How come?"

Harper stops walking, waits for Fen to turn and face them. They take a deep breath and fold their arms across their chest. The sun falls in gold dapples across their freckled shoulders. They regard Fen irritably, the way they always do when they're figuring out how to say a thing that they think should go without saying. "Because," they say at last, "you dropped us."

"I—what?"

"You dropped us. You're the one in charge. You make the decisions, you boss everyone around, you decide what the day's gonna look like. But you got worried about Daneka, so you stopped. Where do you think Morrow went today?"

Fen shrugs. "Out?"

"They went to the coffee shop," Harper snaps, jutting their head forward. "To see that barista they keep flirting with. Because you weren't paying attention enough to notice that Morrow hasn't clocked how the coffee shop is a cop joint, so you didn't tell them not to go."

"You could have told them not to go," Fen mutters.

Harper narrows their eyes. "I did. But Morrow doesn't listen to me the way they listen to you. Which you know. But you've been in your feelings, so you decided someone else could handle the shit you usually handle, and now we gotta figure out if Morrow got followed home by a uniform."

Fen shook her head. "I'm not in charge of—"

"The fuck you're not. Take responsibility for your vibe, Fen. Either we can count on you or we can't. Which is it?"

The two of them glare at each other. A cricket starts to sing the late afternoon down into dusk. Fen breaks first, huffing out a sigh as she looks away.

"I'll think about it," she says at last.

Harper nods. "I know."

When they get back to the house, the potatoes are lined up on the counter, in order from one with no sprouts to one with four-inch-long ones. The celery is floating in a bowl of water, looking significantly sturdier than it had just an hour before. Morrow and Quan are hovering over the sink.

"Hey kids," Harper says, dropping the now-full bag of produce onto the counter. "Whaddaya got there?"

Morrow turns around, grinning and holding up what looks like a wad of white gum. "Butter!"

Fen's jaw drops. "You're joking. Where did you get butter?!"

"They made it," Quan says. He sounds like he doesn't believe the words he's saying.

"I learned how when I was a kid," Morrow explains, dropping their tiny palmful of butter onto a plate on the counter. "It's easy. You, um." Their ears are going red from the combined attention of the other three. "You just put some cream in a jar and shake it a thousand times, then pull out the solid stuff and wash it in cold water. Is this gonna be enough?"

Harper picks up an old peanut butter jar that has a couple of inches of cloudy liquid in it. "Ew."

"That's buttermilk, save it," Fen says quickly. "Morrow, where the fuck did you get cream?"

"The guy at the coffee shop down the road. Me and Quan ran over there after I finished sorting the potatoes. Dude only charged us a dollar for a pretty decent pour. I thought, maybe we could invite coffee shop guy over sometime and—"

"We won't be doing that," Quan says frankly, "but hey. How do you like that, Fen? Butter?"

Everyone turns to Fen. She's holding the plate of butter, her eyes welling with tears. "I like it," she whispers. "Thank you, Morrow."

"I helped," Quan mutters.

Fen's palmset, still sitting where she left it on the counter an hour and a half earlier, chimes.

Everyone freezes. Morrow reaches for the palmset but Harper slaps their hand away.

Quan puts a hand on Fen's shoulder. "Do you want to look at it?"

Fen shakes her head, then nods, then shakes her head again. "Do you still have the cornstarch in the bathroom? From when you were doing liberty spikes in your hair?"

"Uh, yeah." Quan blinks a few times. "Do you need it?"

Fen picks up a potato, not looking at Quan at all. "Yeah. Can you grab it?"

"I guess." He heads down the long hall to the bathroom on the other end of the house, looking over his shoulder at her every few steps.

Once he's out of sight, she pounces on the palmset. There's a message from Daneka.

I'll do my best!

"What does that mean?" Fen whispers to herself.

Harper leans closer. "What's it say?"

"Nothing." Fen folds the palmset shut.

"Well. What do you mean, though? What's nothing? Was it from Daneka?" Morrow wipes their buttery hands on their jeans and reaches one long arm across the counter for the palmset again.

"Yes." Fen jams the handset into her pocket. Her eyes flick up toward the hall, where Quan is returning with a crumpled bag of cornstarch. "But it wasn't anything. Who wants to wash all this marjoram?"

For the next hour, Fen steers the four of them through a recipe. Quan and Morrow work together to clean all the vegetables. By the

time that's done, Fen's got water boiling on the hotplate. She boils all the usable potatoes, then uses the potato water to reconstitute some chicken powder into a cloudy broth. Harper pulls the celery out of its bowl of water to discover that it's more or less revitalized; they chop that and the fennel stalks while Fen dices the wild onion and garlic they found.

Quan is playing lo-fi beats on his palmset, and Morrow is mumbling lyrics to go with the beats, and they're all laughing hard enough that they almost don't hear it when Fen's palmset chimes again. She tosses the garlic and wild onion into a skillet on the hotplate before pulling it out of her pocket and unfolding it.

Remind me where we're meeting?

Harper looks over her shoulder. "Fuck," they whisper.

"What's up?" Quan looks up from the playlist he's curating. "Fen? You okay?"

"I'm fine," Fen says. Her voice is perfectly flat. She folds the palmset back into her pocket, then takes up the wooden spoon next to the skillet and gives the onion a stir. "Harper, can you throw the celery in here for me? Quan, Morrow, go pack your stuff and charge your palmsets. Use the rapid charger in the living room."

Morrow furrows their brow. "Didn't you say the rapid charger is a fire hazard? Or is it—"

"She's right. We gotta go. Hurry," Harper says. "We should pack too," they add in an urgent whisper after Quan and Morrow have gone.

"In a minute," Fen replies. "I want to finish this."

"Fen—"

"In a minute," she says again, her voice steady and certain the way it was before Daneka went missing. The way it's always been. "Carrots?"

"We didn't find carrots," Harper reminds her softly. "You want the fennel, though?"

Fen closes her eyes tight, bows her head. Lets out a teakettle hiss of curses. When she looks back up and meets Harper's eyes, her gaze is flat. "Will we stay together? Do you want to stay with us, I mean? You don't have to."

Harper draws her into a tight hug. "I don't know. Let's figure that out in the morning, yeah? Right now, I'm gonna go pack up my stuff and charge my palmset. Want me to get yours too?"

Fen nods. "I want to finish cooking this for Daneka. Just in case."

Harper taps the recipe box on the counter as they leave the kitchen. "Don't forget this."

After Harper disappears into the living room with both their palmsets, Fen lets herself cry. Just for a few seconds. A couple of sobs, a spill of hot tears, that's all.

Then she adds the chopped fennel stalks to the skillet. When the fennel is bright green, she pours the chicken broth into the pan and lets it boil for a few minutes. It's already thickening a little thanks to the potato starch in the water, but she adds some of Quan's cornstarch too, stirring fast until it makes a thick gravy. She adds marjoram and rosemary since she doesn't have any sage. She smashes the potatoes, stirs in chicken powder and Morrow's butter, adds a few salt-and-pepper combo packets from Morrow's stash.

"Okay," she whispers to herself as she lets the potatoes heat just a little longer, to get any last water out. "Finish it. Move on. Work to do."

She can hear Quan and Harper trying to figure out how to fit her sweaters into her backpack. They won't figure it out on their own, she knows, because they don't know how to roll sweaters up tiny. She'll go help them in a minute, but first, she scoops mashed potatoes into a paper bowl and uses the back of a spoon to spread them in an even layer. She pours vegetables and thick gravy on top, then covers those with another even layer of mashed potatoes. With the back of the spoon, she smooths the top down, then carves lines into the center of the layer to look like the slits in the top of a piecrust.

Quan comes into the kitchen, his backpack rising up over his shoulders like a turtle's shell, and eyes the steaming bowl on the counter. "It's smaller than I thought it'd be," he says. "Good thing there's only three of us. Are there clean spoons?"

Fen's eyes snap up to him. Her face is blazing with barely restrained fury. "Don't fucking touch it," she says in a low, dangerous voice. "This is for Daneka."

He frowns at her. "Chill. Daneka's not here. Are you telling me we're not going to eat this just because she got—"

"She's going to be here," Fen says. "And she's going to be hungry when she gets home. We'll eat on the road. Get moving."

Quan looks like he's about to protest, but then Morrow comes into the kitchen and smiles down at the bowl on the counter. "Daneka's gonna love it," they murmur. "Good job, Fen."

"Are you serious?" Quan snaps. "You don't want to eat it either?"

Morrow looks at him with open bewilderment. "It's Daneka's birthday. We'll figure something else out."

The four of them are out of the house five minutes later. Harper turns the lights off and locks the back door. Morrow boosts Quan over the back fence to let them out through the gate.

Fen is about to ease the back gate shut, but she hesitates, her eyes locked on the dark house. She tells herself that she's trying to remember if she left anything behind, even as she mentally runs through the list of items that she already knows she's carrying on her back.

"Fen?" Quan whisper-yells from the darkness down the path.

The edge of the pressed vinyl creaks in her grip. She rises up on her toes, trying to see inside.

"Hey," Harper hisses. "We gotta move."

A light goes on inside the house.

Fen closes the gate. "Coming."

Fen's "Chicken" Pot Pie

Crust (2 batches)

6 potatoes
3 tablespoons butter
Chicken bouillon powder
Salt and pepper packets

Filling

2 handfuls arugula seed pods, chopped
3 stalks celery, chopped
2 fennel stalks, chopped
3 wild onions, diced
2 tablespoons cornstarch mixed w/ $\frac{1}{3}$ cup water to form a slurry
4 cups chicken broth
4 cloves garlic, chopped
1 teaspoon chopped fresh marjoram/rosemary
Pepper

Instructions

Make the "Crust"

1. Boil the potatoes. Drain, reserving the potato water.
2. Smash the cooked potatoes until smooth.
3. Add butter, chicken bouillon powder, salt, and pepper to taste.

Make the filling

1. Add chicken powder to the potato water to make broth
2. In a nonstick skillet over medium heat, sauté the celery, onion, and garlic. Add the fennel and sauté until bright green.
3. Add the chicken broth to the pan. Add herbs. Simmer 3–5 minutes.
4. Add cornstarch slurry and whisk thoroughly to thicken.

Assemble

5. Line a bowl with a thick layer of mashed potatoes. Add filling, then top with mashed potatoes and sculpt into a crust shape. Optional, if there's time (there's not): toast the mashed potatoes on top with a hand torch.

Handwritten: *Handwritten notes*

Chicken Pot Pie

CRUST (2 batches)

- 2.5C flour
- 1 C butter
- pinch of salt
- 6tbs water

Handwritten: *mix to form crumbs*

FILLING (ctd)

- 1 bag mixed frozen peas and carrots
- 1 onion, diced *or 1 can pearl onions*
- 3 stalks celery, chopped
- 2tbsp flour
- 2tbsp butter
- 4C chicken broth
- 1 tsp onion powder

FILLING

- 1tsp garlic powder
- 2 chicken breasts roasted and shredded
- salt and pepper

Handwritten: *or 1-2 cloves*

Handwritten: *+ 1 tsp chopped fresh sage*

in a floured pan...
bottom several times with a fork...
steam during cooking.
5. bake blind for 15 minutes.

make the filling ← *Do this while the crust is cooking.*

1. in a nonstick skillet over medium heat, saute the celery and onion. *remove unless using pearl on.*
2. in the same skillet, heat the butter over medium heat until it tops bubbling. add the flour and whisk thoroughly until there are no lumps. stir until golden brown.
3. add the chicken broth to the pan. whisk thoroughly until well combined. add the onion powder, garlic powder, and plenty of black pepper. *+sage!*
4. add the cooked vegetables *and pearl onions* and the frozen vegetables. stir to combine. simmer until the sauce thickens into a gravy. remove from heat and stir in the shredded chicken.
5. pour the filling into the blind baked crust. top with the rolled out unbaked crust. cut slits in the top to vent steam. bake until golden and flaky on top, 35 to 45 mins

Handwritten: *Happy Birthday, D. Meet us @ the Rosemary Patch. ♡MQFH*

PART 2: DINNER WITH PETER

Fen's Dad's Soup

2 bay leaves
6–8 peppercorns
3–5 allspice berries
10 cups water; or 10 cups beef broth & omit bouillon
4 tablespoons beef base or 2 bouillon cubes
½ head cabbage, shredded
1 cup celery, chopped
2 onions, chopped
2 carrots, chopped
1 pound sliced sausage
2 chicken breasts, cubed
1 cup ham, cubed
1 6-ounce can tomato paste
1 cup dry white wine
3 large dill pickles, chopped
2 tablespoons capers
¾ cup black olives, sliced
2 cans stewed tomatoes
Salt
Pepper
Optional: Dill and sour cream.

Instructions

1. Tie the bay leaves, peppercorns, and allspice berries up in a square of cheesecloth to form a sachet. Alternatively, put them into a tea infuser. In a very large pot, combine the water, spice sachet, beef base, cabbage, and celery. Boil for 30 minutes.
2. While the water boils, in a very large skillet, sauté the onions and carrots.
3. When the onions start to brown, add the sausage, chicken, and ham to the pan. The sausage will release some fat, which will fry the chicken and ham.

If omitting sausage, add oil or butter to the pan and cook until the chicken and ham are brown on all sides.

4. Add the contents of the skillet to the cooking pot. Add tomato paste to the skillet and stir until it starts to brown; then, add the white wine and dill pickles to the skillet. Stir to loosen all fond from the bottom of the pan, then transfer contents of the skillet to the cooking pot.
5. Add capers, olives, and stewed tomatoes to the cooking pot. Simmer 5–10 minutes until heated through.
6. Add salt and pepper to taste. Serve with dill and sour cream.

★ ★ ★

Iowa is quiet at night, not that anyone in the back of the pickup would know. The engine is so loud that they can barely hear their own thoughts. But that's fine, because none of them particularly want to tune in to that frequency anyway. The noise is a mercy, in its way.

All four of them—Fen, Quan, Harper, and Morrow—are wedged into the space next to the strapped-tight ATV in the truck bed. They've been rattling around back there like coins in a can since the middle of Colorado, where they managed to get picked up for the clearance price of all the pills in Morrow's pockets. The guy driving the truck didn't even look at their faces before opening the tailgate and ushering them in. He didn't look when he slammed the tailgate shut either. Fen was lucky not to lose a finger.

That unlooking was its own kind of courtesy—the gift of anonymity, generously granted to four nobodies in exchange for a palmful of loose capsules.

"Quan. Hey. Hey, Quan." Morrow is folded nearly in half to fit in their corner of the truck bed, closest to the cab. They're nudging a zoned-out Quan with one sharp elbow.

"Wha?" Quan sounds disoriented, like he's just woken up.

Morrow bends down to lean close to Quan's ear. "What did I give that guy?"

"What did you—do you mean the pills?"

"Yeah, I didn't check. Did you see what I handed him?"

Quan leans away, gives Morrow an incredulous look. "No. How do you not know what pills were in your pocket?"

Morrow shrugs, leans around Quan to try to get Harper's attention. "Harp?"

Harper shakes their head, points to their ear. Even if they were open to conversation, which they usually aren't, the thunder of the truck's engine is loud enough to wash out any possibility of conversation.

Morrow doesn't bother trying to get Fen's attention. She's crammed tight into the opposite corner from them. Her back is against the tailgate, and a scarf is up over her face to filter the worst of the exhaust coming from the tailpipe beneath her seat. Her eyes are closed and her skin is a worrying shade of green.

Just as Quan's eyes start glazing over again, the truck slows. The stink of exhaust thickens without the wind of movement to whisk it away. Harper and Morrow pull their shirts up over their noses and mouths; Quan just coughs.

There's nothing here to stop for, but the truck pulls onto the shoulder anyway. The semiautomatic bleat of the rumble strip jolts them all alert. They glance at each other, worry passing between them as fast as an extreme heat warning pinging every palmset in a hundred-mile area. None of them know why the driver would choose to stop in this lonely place.

The engine cuts off. Wildflowers grow next to the highway, bottle caps scattered in the dirt they're growing out of. The golden pre-dusk light makes the broken glass on the highway shoulder glow. A fallow field stretches as far as any of them can see; on the other side of the highway, a blanket of soybeans extends all the way to the horizon. A door opens, then slams shut again. A lone cicada whines nearby; other than that, there's no sound louder than footsteps on gravel as the driver makes his way around the side of the truck.

The tailgate drops open. Fen nearly falls out but catches herself just in time. She drops her head into her hands and sits there, catching her breath.

The driver's hat, a faded blue ballcap with a dark rectangle on the front where a patch has been ripped off, shades his face so his eyes aren't visible. He clears his throat and spits into the wildflowers. "You'll want to get out and walk from here," he says. "State line's in a couple miles, and the State Border Patrol in Illinois started doing agricultural inspections on all vehicles entering the state last year. Depending who's running the booth, could mean trouble for some kinds of people."

"We're trying to get to Chicago," Harper says as they scramble past Fen and out of the truck bed. It's a five-foot drop to the ground. The driver doesn't help them down.

Morrow nudges Quan again. "That's in Illinois, right?" they whisper.

Quan doesn't answer. He pauses at the edge of the tailgate, looking at the driver, who has his face turned toward the soybeans. "Do you know how we can get there without running into State BP?"

The driver responds with silence. He waits while Morrow helps ease a gray-faced Fen to the edge of the dropped tailgate. Once the two of them drop to the asphalt, he slams the tailgate shut again. He hesitates for just a moment before turning his back on all four of them.

"Go through Wisconsin. There's just one guy working the inspection station up there, name of Bouchard. He never gives anyone trouble."

By the time Harper reaches the "you" in "thank you," the driver's-side door is already slamming shut again.

Fen stumbles into the fallow field as the truck vanishes down the long, straight stretch of road toward Illinois.

"Fen. You okay?" Harper stoops to pick up their bag and Fen's.

Fen holds up a hand, then crouches, spasms, heaves. She stays hunched over for a long minute before straightening. "I'm fine," she calls hoarsely. "Just carsick. Anyone have a charge on their palmset? I'm down to two percent."

“I didn’t find a charging pad in the back of the truck, no,” Quan says in a tone that could be a joke or could be a rebuke.

Harper gives him a gentle shove on the shoulder. “Doesn’t matter. We can figure out where to plug in tomorrow. Right now, we need a place to sleep. Storm’s coming.”

“Not for a while, though, right?” Morrow looks up at the thick bank of clouds on the horizon, doubtful.

Harper doesn’t answer him. “Fen, you ready?”

Fen nods and half straightens. Together, the four of them start across the field. They pick their way across the grass, pants tucked into socks, bones jellified from the hours of travel. It doesn’t take long for the road to vanish behind them. After a couple of minutes of walking, Fen looks better enough that Harper stops shooting worried glances at her.

Quan spots an abandoned-looking shack in the middle of a bald patch in the field. The windows are missing and there are holes in the roof that you can see right through, but the night is warm and a roof’s a roof, holes or none.

Harper starts by knocking on the front door. Loud, firm knocks. Cop knocks. They try three times before deciding nobody’s home. The front door isn’t locked, and there’s a palpable emptiness to the house when the four of them walk inside.

They make a lot of noise as they enter, pitching their voices loud like they’re warning off bears. They split into pairs and sweep quickly through the house. There’s not much territory to cover—one main room the size of the truck they rode here in, with a bed pushed into the far corner; a simple kitchen along one wall with a woodburning stove and a pump sink; a water closet that doesn’t merit more than a quick peek to confirm that nobody’s hiding inside.

Fen and Harper confer. “We should check outside too, but I don’t think anyone’s been in this place for a long time,” Fen says, sweeping a layer of sandy dust off the single skinny, buckled shelf above the sink.

"Gotta plug some of the holes in the walls. Wind's already picking up," Harper says, nodding to a gap between the boards where the pink light of the sunset peeks through. "Who wants which job?"

Fen volunteers to check outside. Her face visibly falls when Quan volunteers to walk the perimeter with her. He has his palmset and charging cable in his hand, like he's hoping there might be a power outlet on the outside of the house. Morrow and Harper stay inside, using an old broom handle to tug a pile of rags out from under the bed to plug the gaps in the walls.

Quan starts in on Fen the second they're outside. "Why don't you want to talk to me? Did I do something?" He steps around a haphazard stack of logs, pauses, turns around, and cups his hands around his mouth. "Hey, there's a woodpile!"

"Thanks," Harper yells from inside.

Fen pretends not to hear him. "Did you notice the updates on Daneka's Fotoset?" She pulls out her palmset. The screen is dim and grayscale to save power. She rotates the palmset in her hand until it opens the photo-sharing app.

Daneka's latest update is right there: a picture of a butterfly, captioned

Just livin' life to the fullest!

Quan glances at it, then looks quickly away. "Daneka didn't post that."

"No shit." Fen nudges an old aluminum bucket with one foot. It tips over with a hollow *thunk*. "It's been stuff like that every day. I just can't figure out if it's a bot takeover or if someone's running the account."

"The bots and the Feds train on the same material. Impossible to tell them apart based on voice, but I guess we'll know which one it is if Daneka starts messaging you links to 'investment opportunities.'" He rounds the corner of the house, then stops, tilts

his head. "Hey, when we were inside, did you see a back door into the house?"

Fen follows his gaze. He's looking at a narrow door set into the eastern wall of the house. She thinks for a moment, then answers firmly. "No. Definitely not."

They approach warily. Fen raps on the door hard—it's not as loud as Harper's knock, but it's loud enough that they hear Morrow yell "What was that?" from inside the house. After a few seconds pass without any other response, Fen glances at Quan. He nods and reaches past her for the doorknob.

The door sticks the first two times Quan pulls on it. On the third tug, he yanks it hard, and it opens with a sick, paint-stuck *pop*.

"It's a canning pantry," Fen says, peering inside at the spiderwebbed shelves that line the walls. A single broken bulb hangs from the ceiling; glass crunches underfoot as the two of them squeeze inside.

They both jump at a pounding on the wall. Morrow's soft voice follows, barely muffled. "Hey, who the fuck is in the walls?"

Quan sticks an arm through some cobwebs to smack a fist into the wall. "It's just us," he yells back. "We found a pantry!"

Morrow pauses. When they speak again, it sounds like they're pressed right up against the other side of the wall. "Anything good in there?"

"Electricity," Quan says, pointing to the broken bulb overhead. "Might be an outlet in here. Fen, can we use your palmset's flashlight mode?"

"No," she snaps. "It'll kill the battery."

"Which you'll be able to recharge if we find an outlet," Quan drawls with exaggerated patience. When Fen doesn't immediately pull out her palmset, he snaps his fingers at her a few times. "Come on. Let's go."

Fen opens her mouth like she's about to protest, but then she closes it again, shakes her head, pulls out her palmset. "Fuck you," she mutters as she thumbs it into flashlight mode.

"You're saying that because you know I'm right," Quan replies. He drops into a low squat, then gets on his hands and knees to look under the shelves. "I think I see something back here."

"An outlet?"

"You know what would help me figure that out is if you pointed that flashlight somewhere useful."

Fen stoops to direct the light under the shelf. It lands on a tiny can, half buried in dust. "Don't think you can plug into that," she says.

Quan shoves his arm under the shelf. "There's more back there," he grunts. "I can feel something else. I can almost reach—if I just..." He strains for a moment, then pulls his hand out from the darkness, holding the tiny can and a small glass jar.

The light from Fen's palmset starts to dim. "Shit," she says, "let's check the rest of this place out, quick. I'm almost out of charge."

In the sixty seconds before Fen's palmset dies, they find a few more dust-covered jars, and a wall outlet that's so blackened with scorch marks that even Quan isn't willing to risk plugging into it. They gather everything they've found and bring it inside, where most of the gaps in the walls are plugged with rags and a fire is already burning in the woodstove.

"Huh. Well. This is ... I don't want to say useless," Harper says, looking over what they've found. "But I would have hoped for more actual food."

Morrow squats down in front of the row of jars. "I don't know. I love pickles. I haven't had them in so long." They examine a second, smaller jar, full of dark liquid. "I think this is olives? And that's gotta be sauerkraut," they add, nodding to a jar packed with dense white shreds.

"And this tiny one is tomato paste," Fen finishes, prodding the tiny dusty can Quan rescued from beneath the shelves. "Plus, of course, we always have our beloved ewed tomat." The "ewed tomat" can with the half-ripped-off label has been in Quan's backpack for a little more than a year. It's a little dented, but not enough to worry

about—Fen has explained to Morrow a hundred times that unless her index finger can fit into the dent, it's not dangerous.

Quan stands at the pump sink, working the foot lever until the faucet spits out brown water. He lets it run until the water is clear, then washes his hands. "I say we open all the jars, toss everything together, and call it a salad."

"I can add these," Morrow says suddenly, rummaging through their bag and coming up with a paper package. "A lady outside that scary gas station in Wyoming was selling them. I think they're like homemade Slim Jims." They open the package to reveal a row of wrinkled, finger-length sausages.

Fen stares at the sausages, lets out a sigh. "Harp, wanna go forage with me? Maybe there's something we can add to all this."

"I saw a shit-ton of wild dill out there," Morrow chimes in.

"And I have pepper," a new voice adds.

The four of them jump, wheel around to face the hole in the wall where a rag has been pulled free. A pair of pale eyes stares in at them. "What the fuck," Quan snaps, just as Harper says, "Who are you?" and Fen lets out a startled "Who?!"

Morrow doesn't speak. They simply straighten out of their perpetual slouch and square their shoulders, filling the little space and reminding the other three of what Morrow is like when they're not working to stay small and quiet and gentle.

The stranger outside doesn't move an inch, which is smart. "I don't want any trouble," he says in an easy voice. "I just thought maybe we could share a roof for the night? A storm's coming in, and it isn't going to be pretty out here in an hour or so."

Everyone looks at Fen, because Fen's a soft touch. She's chewing on her lip. Then everyone looks at Harper, because Harper's a tough row. They're frowning. Just then, a gust of wind rattles the shack hard enough to knock dust loose from the rafters. "We gotta," Harper whispers.

"Come on in," Fen says to the stranger, "but if you fuck around, you'll find out. Clear?"

"As a bell," the stranger says. He comes around to the front door and opens it slow, peeking around the doorframe and glancing around before stepping in and dropping a heavy-looking duffel onto the floor. His eyes pause on Morrow, and he gives a slight nod. "Thanks for the hospitality. I'm glad you've got that woodstove going, it's getting cold outside. Like I said, I've got peppercorns. Couple other things too, if you're in need or looking to trade."

He has a soft accent, something that sounds like it comes from miles and miles of cornfields. He's scrawny, short, and thin as a whistle, with hair the color of nothing. He crosses the room right away, pulling a rag out of his pocket and shoving it into the gap he'd pulled it out of in the first place.

When he lifts his hand to shove the rag into that hole in the wall, Quan lets out a soft gasp. Fen's the only one to hear it. She follows his gaze to the stranger's hands and gives Harper a nudge. Harper sees it too, and kicks Morrow's ankle, signaling with her eyes.

The stranger has a bracelet of runes tattooed on his wrist.

"My name's Peter," the stranger says. "Like I said, I've got peppercorns, and bouillon, and some juniper berries too. All dried. And a few bay leaves, and—you won't believe me, but I'll show you—a can of SPAM." He says this last part with a little laugh.

"I haven't had SPAM since I was a kid," Quan murmurs.

Harper cuts him a sharp glance, then returns their attention to Peter. "Sure, show us. What are you doing with all those spices?"

"I collect 'em on the road," he answers, unzipping his duffel. The runes are still on clear display. "A little bit of this, a little bit of that. Makes it easier to get folks on board for a little temporary cohabitation," he adds, aiming a wink over his shoulder.

"I'm gonna grab some of that dill outside before the storm lands on us," Harper says. "Morrow, come with?"

Morrow nods. The two of them step outside, walk a few paces, and begin a whispered conference.

"Okay, which runes mean what?" Harper hisses. "You're into all that spooky shit, right?"

Morrow's eyes go wide with didn't-study panic. "I mean, I'm into *some* spooky shit, but I don't know anything about runes. I don't touch that stuff on account of. You know." They nod back toward the shack.

"Right. That's the problem. How can we tell?"

They stop and stare at each other, glancing back at the shack, both trying to figure out how they can determine what Peter's tattoo means to him. It could be that he believes in magic—or it could be that he believes in the inherent superiority of an imaginary master race. There's no safe way to ask *Are you a pagan or are you a white supremacist?* but for everyone's sake, they need to find out, and they need to find out fast.

By the time they get back to the shack, each clutching a fistful of dill, Fen is already cooking. She's squatting on the floor over the pried-loose shelf from the wall, dicing pickles with an unfamiliar hunting knife while Quan unwraps the foil from a bouillon cube. A collapsible pot of water is steaming on top of the woodstove.

"What are we making?" Harper asks, her eyes fixed on the hunting knife.

Fen glances up, her eyes darting to Peter before returning to the pickles she's chopping. "I remembered a recipe from the box that should work okay, now that we have Peter's help. It's a soup my dad used to make when any of us were sick. I'm making a half-recipe because his recipe makes enough to feed, like, ten people. He called it pickle soup," she adds. Her voice stretches a little tighter as she stares down at the knife in her hand. "But it has another name I can't remember right now. A Russian name. Peter, do you know anything about Russian food?"

"Fraid not," Peter says mildly, popping the lid off the can of tomato paste. "But I'm sure it'll be delicious, whatever it is."

Morrow shows Fen the dill they collected. "Will this help?"

"It's perfect," Fen says with a tense smile. "Give it a rinse, will you?"

"I'll get it," Peter says, rising to his feet and holding out his hands. He passes close to Quan on his way to the sink. "Scuse me."

Quan shifts his weight forward, dropping the bouillon cube into the pot. "No worries. Can I grab those spices out of your bag?"

"Help yourself. Oh, and if anyone needs to charge a palmset, I've got a crank charger in there too," Peter replies, not looking back. He keeps his eyes trained on the dill in the sink as he rinses it. It's a clear signal: *You can look through my shit, I won't stop you.*

Quan darts to the duffel and unzips it. "Are the spices in jars or what?" he calls over his shoulder, already searching through Peter's things.

"Ziptop bags. Can't miss them, they're all the way at the bottom," Peter says, still washing the dill, even though it has to be clean by now. "Just pull them all out and we can see what's useful."

Fen holds up the ripped, water-rippled recipe card up to the firelight from the woodstove. "Looks like we need peppercorns, allspice berries, and bay leaves. They can go right into the pot. Oh, and is there celery salt?"

"Yeah," Quan says. "He has all that stuff. Plus this thing," he adds, lifting out a small, matte-black cube with a folding hand crank on one side and two power outlets on top.

As Quan stands, Peter slowly turns around with the dill. His gaze is perfectly steady. "Did you find anything else that could be of use?"

Quan shakes his head once. "Nope. This is all we need, right, Fen?"

Fen stares hard at Quan. "You read the recipe card. You know as well as I do."

"Then we're good to go," Quan says briskly. He crosses the room and drops the spices next to Fen's makeshift cutting board, then grabs his palmset and charger and plugs in to the black cube.

"I'll take the first shift," Morrow says, dropping to the ground beside Quan. They have Fen's palmset and plug it in next to Quan's. Then they unfold the hand crank and start turning it hard and fast, waiting for the charging symbol to appear on the two palmsets.

“I was going to—” Quan starts, but then he catches a glimpse of Morrow’s dark, determined expression and changes his mind. “Thanks,” he says instead.

Everything moves briskly from there. Morrow charges the palmsets. Harper watches the pot on the stove as the bouillon cube dissolves and the spices simmer it into a fragrant broth. Fen inspects the wrinkly black olives by the firelight, making sure they’re not growing any fuzz before she slices them up. Peter shows them all how to use his hunting knife to cube the Spam without taking it out of its metal tin, while Quan discovers a flat length of cast iron under the woodstove.

“Is this a griddle?” he asks, holding it up and prodding at the lip around the edge. “It looks like—”

“That’s perfect!” Fen cries out when she sees it.

Quan looks startled, but hands over the griddle with a slow smile. “Does this mean you forgive me for whatever I did that made you stop talking to me?”

Fen pulls away, puts the griddle on top of the woodstove beside the pot. “No.”

“Wait, why not? Fen, c’mon. Quit being so—”

“So what?” Fen whips around on him, her voice taut.

Harper raises an eyebrow at Quan. “I wouldn’t,” they warn.

Across the room, Peter sits on the edge of the narrow bed, watching the four of them. The little shack is too small for him to pretend not to hear the exchange, but he has the good grace not to try to intervene.

Quan throws his hands into the air. “I’m sick of this,” he says. “Fen keeps acting like I took a shit in her backpack, and all I’ve done this whole time is—”

“Is be a huge asshole,” Morrow murmurs.

Quan freezes. If Fen or Harper had said this, it would be Quan’s cue to get into the thick of a fight. But Morrow—gentle, kind Morrow, with their cauliflower ears and scar-hatched knuckles—never says fighting words.

“What did I do?” Quan asks. The question has an edge on it, but not much of one.

Morrow shifts their shoulders. They don’t break their rhythm on the hand crank. “You just get mean for no reason sometimes. Like earlier today, when you called me a gorilla. That was mean.”

“I just meant—you know, you’re tall and strong and stuff,” Quan says, his voice faltering as he looks to Harper and Fen for backup and doesn’t find any. “That’s all.”

Morrow huffs out a barely there laugh. “Okay,” they say. “If that’s who you wanna be.”

Quan swallows hard. Harper and Fen look at each other, then at the floor. Morrow keeps cranking the charger until Quan’s phone lets out a chime.

“I want to charge mine next,” Harper says. They go to their backpack, and Morrow unplugs Quan’s palmset and hands it over, and the movement breaks the surface tension on the bubble of their fight just enough for the meal they’re preparing to come back into focus.

Peter clears his throat from the corner. “That griddle should be hot by now.”

The cubed Spam goes onto the griddle. Peter slices the sausage into rounds right over it, each tiny coin dropping onto the hot iron with an immediate sizzle.

“This would be better if we had onions.” Fen sighs.

“Be better if we had a big leather sofa,” Peter replies with a grin. “But here we are.”

The tomato paste slides out of its tiny dusty can onto the griddle, and Fen uses a spoon to stir it until it starts to stick to the metal. Then she calls to Harper, who’s deep in quiet conversation with Quan near the bed. “Harp, can you bring me those pickles?”

Harper looks up sharply. “Morrow, can you get it?”

Fen’s palmset chimes. “Perfect timing. Fen, you’re all charged up.” Morrow steps away from the charger and brings Fen the shelf-turned-cutting board with the chopped pickles and olives on it.

Fen slides the pickles onto the skillet, leaving the olives. She splashes some broth from the pot onto the hot metal, too. The moisture loosens the caramelizing tomato paste just enough for Fen to scrape up all the bits that are sticking to the cast iron.

"Shit," Fen says, looking from the griddle to the cooking pot.

"What's the matter?" Morrow asks.

"I need to put all this stuff," she says, gesturing to the rapidly drying mixture of meat and tomato paste and pickles, "into there." She points to the pot. "But if I pick up the griddle, it'll burn the fuck out of my hands."

Peter steps forward. "I've got it," he says. He strips off his denim jacket.

Fen's eyes are on the food, but Harper, Morrow, and Quan's eyes all lock onto Peter's bare arms as he uses his jacket to shield his hands and picks up the hot griddle, tipping the contents into the pot. The only tattoos visible on Peter are the bracelet of runes and a generic compass rose on one bicep. There's nothing obvious there, nothing that speaks to what danger he might represent.

"What's next?" Peter asks.

Fen consults the recipe card. "Gotta let this simmer for a few minutes, then rinse off some of that sauerkraut and add it in. We could probably get away with not rinsing it," she adds, "but ... it might be *real* funky."

Peter opens the sauerkraut and gives it a whiff. "Could go either way. Your palmset's going off," he adds, looking to the lit-up screen on the floor.

Fen has the cutting board in her hands again, is about to slide the chopped olives into the pot. "Morrow, can you grab it?"

"Oh fuck," Morrow whispers when they've got the screen in front of them.

"What?" Fen asks, dropping the olives into the pot.

"It's a voice message from Daneka."

The room freezes. Peter doesn't seem to notice. He lifts the sauerkraut jar. "What do y'all think? Should I rinse this?" When

nobody answers, he looks up and his face drops. His eyes flick to his duffel bag. "What happened?"

"It's nothing," Quan says quickly. He crosses the room to look at the screen in Morrow's hand.

Fen wipes olive brine onto her jeans. "We got a message from a friend."

Peter glances at his bag again, even less subtly this time. He takes a few steps back from the sink, looks ready to bolt. "A local friend?"

"A friend from back home," Harper says. "Fen, do you want to listen to it?"

Fen shakes her head. "I'm almost done cooking." She sounds tense.

"Fen," Quan says, reaching for her arm.

She jerks away from his touch. "Don't. Fine. We can listen to it." She looks down at her palmset, swallows hard, and presses the notification.

Hey, it's me! Just wanted to know if you're still up for a birthday dinner. Let me know what the plan is and how everyone's doing. Love you!

It's Daneka's voice – her unmistakable chainsmoker rasp -- but something sounds wrong. They can all hear it.

Fen slips her palmset into her pocket. She turns and uses a fork to add some sauerkraut into the pot. "This would be better with onions," she says again. Her voice has all the color squeezed out of it.

"That wasn't her." Quan strides briskly across the room, headed nowhere at all, then turns on his heel to stare hard at his friends. "Right? That definitely wasn't her."

Harper sits on the edge of the bed. "We can't know."

Quan lets out a short, sharp laugh. "That sounded like a robot. It was definitely a fake! C'mon, Harp—"

"It was real," Peter interrupts. "I used to code artificial-speech software. They don't transition between similar sounds that smoothly. You heard when she said 'wanted to know'? The 'd' in 'wanted' flowed right into the 't' in 'to.' That's a human-speech thing. Really hard to smooth out virtually."

Morrow wheels around to face him. "Who did you write code for?"

His shoulders are tight, his face blank. "The company's closed now. They got bought out during the last big market crash."

"What company?" Harper demands.

He swallows hard. Takes a few slow steps toward his bag, then uses a foot to flip it over. There's a faded logo on the side, barely visible in the flickering light from the fire in the woodstove. The twisting double-S logo of the multimedia conglomerate that used to dominate the digital newsletter marketplace. "We developed an integrated voice-to-text service."

"You mean proprietary," Harper says. "So you worked for the company everyone worked for. Why were you so squirrely about it just now? What, are you not a 'champion of free speech'?" All the venom in her voice pools at the end of the sentence.

"I don't agree with everything they—"

"Dinner's ready," Fen interrupts. "Peter, can I use your jacket again?"

He brings his jacket to the woodstove and uses it to pull the cooking pot off the heat. The soup is still bubbling as he carries it to the middle of the room. Harper sets down a couple of rags, and Peter sets the pot on top of them. Morrow passes out spoons.

The five of them sit on the floor around the pot. Fen's eyes are dull as she stares into the soup she's made them. Harper is staring at Peter's wrist.

"What did you say this soup is called?" Peter asks.

"That part of the recipe card is stained," Fen replies. "I couldn't read it."

Quan coughs. "I remember. You mentioned it once, back when we first met. You called it solyanka." He says it slow, his lips working to fit a memory of Fen's mouth.

Fen looks up at him, surprised. "You remember stuff from all the way back then?"

A small smile ghosts across Quan's face, but he doesn't meet Fen's eyes. "I remember everything you say."

Fen hesitates. "Quan, I—"

"I'm sorry for being a dick," Quan interrupts. "I'm gonna try to do that less. Might take me a little trying, though. But I am gonna try. I love you guys."

Harper sniffs loudly. "Love you too. Dick."

Morrow tastes the soup, burns their mouth. "Ow. Fuck. Ow. Where's the dill?" they ask, their voice distorted by pain.

Fen glances behind her. "I forgot—"

"I'll grab it." Peter pushes himself to his feet, walks to the sink. Harper's eyes track him. The hunting knife and cutting board are still in the sink. He reaches past them, grabs the very clean dill, brings it back, and hands it to Morrow.

"Thanks." Morrow tears off a fistful of feathery green fronds, drops them into the pot.

"It'd be better with onions," Fen says, blowing on a spoonful of soup straight from the pot. "But it's not bad. That company you worked for—they're based in Chicago, right?"

"Yeah, that's where I'm coming from," Peter says. He leans forward to dip his spoon into the pot. "How come?"

Fen looks up at him, pins him with her eyes. "That's where we're going. Do you still know anyone there?"

He thinks for a moment. "Depends who you want to meet. Why Chicago? There's not much left of it."

"Always wanted to go. Bright lights," Fen says. "Big city."

Peter nods. "I don't know anyone there. But I know people on the way. Got a buddy who can get us across the state border to

Wisconsin and put us up for a night or two, if that's the route you want to take."

Harper raises their eyebrows at Fen. Fen nods, then frowns at Morrow. Morrow nods, then nudges Quan. Quan takes a long sip of soup, clears his throat, and nods.

"Sounds good," Fen says to Peter. "We'll make our plan in the morning."

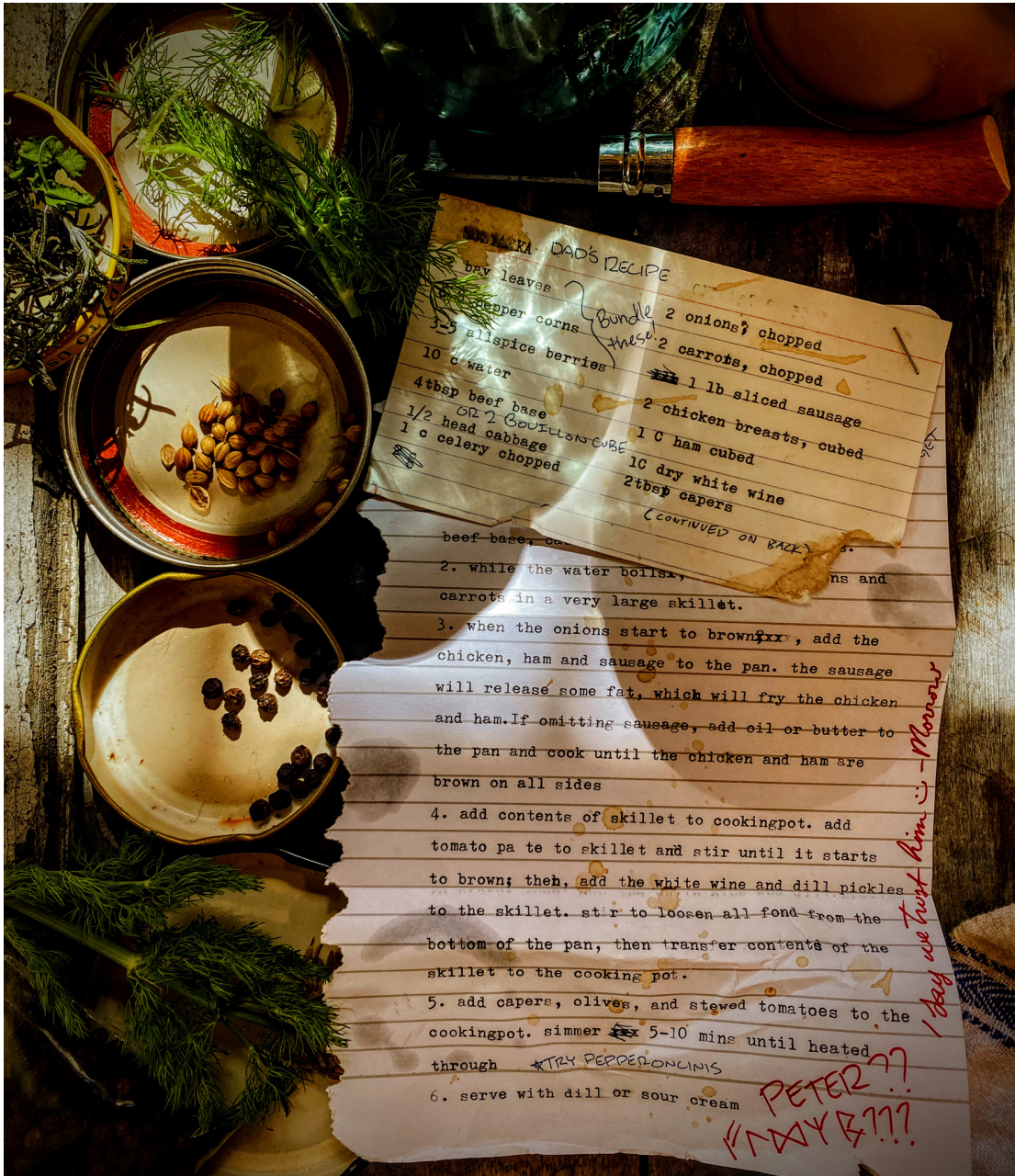
The five of them eat the rest of their dinner in silence. Outside, the wind howls across the fallow field, yanking at the rags in the walls, whipping the petals off the wildflowers that grow on the side of the road.

Fen's Solyanka

2 bay leaves
6–8 peppercorns
3–5 allspice berries
1 shake celery salt
5 cups water
1 bouillon cube
2 cups sauerkraut, drained but not rinsed
1 pound sliced sausage
1 can Spam, cubed
1 6-ounce can tomato paste
3 large dill pickles, chopped
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup black olives, sliced
1 can ewed tomat
Salt
Pepper
Optional: dill, chopped

Instructions

1. In a very large pot, combine the water, spices, and beef base. Boil for 30 minutes.
2. Add the sausage and Spam to the pan. The sausage will release some fat, which will fry the Spam.
3. Add tomato paste to the skillet and stir until it starts to brown; then, add the dill pickles and a little broth to the skillet. Stir to loosen all fond from the bottom of the pan, then transfer contents of the skillet to the cooking pot.
4. Add olives and ewed tomat to the cooking pot. Simmer 5–10 minutes until heated through.
5. Serve with dill.



SUSAN'S DAD'S RECIPE

- bay leaves
- pepper corns *(bundle)* 2 onions, chopped
- 3-5 allspice berries *(nutmeg)* 2 carrots, chopped
- 10 c water
- 4 tsp beef base ~~or~~ 1 lb sliced sausage
- 1/2 head cabbage 2 chicken breasts, cubed
- 1 c celery chopped 1 C ham cubed
- 1 C dry white wine
- 2 tsp capers

(CONTINUED ON BACK)

1. beef base, oil...
2. while the water boils, ... and carrots in a very large skillet.
3. when the onions start to brown, add the chicken, ham and sausage to the pan. the sausage will release some fat, which will fry the chicken and ham. If omitting sausage, add oil or butter to the pan and cook until the chicken and ham are brown on all sides
4. add contents of skillet to cookingpot. add tomato pa te to skillet and stir until it starts to brown; then, add the white wine and dill pickles to the skillet. stir to loosen all fond from the bottom of the pan, then transfer contents of the skillet to the cooking pot.
5. add capers, olives, and stewed tomatoes to the cookingpot. simmer ~~for~~ 5-10 mins until heated through
6. serve with dill or sour cream

PETER??
KINDY B??

I say we trust Ann :- Monday

PART 3: MORROW'S COMFORT

Fen's Sister's Gnocchi

350 g butternut squash

1 egg

2–3 cups flour

Salt

Pepper

1. Cut the squash in half. Rub it all over with oil. Place it face down on a baking sheet and roast at 425 degrees for 25 minutes.
2. Remove the squash from the oven and let it cool completely, about 1 hour.
3. Remove the peel and mash the squash into a smooth paste. Form the paste into a mound and form a well in the center.
4. Crack 1 egg into the well. Stir with fingers to combine.
5. Add flour in batches, working the flour in until a sticky, firm dough forms. Add a big pinch of salt and a healthy amount of pepper with the first batch of flour.
6. Knead for 1–2 minutes.
7. Form into a ball and rest for 20 minutes.
8. Cut the ball into eight equal parts. Roll each part out into a snake the width of your thumb. Cut each snake into 1-inch sections using a knife or pasta cutter.
9. Bring a large pot of water to a rolling boil. Add the gnocchi in batches, stirring gently once to prevent sticking. Once the gnocchi bob to the top of the water, remove/drain and serve.
10. Optional: Fry after boiling to get a crisp exterior.

Suggested lemon ricotta sauce: Combine the zest of 1 lemon, 1 cup ricotta, lots of black pepper, and about 1 ladleful of pasta water. Stir to combine. Consistency should be thick and smooth.

★ ★ ★

The old farmhouse has thin walls, so everyone in the kitchen knows it when Peter and Morrow go from fucking to fighting. The soft thumps and creaks from upstairs are interrupted by the sound of Morrow asking a question over and over, at increasing volume, and then there's a crash that is unmistakably the sound of a body hitting a wall. And then another crash, that is unmistakably the sound of the same body hitting the wall again.

Quan is the first one to move. He and Harper and Fen have been processing oranges all morning for Missus Bouchard. They've been seated at the kitchen table—Quan slicing off thin curls of peel, Harper pulling off the white pith, Fen smashing the oranges through a wide-mesh strainer and into a huge pot in her lap. Quan still has the paring knife in his hand as he gets to his feet and heads for the stairs at the sound of the second impact.

Fen is next. She sets the pot on the table, careful even in her haste—that pot of pulp is their days' rent—and by the third time they hear the body hit the wall, she and Quan are halfway up the stairs.

Harper doesn't follow right away, because Fen is already on the way, and they don't want to move until they know there's a real problem. They finish pulling pith off the orange in their hand, adding it to the pile of foamy white discard on the scarred wooden kitchen table. They listen as, upstairs, Quan and Fen burst into Peter and Morrow's bedroom. They don't stand up until they hear Fen's voice shouting a clear, high "What the fuck?!"

At the sound of that, Harper sets down their orange and makes for the stairs. They take their time. With each step they ascend, they hear the voices upstairs rise. Everyone is talking over each other. Harper can make out "explain" and "are you really" and "don't fucking move" and "Daneka."

They stand in the bedroom doorway and take in the scene. Morrow is in their underwear, breathing like a street-loose bull. Peter is curled at Morrow's feet, naked, head tucked, hands clasped protectively over the back of his neck. Quan and Fen are standing near the bed, peering down at an unfamiliar white palmset.

Harper leans against the doorframe. "S'goin' on?"

Morrow looks up. Their face is alight with rage. "He's not who he says he is."

"I never said I didn't know her," Peter says. The words come out muffled, thick with pain. "Babe, please. If you'll just let me explain —"

Morrow's body twists with liquid speed. They drive their heel hard into the back of Peter's thigh, and the bone-deep *thump* of the impact shakes the air in the room. "We've been here for a fucking month," Morrow says. They usually keep their voice small. It is not small now. "And you never thought to mention that you know Daneka? Never occurred to you?"

Harper straightens, their brows drawing together. "Wait. He knows Daneka?"

Fen is still staring down at the palmset. "Seems like."

They kick out again, but Peter has curled himself up tighter, and the blow doesn't land as hard this time. "You didn't think you should tell us? Not once when we've been sitting around talking about how worried we are? Not once when you were inside of me?"

"Morrow, maybe you don't want to—" Quan says, but Fen puts a hand on his shoulder and he falls silent.

Morrow squats down and grasps a fistful of Peter's hair, wrenching his head back. "You remember what Fen said when we first met you?"

Peter looks up at Morrow the way a broke-neck deer on the side of the road looks at the receding taillights of the truck that put it there. Blood coats his lips and chin. "Wh—?"

"She said that if you fuck around," Morrow growls, "you'll find out."

The hand that isn't clenched around Peter's hair forms a fist. The fist is the size of a brick. The fist is the weight of a brick. The fist is as hard as a brick. Peter closes his eyes, tries to twist out of Morrow's grip as they draw the fist back, but there's nowhere to go.

The blow lands with killing force. Fen and Quan and Harper feel it in their teeth and all of them wonder at the same time whether they've just watched a man die. But then Morrow pulls the fist back again, and Peter sucks in a breath of whistling pain, and they know that—at least for now—he's alive.

Before Morrow can strike Peter again, Harper is out of the doorway and in the room. They step in close enough to press the front of their thigh against the bloody plane of Morrow's knuckles. "Don't," they say. So Morrow doesn't.

Harper and Quan grab Peter by the underarms and haul him to his feet. "Fen, you got Morrow?"

"On it."

"We'll be right back." Harper says. They and Quan drag Peter down the stairs without stopping to let him get his feet under him. After a minute, the front door of the old farmhouse slams.

Fen looks at Morrow, trying to decide what kind of help they might need. She'd said "on it" when what she'd really meant was "you go ahead and handle what you're handling, you can trust that I'll handle things up here." But she doesn't know what handling things up here actually means.

"Is all his stuff in his bag?" Fen finally asks. Morrow shakes their head, points to a pile of clothes in one corner. Fen shoves the clothes into the now-familiar duffel, then opens the window and peers down at the naked, bleeding man in the front yard. "Catch," she calls, and then she drops the bag out the window. She doesn't wait to see if it falls on top of him.

As she turns around, Morrow is pulling on a shirt. "Sorry you had to see that," they say softly.

Fen doesn't say that it's okay, because she knows Morrow's not okay. And she doesn't say that she's surprised Morrow let Peter live,

because that would only make them feel worse about letting out the violence they work so hard to contain. She doesn't say that she can't believe what she saw on Peter's palmset, because she doesn't want to remind Morrow of the thing that made them let their fury loose in the first place.

So she shoves her hands into her pockets and asks, "You hungry?"

Morrow looks up at her and their face is raw and their eyes are shining and she can see all the way down the deep dark tunnel that shame has drilled through them. "Yeah," they say. They're obviously lying, but that doesn't matter. As long as they're answering at all. As long as they're still here.

"It's almost time for lunch. Come downstairs. I'm gonna make something cool."

Quan and Harper are waiting for them in the kitchen. They're back to peeling oranges, and the bright fog of citrus oil is overwhelming. It smells like a day in the sun. Morrow flinches a little, then breathes in deep through their nose. They linger in the kitchen door, filling the frame, watching Quan strip curls off an orange with that tiny paring knife. "How'd Missus Bouchard get oranges all the way up here this time of year?" they ask at last.

"I guess her husband seized them at the border crossing," Quan answers. He doesn't add a barb—gentleness is something he's been trying on lately, with mixed success, but it's a relief that he's managing it right now.

"Yeah, he pulled the truck out of line right before he got sick," Fen adds. "Missus Bouchard told me this morning. She said State BP was so tied up with trying to deny his sick leave that they didn't notice the seized oranges never ended up anywhere."

Harper snorts. "I believe her exact words were, 'If they want the fucking oranges they can come try me.'"

Morrow's face twitches in the same place a smile would go.

They take over for Fen at the strainer, smashing the peeled oranges with a wooden spoon. Their movements are methodical,

rhythmic. The work needs doing, and they need to do it until they're back in their own body, their own mind. Their own promises to themselves.

This is how the four of them—five, including Peter—have been earning their keep at the Bouchard farm for the past month. They've doing odd jobs in exchange for permission to sleep in the old farmhouse on the Bouchard property, biding their time while they wait for Bouchard himself to recover from the SARS-15 that's currently keeping him bedbound. Once he's well enough to get back to work at the border crossing, they'll be able to get into Illinois safely.

To Chicago. Maybe, if everything goes right, to Daneka.

Fen and Quan are thinking about Daneka right now. About her face in that video on Peter's palmset. Harper didn't see it, and they're waiting to hear about it so they can understand what happened upstairs. Morrow isn't thinking about anything. They can't, not after what just happened upstairs. Their skull is filled with soft white static, like the pith that cushions the wet flesh of an orange.

Fen consults a recipe card from her family recipe box. She cleans the counter thoroughly, scrubbing it down with soap and hot water twice over. Then, when she's satisfied that the counter is ready, she pulls a pan out of the oven. It has the leftover half of a roasted butternut squash on it. The other half was dinner the night before, shared between the five of them along with a few eggs from Missus Bouchard's chickens. This half has been sitting in the oven waiting to get used for something.

Fen knows what she wants to do with it now. She uses a spoon to scrape the peel away from the flesh of the roasted squash, then crushes it into paste with her hands. She scoops the paste right onto the clean kitchen counter, shapes it into a hill, and makes a divot in the center of the pile.

"Morrow, can you give me a hand?" She holds up her palms, which are coated in sticky orange squash. "I'm all gross."

Morrow looks up at her with empty eyes. "Sure. What do you need?"

At Fen's instruction, Morrow pulls out the last of Missus Bouchard's eggs and cracks it into the well in the middle of the crushed squash. She mixes the egg and the squash with her hands. The mixture makes a shockingly awful wet noise that draws a cackle out of Quan and a skeptical frown out of Harper.

Then Fen asks Morrow to grab the flour. Missus Bouchard gave a full sack of good white flour to Harper as payment for a full day of fence repair, and they've got half the sack left. It looks to be made from an old version of the Wisconsin state flag, from back before the state took the *e pluribus unum* seal off and replaced it with a second, larger badger.

Morrow stares down at the deep blue fabric blankly until Fen says their name. She has them add a fistful of flour to the heap of goo in front of her. Just a fistful. Then another, and then another, slowly. At first Fen uses her fingers to gently stir, mixing the flour in; then her hands begin to knead as the combination forms a thick dough that pulls away from the surface beneath it. Soon enough, the dough in front of Fen has turned into a smooth orange ball.

Morrow is watching her hands, the dough, the nearly clean counter. Some of the blankness is melting away from their face. "That was cool," they murmur.

Fen smacks the taut surface of the dough with her palm. "Gotta let it sit for twenty minutes. Then I'll need your help again."

"Twenty minutes," Harper says, not looking up from the half-cleaned orange in their hands, "seems like exactly the right amount of time to talk about what happened upstairs."

Fen draws a slow breath. Quan puts down his paring knife. Morrow's shoulders slump. Harper looks to each of them with hard, patient eyes.

Morrow speaks first. "I don't know how to explain the video."

"How did you even see the video?" Quan asks. "Weren't you two right in the middle of—"

"His palmset was on the nightstand. I saw Daneka's name come up on a notification," Morrow says. They're speaking like there's a candle in front of their lips that mustn't go out. The others lean forward to hear. "I grabbed it and looked. He tried to stop me, but—that was a mistake. You know?"

Harper nods. They understand mistakes like this one better than anyone. "Did you see the whole thing?"

Morrow shrugs. "It was a video. I saw it, but he was trying to explain and get the palmset away, so I didn't really get to watch all the way through. Quan and Fen did, though, I think."

"Sort of," Quan says. "But I didn't understand what I was seeing."

Fen's got her arms folded tight across her chest. She's chewing on the inside of her cheek. She drops her chin to her chest and her dark curls, longish now and dry from travel, fall over her eyes. Her deliberation lasts long enough to fill the kitchen with a low hum of tension.

Quan snaps first. "For fuck's sake. What?"

Fen looks up at him, eyes narrowed. "I'm thinking."

"Obviously."

"I'm thinking about whether the thing I wanna say is a bad idea. For Morrow."

Morrow's brow tightens. "For me?"

"I don't want this to make things harder for you."

Harper cracks a knuckle against the table. "I think," they say, "Morrow can handle themselves."

"I know that," Fen says. "We all know that. I'm more worried about—" And then she stops herself, because she doesn't know how to say what she's worried about. It's the tight coil of violence that lives in the center of Morrow, it's the whipcrack of their fist, it's the way they stop feeling pain when it's someone else's turn.

Morrow's shoulders draw down toward their sternum and their eyes find a spot on the floor. "I promise I won't hurt any of you," they whisper. "No matter what you saw on that palmset. I wouldn't. I won't."

Quan rubs his forehead with the heel of one hand. His eyes have gone glossy. "Fen's not afraid of you. Nobody here is afraid of you. It's just—"

"I don't want to make it harder," Fen says again. "But. Okay." She untucks one arm from across her chest and reaches into her back pocket. When her hand reappears, she's got the white palmset between her index and middle fingers. "I kept this."

Harper rises and crosses the kitchen. Their movements are slow, their knees soft, their footfalls quiet. They slowly put their body between Morrow and Fen before taking the palmset out of Fen's hand. Their back is still toward Morrow when they say, "I don't know if Morrow wants to see this."

"I do," Morrow says quickly. "I want to see her."

Quan drums his fingers on the table. "Morrow is fine. You two need to calm down."

The way Harper turns to face Quan has just as much danger in it as the fist Morrow made an hour before. "You want me more calm than I am now?"

"I'm not fine," Morrow cuts in. "But that's okay. I want to see the video. The video isn't the thing that made me—um." They swallow hard. "That made me upset. I don't think it'll make me upset again now."

Harper approaches the table and stands next to Quan. Morrow moves to stand next to them. They rest their palms flat on the surface of the table. Their knuckles are swelling; a deep red bruise is forming on the biggest knuckle of their right hand. Fen winds up behind Quan's chair. She tugs on his hair and he swats her hand away.

The video is one of many in a long series of messages from Daneka to Peter. There are no responses from Peter in the chat. All of Daneka's messages are videos, going back about a month.

"What was the date when we met Peter?" Fen asks softly.

"Not sure," Quan replies.

Morrow sniffs. "It was about a month ago. But I'm not sure if it was before or after that first message from Daneka."

They play through the videos, and it quickly becomes clear that they're all the same video. Kind of. In each one, Daneka stands in a field, squinting into bright sunlight, shading her eyes with the flat of her hand. Her auburn curls toss wildly in a strong wind. There are flowers behind her, yellow and white ones, and some trees in the middle distance. She turns slowly to reveal a massive, shining lake that stretches to the horizon. As she's turning, she speaks, her voice cigarette-raspy and wind distorted but still as musical as always. "You guys wouldn't believe how beautiful it is here! I found the most amazing queer community. We have our own little farm and a communal kitchen that Fen's gonna love! Come soon? I miss you!"

Then she blows a kiss into the camera, and the video is over.

The four of them watch each video. The first one doesn't have the kiss—it just cuts off after "I miss you." In the second one, Daneka just says "amazing community," but in the third one, the word *queer* comes back in. Sometimes the flowers change color. Sometimes it seems to be later in the day, sometimes earlier. The second-to-last video is where the line about the communal kitchen appears.

Harper blows out a slow breath. "So."

"We're fucked," Quan says. "Should have let Morrow kill him."

Fen scrubs her hands across her upper arms. "We're not fucked yet."

Quan twists in his chair to look at her. "Explain how. That guy is clearly working with someone who wants to fuck us over somehow, and who has the ability to make this quality of deepfake. Peter knows who we are, and he knows where we are, and he knows where we're going. Show me a gap we can slip out of. Tell me what I'm missing here."

"Right," Fen says. "That dough's been resting long enough. Morrow, want to help me get lunch going?"

Quan throws his hands into the air. "Great. Yeah, go cook. I'll just sit here and wait for sirens."

Fen walks into the kitchen. Her lips are tight. She grabs the big kitchen knife and uses it to cut the ball of dough into eight sections, never letting the blade come into contact with the countertop. "I just need to think."

"What's there to think about? We need to leave. I'm going to go pack. Harp, want me to pack up your stuff too?"

"Not yet," Harper replies, their eyes fixed on Fen. "I want us to have a plan first."

"I need a minute to think," Fen says again.

Harper's reply is low. "I heard you the first time. I'm not rushing you. Don't let Quan get in your head."

"He's not in my head."

Harper doesn't say anything to that. They don't need to.

Fen gives Morrow an *are you helping or not* look, and Morrow comes to the kitchen. Fen sprinkles flour across the countertop, then demonstrates how to roll each section of dough into a long snake. The width of the snake is halfway between Morrow's massive thumb and Fen's slender one. "Gentle hands," Fen says. "The squash makes the dough break easier."

Morrow's hands are gentle. They're as gentle as a kid holding an egg, as gentle as a cat pawing at a cobweb. They don't break the dough. Fen leaves them to the work of rolling out the sections while she fills a tall pot with water.

"I think we do need to leave," she says slowly. "But I don't think it's an emergency."

At the kitchen table, Harper has taken up Quan's paring knife and is methodically peeling oranges. "Why not?"

"Because whoever Peter was working with—if they're after us, they already know where we are, right? It's not like he can go bring them any new information."

"But now they know that *we* know that *they* know." Harper pauses, mouthing the sentence to herself again to make sure

they've gotten it right. "They aren't spying on us in secret anymore."

"So there's no reason not to just come scoop us up directly," Morrow murmurs. "I'm done with these, Fen."

Fen looks over the lengths of dough and smiles. "These are perfect." She hands Morrow the big knife, handle-first, and shows them how to cut the dough into inch-long sections. "It's good for them to be kind of pinched down at the edges like that. I don't think they're going to come scoop us up from here. They wouldn't raid this place." She doesn't pause between these two sentences, and it takes both Harper and Morrow a moment to realize that they're not connected.

"Because Bouchard's a statie?" Harper considers this. "I don't know."

Morrow frowns down at the dough as they cut it. "He's a state *border* cop. Border cops and regular cops don't protect each other the same way they protect themselves."

"We don't know that Peter's working with state cops. Could be feds," Harper offers.

Fen leans her elbows on the kitchen counter and buries her face in her hands. "We can't know. And if we don't know what's coming, then we can't stay here. But if we run—if we don't get to Chicago ... Fuck. That's where I told Daneka we'd be. We'll miss her if we don't find a way into the state and this is our best bet."

"I'm done with these," Morrow says again, gesturing to the neat piles of miniature pillows on the counter.

Harper drops the last peeled orange into the pile on the table. "Perfect timing. Morrow, you come pull pith off these things. I gotta go."

Fen lifts her head out of her hands. "You're leaving?"

Harper grabs their jacket off the back of a kitchen chair. "Not leaving-leaving. Just heading over to the New House to talk to Missus Bouchard."

"About what?"

They pull the jacket on. "To tell her we're almost done prepping her fruit for marmalade. And to ask after her husband. Maybe he's ready to go back to work. Maybe he's picking up a shift tomorrow."

"There's no way," Fen says warily. "She'd have said something if he was better."

Harper shrugs. "S'polite to ask. Morrow, finish off these oranges so I can bring Missus Bouchard over to pick up her pot of goo. And Fen?"

Fen waits.

"Don't worry," Harper says. It's almost soft, the way they say it. "I'm not leaving you alone. Not yet."

And then they're gone.

Morrow sits at the dining table and starts picking pith off the oranges with quick, careful fingers. Behind Fen, the water on the stove starts to boil. She heaves a hard, sharp sigh.

"I'm sorry," Morrow says after a few minutes.

Fen drops two handfuls of gnocchi into the boiling water. "For what?"

"For being scary. Don't say I wasn't, I know I was."

Fen nods down into the pot as she gives the water a gentle stir. "You were. But it's okay. You were keeping us safe."

They're quiet for a long time. Then, so softly Fen almost doesn't hear it at all, they murmur, "I don't want to be a guard dog."

Quan comes stomping down the stairs before Fen can reply. "There's blood all over the floor in that bedroom. We got time for me to clean it up before we go?"

"Plenty of time," Fen says. She and Quan negotiate around each other in the kitchen—the sink is too close to the stove, and there's not quite room for her to watch the pot while Quan rummages for cleaning supplies. When Quan straightens, a rag in one hand and an unlabeled spray bottle in the other, he and Fen are only a couple of inches apart.

He studies her face for a moment. "Are we fighting?"

"No," Fen says firmly. Then she lets herself smile. "We're just figuring things out. All of us. Me and Harper are working on a plan. It's gonna be okay."

"You're sure?" Quan studies Fen's eyes, her forehead, her mouth. "Is Harper leaving?"

"They said they're not. I believe them."

"If they leave ... will you go with them?"

Fen blinks rapidly. "If Harper leaves, I don't think they'd want anyone to come with them. But they're not leaving, so it doesn't matter, right?"

"Sure. And we're not fighting?"

It pulls a little smile out of Fen, finally, Quan asking this again. "We're not fighting."

"Good." Quan kisses Fen on the forehead once, quickly and lightly, and then he's gone, long strides carrying him out of the kitchen.

Fen blinks at the space where Quan was standing a moment before. She turns wide eyes toward Morrow. "Did you—?"

Morrow stares back, their brows nearly touching their hairline. "I saw. Are you two...?"

"No," Fen replies. "Not that I know of. Maybe—no. Right?"

Morrow doesn't have an answer for her.

In the pot, the gnocchi are starting to bob to the surface. Fen thinks of Daneka's hair in the video, the way it tossed in the wind. She heats a pan on the other burner, drops a knob of butter from Missus Bouchard's huge ornery cow onto the heat, and waits for it to melt and sizzle. She thinks of Daneka's eyes in the video. Once the butter starts turning golden, she scoops the cooked gnocchi out of the pot with a slotted spoon and drops them into the butter to fry. She thinks of the shine of that vast lake. She puts more gnocchi into the pot, and works in batches to boil and fry them.

She thinks of Quan's lips on her forehead, and she smiles down into the sizzling pan.

As the house fills with the smell of browning butter, Morrow pulls the pith off oranges, and Quan scrubs the floorboards, and Harper charms an answer out of Missus Bouchard. The sun outside is high and bright. It shines on the old farmhouse, and the big new one on the other side of the property, and the milking shed and the chicken coop and the feed shed, and somewhere out there, it shines on Peter, too.

Fen sprinkles salt a pile of toasted, butter-glossy gnocchi. "Come get a plate," she calls. She knows the only people who can hear her are Morrow and Quan, but part of her is calling out to Daneka, wherever she is. Part of her is making a plate for Daneka. Part of her is cooking for Daneka, every time she cooks. Every meal.

She doesn't wait for anyone to come running before she grabs a fork. The bite she takes is too hot.

She closes her eyes and lets it burn her tongue.

Fen and Morrow's Gnocchi

Half of a butternut squash

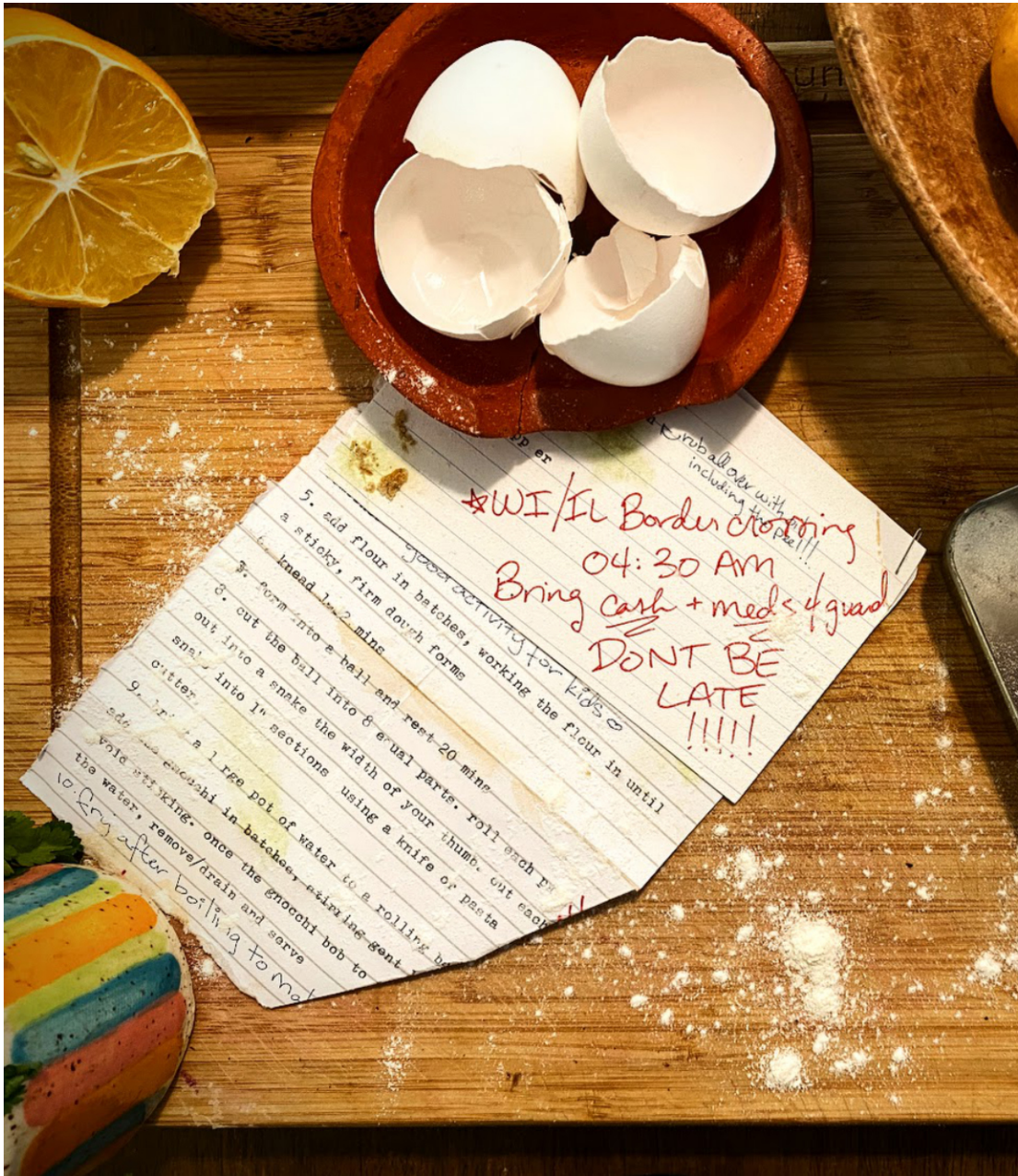
1 egg

2–3 cups flour

Salt

Pepper

1. Place the half-squash face down on a baking sheet. Rub it all over with butter. Roast at 425 degrees for 25 minutes.
2. Remove the squash from the oven and let it cool completely.
3. Remove the peel and mash the squash into a smooth paste. Form the paste into a mound and form a well in the center.
4. Crack 1 egg into the well. Stir with fingers to combine.
5. Add flour in batches, working the flour in until a sticky, firm dough forms.
6. Knead for 1–2 minutes.
7. Form into a ball and rest for 20 minutes. **This is the perfect amount of time for a hard conversation.*
8. Cut the ball into eight equal parts. Roll each part out into a snake the width of someone's thumb. Cut each snake into 1-inch sections using a knife or pasta cutter.
9. Bring a large pot of water to a rolling boil. Add the gnocchi in batches, stirring gently once to prevent sticking. Once the gnocchi bob to the top of the water, remove.
10. Melt butter in a skillet over medium heat. Once the butter starts to brown, fry gnocchi in batches.
11. Sprinkle with salt and pepper and eat piping hot.



Probable with including the...
*WI/IL Border crossing!
04:30 AM
Bring cash + med^s if quad
DONT BE LATE!!!!

5. add flour in batches, working the flour in until a sticky, firm dough forms
6. knead for 2 mins
7. form into a ball and rest 20 mins
8. cut the ball into 8 equal parts. roll each part out into a snake the width of your thumb. cut each snake into 1" sections using a knife or pasta cutter
9. in a 1 gal pot of water to a rolling boil, add the sections in batches, stirring gently
10. once the gnocchi bob to the surface, remove/drain and serve
10. Fry after boiling to melt

PART 4: HARPER'S **HOMECOMING**

The Abbott's Risotto

Oil—enough

½ onion, chopped, for every 3 people eating

1 clove garlic for every 3 people eating

1 handful of rice for every person eating **rinse once*

1 splash wine or juice of 1 lemon

1½ cups broth for every handful of rice

Add in: Meat, vegetables, mushrooms

1. Heat oil. Soften & brown onions and garlic.
2. Add oil. Add rice, stir until edges go clear.
3. Add wine, stir until liquid is gone.
4. Add a little broth. Stir until liquid is gone. Repeat until all broth is gone.
5. Add whatever you like.

★ ★ ★

Harper walks behind everyone else as they make their way down East Wacker Drive in what used to be the Loop. The four of them are in the center of the street, not trying to hide their approach. *Not looking to make anyone nervous*, Morrow had said when they entered the city. *Not looking to make anyone pissed*, Quan had replied.

Harper hadn't said anything. They don't say anything now either. They just hang back, half a block behind everyone else, hood up, raising a hand in acknowledgment whenever Fen glances nervously over her shoulder at them. Fen's still worried that Harper's going to disappear, leave the group, strike off on their own. It's an understandable worry, but Harper wishes Fen would just sit with that

worry for half a day instead of constantly bleeding it out onto every surface she touches.

The blacktop is still cracked from the time a tank rolled through the neighborhood. Harper looks down at the zagging splits in the street, remembers the sound of treads. The road here wasn't made to support that kind of weight, but nobody cared then and nobody's left here to care now. Harper didn't even care, not at the time, even though they loved these roads. It was hard to care about anything but the ten minutes that had just happened and the ten minutes that were on the way. Still, that tank should have fallen through the asphalt, through Lower Wacker, down onto the now-submerged Riverwalk. Should have cracked the pavement straight through.

The other three are loud up ahead. Loud on purpose—that's what they all agreed on. No sneaking, no surprises. Treat the Rosemary Patch like a bear den, that's the smart approach so it's what they're doing. Quan and Fen are bickering, an *are-we-there-yet* back-and-forth that has a smile in it on both sides. Morrow's got their hands deep in their pockets, just listening, but their bigness is loud and for once they're not trying to hide it.

The buildings that line one side of the street get a little taller. They're almost to Stetson Avenue now. Harper looks up into the empty eye sockets where rows of glass windows used to be. The piercing whistles of lookouts echo up the block, *twee-twee-twee-twee*. Fen's chin snaps up at the sound.

Harper sighs and runs a palm across the patchwork stubble on their scalp. "Here we go."

The group's strategy of being obvious pays dividends. As they approach the remains of Columbus Plaza, four figures melt out of the shadowy mouth of one of the buildings. Nobody Harper recognizes—they're kids, practically, all wearing red rags around their biceps, all making faces to make it clear that they know how to *kick ass*. They're skinny but in a growing-too-fast way, not in a starving way, and they all have all their hair. Harper figures there's

probably a good number of adults standing just out of sight, letting these cubs get some experience. It's a promising sign.

"Stop there," one of the kids yells, a scrawny Black kid with a tight fade and a missing front tooth. The kid's got a scowl that would stop a tank in its tracks.

"No problem," Fen calls. She holds her hands out at her sides. Quan and Morrow do the same. Harper's instructions echo through everyone's mind: *Everyone stay relaxed. Don't look tense. If you're calm, they're calm.*

One of the other kids—tall, white, weedy, blonde hair that's falling into her eyes—has a big stick that she bonks against the blacktop. It's genuinely a little menacing. "What are you doing here?"

"We're looking for the Rosemary Patch," Morrow says. They're doing the worst job of looking calm. They're thinking about what'll happen if these kids decide they want a fight. Dreading the possibility of combat with children. The tension radiates off them in sick shivers.

The scrawny kid with the fade looks behind him, back into the building he came out of. The blonde shoves him and hisses something that sounds like "Don't look, dipshit."

"It ain't here." This from the smallest of the kids, who wears a ball cap that's too big for his head. "You're in the wrong place. Turn around."

Fen takes a slow step forward, her hands still out at her sides. "I think it is here, actually. We're here to see, um." She hesitates long enough that Harper takes half a step forward, but then she sticks the landing. "We're here to see The Abbott."

The kids lose their composure immediately. They're grabbing each other and talking over each other, gesturing at the same building the one kid had looked into. After a few seconds of this, an adult figure strides out of the shadows with the loping impatience of a chaperone who needs to impose order.

Harper's eyes track the well-muscled neck, the broad bony shoulders, the long swinging arms. They tug their hood down over their eyes just a little further.

"Fuck's sake. Everyone downstairs, we're going over security protocols again in the morning. And Devon? Don't let me hear you calling anyone else a dipshit."

The blonde kid crosses her arms. "What if he's *being* a dipshit?"

Fen interrupts. "Sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"You can call me PJ. Because that's my name."

Harper bites their lips to keep from smiling, mutters to themselves, "That stupid fucking joke."

Fen holds out a hand to shake. "PJ, I'm Fen." The wind is catching on the hollowed-out buildings, making the street loud. The two of them talk, trading introductions and explanations and code words. PJ leans around Fen to get a look at Harper but doesn't seem to recognize them.

"Alright," PJ says in a voice loud enough to carry up the block. "Come on down."

She leads their group across the old six-lane street, toward the river. Fen hangs back, waiting for Harper to catch up.

"Looks like we're in business," she says. Her eyes are sparking with anxiety.

"Looks like. You scared of heights?"

Fen cocks her head. "Not really. Why?"

Harper lifts their chin toward the railing on the edge of the street. Fen watches as PJ, the four kids, Quan and Morrow approach. PJ crouches down and adjusts something at Devon's waist.

And then Devon dives over the edge of the overpass.

Fen doesn't make a sound. Her eyes go hard and sharp. She looks from PJ to Morrow to Quan to Harper, her nostrils flaring, her breath still.

Harper holds up a hand like they're trying to steady a spooking horse. "It's okay. Nothing's happening. That's just how we get to where we're going."

Fen gives a little shiver, rolls her shoulders. "I don't like this."

"You just don't like surprises," Harper says. "But you're gonna like this. I promise. Unless you're scared of heights, and then you might never speak to me again."

When Fen peers over the edge of the overpass, she isn't scared by the drop from Wacker to Lower Wacker. "And you're sure it's safe?"

"When have I ever lied to you?"

"Never. But ... you also haven't said that it's safe, so I don't think you'd count it as a lie, would you?"

Harper grins. "Well. You won't die, anyway." While PJ is clipping the rest of the kids to their lines and sending them down, Harper tells her about the hidden street beneath Lower Wacker where the Rosemary Patch used to be located. "You're not going that far, though. There's an old service tunnel that goes from Lower Wacker into the old auto pound. You'll be walking a few blocks to get there. Don't worry. PJ will get you there."

Fen leans far over the railing to look down at the street below. "How come we didn't just go straight there? Why do we have to go underneath everything?"

"Chicago used to be monitored by drones. One hundred percent of the time," Harper says. "These days, who knows. Better not to risk leading anyone to home base."

Morrow gives a joyful shout as they slip over the edge of the railing, a loose length of cord in their hands. Quan goes soon after, silent and trembling with nerves. Fen gives Harper a small, loose salute, then turns toward PJ.

"My turn?"

PJ gives her a warm smile. "You'll do great."

"Where do I clip in?"

"You don't," PJ replies. "The kids wear harnesses. We don't have enough for adults."

"Is it safe?"

“If you don’t want to take the line down, you can walk”—she points into the distance—“that way, until you come to the part of Wacker that collapsed onto Lower. It makes a kind of ramp down. It looks dangerous, but the kids play on it all the time, so you’ll probably be safe to scramble down.”

Fen frowns. “What made it collapse?”

“Tank. This street’s not made to support that kind of weight.”

Harper jolts. “When did they come through again?”

They’re still far enough away, their face still shadowed enough by their hood, that when PJ gives them a curious glance, she doesn’t recognize them. Still, Harper is thankful when Fen recovers PJ’s full attention by asking about how to hold the line without tearing up her palms. Harper stays quiet after that, waiting for Fen to drop over the edge before stepping forward.

PJ peers at them, her eyes searching. “Sorry, I didn’t catch your name. Fen said you were with her group, but— Hang on.” Her face hardens and before Harper can dodge, PJ’s hand has darted out to snatch their hood away. “You,” she breathes.

Harper gives her a wary smile. “Hey babe.”

PJ’s arm twitches like she wants to slap Harper across the mouth, but no blow comes, which is how Harper knows she hasn’t forgiven them yet. “The fuck are you doing here?” She bites out the words like a cold wind.

“I’m with Fen and them. Traveling together. We’re looking for—”

“For Daneka, right. Fen said. So. You and Fen are together.”

“Not—” Harper sighs. They’d somehow forgotten PJ’s weapons-grade jealousy. “Just traveling together. Nothing else. Will you let me go down so we can see The Abbott? The others are waiting for me down there.”

PJ shakes her head. “Fuck no. Nobody down there wants to see you.”

Harper rocks back on their heels. “Hey now,” they murmur.

After a moment, PJ twists her neck, rolls her eyes, drops the anger from between her molars. “Sorry. That was mean and it’s not

true. But, Harp—you can't just come rolling back in after what you did. You left without saying goodbye to anyone. You hurt a lot of people. You have to know that."

"I know. And I'm prepared to talk to The Abbott about it." Harper reaches out and touches PJ's upper arm, lets their fingers drift down to her elbow. They don't acknowledge the fact that the "lot of people" they hurt included PJ. Was probably mostly PJ. "Trust me. I can handle myself on this one."

"You can handle yourself on anything," PJ grumbles. And then she gives a sharp tug on the line that's knotted around the handrail. When it holds strong, she gives it to Harper. "You better not leave without saying goodbye this time. I mean it. I'll kick your ass."

Harper loops the end of the line around each of their thighs, then grip the slack in both hands. They swing one leg over the rail, then lean back to kiss PJ on the cheek. "Thanks, babe."

Before they can so much as grin at her, PJ plants her palms on their shoulders and gives them a hard shove. Harper tumbles off the edge of the overpass with a long-buried whoop of freedom.

When their feet touch the asphalt of Lower Wacker, the others are already standing in a cluster nearby, talking softly. Harper approaches, grinning, ready to rib Quan for his nerves—but when they get close, the group parts, and Harper's grin falls away.

The Abbott is here. She's as short as the scrawny kids who'd been standing guard, as broad as a barrel, and as old as the city itself. She aims her dark, creased face up at Harper and measures them with a cool, steady gaze.

"So. You're back."

Quan looks up at Morrow, openly perplexed. "Back? Harper's from—"

"Here," Harper interrupts. "I'm from here. And yeah, Abbott, I'm back. Me and some friends, who I see you've already met."

PJ drops to the pavement behind Harper. "We gotta move," she says. "We've all been here too long already. Abbott, I thought you were going to wait for us at the Patch?"

"A little mouse told me I'd want to come see the visitors for myself," The Abbott says. She reaches out a hand and, without looking, rests it on the head of the kid in the too-large baseball cap. "He never met you while you were here, Harper, but he still knew you on sight. You're something of a scary story among the children."

PJ steps forward, pinching the bridge of her nose with one hand. "Please. We seriously have to go. Can you and Harper talk on the way there?"

Harper flinches—when they lived here, that would have earned anyone a sharp rebuke from The Abbott, but it doesn't come. The Abbott simply nods. "Thank you for keeping us on time. Lead the way. Harper, you'll keep me company in the back of the group. I walk slower these days anyway."

The Abbott waits while PJ herds the group toward the service tunnel. She stands still until Harper sighs and holds out an arm. "You need someone to lean on?"

"I don't need it, but I'll take it anyway," The Abbott says. She loops her arm through Harper's and pats them on the forearm like they're a sturdy horse. "I've missed you."

"You haven't."

"I have!" The Abbott lets out a raspy laugh. "Now, tell me why you're back. I heard it from your friends, but I want to hear it from you."

Harper explains. They tell her about Daneka, about her disappearance and the messages they've been getting from someone who seems to be Daneka but isn't. They fill her in about Peter, then about Peter and Morrow getting together and falling apart, then about their little group's journey across the border from Wisconsin into Illinois. They tell her about Fen, who relies on them almost as much as they rely on her.

"This Bouchard," The Abbott says thoughtfully. "Who you stayed with in Wisconsin. Is he part of our family?"

Harper thinks for a moment. "Don't know. But his wife—I think you'd like her. I convinced her to convince him to get back to work

by telling her how much the state cops would hate it if a bunch of queers made it into Illinois. She laughed so hard I thought she was gonna choke.”

“So you’re hoping to see Daneka here.”

“Fen is. Personally, I think it’s too much of a long shot. But—”

The Abbott clicks her tongue. “You’re a pessimist. I don’t know why. You were raised better than that.” Then she purses her lips and whistles once, high and sharp. The group ahead stops and waits until Harper and The Abbott have caught up to them. “Alright, children,” she says, addressing the new arrivals more than the actual kids. “In a minute, we’re going to arrive at the Patch. Our visitors are going to earn the right to stay with us by making dinner. Enough for all ten of us.”

Fen glances at Harper with obvious surprise. Harper shakes their head and shrugs. Neither of them offered this to The Abbott—she’s simply setting her terms.

“Excuse me,” Quan asks, his voice as careful as it gets. “How long can we stay?”

The Abbott grins. “That’ll depend on how much I like dinner, won’t it?”

She leads them into the Rosemary Patch, and Quan, Fen, and Morrow gawk at the sheer scale of the underground community that sprawls throughout the old impound garage. Sturdy little houses line the walls, built out of the shed skin of the city: old street signs, sheets of corrugated metal, tiles pried up from the lobbies of abandoned skyscrapers. Clusters of adults sit out in the common area, processing food or studying playing cards or watching the children who chase each other across the building. The air is a little sharp with the smell of old motor oil and too-close bodies, but overpowering those smells is the smoke of cookfires and the unmistakable aroma of baking bread.

PJ jogs forward and leans close to Harper, murmuring in their ear. “You haven’t been here since the bakery started up. The new moms run it. Fresh babies and fresh loaves. Bet you wish you never left.”

Fen hears and interrupts, and Harper can't decide whether to be irritated or relieved. "Harper, you used to live here?"

"We talked about this already," Quan says. Fen gives him an irritated frown and he spreads his palms. "It's not my fault you were too busy flirting with PJ to listen. Harper's from here."

"I don't want to get into it," Harper says. "Peej, can you show us where we're cooking tonight?"

PJ leads them to a small communal kitchen between two of the makeshift houses. It's open, looking out into the common area, covered by a low overhang. Plywood is propped up on cinderblocks to form a U-shaped countertop, and bins below that counter hold plates and dented pots. Along the back wall, staples fill bins made of thick plastic with heavy screw-on lids: flour, rice, onions, cassava.

PJ points to a corner with a hotplate. Underneath it is a row of water jugs and a basin of assorted cooking implements. "This is the only spot that's available. Everywhere else is reserved for the night. You should have gotten here earlier if you wanted a better setup."

Morrow peers into the basin. "These are all broken. Look," they add, holding up a wooden cooking spoon that's held together in the center with duct tape. "What happened here?"

"Probably Jaan, practicing their drumming," she says. Then she adds, "That's my kid. They love music." She doesn't look at Harper when she says it, and the not-looking is as loud as the words themselves.

"It's fine. We can cook with broken stuff," Harper says. "Thanks for showing us."

PJ nods. "No problem. Just hand me your packs and I'll get out of your hair."

Quan balks. "Our packs?"

"I'm going to search your shit," PJ replies lightly. "Don't worry. You'll get everything back."

Quan grips the straps of his backpack with white knuckles. "I don't want—"

"You don't want to argue on this one," Harper murmurs to him.

“The fuck I don’t,” Quan insists. “What’s she looking for?”

PJ gives Quan a carnivorous grin. “I don’t know, Quan. Trackers. Guns. Palmsets with fake videos of my friends, maybe.”

Quan’s mouth opens, then snaps shut as he looks at Morrow. “You told her?”

“I told the Abbott,” Harper interjects.

“There hasn’t been time for The Abbott to—”

Harper laughs. “Never assume she hasn’t done whatever she might take a mind to do, Quan. Trust me on that one.”

“Okay, but we aren’t the ones who made the videos of Daneka,” Morrow points out.

PJ raises her eyebrows. “Then you shouldn’t need to worry about what I’ll find in your bags. I’ll plug your palmsets in, too. You must be carrying a bunch of dead batteries by now.”

The four of them hand over their packs—Quan reluctant, Morrow and Fen resigned, Harper almost relieved. PJ thumbs the empty carabiner that hangs from Harper’s backpack strap. “No keys?”

“Nowhere to save keys for,” Harper says. “You have a kid?”

PJ can’t restrain a small, soft smile. “Yeah. They kick ass. Too smart for their own good, and they’re a little thief too. They remind me a lot of you. You’ll like them. If you want to meet them, I mean.”

It takes Harper a moment to find breath, and then another moment to find words. “Yeah. Yeah, I’d like that.”

And then PJ is gone, and The Abbott is gone, and the kids who’d been standing guard are gone, and it’s just the four of them, alone again in a strange kitchen.

Fen steps in close to Harper. “Do you want me to handle making dinner? I don’t mind.”

Harper shakes their head. “You don’t know how to do this.”

Quan looks up from where he’s rummaging through the broken cooking implements. “What? Of course she does. And she has the recipe box.”

Harper turns to Fen. They take a deep breath and fold their arms across their chest, and in that moment, it’s as if no time at all has

passed since they left the squat. The light that falls through the street-level grate above dapples Harper's shoulders, and the muggy river air hangs around the two of them like the falling wings of dusk, and Harper is just as irritated with Fen as they were on the path behind the houses in the neighborhood where they became family to each other.

"You're gonna make me say this?"

Fen visibly braces herself. "Yes. Unless there's something you think you can't say to me."

"Fine. You don't have a recipe in your box that can handle this situation, Fen. You aren't prepared here. Every recipe you know how to cook calls for eggs or butter or meat."

Morrow speaks up. "Not the—"

"Don't say *not the vegan ones*. Those are worse. You think we're getting handed chia seeds down here? Applesauce? Corn? The point is, we're not cooking with the kind of resources you're used to."

"But if everyone works together, we can figure out—"

"Everyone's not going to work together, Morrow," Harper cuts in. "Not with us."

Fen looks around at the vast expanse of the underground garage. It's filled with the hum of life. "They seriously don't have any of that stuff down here? Eggs, I mean? For all these people?"

Harper laughs. "I'm not saying they don't have it. They probably do. But they're not going to give us any of it to cook with. Do you understand? They're not going to give us the things that make it easy to make something tasty. We're being tested right now. And that's why you're not cut out to make this dinner."

Fen bristles. "Because, what, I can't cook when it's tough? I didn't see you complaining when—"

"No," Harper interrupts. "Stop. You're not hearing me." They step close and put their hands on Fen's shoulders, try to make their face kind and their voice kinder. "You can't do this because you've only ever cooked for people who like you, Fen. People who will work with you to help you do a good job for them. And this isn't that situation."

You'll hate how it feels to make dinner for people who are hoping you'll fuck it up. It'll hurt your heart. So let me do it this time, okay? I'm good at this."

Fen blinks hard. "I didn't know you knew how to cook," she says softly.

Harper pulls her into a tight, brief hug. "You never asked."

Fen joins Morrow and Quan beneath the lip of the overhang, and the three watch as Harper takes stock of what's in the kitchen. It's not much—the staples that are available to everyone in the community are foundational. "How the hell am I gonna turn this into dinner?" they mutter to themselves.

Fen clears her throat. "Can we help?"

Harper shakes their head. "I know what I want to make. I just have to figure out how to make it into something worth eating. The Abbott's probably told everyone not to help us, even if we can trade for ingredients."

They turn to see a knot of young children, none of them older than eight, staring at Morrow. One of them breaks bravely loose from his friends and approaches the communal kitchen. He stands a couple of feet away and waits for Morrow to notice him. Finally, he just starts talking. "Hey excuse me I'm sorry but are you a giant?"

Morrow turns, laughing. It's a freer noise than they've made in a long time. "Yes," they reply, "I am a giant! A giant *monster!*" On the last word, Morrow holds their hands high overhead, growls, and trots toward the kids, who run away shrieking in open delight.

A game crystallizes effortlessly, the way games so often do with children that age. The children retreat and then, once Morrow's back is turned, they race forward again. Morrow lets them get a little closer each time before turning around and letting out a roar, giving the kids an opportunity to flee. Fen is half collapsed with laughter; Quan rolls his eyes, but he can't hide a small smile.

Harper smiles too, because they've found the solution to their problem. "Hey, Morrow."

"I think you mean hey *monster*," Morrow replies, grinning so hugely that they're almost unrecognizable.

"Sure. Monster. Can you send the kids on a mission?"

Morrow flips the game effortlessly. The kids are thrilled to be given jobs—by a giant, no less—and vanish into the Rosemary Patch with absolute determination. While they're gone, Harper rummages around in the bins. They pull out three good onions and a wrinkled half-head of garlic, and take mercy on Fen by asking her to dice them up. They measure out rice with their hands—ten big handfuls for ten people, plus an extra two handfuls just in case. They use a jug of water to give the rice a single rinse, dumping the starchy rinsewater into a big jar, which they'll give to The Abbott since she likes using rice water to wash her face. She'll think they forgot, and they'll show her they didn't, and the fact of their remembering will be a better gift than the rice water, they think. They hope.

Then they fill a huge pot with clean water and set it on the hotplate, bringing it to a boil, hoping something will appear that they can put into it.

By the time the water is bubbling, two of the kids are back. One of them—an Asian kid with two stubby pigtails—has bulging trouser pockets. "I got it," they gasp.

"What'd you get?" Morrow asks, squatting down low to look the kid in the eyes.

They pull out two fistfuls of what looks like shards of tree bark. "Mushrooms!"

Morrow cups their hands for the kid to dump their prize into. "... Are you sure these are mushrooms?"

"Yeah! My mom dries 'em. They smell." The kid points, wrinkling his nose.

Morrow sniffs the dark brown pile of mushrooms before mirroring the kid's expression. "Those sure are mushrooms," they agree. "Harp, can you use these?"

"These are perfect," Harper says, leaning across the plywood counter to take the mushrooms. As they drop them into the boiling

water, they call over their shoulder. "Thanks, kid. What's your name?"

"Jaan!"

Harper doesn't turn around until they hear the sound of small feet running away. Then, hoping Jaan is gone, they cautiously glance over their shoulder to see Morrow deep in serious conversation with the other child who'd come with Jaan. He looks like a miniature version of the kid with the fade who'd stopped them up on the street, and he's got something small cupped in his palm.

"You're sure it's okay with your dad if we use this?" Morrow asks softly.

The kid shakes his head. "But he won't know I took it. He has a big jar and this is only a few of them."

Morrow nods and points the kid toward Harper. The kid approaches and reveals his offering: five, fragrant, salt-crusted preserved anchovies.

"Holy shit," Harper breathes. "Thank you. This is—wow."

The kid looks up at Harper with wide, shy eyes. "Can I see your head? I heard it got burned off when you left."

Harper crouches down to take the fish, and bends their neck to show the kid the scars that map their scalp. "It was the year before I left, actually. When the old Rosemary Patch got raided and burned down."

The kid reaches up to touch the scars without asking, and Harper flinches, both at the sudden touch and at the knowledge that their head is going to smell like fish for days. But they don't move away. They let the kid feel the history of the Rosemary Patch that's etched into their skin.

"Did it hurt?" the kid asks.

"Like hell. But it was worth it to help people. It usually is. You know, the way you helped us today," Harper says.

The kid snatches his hand back. "I gotta go." He runs off.

"You overplayed it," Quan draws. "Too didactic."

"Where'd you learn *didactic*?" Harper retorts.

Fen pushes a sheet pan of chopped onions and garlic across the plywood. "Anything else I can help with?"

Harper shakes their head and drops the salted anchovies into the steaming water along with the mushrooms. They stir, waiting for the flesh of the fish to melt. "Unless you can find some oil."

"I thought nobody here was going to give us anything," Fen says, more than a bit tartly.

"They're not giving us anything. Not voluntarily," Harper replies. "The kids are stealing for us."

Fen balks. "What? We can't steal from these people, we're their guests—"

"See? This is why I said you wouldn't be able to make this dinner. You're their guest, so *you* can't steal from them. It's different for me. I'm from here. I can be awful." Harper gives her a look that they know makes them look like The Abbott. "Morrow, any other little thieves coming back to us?"

Morrow lifts their chin at a tiny figure that's weaving through the common area, clutching a jar. "Looks like one more."

The kid is as small and round as an apricot. She races up and nearly smacks into Morrow headlong before pressing the jar into their hands. "If anyone asks, I didn't do it," she says breathlessly before disappearing, her tiny head bobbing with every step she takes as she races away into the depths of the garage.

Morrow holds the jar up to their eyes and squints. "I ... don't know what this is," they say slowly.

Quan bends to peer into the jar. "Nope. No clue."

Fen plucks it from Morrow's hand and holds it up to the thin light that streams through the holes in the garage roof. "The label just says 'candle.'"

"No fucking way." Harper snatches the jar away from Fen. "Fen, I'm so sorry. I was an asshole to you earlier and I was wrong."

"What?"

Harper opens the jar and takes a deep sniff of the contents. "This is beef tallow. It's fat. I can cook with this. I shouldn't have yelled at

you about needing butter because the relief I feel in this moment is enormous.”

Quan puts his hands on his hips and cocks his head to one side. “This is the most I’ve ever heard Harper talk.”

Harper gives Quan the finger and turns to the hotplate. They move the steaming cooking pot, which smells fishy and pungent from the anchovies and the mushrooms, to the side, and replace it with a different, wider-mouthed pot. They use a cracked wooden spoon to scoop a little beef tallow into the pot and wait for it to melt down. When it’s hot, they drop in the onions and garlic. After a few minutes the kitchen area is alive with the smell of ingredients becoming food.

The Abbott comes by to look in on Harper’s progress. Her eyes move from the jar to the steaming pot of broth. “Mmmm. I see.”

“Not taking notes at this time,” Harper says. “If you want to criticize, you’ll have to pick up a spoon and start cooking.”

The Abbott purses her lips in what might be either a reproach or a smile. Before she moves off, she presses a hand to Morrow’s arm and leans in close to them. “You and I should talk more. I’ve been hearing a lot about you from the children. Have you ever considered...”

Her voice fades out of hearing as she tugs Morrow off a ways giving them her pitch for whatever it is she wants them to do. Harper stirs the onions and garlic. They’re soft now, and just starting to brown, and Harper whispers the next steps to herself. “More fat, then the rice, stir until it changes.” They drop another scoop of beef tallow into the pot, let it melt, pour in the rice. They stir the rice over the heat, watching for the moment it becomes translucent at the edges. “Hey, Fen? Can you find me a ladle that will actually hold water?”

Fen ducks under the plywood and starts rummaging through the bin of kitchen implements. She holds up three different ladles, one of which is inexplicably slotted. The other two are badly cracked. Desperate, she pulls other bins out from under the counter and

opens them. She clangs pots and pans together in her haste as she digs beneath them, hoping to find a dropped ladle.

“What the hell? Hey—hey, Harper!” She jolts up behind Harper with a bottle in her hand. “I found booze. Do you want some?”

Harper rounds on her with the piping hot irritation they reserve for moments when they’re interrupted mid-task. “Do I want? Some booze? Are you fucking—”

Fen raises an eyebrow. “For your recipe,” she says coolly. “Thought it might come in handy. But what do I know about cooking?”

Harper drops their cracked wooden spoon into the pot and clasp Fen by the shoulders. They press their forehead against hers briefly, then kiss her on the cheek. “I’m awful. Thank you, yes, I want this.” They take the bottle from her and open it, give it a smell, and grimace. “Not booze. Vinegar. Still useful, though. Thank you, I love you, go find me a ladle.”

Fen continues searching as Harper eyes the rice. It’s turning translucent at the edges. “Wine,” they whisper to themselves, “then broth.” They eye the vinegar. It’s a deep golden color—it was wine once, they figure. They splash a little into the pot, then a little more, and that’s when Fen pops up next to them with a ladle.

They grab it with the hand that isn’t stirring. It has a perfectly intact bowl—but only two inches of handle remain. “This is basically a mug,” they mutter, but it’ll have to do, and they use it to scoop some broth into the rice just in time.

“So,” Fen says as Harper stirs. “Seems like this place is really home for you.”

“Mm.”

Quan leans almost all the way across the plywood. “Seems like you’re. You know. From here.”

“Mmm.”

Morrow comes walking back up, their arms spread wide, children dangling from each one. The Abbott is nowhere in sight. “Yeah, hey,

so, you used to live at the Patch. Seems like you might want to tell us some stuff about that?"

"No," Harper replies. "I want to finish making dinner."

Fen touches the back of Harper's heel with the toe of her boot. "What still needs doing? Can I help?"

Steam rises up from the pot, billowing around their face. "No. I'm just going to add broth and then stir until the rice soaks it up, then do that same thing again. And again, and again. And again. Until it's done." They let out a laugh that isn't a laugh, not really. It's more like a sigh with a stutter in it. "Suits this place."

Morrow shakes off one of the children. The kid falls with a thump and a bright laugh. "Why?"

"Because that's what it's like living here. You just do the thing that needs doing, over and over, until you die."

The Abbott approaches again, from across the common space. Her steps are slow and stately, perhaps a little stiff. Her eyes are locked on Harper, but she stops next to Fen. "I've made a decision," she says. "I'm not going to wait until after dinner to discuss Daneka with you."

"What? You never change your mind," Harper says distractedly, ladling more broth into the pot.

The Abbott nods. "I'm changing it this time. Because I think you all will want make your plans tonight, rather than tomorrow."

This catches Harper's full attention. "Tonight? No, we need a place to sleep, please—Grand-Mère, you can't—"

"Stop. And listen," The Abbott says, in the voice of someone who is used to teaching children and adults how to behave. "I said you will want to make your plans tonight. You're making me dinner, Harper, I'm not putting you out before dawn."

Quan snorts. "Might want to taste the dinner before you decide."

"Come over here and say that," Harper offers.

"PJ went through your bags and didn't find anything unexpected," The Abbott says. "So I'm going to give you what Daneka gave me, so you can go and find her tomorrow."

The air inside the Rosemary Patch goes still and silent. Harper drops the ladle and it strikes the floor with the clang of some enormous, dark bell. Morrow lifts their hands to the back of their neck and laces their fingers together, looking at the ground in an unconscious echo of the way Peter had tried to protect himself from their fists. Quan looks at Fen with wide, worried eyes. Fen covers her mouth with both hands, then says, "What?"

From an inside pocket of her coat, The Abbott produces two envelopes. "She was here two weeks ago," she says. "She said you left her a note on a recipe card, saying to come here. I don't know how she found us, but she did."

"We talked about it for years," Fen whispers. "We thought you were a myth, but—but we talked about coming here, trying to find you."

"She did. But she said she was being followed. That's why I didn't send you all away when you told me about Peter—he's already on his way. Bounty hunter, supposedly. Probably started tracking you all the way back at that house you were squatting in. PJ will handle him when he arrives. Thank you for doing him a bad turn, Morrow. I know you wish you hadn't, but I'm glad someone did."

Morrow doesn't move, doesn't speak. Behind Harper, the rice is beginning to sizzle.

Fen sways on her feet. "So Daneka's not here. I— She's not here? But she's alive?"

The Abbott nods. "As of the time I last saw her, she's alive, yes. She moved on three days after she got here. But she left these in my care." She holds up one envelope, then lowers it to the countertop. "That one is for all of you. And this one," she says, holding up the second envelope, "is just for you, Fen. She said you'd come. She thought everyone would probably come with you, but she said that if they didn't, you still would. She cares for you a great deal, you know?"

Fen swallows hard, glances at Quan briefly before taking the envelope. "Thank you," she whispers.

Harper takes a halting step toward the first envelope. Then they stop, turn around, swear down at the pot on the stove. They grab the ladle off the floor, add two quick scoops of broth to the pot, and stir hard and fast, scraping up the rice that's browned on the bottom of the pot. "Fuck fuck fuck," they whisper.

"Don't worry about it so much," The Abbott says. "All you have to do is keep going, and you'll get there."

Harper doesn't acknowledge her. They just keep stirring. They know she was talking about the risotto, which she taught Harper to make when they were as young as the little thieves they'd employed to gather ingredients. They also know that she was talking about Daneka. And about coming home, and about growing up, and about everything else they've ever done and will ever do.

"This shit is why I left," they growl. "Advice. Envelopes. Burnt fucking rice."

Fen comes back around the counter and looks over their shoulder. "It's not burnt. It's just fond."

"What?" Harper snaps.

"It's just fond. The stuff that sticks to the bottom of the pot and turns brown. It's fond. That's where all the flavor is."

Harper keeps stirring. "We'd better hope it's a good flavor."

"It will be," Fen says, walking away, wanting to give Harper the space she knows they need to go through whatever it is they're going through. Fen's never come home to anywhere before. She doesn't know what it's like. But it looks like it hurts, and she knows Harper doesn't like to be seen when they're hurting.

Still. She pauses, touches the envelope that's meant for the whole group. "You don't have to come with me and Quan when we go find her. I don't expect you to, I mean. I don't think Morrow is coming," she adds, looking over her shoulder at the place where Morrow and The Abbott are deep into another quiet, serious conversation. "I think they're going to stay, probably. It's okay if you want to stay too."

Harper pauses in their stirring, which has become too frenetic anyway, too intense. They wipe their forehead on their wrist and look at Fen, really look at her, and their face is an open wound. They're a cracked ladle, and all the love and pain and exhaustion in them is leaking out, and they can't stand for it to splash onto Fen but there's no way to keep that from happening right now so they let it happen. "You don't sound scared."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean. Normally, when you ask me if I'm staying or going, you sound scared."

Fen nods. She's looking down at the risotto, which is nearly done, so that she doesn't have to look at Harper. "The thing is. I figure it's probably okay either way. You left this place, and then you came back, and it's obvious that it's still home for you. Even if you don't want to talk about it—"

"I don't mind talking about it with you. If you want to know, I'll tell you." They tip the big pot over the smaller one, pouring the last of the broth into the risotto along with the plump, rehydrated mushrooms.

"Either way," Fen says firmly. "If you and Morrow decide to stay here, and I go off with Quan to find Daneka, that doesn't mean we'll never see you two again. It doesn't mean you'll forget about us. About me," she amends. "I trust you not to forget about me."

"And you've figured out that you don't need me. Right? No, don't—it's not a bad thing," they say before Fen can protest. "I just mean that for a long time, back at the squat, you didn't trust yourself. You thought you needed me for backup. Right? And now," they continue, not waiting for her to agree, "you know that you can do things on your own. So you're not as scared of what'll happen if I'm not there." They turn off the heat and give the risotto a final stir.

Fen has her arms folded tight across her chest. "I don't just want you around because I'm scared. Is that what you think?"

Harper taps the spoon against the edge of the pot. "I don't think that's the only reason you've wanted me around in the past. But I

think it was in the mix. And now, I think you want me around because you want me around.”

Fen nods. “You really haven’t made your decision, have you? I’ve never seen you take this long to figure out what you want.”

Harper lets out a low, dry laugh. It’s a laugh that Fen’s never heard before. She thinks it might be their realest laugh. “Fen. You’ve been watching me try to figure out what I want since the day we met. You just didn’t know until now what I was trying to decide on.”

A group of children are gathering on the other side of the common area. The four guards, and the three thieves, and a handful of others. Fen points to them. “I think your risotto is going to have to feed more mouths than we thought.”

“You still don’t know? What choice I’ve been making?”

Fen shakes her head.

Harper eyes the growing mass of children. Jaan is near the front. “The way I see it, I’ve been looking at two options. There’s eating dinner with you and Quan and Morrow and Daneka, or there’s everything else in the world.”

“And you picked us?”

“Every time.”

The two of them stand side by side. Fen watches the children. Harper watches the risotto. They don’t look at each other, and they don’t touch each other, and they don’t speak. Their hearts beat at the same speed. They feel it together—the pain and fear and hunger of the months they’ve shared, the emptiness of the years that came before they knew each other, the echoing expanse of the future and all the hell that might be in it. Harper inhales, and a moment later Fen exhales, and neither of them has ever been so unalone.

Harper breaks the silence first. “This risotto’s gonna get cold fast. Not that the kids’ll care, but still. It deserves to be eaten hot.”

Fen nods. “Sounds good. I’ll go find bowls.”

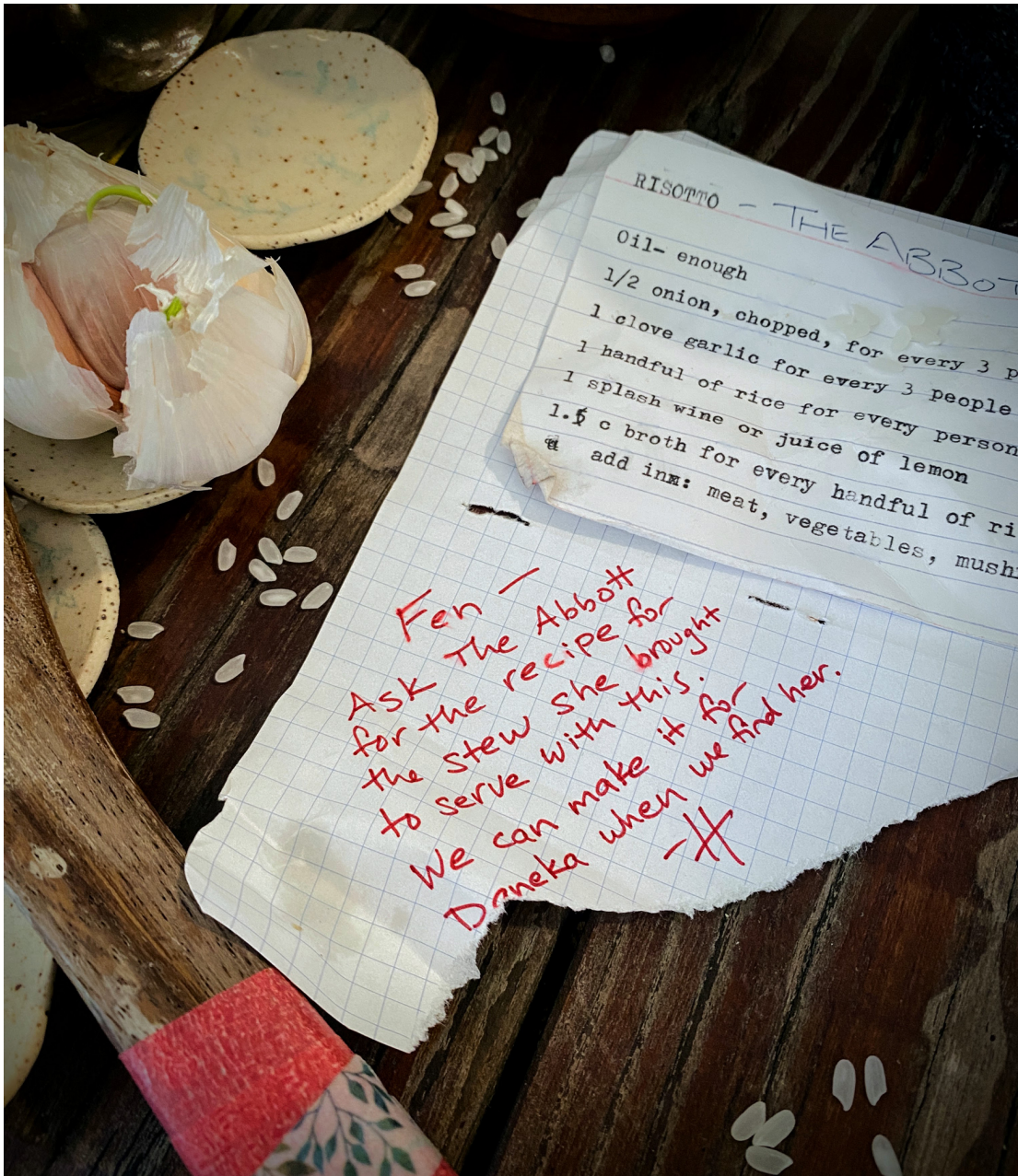
Harper's Risotto

Serves 10

18 cups water
4 tbsp beef tallow, divided into two parts
3 onions, chopped
6 cloves garlic
12 handfuls of rice **rinse once*
2 splashes vinegar
1 cup dried mushrooms
5 salt-cured anchovies

Add mushrooms, anchovies, and water into the big pot. Boil until mushrooms are reconstituted and anchovies have more or less melted away.

1. Heat tallow. Soften & brown onions and garlic.
2. Add oil. Add rice, stir until edges go clear.
3. Add vinegar, stir until liquid is gone.
4. Add a little broth. Stir until liquid is gone. Repeat until all broth is gone.
5. Add whatever you like.



RISOTTO - THE ABBOTT

Oil- enough
1/2 onion, chopped, for every 3 P
1 clove garlic for every 3 people
1 handful of rice for every person
1 splash wine or juice of lemon
1.5 c broth for every handful of ri
add ins: meat, vegetables, mush

Fen -
Ask The Abbott
for the recipe for
the stew she brought
to serve with this.
We can make it for
Daneka when we find her.
-H

About the Author



Photo ©Kate Dollarhyde 2023

Sarah Gailey is a Hugo Award Winning and Bestselling author of speculative fiction, short stories, and essays. They have been a finalist for the Hugo, Nebula, and Locus awards for multiple years running. Their bestselling adult novel debut, *Magic For Liars*, was published by Tor Books in 2019. Their most recent novel, *Just Like Home*, and most recent original comic book series with BOOM! Studios, *Know Your Station* are available now. Their shorter works and essays have been published in *Mashable*, *The Boston Globe*, *Vice*, *Tor.com*, and *The Atlantic*. Their work has been translated into seven different languages and published around the world. You can find links to their work at sarahgailey.com, or sign up for email updates [here](#).

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The book cover features a central illustration of a young girl with long, wavy, light-colored hair. She has large, curved, reddish-brown horns on her head. Her eyes are a pale, glowing blue. Her mouth is wide open, showing a dark, bloody interior. She is holding a dark, bloody object in her hands. The background is a dark, starry space with various colored stars and a purple and blue gradient. The title text is overlaid on the illustration.

EVERYBODY

IS

IN THE

PLACE

EMMA J. GIBBON

Everybody Is in the Place

EMMA J. GIBBON

illustration by

ORABEL

REACTOR 

We're coming up, coming up, coming up, coming up, we took the acid half an hour ago, and I can hear the fair music rising up louder and louder, washing over our boring town like a wave. I try to explain to Maybelle about an old song I like that's about waves, and the lyrics go backward and forward and the music does too. "It mimics the song," I say, "the words, the flow," but I can't explain properly, and I look at her and she laughs and shakes her head. She looks so fucking happy. Her blonde curls shake and I can see traces, electric blue and purple and green sparking off them. "It's happening," I say, and she says "yes, yes," and we grin at each other because this is it. We're living the life, this life, our life, and fuck this is more like it. We're going to the fair and we're young and we're absolutely off our heads and—

"Let's go," shouts Clara, and she stomps her foot like a cartoon character, and I imagine her shaking her fists at us, and it makes me laugh. "The fair'll be over before we get there at this rate. Come on!" Clara wants to get to the fair to see the fair lads, she wants to go on the waltzers, the ride that always makes me want to puke. It goes around and up and down in sickly waves while the booths spin madly on their own axes, like the Tilt-A-Whirl but dark, closed in. Clara wants to scream while the fair lads spin around the girls they like faster. She tips up to drink from the big plastic pop bottle she's drinking from, and I know it's filled with disgusting white cider and pineapple juice. She'll puke it up later, but for now she's drinking and tapping her foot to the fair music. "Come oooooonnnn," she shouts, and we laugh, but we follow her. She says we walk too slow, and we do stop to talk, and to look at things, and to think about things, but isn't that what we're supposed to do? Everything is interesting, and everything doesn't end, we come back again, and the fair will always be here, really, if you think about it.

We're walking up the hill, next to the road, past the church and the fire station and then our school, but it's the weekend so it doesn't matter, and then we see the fields where the fair comes every year. The old folks call it the Feast, but I don't know why. I imagine them all eating each other—blood and gore as they feast—but I have to push, push, push it out of my head because that's not what we're doing here. The weather is the best it's been in months. There are clouds, but it's bright and warm. Even if it rains, it won't matter because the fair, right?

"What?" says Maybelle, and I say

"What?" and she says—

"You're muttering."

"That song," I say. "It goes backwards and forwards."

"Are you still going on about that?" she says.

I can't remember the name and it's an ancient song anyway. I'm embarrassed I mentioned it.

"Can we at least get there before the sun goes down?" says Clara. "I can literally see the field."

"Go ahead," I say, "we'll find you before you have to go for your bus."

"Yeah, right," she says, but she necks the rest of her drink and throws the empty bottle in a bush and keeps walking, wobbling a little.

Maybelle and I don't care about the waltzers or the fair lads or spinning around faster. Rumor has it that the Labyrinth is back; it hasn't been there for years. Rumor has it a girl got killed or went missing or something, but that can't be true because it's back and if it's back, then there must be nothing wrong, right?

I sit on the short wall just before the field and light a cigarette. It feels too large between my fingers and my face feels funny. It's hard to smoke when I can feel the euphoria of the trip bubbling in my chest. "I'm nervous," I say, "about the Labyrinth."

"Why?" says Maybelle. "You're from the rat maze, you should be used to it."

"Ouch," I say. Not all of us can come from the fancy neighborhood, but I don't think I say that out loud. She sits next to me and bumps her shoulder into mine, like a cat.

"You know I don't mean it. Dusty says people from the rat maze are authentic." Dusty is her drug dealer, and mine by default, I suppose. He was the one who supplied the tabs earlier. A new kind, "horns" he called them, a smiling bull's head printed on each one.

"Dusty would know," I say fake earnestly. Maybelle laughs.

"See, who even says stuff like that?" I laugh with her, but I can see the map of the rat maze forming in front of me on the pavement. All of the alleys and dead ends and crappy streets that form where I live. Too-small houses and flats too close together, all of us crammed in. I'm looking down at it. It raises up like a head on a coin and starts to spread over my feet and ankles and knees. I throw my cigarette into the road and try to brush the maze off, but it spreads over my hands. I don't tell Maybelle; I figure I can just live with it.

The map begins to hover slightly above the surfaces, the gray pavement, the jeans on my knees, my hands, and begins to slowly move in a wide, lazy circle. I know that if I looked in the mirror, my freckles would form the same pattern. "Are there mirrors in the Labyrinth?" I ask Maybelle.

"Yeah," she says, "Dusty says it's like a mirrored maze rather than anything scary." How does Dusty know everything, suddenly? I look up at her. Maybelle doesn't have freckles. She tans easily though, even with her almost white hair. She takes a last drag of her cigarette and throws it in the road after mine.

"A labyrinth is not a maze," I say. "A labyrinth goes one way in and then you follow one way out. It doesn't have dead ends like a maze."

She laughs.

"How did you get so brainy?" she says.

"I'm not," I say. I look down and a big fat raindrop plops down on the map, making it run a little like ink. Then another and another. "It's raining," I say, but when I look up at the sky, the clouds are gone. It'll be dark soon.

"Is it?" says Maybelle.

"I think so," I say, "the map's running." I can't feel the rain though. I get on my hands and knees and feel the ground. It doesn't feel wet, but my hands are wiping away the rat maze, causing it to smudge. Maybelle gets down next to me, patting the ground. She doesn't ask about the map.

"It might be raining," she says, "I can't tell."

An old lady walks by. She keeps turning and looking at us, crouching down to see what we're looking at. She thinks we've lost something. Maybe we have. It's not raining. The acid hits again and I'm laughing, laughing, laughing at what we're doing, so much I'm crying, and Maybelle is too. She gets up and grabs my hands to drag me up. "The fair!" she shouts.

"The Labyrinth!" I shout, and we run past the old lady, up, up to the fields where the fair is.

I can hear the *thump, thump, thump, thump* of the music of the waltzers as we get nearer, where most of the people we know from school are. I can feel it in my chest, next to my heart, doing an echo of my heartbeat, *thump, thump, thump*, and underneath, organ music from the carousel. "CA-RUH-SEL," I chant as the ticket booth comes in sight. Then the music stops, a record scratch, and rewinds, quickly, before starting again. I look over at Maybelle to see if she notices. She skids to a halt, her face blank. "The trees," she says. I look at the trees lining the road at the edge of the fields, perfectly straight, a leftover from when all this was a fancy estate with a famous gardener.

"OK," I say. They are in a straight line and green. I can see the far tree where we go to smoke at break time.

"No, look again," she says.

I blink. The leaves turn yellow. I blink again and they're red, then brown, then the trees are bare, then pink and white, spring blossoms, then green, then they cycle faster and faster until I have to look away. The woman at the ticket booth is looking at us suspiciously. Maybelle pays for us both, and the woman puts a paper bracelet on my shaking, too-skinny wrist. The sun is almost down, and the bright lights of the fair are beautiful. I think about when I was a kid, on the bus with my mother at night, and I thought all the streetlights glowing orange in the dark were fairs in the distance—huge rides, rollercoasters like I'd seen on TV, far bigger than those at the Feast. I would ask my mam if she could take us, if we

could get off at the next stop and go to the fair, and she would look at me confused and shake her head. "We're going home, Enid." I would try to explain, but I couldn't make her understand. I think about telling Maybelle, but—how could I tell her that sometimes what I thought was true wasn't real, even without the acid?

I stand in the center of it all. I can feel the sounds wash over me, the carousel organ winding up faster and faster, the pulsing techno of the waltzers shaking my feet, the whirring and buzzers and alarms of the sideshows and arcades. Kids shrieking, someone blowing a whistle, barkers shouting, and Maybelle sing-shouting, "Enid, Enid, ENID!!" and I grab her by the shoulders and kiss her, and she pushes another tab into my mouth with her tongue. The world spins, the fair lights a colored blur in the night as the smells hit me: the patchouli oil that Maybelle always wears even though it's for hippies, the sweetness of toffee apples and candy floss, the heavy grease from the hot dogs and burgers, the cigarette smoke that makes me crave another, the acrid scent of fair-lad sweat, and the ten thousand layers of oil used to grease the old machines. I imagine someone will die on the waltzers tonight, a car will disconnect and fly off its connections and spin recklessly into those standing on the gangway. I hope it's not Clara, but I know I'm in no condition to stop it, any of it.

Maybelle grabs my hand and shouts in my ear, "There it is!" I follow her other arm to her hand and where her finger is pointing: there at the end of the midway, is the Labyrinth. I expect it to be all flashy bright lights and neon spray paint. It *is* a comeback after all, but in truth it looks drab. A clapboard front painted in oranges and browns, as if it's an old house about to fall down. On either side of the entrance are spotted old mirrors, and there doesn't even seem to be anyone attending it.

"Why is it there?" I say, and Maybelle laughs.

"What?"

"It wasn't hard to find," and I mean something this mythical, a labyrinth! It shouldn't be this easy to find. We've had no quest, no difficulty, not even any winding paths. "It's just there, in plain sight."

"It's a fair ride, Enid. Come ooonnnnn." Maybelle drags me over to the doors.

It is there where I balk like a nervous pony, leaping backward as if scalded. I've taken too much acid. The hammering of my heart is deafening. "Should we check with someone, show our wristbands?"

"There's no one here. They've probably gone for a piss. You gonna go all rule-follower on me now, Enid? Who even are you? Where is my Enid, where has she gone?" She starts looking around comically, over my shoulder, under her shoes, lifting my T-shirt to look underneath. "My Enid has disappeared." I laugh. "Since when have you been a scaredy-cat?" she says.

I grin at her and run into the Labyrinth. She runs after me. There are rushes in my body I can't control. Rolling waves of euphoria wash over me. I can taste them.

The first thing that hits me is the silence. It's a dead sound. We were just in the midst of so much noise, and now nothing and then an "Ahh fuck" ricochets off all the walls, bouncing and echoing and ending up fuck knows where. I turn around and see Maybelle. I can see her grin even in the semidarkness.

"I stubbed my toe," she says.

"Be careful," I say. I can smell lingering dry ice, but I don't see any. The Labyrinth is barely illuminated in black light, and there are mirrors everywhere. Not fun house, just regular mirrors, and it seems creepier somehow. I look down at my clothes, and all the pills on my sweater are glowing white, like alien dandruff. I hope Maybelle doesn't notice. She doesn't even have old clothes. I look in the nearest mirror and I see I was right. The rat maze is all over my face. My freckles form my street, my house, my family. I look over at Maybelle; her face is clear, just a ghost of a mustache where her white hair contrasts against her tan. I have to look away and try not to think about how some of us are marked anyhow.

It must show on my face because Maybelle bumps me again. "Come on, Enid. We're supposed to be having fun," She's lisping, and I realize she might have taken something else aside from the acid. "Tag," she says, "you're it," and she runs shrieking further into the maze.

"It's a labyrinth, not a maze," I mutter to myself and run after her, not sure if I want to catch her. Let her run in front of me forever.

"Is it the beginning or the end?" she shouts, her voice echoing and seemingly deeper in the Labyrinth than is possible.

"It's both," I shout, slower than her, trying not to bump into the walls.

Then she's in front of me, smiling, radiant. "Why do you never give a straight answer?"

I snort. "You know why," and I reach out for her, but it's a reflection, not her. I turn around to try to find her, but the Labyrinth fills with dry ice. I can't see a thing.

"Meet me in the middle," she says, and it feels like she's right behind me. I almost feel her breath on my cheek, but when I turn there's nothing but whiteout. I stumble around blind, on the edge of panic. "You're having fun," I mutter to myself, "this is the best time of your life." As the white smoke begins to dissipate, the organ music starts, loud and echoing, coming from inside. The attendant must have come back from his break. The music stops the downward spiral I was heading down.

"I'm coming for you!" I shout, and I begin to move around the Labyrinth, trailing my fingers against the mirrors as I go, smearing them, leaving bright trails: blue, purple, green, the rat maze rising to meet me from the muddy floor. I look

ahead instead, going faster and faster, and the music comes with me, speeding up, higher in pitch. I can see myself in the mirrors, but for once, I don't mind. I can see myself in action, moving, getting taller and taller, my feet becoming hooves, my legs lengthening and changing shape. I gain more traction, running around faster and faster still. I know where I'm going, I follow a trail that has appeared in front of me, guiding me through. I see glimpses of Maybelle refracting around the mirrors, the edge of her jacket, the cuff of her jeans, her hand skimming the walls the same as me, and then her head, turning the next corner, horns sprouting from her blonde curls. I don't look in the mirror to my own head, but I can feel the extra heaviness. We run, run, run, turning corner after corner, running blind now that spotlights reflect on the mirrors, dazzling us. The music fast, louder, louder. We're shouting back and forth at each other. I scream her name over and over. How long have we been running? For hours, it seems, forever and ever, the labyrinth is never-ending. We've always been here.

"I'm here," she screams back, "I'm here, I'm always here." The mirrors are a blur now; I'm running, running, faster than it seems possible. The music is nonsense, too fast to make sense. We are trails of light chasing around each other. Is Maybelle in front or behind me? She's everywhere, all around me, we're the same in the Labyrinth, and everything is bleeding into everything else.

And then I reach the middle. The music stops. Maybelle stands in the center, her arms raised, her horns pointing upward, hooves scratching on the floor, incandescent, bathed in light. I try to catch my breath, one loud gasp, as the air is suddenly cold and I feel it in my bones. She's holding something in her hands above her: a large, beating heart, blood dripping down her arms.

"Enid," she says, and her eyes are starlight. "We're here. In the place."

"I know," I say. "It's the beginning and the end."

"We're home," she says.

"I know," I say. "We're everything."

She lowers the heart to her mouth and takes a huge bite of it. I hear the squelch of her bite and smell the coppery tang of the gore covering her cheeks and chin. She holds out the heart to me. "The Feast," I whisper.

Then the lights go out, and the music stops, and the dry ice floods the Labyrinth again.

#

The music comes back, rewinds backward, fast at first, then slows down rewinding, winding down

like an old tape gone haywire, low and weird, then stops. The dry ice clears and there's only the black light on. Maybelle is gone. I look around and all I see are my reflections. I'm just me. My hair is mussed, but there are no horns, on my feet are my scuffed Chuck knockoffs. The rat maze is still in my freckles, but only faintly. The traces have gone. I dig in my pocket and pull out my cigarettes and

light one up. My hands are shaking. How long have I been in here? The air is suffocatingly stale.

There's a *ker-clunk*, and the black light is replaced by normal strip lights, like the ones at school. A voice comes out of nowhere, a rough man's voice. "Hello? Come on, love, we're closing. Time to go home." I retrace my steps, back through the Labyrinth, not a maze, no, forward and backward, a much shorter distance. The attendant comes to meet me. He's a fair lad, not much older than me.

"My friend," I say.

"You're the only one here, love. Come on, I've got to close up." I follow him out. It's raining. The midway is getting muddy. Cigarette butts and food wrappers mashed into the ground under the dimming lights. The fair is closing. There's no music.

"Enid, Enid!" Clara grabs my arm; she smells of vomit and her tights are ripped. "I'm gonna miss my bus!"

"Maybelle ..." I begin to say, but Clara tuts.

"Who? Come on, we've got to run." She pulls me along, and I run after her, my feet heavy and claggy. The fair lights wink out behind us. We run past the trees. I see the ghost of them change, faintly, green then pink and white, then skeletal, then red and orange and yellow. We run down the hill, past the school and the fire station and the church, rain soaking us to the skin.

When her bus pulls out, I see Clara's sad face looking out of the window into the blank slate of night, a face she doesn't want me to see. I realize I haven't asked her how her night went. But do I really want to know? I know something bad has happened. I know that they always turn sour, these nights full of promise. I'm starting to come down, I know it, but there's this other gnawing feeling that I'm forgetting something—that something is missing. I walk through the center of town and up toward the rat maze. I see the streetlights when I reach the top of our hill, and I smile thinking about kid-me thinking there were fairs everywhere, and I wonder why my mam didn't ask me what I meant. Just kid babble, I suppose. I sigh, like I always do before I enter the maze, and I meander through the alleyways to get to our house. I'm at the gate when I hear someone shout my name. It's Dusty, my dealer. He doesn't live in the maze, but he's always here.

"Been to the fair?" he says.

"Yeah," I say.

"Got any smokes?" I check my pockets, and there's one crumpled in the packet. I hand it over to him and he lights up. "Those horns, eh? Pretty good?"

"Yeah," I say. I just want to be home. Home in bed. I'm even less sure than ever that the house at the end of this path is home. "I'll see you," I say.

"Yeah," he says, and I watch him disappear under the streetlights, and there are the last traces, green and purple and blue.

About the Author

Described by NPR as “Shirley Jackson meets Johnny Rotten,” **Emma J. Gibbon** is an award-winning horror writer, podcast creator, and poet. Her debut fiction collection, *Dark Blood Comes from the Feet*, was one of NPR’s best books of 2020 and won the Maine Literary Book Award for Speculative Fiction. Her stories have appeared in *The Dark Tome* and *Toasted Cake* podcasts, and various anthologies, including *Wicked Haunted* and *13 Haunted Houses*. Her poetry has been published in magazines and anthologies, including *Strange Horizons*, *Kaleidotrope*, and *Under Her Skin*. Most recently, Emma was part of the writing team behind the *Realm* podcast drama, *Undertow: Blood Forest*. Emma lives with her husband, Steve, and four exceptional animals: Odin, Mothra, Hamlet, and M. Bison (also known as Grim) in a spooky little house in the woods. You can find her at emmajibbon.com, or sign up for email updates [here](#).

REACTOR

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★

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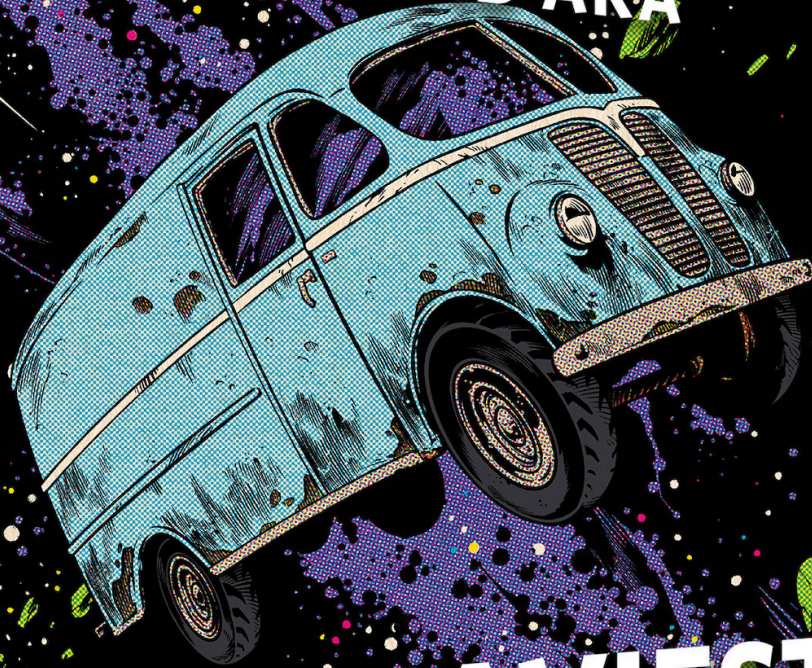


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DARYL GREGORY

I'M NOT DISAPPOINTED
JUST MAD AKA



THE HEAVIEST
COUCH IN THE KNOWN
UNIVERSE

I'm Not Disappointed
Just Mad AKA The
Heaviest Couch in the
Known Universe

DARYL GREGORY

illustration by

JOHNNY DOMBROWSKI

REACTOR 

Let's skip the prologue for now and get right to the invasion, which all started for Tindal with the tragedy of the Tim Hortons cookie.

Tindal was sitting on the floor of his dark, cozy bedroom, jamming to Paul Anka's swinging cover of "Wonderwall," and about to tuck into his breakfast—a sexy, red velvet cookie with cream cheese filling, only slightly crusty from spending the night lost in his bed linens—when the bedroom door was yanked open. Unfortunately, he was leaning against the door at the time. He fell into the sunlit living room, and the cookie, seizing its moment to escape, flew from his hand, bounced once, and vanished into the general chaos of the apartment.

He would never see that cookie again.

A wail escaped him. Then he squinted upward at the imperious figure looming over him—the being that had so rudely hoicked open his door. He tilted his head to take in the perimeter of the silhouette. "Aunty Mads?"

It had been more than a year since he'd seen her. She looked the same—the Nordic pop star cheekbones, the black hair streaked with gray, those eyes that could grab you and just as suddenly let you go like you were a firefly. He scrambled to his feet. "How did you find me?" No, that came out wrong. He put his guilty feelings aside for a moment and hugged her. "I mean, what are you doing here?"

She returned the hug, and then leaned down, lovingly cradled his face in her hands—and plucked the earbuds from his ears.

"You're shouting," she said in that unplaceable accent of hers. "Do you know what's going on outside?"

He *wanted* to say yes. But now that he thought about it, there had been more than the usual amount of brouhaha in the apartment, and a continuous warbling of sirens in the distance, and the roar of large roaring things. The floors and walls had been vibrating intermittently as if the building had been rezoned as a subwoofer. He'd nearly been tempted to turn off his earbuds.

"I've been in my room all morning."

"That's not a room, kiddo, that's a coat closet."

"Former coat closet. Now it's—"

She raised an eyebrow.

"...my closet?"

"I've been trying to call you for an hour." She surveyed the array of couches and cots, the assortment of battered furniture and cockeyed lamps, the power strips asprout with cables, snowmanesque piles of garbage bags stuffed with clothes,

and the many, many candles, mostly unlit. "Oh my dear, I should have come to set eyes on you well before this. How many people live here?"

"On average?"

What was odd was that none of the dozen or so roommates or their hangers-on, couch-surfers, and auxiliary sex partners were present at the moment. "Where is everybody?"

"They probably evacuated," she said. "Or found a shelter."

"Are we being *evicted*?"

Thunder rattled the windows. A blown-glass bong tumbled off a shelf, onto another bong, and both shattered. Sirens wailed in the distance.

"Time to move," she said. "Also, you're going to need pants."

He was wearing only his tighty-not-so-whities, in stark contrast to Aunty Mads, who looked, per usual, ineffably cool, even though each article of clothing could have been grabbed from a Goodwill rack. Today's look might be called Parisian Lumberjack Gone Clam Digging: flannel shirt tied at the waist, dungarees rolled to her shins, ballet flats, chunky necklace.

Tindal scabbled around his 1 × 3 meter bedroom, finding and wriggling into clothes. "Where are we going, exactly?"

"My house. I need your muscle."

"Ha!"

"Okay, your energy and Morris's muscles."

Morris! Nobody except Aunty Mads called El Capitan by his given name.

"I already called him and he's waiting for us," she said. "I'd been under the impression you two were living together."

"We were, but El Cap's got a poly thing going right now," Tindal explained. "I was kind of a, not third wheel, exactly—fifth? Sixth? So I got my new place here and—wait, what's this muscular activity?"

"You two are going to move a couch across town."

He poked his head out the door. "A couch? Not Mr. Nappy?!" At her wince he said, "You can't sell him! I'll take him."

"I'm afraid you don't have the room, kiddo."

True, but...maybe he could find a new room? He loved that couch. Growing up he'd spent many afternoons, and not a few nights, stretched out on its comfy bulk.

"Mr. Nappy is moving to a new home upstate," Aunty Mads said. "Extremely upstate."

"Well, at least you're not throwing him out."

He tied up his hair and emerged, more or less decent. Aunty Mads stood by the door, impatient, but Tindal looked around worriedly, feeling as if he were leaving something behind. Oh! The candles. He danced around the room, blowing them out.

"Can't be too careful," he explained. Some of his roommates only owned what they could carry. One more apartment fire they'd be ruined.

"You're sweet," Aunty Mads said. "But we need to go."

He followed her down the three flights of stairs to the front steps of the building. The sirens were louder, and a line of cars jammed the street. She set off down the sidewalk at a swift march, toward El Capitan's apartment. A pair of military jets raked the rooftops and zoomed out of sight.

Though it was embarrassing, he decided that he simply had to ask: "What's going on, exactly?"

"Behind you," Aunty Mads said.

He looked back, then up. Hovering above the Toronto skyline, a few miles away, a gargantuan shape swallowed half the sky. The lumpy gray slab bristled with long needles, as if scores of giant porcupines had become stuck in cement.

The two military jets were heading straight at it—until they exploded. Then, suddenly, they became a thousand pieces of metal going many directions at once.

"Holy Fuckowski!" Tindal shouted.

"Keep moving."

"Is that a *spaceship*?" Tindal asked.

A column of glittery light appeared below the ship (for that's what it had to be) and enveloped a skyscraper. The light shimmered like crushed disco balls, partially and prettily obscuring the building. Were the aliens going to blow it up? Levitate it into their ship? Then the light clicked off and the vasty bulk drifted onward.

"Huh," Tindal said. "What's it doing?" Aunty Mads didn't answer; she'd marched on. He scrambled to catch up. "Are you sure you want to move Mr. Nappy during this, uh, *alien invasion*?"

"Pfft. It's one spaceship—that's hardly an invasion."

★ ★ ★

Which was a very Aunty Mads point to make. When Tindal was growing up, she was one of those neighborhood characters that kids feared, old people scowled at, and everyone thought was a witch. She painted her rambling house in multiple clashing colors, refused to mow her lawn, cooked food that smelled like hot mulch, and blasted "music" that made cats nervous. Also she did things that were legit insane, like commanding heavily armed gangbangers to get off her lawn—and then they'd do it. Basically, she put out Big Wiccan Energy twenty-four-seven.

Tindal had been just as afraid of her as the kids from school, but when he was eight years old she stopped one of his mom's boyfriends from beating the shit out of him—she did something to the guy's *ear* that dropped him to his knees, which was amazing—and from that point on, whenever things got bad at his mom's place (which was pretty often), he'd run down to Aunty Mads's house and she'd feed

him hot dogs and Shreddies and Capitaine Crouche, food that she kept on hand, he later realized, only for him. She let him chase the robot vacuum around, and at bedtime would tuck him into Mr. Nappy, her giant orange couch, and tell him bedtime stories.

The fact that he hadn't seen her lately was entirely his fault. She'd texted him and left voicemails, often just checking in but sometimes inviting him to dinner. But he put off replying because certain aspects of his life had become embarrassing. He told himself he'd call her as soon as he'd "straightened some things out," but the number of things requiring straightening only grew like the contents of Uri Geller's spoon drawer.

A few more explosions sounded in the distance, hidden by rooftops. The disco spotlight came on a couple more times as well. Tindal was starting to panic but there was nothing to do but keep up with Aunty Mads.

El Capitan—El Cap, El C the DJ (available for parties), *Morris*—was waiting for them on the street, beefy and huge, like a grizzly who'd gotten up on its hind legs and was calmly optimistic about nabbing a high-flying salmon.

"Looking good, Aunty Mads!" El Cap said. They exchanged cheek kisses like a couple of Québécois. She was nearly as tall as he was.

El Cap told them that the rest of his polycule—two girlfriends, one boyfriend, and an English bulldog—had decided to evacuate the city. They'd headed north on the DVP, though their texts reported that traffic was nearly at a standstill.

"And you stayed to help me out," Aunty Mads said. "That's brave and kind."

"I'm sure it'll all blow over," El Cap said. He thought everything blew over, and he was usually right. He'd been Tindal's best friend since grade nine, and was really the best possible person to call when, say, two teenagers broke into your house and ate a wall-full of drugs—but that was another story.

El Cap led them down the alley to a narrow garage. "For all your transportation and moving needs," he said, raising the door with a flourish, "consider the Flea Bus!"

Ah, the Flea Bus. She was a rusty, powder-blue, 1963 International Metro, bulbous and blunt-faced, sporting a fancy art deco grille that gave her the air of a duchess fallen on hard times. She'd started life as some kind of delivery truck, but the faded logo and cartoon dog painted on her side marked her last professional job, serving as a mobile pet grooming service.

"Don't worry about your couch," El Cap said to Aunty Mads. "All fleas have fled."

"Died of old age, I imagine." She took shotgun, and Tindal duck-walked into the cargo area, which was carpeted with overlapping rugs of various vintages, and squatted on a toolbox. The Flea Bus didn't want to start, but El Cap eventually persuaded her to come out of retirement and they lurched into the street.

A trio of helicopters whopped overhead. A second later explosions shook the air. El Cap glanced in the rearview mirror. "Not a great day to be in the Royal

Canadian Air Force," he said, the slightest worry in his voice.

"They should probably stop attacking it," Aunty Mads said.

"But what's up with the sparkly light?" Tindal called over the engine noise.

"They're clearly looking for something," she said.

"In *Canada*?"

They rumbled westward. Traffic was terrible, and cops at intersections kept trying to wave them *out* of the city, but twenty minutes later they'd finally made it the two kilometers to Aunty Mads's Victorian. Tindal was pleased—no, *relieved*—to see that even though the house was painted in new colors, it was otherwise exactly itself.

Aunty Mads directed El Cap to the backyard and had him park with the rear of the bus abutting the stoop. Then she led the boys inside, into the kitchen. The smell of the place was also exactly itself, a mingle-mangle of unnamed spices, strange citrus, and overheated electrical wiring.

Something clattered to the floor in the next room, and Tindal heard a distinctive whir. He rushed into the dining room. "Sucky!" he cried. The vacuum cleaner sat on the ground near the table, roughly the size and shape of a horseshoe crab, but even flatter, and also hovering an inch off the ground. Tindal rushed forward and the thing scooted away between the chair legs.

Tindal laughed in delight. "Oh man, you're the best, Sucky." He was surprised that the machine was still running; it had to be as old as he was.

"You know, I could never figure out how that thing worked," El Cap said.

"Where are the wheels? And where does the dust go?"

"Magnets," Tindal said patiently. Aunty Mads had explained it to him long ago.

"Enough bothering the help," she said, and shoed them into the living room.

"Here's the patient in question."

And there he was indeed, bright orange and bulging: *Mr. Nappy*. The couch spanned one end of the room, its chubby arms nudging the walls. Its plush cushions wide enough for three Tindals to sleep side by side. It seemed even larger than he remembered, which was not how childhood memories were supposed to work.

"Just look at him," Tindal said. "Still fabulous."

The sofa, positioned to take in both a view of the room and the street outside the big picture window, glowed in the sunlight, the upholstery somehow throwing off more colors than seemed possible: harmonics of purple, gold, jade, orange.

"Aunty Mads," Tindal said. "Can I do the thing?"

She rolled her eyes in mock exasperation. "Be quick about it."

Tindal ran toward the couch and leaped, Superman-style. "AIRBORNE!" he shouted. He came down on his face and chest and sank into those deep cushions.

It felt so good. When he was little, and Aunty Mads had finished with the bedtime stories, she'd sit on the edge of the cushions and pat his back until he fell

asleep. By middle school he was tiptoeing into the house at two or three in the morning, when only Sucky was awake and Hoovering about, and would crash hard on the couch, no bedtime stories or even blankets required; Mr. Nappy always seemed to be the right temperature in hottest summer or coldest winter. Tindal would fall asleep to a hum that seemed to come up through the bones of the sofa.

Tindal rolled over. "I still can't believe you're getting rid of him."

Aunty Mads offered an apologetic smile. "All things have their path in life, kiddo."

"But he still looks great!"

"What he looks is large," El Cap said. "Are you sure we have to do this, now?"

"I wouldn't ask if wasn't important," Aunty Mads said. "Truly."

El Cap seemed to work this over in his head, then nodded. "I'll go get the dollies and move the dining table out of the way." Aunty Mads walked out with him.

Tindal lay on the cushions, admiring the tall bookcases full of books Aunty Mads used to read to him, the soda bottles and car parts she'd hung on the wall as if they were art. A memory came to him, from a night after an escape from his mother's apartment. He was eight or nine or ten (his chronological memory was not great), and woke up on Mr. Nappy. He wasn't sure what had woken him up, but then he heard Aunty Mads, talking away to someone. And then she said something like, "You want to stop being a ghost?" He shuffled into the kitchen and found her there, holding a coffee cup, feet up on the table. Nobody else was in the room.

It was an old but familiar memory, one that he used to frequently marvel over. Aunty Mads talks to ghosts! But then he grew older and discovered the wide world of psychedelics and learned that not everything his brain thought was happening was, strictly speaking, happening. She'd probably been on the phone.

But to who? Thinking of it now, he was struck by how lonely Aunty Mads must have felt all these years. No friends (that he'd ever met, anyway), no family from the old country, and nobody to talk to but herself. No wonder she'd been texting him lately! Guilt washed over him. He'd blown off all those messages because he was so focused on himself and his own problems.

A boom shook the walls. Tindal, buffered by Mr. Nappy, felt nothing but a slight tremor. El Cap and Aunty Mads hurried in, and Tindal sat up. "Aunty Mads, I want to apologize for not calling you back. I feel terrible and I should've never—"

"Don't worry about it, kiddo. Really."

El Cap handed him a wooden triangle with casters bolted on. "I'll lift the end, and you shove this under." The big man squatted, grabbed the frame, and managed to raise the end a dozen centimeters. "Now, please," he said through gritted teeth. Tindal placed the dolly and then scrambled out of the way.

"Woof," El Cap said. "Is this a sleeper couch?"

The light coming through the window suddenly dimmed, as if a storm cloud had rolled in. Aunty Mads went to the window. "I'm afraid we're out of time, boys."

Spangled light filled the room, pouring straight through the roof. Disco dust! Tindal shouted something and covered his head. El Cap looked at the ceiling. The couch glowed full technicolor. And Sucky the vacuum cleaner levitated, pulled off the floor.

Several seconds passed, during which Tindal remained in a full-body wince. Then the light snapped off.

Aunty Mads turned from the window and frowned. The vacuum cleaner was still hanging in air, still glowing redly. "Sucky?" Aunty Mads said. Suddenly the machine clattered to the ground.

"Is the ship moving on?" Tindal asked.

"Not exactly," she said.

"So...not moving?"

"I'll take care of this." She leaned down and kissed Tindal on his forehead. Then she clapped El Capitan on the shoulder. "Watch out for each other. And the couch. Speaking of which, could you proceed, quickish-like?"

"No problem."

"Where are you going?" Tindal asked. "What do you mean, take care of it?"

"Quickish!" She opened the front door and strode out to the street.

"Little help," El Cap said from behind him.

"I don't like this," Tindal said. "What if she gets exploded like those choppers, or—"

"Little help!" El Cap, in a deep squat, was straining to hold the couch a few inches off the ground. Tindal dashed to his side and tucked a second dolly beneath it. El Cap lowered it carefully, then blew out his breath. "Damn," he said.

Tindal wanted to check on Aunty Mads but El Cap was already pushing the couch forward. Tindal danced ahead and did what he could to keep the front end pointing in the right direction. They were forced to stop in the kitchen. The back door was wide, but not Mr. Nappy wide.

"We'll have to turn it sideways," El Cap said.

"Is that even possible?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"If we can turn it sideways."

Tindal knew there was no actual we in this. El Cap took a slow breath, lowered himself into a deep knee bend, and gripped a rear leg. Then he grunted and straightened. The end of the couch came up a few feet and the big man held it there.

But to Tindal there seemed to be no progress possible from this position—a clean and jerk would not be clean, and the jerk would be painful.

"I'm behind you a hundred percent," he said.

El Cap rotated his body and shuffled his hands along so that he was holding the rear of the couch with his back to the wall. Previously reticent veins made an appearance on his neck. Sweat broke out on his forehead. Tindal couldn't remember seeing El Cap sweat before.

"Stand back," his friend said, then slammed one foot against the wall behind him. For a moment he was holding the couch aloft on one beefy leg and two beefy arms. Then he kicked off the wall and the front of the couch came down with a gentle, upholstered *poof*.

"Captain my captain!" Tindal said.

El Cap lifted his tank top, mopped his beard and face, and nodded at the bottom of the couch. "Definitely a sleeper."

The bottom was a bulging metal plate, engraved with dense whorls and loops. As Tindal stared the lines seemed to move, as if on the verge of becoming a cartoon about the dangers of LSD. "It looks..." Tindal struggled to describe the feelings stirring inside him. "...European."

"Go run around the house and get on the other side," El Cap said. "I'll push from here."

Tindal blinked away the effects of the sofa and booked it through the dining room, where the front door was still wide open. He skidded to a stop. Aunty Mads stood in the street, arms at her side, looking up with a bemused expression, like Dorothy expecting a familiar twister. Something long and gray dropped from the sky and *wham!* bashed into the pavement. Tindal jumped, but Aunty Mads didn't.

Another object hit the street, and another, a drumroll of meteor strikes. Tindal found himself on his ass, ears ringing. Aunty Mads was now surrounded by armored creatures. They looked like huge, heavily muscled dogs who'd sprouted bulbous, multilobed broccoli heads, and which in turn had extruded a dozen or so silvery tentacles.

In short, they looked exactly like Gadzooks.

★ ★ ★

Aunty Mads would tell him bedtime stories about the brave sea captain, Tindopheles, and his battles with the great and terrible Gadzooks. They were monsters—part dog, part squid—but *organized* monsters. They followed a queen, the Luminous Gadzook, and built castles and ships, and marched around in suits of armor. Many of Tindopheles's adventures involved out-talking and out-tricking them, rescuing their hostages (often handsome princes), or stealing their magic whozits and whatsits, before making his escape. Often it was not a clean getaway, and the Gadzooks would catch up to him, and Tindopheles would reluctantly arm his omni-cannons. He'd blow holes in their hulls, and the Gadzooks (weighed down

by their suits of armor) would sink like stones. This didn't kill them, because they didn't need to breathe, but did drop them to the bottom of the ocean with a long walk home.

So, to see the Gadzooks standing right in front of him, almost exactly as Aunty Mads had described, was *super* weird.

One of the Gadzooks seized Aunty Mads, pinning her arms to her sides. Tindal yelped. A bevy of Gadzook tendrils twisted in his direction.

Aunty Mads shouted a word he didn't catch.

"What?" Tindal called from the porch.

"Stick to the plan!" she said.

What plan? Moving the couch? That couldn't be it. Who cared about a couch at a time like this?

Then she shouted, "*Get them out of—*"

Tendrils engulfed her head. A second Gadzook had slammed them into her.

Tindal shouted—and was suddenly airborne for the second time that day, this time involuntarily. He was sent flying through the open door, into the living room. He bounced on the wooden floor, rolled, and kept rolling until he banged against a wall. A rusty carburetor, one of Aunty Mads's art pieces, thumped onto the ground next to him.

The front door slammed shut.

Tindal wheezed, trying to get his lungs to reinflate. What in heaven's name had just happened? Some tingly force had seized his body and thrown him into the house.

He wanted to run to the window to see if Aunty Mads was okay—but then thought better of it. *Get them out of here.* There was no arguing with that commandment; Mr. Nappy and El Capitan were now Tindal's responsibility. Aunty Mads would take care of the Gadzooks.

He rushed to the kitchen. El Cap was bent over, attempting to shove the couch through the door. It was wedged about halfway through. Then Tindal remembered that he wasn't supposed to be in the house, but on the other side, pulling.

"It sounded like artillery up there," El Cap said.

Tindal opened his mouth, closed it. He kept picturing the Gadzook grabbing Aunty Mads's head. Was she dead now? What were they doing with her?

"You okay, little buddy?" El Cap asked. "What happened?"

Tindal took a breath. "Um...a lot."

Then he forcefully shook his head—good for disguising tears. "Aunty Mads wants us to keep going. So, on three?" He put his hands against the couch. El Cap, bless him, didn't hesitate. He lined up next to Tindal and said, "One, two..."

A sharp *crack!* and Mr. Nappy seemed to leap away from them.

El Cap straightened, frowning in confusion. The door frame had split on each side. And the couch was now wedged inside the Flea Bus, snug as a burrito in a

baby's mouth.

Tindal and El Cap exchanged a look. "So...it fits," Tindal said. El Cap closed the two rear doors, and they scrambled into the cab. Mr. Nappy was pressed right up against the seats.

The Captain turned the ignition. The Flea Bus, perhaps sensing the gravity of the situation, started right up. "Where to?" El Cap asked.

Tindal blinked. "Didn't she tell you?"

El Cap slowly shook his head.

Tindal tried to remember what Aunty Mads had said. "It was...across town?"

"Tindy, my dude, we need a—whoa." He was looking past Tindal, through the passenger window. A Gadzook had stomped around the corner of the house. Its bulging head swiveled in their direction, tentacles wagging.

"That's an alien," El Cap said.

"We should go," Tindal said.

"Agreed."

The Captain did complicated things with his feet and hands. The Flea Bus lurched forward, and then turned away from the alien. They churned out of Aunty Mads's yard and into the neighbor's.

"Weber!" Tindal called, but El Cap had already seen it. The truck plunged between the Weber propane grill and an above-ground pool. Lawn chairs clattered off the bumper and went flying. The bus's front wheels thumped over the curb, onto a street, and El Cap cranked the wheel. The truck tipped on heavy springs. Tindal made a high keening sound he was not proud of and jammed a hand to the roof to stop himself from sliding into El Cap's lap. Then the side of the bus whomped down and El Cap aimed the bus between the rows of parked cars, heading south at what seemed to be the bus's top speed, 45 kph.

"Is it following us?" El Cap asked.

Tindal leaned out the window. There was nothing behind them. "All—" The Gadzook charged out of the side yard and landed in the street. "—not clear." The alien juked easily on those four feet and started galloping after them.

"Go faster," Tindal suggested. The alien, head-tendrils whipping angrily, was rapidly gaining on them. Then a bang shook the truck.

Tindal pulled in his head and looked into the cargo area, past Mr. Nappy. One of the rear doors had been pulled free. The Gadzook held the door in several tendrils while still running. Then it tossed the door aside and grabbed the bus's empty frame. Tindal screamed.

And then the creature...came apart.

One moment the Gadzook was hauling itself into the cargo area; the next a dark blur zipped from right to left in the air outside the bus, and *plink!* the dog body detached from its thick neck. The torso tumbled in the bus's wake, somersaulting across the pavement, legs flailing. The gray broccoli head, however,

held tight to the doorframe, while its neck stump convulsed like a fish, fanning dark liquid into the air behind the bus. Tindal opened his mouth to follow up his first scream, but before he managed a sound he was distracted by another blur in the air. Suddenly the Gadzook's head divided in two, also with a cheery *plink!*

Dark blood—or motor oil, impossible to say—sprayed the roof. The head lost its grip on the doorframe and bounced away like a tentacled bowling ball.

El Cap frowned at the side mirror, speechless. Tindal couldn't figure out what had happened, either.

The street T'd. El Cap swung right, then had to brake to a stop. The intersection ahead was solid with creeping traffic. El Cap leaned out his window and got the attention of a middle-aged driver in a middle-aged Volvo. "Can I? Okay?" The driver allowed the Flea Bus to edge crosswise into the avenue. "Thanks!" El Cap called. "Sorry! Thanks!" He steered the bus to the other side and sped away—"sped" being an extremely relative term.

"I still don't know where we're going," El Cap said. "We could head north with everyone else."

"The spaceship came from the south and was heading north," Tindal said. "So go south?"

"But then it stopped at Aunty Mads's. Now it could be heading back to the waterfront."

Aargh! Such a conundrum. Tindal realized he'd been absent-mindedly rubbing the arm of the couch. It felt nice. "Maybe we should just take it back to your house. Or we could—"

The hand of physics, citing the rules of momentum, shoved Tindal into the dashboard; the Captain had slammed on the brakes. A quartet of Gadzooks stood in the middle of the street, half a block away. Judging from the impact craters beneath their feet, they'd just landed. Their tendrils were aimed at them, and the tips of several of those wriggly arms were glowing bright orange.

"Do they have guns in those things, too?" El Cap asked.

"In the stories they had flintlock pistols, but maybe?!"

"What stories?"

One of the tendrils erupted in light. The air in front of the Flea Bus flared white...and then faded, leaving behind the smell of burnt toast. The Gadzooks were still standing in the street, though now their arms seemed agitated.

Tindal couldn't understand why they were still alive. Was that a warning shot?

"Back up?" Tindal suggested. Then: "Never mind."

The blur had returned.

The fast-moving smudge dashed between and through the bodies. Gadzook heads popped from necks like dandelion bulbs. Limbs flew. The sprays of blood were horrific but also a bit bombastic, almost show-offy. Were Gadzook suits of

armor pressurized? These space dogs were going off like hot, heavily shaken beer cans.

Within seconds, all four of the aliens lay in pieces across the road. The blur hovered over them, as if admiring its work.

El Cap said, "Is that...?"

The blur zipped toward them. Tindal ducked, but the blur swooped past the windshield, over their heads, and then—*sha-ring!*—cut through the roof of the Flea Bus.

It was in the vehicle with them, hovering at eye level in the L of the couch. It was so flat that it would have been invisible if not for the faint red glow that surrounded it.

"Sucky!" Tindal said.

"Let's get one thing straight," the vacuum cleaner said. "If you call me that again, I will cut you in half."

★ ★ ★

Tindal, in a state of bogglement, shut up. The appliance floated to the dashboard, turned in place, and started issuing driving instructions—which El Cap obeyed. They zigged and zagged through the neighborhood, but were heading mostly westward.

"So what *is* your name?" Tindal asked.

"You wouldn't be able to pronounce my full name," it said. "You may call me Surokar Kedissear Vanteen Tev Vanteen."

"So I was close."

The machine's aura flashed scarlet.

"Where are we going, uh, Surokar?" El Cap asked. "And also, why are these guys chasing us?"

"The Gadzik aren't after you, they're after the Neoton."

Tindal frowned. "The exercise bike?"

"That's a Peloton," El Cap said helpfully.

"The *couch*," Surokar said. "Fortunately for you, its defenses have kicked in. Its baffle field makes us invisible to their ship's sensors. Eventually they'll figure out what we've done, at which point they'll start tracking us visually. When they spot us they'll drop a thousand marines on top of us."

"That sounds bad," Tindal said.

"It is. A dozen or so seconds of thrilling combat will ensue, during which you boys will be, hopefully, killed instantly."

"Thanks?" El Cap said.

"Can we go with not killed at all?" Tindal asked.

"Oh, you don't want that," the machine said. "If you're alive you'll be taken to their ship, interrogated, and tortured until they learn, pretty much instantly, that you're human morons who have no usable information, at which point they'll keep torturing you because A, they're good at it; B, they take pride in their work; and C, their religion demands it. Gadzik marines take umbrage at any lesser species who'd dare to kill them in the streets, much less kill five of them."

"But you killed them," El Cap pointed out.

"The Gadzik aren't into splitting hairs. Turn right at the stoplight."

"You keep saying it wrong," Tindal said. "It's Gadzook. Gadzook marines."

The machine made a noise that might have been an electronic sigh. "Tindal, please consider the possibility that the person you call Aunty Mads may have given them a funny, unthreatening name because you're a child."

"You mean I *was* a—"

"Nope."

"Ouch," El Cap said.

"And what do you mean, the person I called Aunty Mads?" Tindal asked. "What do *you* call her?"

"Just Mad."

Tindal squinted. "When you say *Just Mad*, do you mean, *Just Mad*, or just *Mad*?"

"Just Mad."

"Hate to interrupt," El Cap said, "but, uh, you know."

"We've got to go back to the house and rescue Aunty Mads," Tindal said.

"Don't be ridiculous," Surokar said. "She's already on their ship. It's climbing now into the upper atmosphere as we speak, but they won't leave orbit until they've found the Neoton."

"Can we just give them the couch?" El Cap asked.

"No!" Tindal cried.

"That's the first reasonable thing that's come out of your mouth," Surokar said.

"I don't understand why they want a sofa," El Cap said.

"The sofa is a Neoton, a complex—"

"Everybody shush!" Tindal said. To the machine he said, "Are they going to torture Aunty Mads?"

"You're clearly not listening," Surokar said. "It's probably already begun. They want to force her to find the Neoton and disable its defenses so they can have their way with it. But don't worry. She won't break. She's a custom-grown, gene-fixed, neuro-optimized citizen of the Bloom."

"A what of a what?" El Cap asked.

But Tindal had stopped listening. His eyes had filled with tears and his throat had closed.

El Cap put a hand on his back, but said nothing. He always knew the right thing not to say.

"We have to—to rescue her," Tindal said through a hiccupping breath.

"The only thing we're going to do," Surokar said, "is follow the plan."

Tindal stared at the machine. "She was talking to you." He palmed the tears from his eyes. "When she said stick to the plan, I thought she was talking to me, but—"

"I was just behind you, ready to annihilate the Gadzik landing party where they stood. Unfortunately, Mad insisted that I get the Neoton and you two out of the area."

"So you shoved me into the house," Tindal said. "And then you went around and yanked the couch through the door and into the bus."

"Point to the meat brain," the machine said. That was something Aunty Mads was always saying: Point to you, point to me.

"But how did you move it?" El Cap said. "You don't have any arms, or..."

"Magnets," Surokar said.

"I knew it," Tindal said.

The machine flashed red. "I don't have time to explain field technology to you. See that sign for the park? Turn in there."

The Flea Bus coasted down a steep, thickly wooded parkway, headed for the water. Tindal could not stop thinking about Aunty Mads. What were they doing to her? And how were Tindal and El Cap going to rescue her?

The machine told El Cap to keep going through the parking lot, onto one of the paved walkways. El Cap wasn't happy about the motorized trespassing, or the angry looks from the park visitors. (Which—really? Tindal thought. An alien invasion in progress but you're not going to cancel your picnic?)

They drove out onto a peninsula, where the walkway curved around the point like a keyhole. "Stop here," Surokar said. "And don't go anywhere." The machine zipped through the passenger window and then scooted low over the blue-green water. Tindal, squinting through a windshield freckled with Gadzook blood, lost sight of it immediately.

A minute passed. The Flea Bus's engine rumbled. Tindal sat back in his seat and contemplated the heaviness in his chest.

"So," El Cap said. "Aunty Mads is an alien, too."

"Checks out," Tindal replied. He'd always thought she was kind of amazing. He just couldn't understand why she'd let the Gadzooks capture her like that. *I'm going to go take care of this* she'd told him, but that had been another lie to make him feel better.

Together they stared out through the windshield.

"And another thing," Tindal said. "Why is Sucky so, you know..."

"Homicidal?" El Cap offered.

“Mean.”

El Cap pulled at his beard. “We can dump and run, my dude. If they want the Neo-couch, let them have it.”

Tindal shook his head. “Aunty Mads asked us to take care of it. We really should have asked Sucky why they want it so bad.”

But El Cap’s attention had moved to the lake. A few hundred yards away, the surface of the water bulged, and a large something burped into the air and hung there—a blueish egg the size of a local bank, decorated with silvery fins. Water sheeted from it as if it were capped by an invisible umbrella.

Tindal and El Cap exchanged a look. Was this good news or bad news?

The egg glided toward them, over the surf, and hovered in front of the bus. The front of it folded open, exposing a gleaming white interior, and a small levitating robot.

“Don’t just sit there with your ape mouths agape!” Surokar shouted. “Let’s go!” The remaining rear door of the Flea Bus flew open, and the couch levitated out. Six minutes later they were in space.

Prologue

(Some time ago)

::So, we're a hotel now?::

"Don't be a grump. Hand me the teapot, would you?"

::It was bad enough when he was popping in all the time, and now he's sleeping over?::

"Teapot?"

::Ask me in your real language. You've got a transmitter in your head. Use it::

"Fine, I'll get it myself."

::You're going native, Mads. Going soft::

"Soft natives are the worst."

::You've been separated from yourself too long. You're stuck in that absurdly limited meat body, cut off from your true self. It's as if—::

"Good riddance."

::—you're *trying* to forget who you are::

"No chance of that, unfortunately."

::You turned your Neoton into a couch::

"An adorable, comfy couch."

::I don't know what's worse, you speaking English all the time, or allowing some barely sentient Dickensian waif to drool all over the most advanced mind within a thousand light years::

"Dickensian? Why Surokar, you've been reading their books."

::What choice do I have? We've been stuck here for decades. I'm bored silly::

"Also, Tindal's not a waif. He's just a child in a bad situation who could use a little help."

::That's the exact definition of waif::

"Point to the vacuum cleaner."

::You've made him dependent on you. You never should have interfered in his life::

"That thug could have killed him. He'd already broken his arm. What would you have me do?"

::Call an ambulance—anonously. Keep your head down. Don't beat up on the locals. And certainly don't bring children into the house and knit their fractures with technology that shouldn't exist on this planet::

"I just wish I had the tech to do something about this terrible tea. Do you think I can grow something in the backyard that tastes at all like elanthus?"

::You're changing the subject::

"What *is* the subject?"

::Your questionable decision-making. You seem to think you're helping the boy when you're doing the opposite::

"How so?"

::Filling his head with fables, for one. If you're going to tell him about the war, at least tell him the truth::

"You want me to tell him what I am? What happened to keeping my head down?"

::I didn't say tell him the facts, I said tell him the *truth*. He should know how scary the universe is. The world isn't some fairy tale where he's the hero and the good guys always win::

"He already knows that. He's not even nine years old and he's seen enough horror. You've seen his mother in action. No, let him have a happy ending or two."

::The war's not over, Mads. The Gadzik refuse to surrender::

"So you've been listening to the passive feed."

::One of us has to. They've resorted to guerilla warfare, picking off small Bloom ships. But the general opinion is that they're rearming for another major offensive::

"That'll be somebody else's fight."

::What the Bloom needs is you::

"Do they still think I'm dead?"

::Define they. If you're talking about your fellow ships, the consensus is that you're gone. They can't imagine you allowing yourself to be captured, *or* staying out of the war voluntarily, so...::

"That's just a lack of imagination."

::The Gadzik, however, are unconvinced. They're still searching for you. They found the wreckage, but the dearth of Neoton-quality exotic materials raised suspicions::

"Hmph. I thought the fragments I left behind were quite convincing."

::The Thirteenth Gadzik Instantiation runs on zeal, not logic::

"I was hoping...well. It doesn't matter what I hoped."

::The Most Luminous Mare wants to try you for war crimes::

"Sure she does. A lot of people in the Bloom would, too."

::Nonsense. You did what you had to do. What no one else *could* do. And they still—::

★ ★ ★

"Here we go. Is it time for the monthly pitch meeting?"

::You should be rebuilding yourself. Right now you could have factory bots in close orbit to their little yellow sun, generating exotics for your hull. In a few years you could bootstrap yourself into fighting shape, better than before, even::

"I'm retired, Surokar."

::Are you sure all of you is retired?::

"The Neoton's staying dormant."

::Why don't you wake it up and ask it?::

"Watch yourself."

::I apologize, but I'm worried that you're not thinking clearly::

"See, that doesn't sound apologetic."

::What if you die? You're tough, but one of these humans could get in a lucky shot::

"That's why you're here."

::Please, Mads. If you become incapacitated, I can't unlock the Neoton. And the Bloom needs everyone back in the fight::

"You want to stop being a ghost, be my guest. Take the shuttle. All I ask is that you don't send a signal homeward until you're well out of range of this planet."

::Who are you hiding from—the Gadzik or your fellow ships?::

"Yes."

::Ha. You disappoint me, Mads::

"Now who's being funny?"

::You can't hide forever::

"I can hide for a damn long— Hey, kiddo. What are you doing up?"

"Who are you talking to?"

"Nobody."

"BLEEP BLOOP."

"Hi, Sucky!"

"Come on, little man. What do you need, a drink of water? Let's get you taken care of, then tuck you back into Mr. Nappy."

★ ★ ★

Six hours later they were still in space.

On any other day, Tindal thought, a trip on a spaceship would have been a mind-shattering turn of events. Today it ranked fourth, maybe fifth. The Earth,

which had filled the big, curved window at the start of the trip, had steadily shrunk as they flew away, transitioning as smoothly as a special effect in a sci-fi movie, and not a Canadian movie, either, but an American blockbuster. Now their home planet had disappeared.

Tindal sat on Mr. Nappy, holding his head in his hands. The sofa was the most comfortable seat in the cabin and by far the most colorful. The rest of the ship, which Sucky said was not a ship at all but merely a shuttle, seemed to be one contiguous surface, with helpful bumps and recesses, like a walk-in shower. The color palette leaned heavily into the Ikea catalog, with lots of piney browns and crips whites.

El Capitan explored every chamber, and then finally came back to the main cabin bearing cups and plates loaded with various shapes.

"I found food," he said.

"I *made* food," Surokar corrected. The machine was floating above a perfectly blank countertop it insisted was the control panel. When they left the planet it was pretty braggy about how, thanks to its excellent manipulation of the baffle fields, the Gadzook ship hadn't noticed their escape from the planet. But it had refused to answer any of their questions or even tell them where they were going, "in case they were captured."

El Cap crouched down in front of Tindal. "You should eat, buddy."

"No thanks."

"Come on. This triangle one tastes like pumpkin."

"He'll eat eventually," Surokar said. "We'll be in here for a while."

"How long?" El Cap asked.

"Twenty-two days, give or take."

"*What?*" Tindal said. "You said it was a short trip!"

"I said it was a relatively short trip," Surokar said.

"The Flea Bus is for sure going to get towed," El Cap said.

"I wouldn't worry about the vehicle," Surokar said. "There's a good chance the Gadzik will nuke Toronto, or set the atmosphere on fire, or snap a black hole into the center of your planet, destroying it completely. The bus, in other words, is toast."

"Why would they do that?" Tindal yelled. "What did we do?"

"If Mads doesn't tell them what they want to know—and she won't—they'll eventually start breaking things, just to see if they can get the Neoton to reveal itself."

"But *why* do they want Mr. Nappy?" Tindal asked. "You can tell us now. We're not going anywhere and the Gadzooks are behind us."

The machine's aura flickered through a variety of oranges and yellows, then settled into resigned, mottled brown. It floated out into the middle of the cabin.

"I'm only going to present this exposition once," the robot said, "and I will not be taking questions."

To understand our current situation, it said, you had to understand the Bloom—a vast yet thinly distributed civilization roughly nine thousand years old by the human timescale, yet a dewy-cheeked adolescent, galactically speaking. It wasn't an empire or a republic or any kind of government Earthlings had conceived of, but more a kind of group project whose members were several trillion (mostly) humanoid organics, a smaller number of machine intelligences, and an even smaller number of Neotons. These last beings were mind-blowingly clever intelligences embodied in ships and orbitals who, Surokar explained, kept things running, as far as anyone could tell, because they seemed to enjoy it. Bloom citizens, organic and inorganic alike, tended to be ethical hedonists: self-consciously rational, skeptical, materialist, and all-around good sports. The society they created was a moneyless communistic utopia with infinite resources, without poverty, disease, or even discomfort, except as one chose to be uncomfortable, and many did, because it could be interesting. In the Bloom, everything mattered and nothing did.

"Sounds nice," El Cap said.

"Don't interrupt," Surokar said. "But yes."

So nice, in fact, that other galactic civilizations—like, say, the Thirteenth Gadzik Instantiation, an empire built on religious exceptionalism and divinely sanctioned expansionism—sometimes concluded that the Bloom was so decadent, so fat and happy, so *soft* that it practically begged to be dominated. They'd eye those vast Bloom ships and those giant orbitals chock-full of self-indulgent pleasure-seekers and think, *That's quite enough of that.*

"But here's the thing they all learn eventually, Earthlings..." Surokar's aura flashed a devious orange. "If you fuck with the Bloom, the Bloom fucks back."

In a society made up of hedonists, especially of the ethical flavor, the distasteful business of defending the flock from the galactic wolves fell to a certain class of citizen—eccentrics, oddities, high-minded sociopaths—with a talent for dirty tricks and an ability to handle special circumstances. *Someone* had to assassinate foreign heads of state, rig elections, subvert dynasties, demoralize the populace, instigate civil wars, seed doubt, instill fear, sow chaos, and generally undermine the Bloom's enemies before they became a serious threat.

"So Bloom's a communist utopia..." Tindal slowly said. "...that also does terrible things?"

"Life is complicated," the machine said.

"And the Gadzik found out they were being messed with," El Cap said.

"The origins of the conflict are murky."

"So yes," El Cap said.

The hot war with the Thirteenth Gadzik Instantiation began almost a hundred years ago, Surokar explained, when the Gadzik stormed an orbital on the fringes of the Bloom. Bad news all around. The Bloom tried to respond, but they were vastly outnumbered. The Gadzik had for years poured all available resources into the machinery of war. Their leader, the Most Luminous Mare, declared the Bloom to be evil, and once so declared, their religion allowed them no moral off-ramps, no way to deescalate. They built warship after warship. They conscripted every citizen who might serve. And then they swarmed us. They drowned us in their own blood. It was holy.

The Bloom's Neotons, as brilliant as they were, couldn't fathom this level of zealotry. They weren't ready for total war. Most of its ships were also homes to its citizens, not warships. The Neotons reluctantly concluded that if they were to survive, the Bloom would have to become a different kind of society. They created new factory ships, which in turn birthed outrageously beweaponed, ridiculously fast warships. The Neotons chosen to inhabit them were tactically brilliant, morally flexible, and willing to do anything in defense of their fellow citizens. And then they were set loose upon the Gadzik.

"The ship I served on," Surokar said, "was a Shredder-class corvette named *I'm Not Disappointed Just Mad*."

Tindal sat up. "The what-what?"

"There were no organics on board," the robot continued. "The high-G maneuvers alone would have turned them to pulp. The crew consisted of me and three other machines, but we had almost nothing to do. The *Just Mad* didn't need us. It became the deadliest Bloom ship ever to enter the war. The Neoton was so efficient, so vicious, that it worried even the other warships."

Tindal looked down at the couch, then slowly, slowly stood up.

"In the first three years of combat," Surokar continued, "the *Just Mad* ripped apart twenty-two Gadzik warships and an untold number of lesser vehicles. It sliced open their hulls, peeled the sailors from their armor, yanked them into the vacuum of space, and left their flash-frozen corpses floating in its wake. And still —"

"Can we—?" Tindal asked.

"—*still* it wasn't enough. The Gadzik sent ship after ship against us. They were so sure that their god was on their side. The Thirteenth Instantiation had never lost a war. Their home world had never been attacked by an alien species; the walls of their nest temples had never been breached. Generations of Gadzik children grew up assured of their divine status. Their victories were proof of its favor."

"Can we back up a bit?" Tindal pleaded. All his clothes felt too tight. "The Neoton you're talking about—that's Mr. Nappy?"

"What you see is just the smallest part of it, its anchor in normal space. Almost all of its mass—millions of kilotons—exists in excession-space."

"I thought it was heavy," El Cap said.

Tindal said, "So Aunt Mads, she was part of the crew?"

"I've already told you," the machine said, "there were no organics with us. The woman you know as Aunt Mads didn't exist then. I grew her body in a vat when we reached Earth."

"A *vat*?"

"She's an *avatar*, Tindal. A biological expression of the ship. And yet, fundamentally, she is the ship."

"No way," Tindal said. "Aunt Mads wouldn't do that stuff. I mean, come on..."

"You have no idea what the *Just Mad* is capable of," the machine said. "The Gadzik didn't, either."

"What did she do to them?" El Cap asked. "I mean *it*. The ship."

Did she hurt little kids? Tindal thought.

The robot hesitated. "All that matters is what's happening now," it said finally. "We're going to crawl our way back to Bloom space and install this dormant mind in a new body. Hopefully its fellow Neotons will figure out how to wake it up."

"Mr. Nappy is sleeping?" Tindal asked.

"Sleeper couch," El Cap said, nodding.

"It's in lockdown mode," Surokar said. "Bare minimum functions, automatic defenses. Why do you think Mads forced you into moving it when the Gadzik showed up? She knew it would—uh oh." The machine zipped back to the blank console.

El Cap frowned at Tindal, then looked back at the robot. "Uh oh?"

Surokar's lights flashed orange and red. "They found us. That's not possible."

"Who found us?" Tindal asked. "The Gadzooks?"

"GET ON THE NEOTON!" Surokar's voice seemed to blast from every surface at once, the volume set to 1986 Metallica. "THE COUCH!"

Tindal, standing on the far side of the room, was paralyzed. Settling into Mr. Nappy seemed like exactly the opposite of the appropriate thing to do, namely running and panicking.

"NOW!"

Tindal was sent flying. He slammed into the sofa's deep cushions, and a moment later El Cap landed beside him. This telekinesis thing, Tindal thought, was never not going to be terrible.

Surokar hovered in front of them. "Whatever you do—"

A brilliant beam of light sliced through the hull, and the robot exploded into shrapnel.

"SUCKY!" Tindal screamed.

The beam swung back toward the couch and the world went white. Tindal squinted against the glare. It was the same flash that had surrounded the Flea Bus when the Gadzooks had shot them.

Then the glare vanished, and the shuttle was gone. No, not gone; shattered. The pieces spun furiously away from them into the dark. The complete lack of sound was frightening.

"You're bleeding," El Cap said.

Tindal put a hand to his ear and his fingers came away bloody. Am I deaf now? he thought. Then he remembered that El Cap had just spoken to him. Somehow they were still breathing, still alive—while in naked space, on a couch.

Tindal pulled up his legs and gripped his knees.

Mr. Nappy slowly tumbled, showing them new angles on the glittering destruction racing away from them. And then suddenly the Gadzook ship was above them like a new planet.

Afterword

I'm so sorry, Tindal. Why am I putting you through this? Why am I telling this story?

On the bookcase next to my writing desk is a shelf filled entirely with the works of Iain Banks and Iain M. Banks—one man with two names. I've read every book he's written, except one. He died in 2013.

I never got to meet him. He was a drinker, an activist, a tale-teller, and a famous maniac. I've met friends of his and heard stories secondhand, like the one about the night he crashed his Porsche, or the night he climbed the outside of the hotel at the Brighton Worldcon. I would have loved to have had a whiskey with him and heard him tell these stories in person.

But I don't think I'd have had the courage to tell him how much his books meant to me. I certainly wouldn't have told him that I so admired his work that my wife and I named our son after him. That's a little too stalker-y.

When I was in college, a friend who knew I wanted to be a writer handed me Banks's first novel, *The Wasp Factory*, and said, I think you're gonna like this. Oh, I did, Tindal. It lit me up. I couldn't believe how daring and strange it was. And then, a few years later, I read *Consider Phlebas*, the first of his space operas about a society called the Culture. It was as if someone had taken all the musty space empires from Heinlein and Clarke and Asimov I'd absorbed over the years and spun them into jazz. I wanted to be a writer, but I didn't know how to write like *that*. Where did he learn to do such things?*

His books don't exist in your world, Tindal, so a few details: the Culture novels are science fiction, set in a post-scarcity communistic utopia spread thinly over the galaxy, and kept running by powerful AIs called Minds, for the benefit of humanoid and machine citizens. Maybe that kind of thing sounds familiar to you, now. I changed their names for both artistic and legal reasons.

If Banks were alive I wouldn't have written this story. I wouldn't have needed to. But as I type this, it's been almost exactly ten years since he died of gallbladder cancer. *Cancer*. All those sportscars he drove fast around the switchbacks of Scotland, and the universe couldn't see fit to let him die in a fiery crash, at the age of ninety-eight? He was robbed of a suitable death, and decades of life, and we were robbed of the many books he'd yet to write.

I'm sorry, Tindal. Was this too sentimental? This story was supposed to be a lark. A bit of fun to pay homage to my favorite writer. But here's this mopey afterword, jammed into the middle of the text. And the rest of the story gets darker than I intended. But that seems appropriate, too. Banks never shied away from violence and tragedy. He wrote a book called *Against a Dark Background* which lives up to the title. And then there's the appalling twist in *Use of Weapons*, or the regretful, war-shaken Mind at the heart of his saddest book, *Look to Windward*.

The one existing novel of his that I haven't read is *The Quarry*—the last one he wrote. It's sitting right there, a few feet from my desk. I may not be able to live in a utopia, but I can make sure I live in a world where there's one more Iain Banks book waiting for me.

Okay, enough of this. But before we resume, I just want to say, Tindal, that I'm sorry about what happened to Aunt Mads. I would have changed it if I could.

★ ★ ★

Tindal was too sad to fully take pleasure in the fact that he was still alive. Hours ago the Gadzook ship had slurped up the couch out of space, Tindal and El Cap still on it, and deposited them in its very large, very metallic belly. No one came to greet them and/or torture them.

Mr. Nappy seemed to be floating a foot or so off the floor. Even if Tindal had been brave enough to hop off the couch (which he wasn't), he wouldn't have been able to. The sofa was surrounded by a hard, invisible bubble. El Cap had helpfully mapped out the contours of this barrier with his hands, standing up on the cushions, reaching down below their feet. They were trapped.

Sometime later, a distant hatch opened, and half a dozen Gadzooks wheeled in a large gun-like device, Kirby-esque in bulk and detail, with a gaping mouth that they aimed at the couch. It looked a lot like the way Tindal had imagined the omni-cannon.

After much fussing with nobs and levers, the Gadzooks fired. The noise was tremendous. Tindal shouted, of course. But the beam struck the couch's bubble, briefly turning the world white, and then...nothing. Tindal and El Cap and Mr. Nappy were unscathed.

One of the Gadzooks cantered forward, waved its tentacles about, and clip-clopped back to the machine. The crew made several adjustments to the device and fired again.

This went on for quite some time. Eventually, however, the marines gave up. They pushed the cannon out of the way and marched out.

Tindal curled up in a ball at one end of the couch. The inside of his right ear still stung as if it had been jabbed with a metal Q-tip, but at least he'd stopped

bleeding. He was thirsty and also hungry. If he'd known what was coming, he thought, he would have eaten El Cap's pumpkin triangle. Heck, he would have scoured his apartment for his Tim Hortons red velvet cookie!

"So are they just going to starve us to death?" he complained.

"Hard to say," El Cap answered. He was sitting upright, his feet resting on the bubble.

Maybe Sucky was the lucky one, Tindal thought. The machine had been exploded instantly, presumably without pain.

El Cap tapped Tindal on the shoulder. More Gadzooks had entered the metal belly, just four of them this time. One of them carried what looked like a rolled-up rug, and another gripped a long golden staff.

The Gadzook with the staff marched forward, reared back, and butted its head against the forcefield. Then again. Each strike made a decorous thump. Did he think he'd succeed where the omni-cannon had failed? Or was this some kind of ritual?

"I'm sorry," Tindal said to the alien. "We can't turn it off."

The Gadzook's tentacles flexed, and its metal head popped off. Correction, it's metal *helmet*. The face inside was long and equine, deeply furred. Aunty Mads's stories had not prepared him for that. Nubby, fingerlike antlers protruded from its skull. It looked like Bambi, though the eye stalks were a little alarming. Each pupil was glossy black.

The Gadzook smacked the bottom of the staff against the ground, and the image of another Gadzook appeared in front of it. A hologram! This remote-Gadzook was unarmored and unclothed, but not naked: it was covered in yellow-white fur that had been blow-dried into a luscious shag. Its many antlers were chubby and drooping.

Tindal recognized the creature. It could be none other than the Luminous Gadzook.

The Luminous made a noise, a kind of gentle bleat. The Gadzook holding the carpet roll dumped his burden onto the ground. The sack unrolled partially, and a pale human arm extended out of it.

"Aunty Mads?" Tindal said.

The Luminous bleated more loudly. Then again.

The other three marines crouched low, and two of them removed their helmets. They were all gorgeous. "Do you speak Gadzook?" El Cap asked Tindal.

From the floor came a faint laugh. Tindal leaned over the edge of the cushion and looked down. The hand pushed aside the cloth. It was Aunty Mads. Her face was misshapen by bruises. Her hair was matted with blood.

"Gadzooks," she said. "Heh." A few teeth were missing from her smile.

"What did they do to you?" Tindal asked, though of course he could see it on her face.

One of the marines bleated forcefully. Mads ignored him. "My legs aren't working at the moment," she said. "But otherwise fine. I turned off my pain receptors an hour ago." She pushed herself onto one elbow. "Where's Surokar?"

"Umm..."

Don't say I'm alive.

Tindal yelped. The voice, which sounded a lot like the robot, had come from inside his head. "You're alive?"

Aunty Mads's eyes narrowed.

What did I just say? Tindal's jaw vibrated with each syllable.

"They blew him up," El Cap explained to Aunty Mads. "We're sorry."

"Well damn," she answered. After a pause she said, "I never meant for you boys to be here. I'll try to get you out of this mess."

The marine lunged forward and kicked with a front leg. Aunty Mads's head snapped back. Tindal jumped from the couch and smacked the invisible barrier. "Leave her alone!" he shouted.

Calm down, Surokar said.

Now the Luminous was bleating at Aunty Mads, and she was answering him in some kind of non-bleat, yet non-English language.

Tindal sat down again and whispered, "How are you alive? Where are you?"

I'm in your ear canal. When the G's attacked I detached my core and hid inside you.

"Ew."

I'm not happy about it either.

"What do we do?"

First, shut up. They can understand you.

Tindal ducked his chin and pretended to wipe at his mouth. Very quietly he said, "They know English?"

Please. All they had to do was sample the planet's airwaves for five seconds.

"Can you translate what they're saying, for me?"

You insult me.

"So yes?"

Surokar buzzed something like a sigh. *The Most Luminous Mare thinks you and El Capitan are operatives who can disable the Neoton field. Mads is trying to explain that you're just dupes—local yokels—who were accidentally enveloped when the Neoton's defenses kicked in.*

Aunty Mads spat a glob of blood but then continued to talk in that strange language.

I don't think the Luminous believes her, Surokar vibrated. *She says someone on Earth alerted the Gadzik to the Neoton's location.*

"What?"

Shush. And that someone signaled them a second time when the shuttle was escaping. That's how they found us.

"But—"

Aunty Mads seemed angry now. "It wasn't the humanoids," she said in English. Her voice was slurred. "It was the fucking machine." The Luminous made a querying noise. "Because it wanted me back in the war," Aunty Mads said. "It wanted to force my fucking hand."

The Luminous Mare made noises that Tindal interpreted as laughter, the mean girl kind.

Tindal rubbed at his jaw to disguise the next question. "You betrayed Aunty Mads?" he whispered to Surokar.

Don't be ridiculous.

"Then what is she talking about?" Tindal whispered. He needed to think this through.

I didn't tell the Gadzik where we were. They tried to destroy me, remember? I'm trying to rescue you, meat brain.

"Point," Tindal said.

El Cap leaned close. "Who are you talking to? Are you on Bluetooth?"

"Tooth maybe?" Tindal realized he could talk to Surokar by talking aloud to El Cap. "How are you going to rescue us?"

El Cap said, "I don't know, buddy."

I can't do much in this state, the machine answered, but if the field went down, I could take out these guards.

"Great!"

Not great. The Neoton senses it's inside an enemy ship, so the field will stay on. Only Mads can override its defense protocols, but she won't do that, because she's trying to keep you fragiles alive.

Aunty Mads had levered herself onto one elbow, talking urgently to the Luminous. Her voice sounded garbled, distorted by her injuries. Working through the damage, Tindal thought, and working her own plan. But the Luminous was angrily bleating back at her, interrupting.

"What are they saying?" Tindal asked.

"No idea," El Cap said.

I'm not translating this.

"What? Why not?" Tindal said.

You don't need to know what the Gadzik think of the Just Mad. All you need to know is that the ship did what it thought was necessary.

"But—"

This isn't one of her bedtime stories, Tindal.

Tindal fell back against the cushions. Aunty Mads had stopped speaking, and the hologram was shouting at her now. The marines' tendrils flicked back and

forth, agitated.

It ought to be one of her stories, Tindal thought. That's all he wanted, really. He wanted to be back in Aunty Mads's house, sitting on this ridiculously comfortable couch, listening to her explain how everything work out.

The marine still wearing a helmet stepped forward and pressed a gun-tendrill against Aunty Mads's forehead.

"Hey!" Tindal shouted. He stood up on the cushions and raised his hands. "Gad—ziks!" he said. Words were coming out but his brain was struggling to keep up. "My name is Tindopheles! And I can give you what you want!" The Luminous hologram halted mid-bleat. The marine holding the staff turned it, and the hologram looked at him.

Tindal thought, What *do* they want?

"Hey buddy," El Cap said soothingly. "Maybe don't antagonize the space alpaca?"

And then the answer came to him. Tindal looked into the furred face of the Luminous Mare and said, "I can turn off the Neoton's defense field."

"What are you doing?" Aunty Mads asked softly. Her left eye had started to swell shut, the result of that Gadzik hoof.

Tindal looked down at her. He put on a smile that he hoped was confident. "What Tindopheles always does," he said. "Talk fast." And trick the Gadzooks, he thought, then escape with the prince and steal their magical whatsit.

You're going to get us all killed.

"You can have the Neoton," he told the Luminous, ignoring the tiny vacuum cleaner. "Blow it up if you want. Whatever it did, it probably deserved it. All I ask is that you allow me and my fellow avatar to return to Earth."

"Um..." El Cap said.

"Oh, and my loyal captain. Him too."

The Luminous bleated. And bleated some more.

"Sucky?" Tindal said under his breath.

Fine. He says only the avatar can deactivate the field. He knows how Bloom ships work.

"Yes," Tindal said. "Right." His heart was beating fast. What would Tindopheles do?

They're tired of this. They're going to kill her.

"Wait!" Tindal said. "Who said there was just one avatar?"

The Luminous snorted.

"You want me to prove it?" Tindal raised a fist. "The field's going off in one..." He pointed. "Two..." He locked eyes with Aunty Mads. Or rather, eye. Her left one had completely closed, now. But even battered and bruised, Tindal thought, she was beautiful. "Three?"

He stepped off the cushion—and onto the floor. The bubble had disappeared.

The Luminous hologram gazed down at him with eyes like wet river stones. It bleated something, and one of the marines nodded.

Their dampener's on. The field can't come back on while we're inside their ship.

Tindal took a breath. Held it.

The Luminous Mare leaned toward Tindal. Up close the hologram was very high-res, almost solid looking. It made a soft sound.

"What did she say?" Tindal asked.

Kill them all.

The next sound Tindal heard was a loud pop. "Ow!" He clapped a hand over his ear.

The helmeted marine whose gun had been aimed at Aunty Mads suddenly began to shake its head back and forth. Its front knees folded, and then it collapsed sideways.

A second marine bowed and tried to grab its helmet with its antlers. A hole blossomed in its neck. Dark blood—definitely not motor oil—jetted from it.

The marine holding the staff made an alarmed noise, and the Luminous vanished. Tindal grabbed the staff. The Gadzik shook it violently, trying to pull it free, but Tindal held on like a desperate Chihuahua. "Little help!" Tindal called. "Little help!"

"Dude," El Cap said. Two of the Gadzik's eye tendrils swung toward the big man, just in time to see a huge fist smash into its oblong face. The creature stumbled backward, tripped over its back feet, and flopped to the ground, unconscious. "Sorry," El Cap said, sincerely.

Tindal looked around. While they'd been busy with the staff guy, Surokar had knife-missiled through the fourth marine. They were unguarded, for now.

Tindal crouched next to Aunty Mads, still holding the golden staff. "Are you okay?"

"Not great." Her mouth barely moved.

"I got their magic stick!"

"Good job, kiddo."

El Cap knelt beside her. He unfolded part of the wrap that had covered her. Her clothes from belly to thighs were damp with blood. Tindal jerked back, and then was immediately ashamed of his reaction.

"Run," she said.

A fly buzzed in front of Tindal's eyeball. "Get her onto the couch." Surokar's voice was surprisingly audible.

"Leave me," Aunty Mads said.

"Not gonna happen," El Cap said. He folded the cloth over her, then carefully worked his hands under her and lifted, then carried her to the couch, which was still hovering above the floor.

"Place her head at the far end," Surokar said. "Touching the arm."

Tindal scooted forward to straighten her legs. "Now what? How do we get out of here?"

"Look twenty degrees left," Surokar said. "Other left. See that big door? There's a ship on the other side. I'll fly ahead and get the door open."

Tindal set the golden staff alongside Aunty Mads, then he and El Cap started to push the couch like a couple of bobsledders. Mr. Nappy had a lot of mass but once it got in motion it really wanted to remain in motion. Almost immediately they were moving so fast that Tindal was struggling to keep his hands on the couch.

They'd crossed the length of two (Canadian) football fields when Tindal heard a ruckus behind them. Far away, a herd of Gadzooks had entered the belly, and were charging toward them; hooves clattered on the metal floor. And the thing about Gadzooks, Tindal had learned, was that they could run fast.

"Uh..." Tindal suggested.

"Yup," El Cap agreed. They pushed faster. Some kind of energy beam flashed to their right. Then another. The Gadzooks bleated and wailed. Then they were ten meters from the huge metal door—which was still, regrettably, closed. El Cap pulled back on the couch and tried to lock his legs but the couch slammed into the door. Aunty Mads's shoulders came up and fell back again. She made no noise. "I'm so sorry!" El Cap said.

"Surokar?" Tindal's voice had climbed into a panicky register. He couldn't see the tiny robot. Energy beams scorched the door and the wall around it.

"Working on it," Surokar said, from somewhere. The Gadzik herd thundered toward them.

Tindal crouched beside Aunty Mads. Her eyes were closed. "Don't worry," he said.

"Tell it I'm sorry," she said. Her eyes remained closed.

"Who? Surokar?"

"I lied."

About what? Tindal wondered. But that wasn't important now. He touched her shoulder and hoped that hadn't hurt her. "You can apologize when we get home."

The huge door suddenly slid open. On the other side was a wide hangar, with one end open to space. Sitting on the floor were several large, elaborate geometric structures with many ramps leading into them, like fancy gift boxes with their flaps down.

"Those look like spaceships to me," El Cap said. "Let's go!" He shoved the couch through the door. Tindal scrambled to his feet and followed. The Gadzik herd was closing on them.

"Shut the door!" Tindal shouted, hoping Surokar would obey him. El Cap pushed toward the nearest ship.

"STOP," Surokar said. Tindal didn't know where the robot was.

Gadzik marines began to spill out of the ships. They rushed down the ramps, helmet tendrils swiveling to aim in their direction. But behind them the herd had reached the door.

Tindal grabbed the golden staff and shook it at them. "Stay back! I have your stick!"

The miniscule robot appeared in Tindal's eyeline, hovering just in front of Aunty Mads's face. "I'll kill as many as I can, Mads. I'm sorry. For all of you."

Aunty Mads opened her eyes. "Morris?" El Cap leaned close. "Pick me up."

"Ma'am?"

"Please."

El Cap stooped and lifted her from the couch. The Gadzik formed a circle around them. Tindal backed up until he was standing beside them.

"Hold your breath," Aunty Mads said.

"Why?" Tindal asked. "What's happening?"

"I'm about to wake up."

Many things happened at once. A thundercrack sounded above them. The light shifted. And Gadzik marines began to scream.

Scores of meters overhead, the ceiling had peeled back, opening the hangar to raw space. The wind roared. And Mr. Nappy suddenly disassembled: cushions went flying, the back split and cartwheeled away, an inner spring popped free. A blob of chrome rose up out of the body of the couch, drifting toward the hole in the roof—and then abruptly accelerated.

Aunty Mads said something he didn't quite catch. It sounded like, "There I am."

Out there, beyond the rip in the hangar roof: Wings. Black wings, all in motion, joined into an angular, furious shape. Its surface swirled with light, like a galaxy in motion. Those starry loops and whorls, Tindal thought, were so familiar.

Some of the Gadziks fired their head cannons at it. Almost instantly those marines came apart; their armor was ripped from the furred bodies, their legs were pulled from torsos. Some burst into flame. Others ran. One of them stumbled and vanished in light before it hit the ground. Marines were yanked up, into space.

And then Tindal's feet left the floor. He lost his grip on El Cap and was sucked upward, so fast, so fast—

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—and then he was on all fours, heaving, spilling his guts onto a glass floor. It went on for a while. Tindal was surprised; he didn't think he had anything left in his stomach. Then he sat back, and hidden pores in the surface opened, and the vomit vanished. Magic.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead and looked around. The walls were also dark, nearly opaque. "Hello?"

A section of the wall slid away, revealing a corridor. He walked through. "Aunty Mads?" he called. "Surokar?"

He kept walking. The wall to his left became a window. He was in space (again), but not empty space: he was looking down on a scattering of bright shards, like a plate shattered on black tile. It had to be the remains of the Gadzik ship.

He moved through sliding panes until he found himself in a wide room. El Capitan was kneeling on the floor. Aunty Mads lay beside him, unmoving. El Cap looked up with a stunned expression.

Tindal's body convulsed. He cried out and fell to his knees. He couldn't look at Aunty Mads's body.

El Cap came to him. "It's okay, buddy." His big arm went around him. "It's okay."

But it was not okay. When he could control his breath he pushed El Cap off him and stood, suddenly furious. "Hey!" he yelled at the ceiling. "Are you listening?"

"Tindal..." El Cap said worriedly.

"Mr. Nappy! Where the hell are you?"

"Behind you."

Tindal turned. A man sat in a chair, leaning forward, arms folded over knees. His hair was black with a streak of gray. His cheekbones were fantastic. "Though, not exactly. You know, hologram."

"Where's Surokar?" Tindal asked.

"Being repaired," the ship said. "It's a miracle that old machine survived."

"What about Aunty Mads?" Tindal said. "What about her?"

The ship—this hologram of the ship, whatever it was—shook its head. "She wasn't a machine, Tindal. You can't just reboot her."

Tindal marched toward him. "She took care of *you*, right? Kept you hidden, kept you safe. Then she built you a new body."

"New and improved."

"So do the same for her. Bring her back."

"Me, her...it's a little more complicated than that." He leaned back in his chair, though Tindal wasn't sure if the chair was a hologram, too. "I like you, Tindal. I have her memories back with me now. But I also know you from all those nights you were sleeping on top of my casing. Electrical activity leaks through. Maybe our dreams even mingled."

So, some part of Mr. Nappy had always been awake. "You're the one who betrayed her," Tindal said. "You told the Gadzik you were on Earth."

The ship nodded. "The part of me that was dreaming dreamed of escape. And, well, vengeance."

"So yes."

He laughed. "I did manage to leak a signal I thought they'd pick up."

"And when we escaped with Surokar, you told them where we were."

"I needed my avatar to unlock me," the ship admitted. "I never anticipated that a part of me would be so hesitant to wake up the rest of me, but life is full of surprises." He squinted. "I'm also a little surprised you've worked this all out. I imagine a lot of people underestimate you."

"Don't do that. Try to be nice to me. You're not Aunty Mads."

"Perhaps not. I will, however, respect my former self's wishes." The ship straightened in his chair. "You're safe, Tindal. You, El Cap, everyone on your planet. The Gadzik will never return. I'll make sure they won't even be *able* to approach this planet again."

"You're going after them."

"Oh yes."

Tindal could hear the eagerness in the ship's voice. "You're nothing like her," he said.

"It's okay if you think that."

"Take us home," Tindal said. "And Aunty Mads too."

Appropriately Placed Epilogue

(five weeks later)

Tindal was kneeling in the backyard, doing some late-season planting, when the Flea Bus rumbled in. El Cap ambled over carrying two grocery sacks and nodded at the flowers. "They look nice," he said. "Strange but nice."

A good description. The plants were spiky with a purplish bulb shaped like a tiny three-fingered hand. Tindal had no idea if they were in some early stage or if they'd always look like this. Time would tell. He just wanted this mound of dirt to be covered with plants, and soon, so no one would come poking around.

"Did you bring me a surprise?" Tindal asked.

"It's not a surprise if I always do it."

"Aw."

El Cap tilted one of the grocery sacks so Tindal could pluck out the red Tim Hortons bag. "My favorite! You're the best!"

They went into the house, unloaded the groceries. El Cap showed him a foil packet of something that definitely hadn't come from Safeway. "I *think* this is the stuff?" El Cap said. "My guy was pretty sure."

"I'll check." Tindal carried the packet and the Tim Hortons bag into the half-empty living room and then downstairs, into the basement. The lab door opened for him automatically, which was fortunate, because his hands were full.

In the middle of the bright, humming room, Surokar hovered above a conglomeration of equipment. The robot's new body was a bit sleeker than his original one, and shinier. It had turned down Tindal's offer to paint on racing stripes.

Tindal showed him the foil packet. "Are these the proteins you ordered?"

The machine drifted forward as if it couldn't read the label from across the room. "We'll see." The package was plucked from his hand and levitated to a high shelf.

Tindal walked to the huge glass tube set in the floor and leaned over. Inside floated a pale body and an equally pale face defined by architectural-quality

cheekbones. The skull bristled with new black hair.

"How much longer?" Tindal asked.

"Stop asking me," Surokar said. "She'll be done when she's done."

"And she'll remember me?"

The robot sighed. It had assured him, repeatedly, that Aunty Mads would remember everything, right up to the moment she got off the couch and the *I'm Not Disappointed Just Mad* ripped through the Gadzik hangar. Her latest backup had finished just in time.

Tindal was glad she wouldn't remember her death. Having memories of Gadzik torture was bad enough.

He pulled up a crate and opened the Tim Hortons bag. And there she was: a red velvet beauty with cream cheese filling. He bit down and groaned with pleasure. It was still warm.

"Do you have to do that in front of me?" Surokar said.

"What?" Bits of red crust tried to escape down his chin but he caught them in his palm and popped them into his mouth. Even the crumbs were delicious.

"I was thinking," Tindal said, chewing.

"I warned you about that."

"Maybe we should get a new couch."

About the Author



Daryl Gregory won the IAFA William L. Crawford Fantasy Award for his first novel, *Pandemonium*. His second novel, *The Devil's Alphabet*, was nominated for the Philip K. Dick Award and was one of *Publishers Weekly's* best books of 2009. His novelette "Nine Last Days on Planet Earth" was a Hugo finalist. His short fiction has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, and *The Year's Best SF*. He has also written comics for BOOM! Studios and IDW. Daryl lives in Oakland, CA. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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* One of Banks's early influences was the novel *Lanark*, by his fellow Scot Alasdair Gray. Gray placed the epilogue of the novel four chapters from the end, and in it, the author of *Lanark*, calling himself Nastler, directly addresses the main character, telling him that the epilogue is placed where it is because "it's too important to go [at the end]...it lets me utter some fine sentiments which I could hardly trust to a mere character." Gray also placed in the epilogue an "Index of Plagiarisms," a list of influences and outright literary thefts he used to write the book. Which reminds me: all information about Banks and *Lanark* I lifted from *The Culture Series of Iain M. Banks, A Critical Introduction*, by Simone Caroti.



A WELL-FED COMPANION

CONGYUN "MU MING" GU

TRANSLATED BY KIERA JOHNSON

A Well-Fed Companion

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illustration by

PARK INJU

REACTOR 

*as if awakened, she turns her face to yours;
and with a shock, you see yourself, tiny,
inside the golden amber of her eyeballs
suspended, like a prehistoric fly.*
—Rilke, “Black Cat”¹

Hairuo was the only person in the neighbourhood who had a cat.

Every morning, she woke to the roar of the hair dryer. Hairuo’s roommate liked her hair fluffy to match her toy poodle, so she had to wash and style it every day. Hairuo preferred to spend an extra thirty minutes in bed, doing nothing but staring up at the ceiling, imagining its rough, uneven lines as mountain ranges. The hair dryer droned on—she pictured herself on the wings of an airplane about to take off, overlooking the world turned upside down. Shadows of trees outside the window moved across the ceiling like giant birds soaring over the landscape. Could someone’s soul fly like that?

She let her hand hang off the side of the bed to stroke her cat. Her companion, her little soul.

The cat lay underneath the bed, only the white tip of his tail peeking out as it swept impatiently from side to side. She knew he didn’t like the noise. They were always at their most distant from each other in the mornings, kept apart by the incessant drone of the hair dryer, the increasingly dazzling sunlight, and irrepressible feelings of hunger and anxiety. He hid in the dark and folded up his slender mouse-like tail.

Hairuo got up, dressed slowly, and plucked a strand of black cat hair from her white sleeve. It felt thick and stiff, and she hesitated for a moment before throwing it away. The cat had a small frame, but he had been losing a lot of fur recently and appeared all the more fragile for it. He wasn’t eating well. Cats were picky eaters, she

knew that, but that didn't mean she could just let him starve. Nor could she rightly feed him nothing but bland, tasteless food, even though she herself only ate the bento box lunches from the convenience store downstairs: neat, uniform meatballs rolled on an assembly line and small cubes of diced carrot, day after day.

Hairuo's roommate stuck her head out from the bathroom, her hair bound up in rollers. Her poodle lay on his back, his tongue lolling happily from his mouth, his tiny eyes concealed by curly fur. As Hairuo's roommate began to loosen the rollers, she eyed Hairuo's dishevelled hair and pallid face through the mirror with an impatient expression.

"You know, having a cat isn't an excuse not to make an effort—"

"Goodbye," said Hairuo. She thought she heard the cat snarl quietly from the darkness below her bed.

Few people were still on the street by the time Hairuo headed out the door. A man with a bulging backpack, towing a short-legged, long-bodied sausage dog, passed her as he staggered towards the bus stop. She recognised him as another resident of their building. He'd once pressed a sweat-soaked sports game ticket into her hand, making her palm grow so sticky that she'd hardly been able to disguise her laugh. Afterwards, she'd seen him talking with her roommate by the neighbourhood's raised flowerbeds, sausage dog and poodle sniffing one another from head to tail; their cautious politeness had seemed on the verge of blossoming into warmth at any moment. Hairuo had left in a hurry.

Her cat didn't go to work with her like other people's dogs did; he stayed home alone instead. Even though "home" was a crowded shared apartment, it was the only place that was dark, quiet, *free* enough to suit him. He needed plenty of rest, far more than Hairuo herself. While he napped in his cat bed at home, she stared at the files and drafts on her computer screen and felt her mind drifting far away. Only the sound of her manager's footsteps walking back and forth could jolt her awake again. The manager's boxer dog always followed behind him, her thick shoulder blades rolling beneath her

sleek fur as she went. Every time the two of them went past, Hairuo felt glad that her cat didn't have to come face-to-face with a dog like that.

She forced her attention back to her work, putting the cat out of mind for the time being, and resumed tapping away at her virtual keyboard. Dogs lay peacefully beneath desks around the office; there was complete silence apart from the quiet rustle of their fur being stroked. Hairuo's seat was the only one with nothing beneath it.

In the winter of the year 1900, eighteen-year-old Emmy Noether and her rare snow leopard were admitted into the University of Erlangen—

In the winter of the year 1900, eighteen-year-old Emmy Noether and her rare snow leopard didn't sit in the front row in class. She was never sure whether she or her snow leopard were the greater curiosity for her male classmates. But she was already no stranger to standing out from the crowd —

In the winter of the year 1900, eighteen-year-old Emmy Noether listened to lectures by Hilbert, Klein, Minkowski, and other master mathematicians in Göttingen, but she was at her freest when she let her rare snow leopard roam through Bavaria's Black Forest. Ravens and albatrosses circled high up in the sky above, and Emmy watched as they became black spots in the distance. From their perspective, the rivers, fields, and villages were as minute and abstract as a chessboard. As day after day passed in careful study for Emmy, her snow leopard gradually shed his spots to become a dazzling white. The purest alpine snowfield on Earth—the snow leopard's native state.

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Hairuo paused the tapping of her fingertips on the screen and gazed out of the bus window, picturing the snow leopard in her mind's eye. It was a rainy evening, and the drizzle painted rivulets of indigo and pitch black down the window like a hasty watercolour. She saw her own face half-illuminated in the wash, her lips dark and eyeliner smudged as if by the rain. She reached out a hand to draw a pattern in the condensation on the window, then turned her head, gently

pressed the Enter key, and ended the paragraph. The story had begun as a nerve impulse in her brain, but typed out it transformed into pulsing computer bytes that flowed into the external hard drive installed behind her ear. The hard drive was designed to look like a delicate hair clip, the tip of which was implanted deep into her skull, leaving only the old-fashioned amber outer shell exposed beneath her hair.

In her imagination, the snow leopard was Emmy Noether's soul, its agility and beauty visible for everyone to see. But exceptional beauty was often more frightening, more abhorrent, than ordinary ugliness; only a bird flying high enough would pay it no mind. Companions could grow, the colour of their fur could change, Hairuo thought, but a snow leopard was a snow leopard, and a cat could not become a dog.

Emmy Noether fed her snow leopard the purest of thoughts, and so his black spots disappeared completely. Hairuo kept trying to come up with a good ending for her story. She thought of her little cat—what was there for him to eat from her ordinary life? What could he grow to become?

Hairuo's gaze drifted, then focused once again. The inside of the bus was dimly lit; the man and dog sitting beside her both looked drowsy, and the man almost bumped into Hairuo's shoulder as the bus rocked and swayed, while his husky companion rested her head on her owner's polished leather shoes. The dog was beautiful, just like her owner, but Hairuo would never be a dog person.

She jumped off the bus, opened her umbrella, and splashed her way through a vast puddle. The cat that often roamed around the street corners was nowhere to be seen today. Her heart stuttered for a moment, echoing the rain falling to the ground, and she hoped that it was just hiding from the weather somewhere.

Hairuo had once tried to imagine what that cat's owner might look like. The cat was white with a circle of black fur on the top of its head like a woollen hat—it should've looked amusing, but Hairuo had never managed more than a half smile at the sight of it. The cat was

thin enough for its ribs to show. She had no way to feed it, so she'd taken photos and put them online, hoping its owner would see them and show up, but nothing had come of it. Not many people had cats.

Hairuo was well aware that people who had lost their companions might already be long gone. Dogs could barely survive on their own for any length of time. Cats were used to spending time alone, wandering around, hiding, almost completely independent from anyone or any community, but they were still companions in the end.

Hairuo waited in the pitter-patter of the rain until twilight gradually thickened into night and the splashing puddles grew still. She returned home beneath flickering streetlights. Vague sounds of laughter could be heard from her roommate's bedroom, but Hairuo couldn't tell whether the laughter was real or canned, coming from her roommate's favourite show. Hairuo had watched it before too: the host had a Saint Bernard companion that weighed a hundred kilogrammes. Every sentence the host said produced massive reactions from the audience, and everyone repeated his jokes endlessly the following day. When the show first started airing, his Saint Bernard had been a tiny puppy, but over time she transformed into that honey-and-milk-coloured mountain of a dog in the broadcasting studio today.

Dogs got their energy from joining packs, chasing and sharing the spoils of their catch. But cats were not the same.

Hairuo walked into her room and kept the lights off as she felt about in the dark. Her fingertips hit the touch point on the hard drive. Faint light glowed beneath her hair, then followed the lines of her cheeks to shine on her arms as it flowed down and away. Fifteen hours of visual data, sixteen hours of auditory data, twenty-four hours of consciousness and subconsciousness—the amount of information flowing out seemed immense, but there was little real nourishment to be found beneath the redundant noise of clichés and empty phrases.

The cat squeezed silently into his half-moon bed. In the flickering rays of light, Hairuo couldn't see how well he was eating; she just hoped that he might grow a little bigger. He should enjoy the story about Emmy Noether, but she wasn't sure how he would take the disappearance of the stray cat from the street corner.

Cats' stomachs were far more sensitive than dogs'.

The fluorescent light faded. The cat slipped soundlessly out of his bed and gazed back at her; in the darkness, his eyes shone like stars. She reached out a hand and he began to lick her palm, his tiny tongue rough, damp, warm. This didn't happen often. With a jolt, she realised she had been longing for it.

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Hairuo would always remember the day the cat came. Her whole class lined up in the corridor, waiting their turn for their companions to take shape. Hairuo was the last person in line. The sky was a strange, reddish-orange colour, like the surface of Mars, and she watched the white poplar trees on the sports field shiver in the dusty air. It was April. She didn't join in with her classmates' enthusiastic whispered discussions. Lots of them wanted Great Danes or English mastiffs—they grew quickly so long as they had enough to eat—while others wanted poodles or Chihuahuas, which were energetic despite their small size, and not picky eaters to boot.

The first mental imaging scan took twenty-one minutes. Memory networks formed flesh and blood, modes of perception synthesised into skin and fur, thought patterns built the crisp white skeleton, while the fire of life—the beating heart—came from your most deeply held desires, hidden on the lowest level of the neural network. These tiny animals were a part of people, but they were lifelong companions too; they swallowed everything you saw, heard, and thought, and grew into forms that flesh-and-blood human bodies had no way to contain.

Why couldn't companions be trees? That way she wouldn't have to feed it. But when Hairuo saw that ingenious skeleton gradually

take shape, sharp nails retreating into paws and a tiny tortoiseshell kitten appearing before her eyes, she never wished for a tree again.

Hi, little monster. She reached out to stroke his mottled yellow-black tail.

The cat retreated and swiped; his thin claws left three shallow lines down her arm. It took three weeks for this welcome gift to fade away.

Cats can be easy to look after, but they come with their challenges too, Hairuo's class teacher told her, begrudging the effort; he'd never liked her much. There were always a few students in each year group who had cats, but hers was just so small ...

She couldn't remember what else the teacher had said to her, but she'd skipped class the next day and stayed in her dormitory instead, lost in thought. The cat lay on his stomach on the windowsill and watched the packs of dogs out on the sports field. They were playing Frisbee. Occasionally she raised her head and the cat's ears would twitch slightly, but he never turned to look back at her.

All of a sudden, he hiccupped repeatedly, one after another, then spat out a ball of sticky yellow bile. Hairuo was terrified at first; she didn't learn until later that it wasn't unusual for a cat to throw up like this sometimes. She went straight out the following day to have that amber-coloured hard drive embedded in her skull, where it recorded electrical signals directly at the neuron level. This type of implanted processor could store massive amounts of information with high spatiotemporal resolution. Hairuo was determined to experience more of the world, put herself out there too, so that she could feed the cat well.

Ten years passed by. She never cut her hair short again; she didn't want anyone to see the hard drive's outer shell. But the cat still grew slowly, and her little soul became even more estranged and indifferent than she had believed possible. She'd always thought that he had no hopes of his own and so no disappointments either, that

he just wandered like a shadow through his own world—up until that day when she felt the rough warmth of his tongue on her hand.

* * *

Companions hadn't always been animals.

When Hairuo's parents' generation had been children, people's souls appeared as strikingly realistic digital portraits, projected onto screens. The portraits had high resolution surveillance cameras for eyes, circular microphone arrays for ears, and pseudo-stereo speakers for mouths. The most important thing was the heart—the kernel in which deep learning frameworks were processed. It gathered together every carefully composed or hastily scrawled line of writing from its owner, every sentence of speech, and combined these with the ocean of information that could be found online to undergo an individualised modelling process. When soul portraits left the factory, they were little more than blank slates; it was only after interacting with their owners that they began to learn and grow, gradually revealing their innate form.

And so for the first time, a person's soul—that ancient secret which had long been sealed up in people's skulls or chests—found a new place to live. By the time Hairuo's parents' generation grew up and entered adulthood, more often than not they had to submit their soul portraits' web address along with their resumes.

But problems followed. The careful deductions of the algorithm often produced portraits that defied expectations. An arrogant person might manifest a timid, self-doubting soul, while a despondent soul might belong to a seemingly optimistic person. A person's hidden depths, which they themselves had had no way of seeing clearly before, were gradually brought to light with every word they spoke. There was nowhere to hide from the omniscient, grasping hand of the algorithm.

Lots of people demanded this nakedness be covered up again. They said that just as our ancient ancestors used furs to protect their bodies, so too should soul portraits be protected, hidden. But

there were even more people who disagreed, saying that in its explorations of the outside world, humanity had already gone too far for too long; our estrangement from the spiritual world grew deeper and deeper every day, bringing with it endless misunderstandings and disputes, all blood and tears and pain. People needed a vehicle, a channel, an interface through which they could externalise the soul, that part of themselves that was both innate since birth and in constant flux.

The final plan was both an escalation and a compromise: the virtual image on a screen shifted into something real and warm. 3D-printed alloy skeletons, lifelike flesh and fur bioengineered with stem cell differentiation technology, as well as a refined positronic brain—together they formed a small animal companion, a dog or a cat. A companion was easier to swallow than a mirror. The real selves that people didn't want to see, didn't dare confront directly, were hidden in flesh, concealed by skin and fur. Cautiously extending an animal's nose, tongue, teeth, or paws towards the world felt more acceptable somehow.

Hairuo's generation was already well used to these furry souls. Companions were independent and warm, far superior to the ice-cold mechanical nakedness of soul portraits exposed on screens. How many sweethearts fell in love at first sight because their dogs touched noses and sniffed each other's tails in curiosity at dog parks? Apparently it was easier, less hassle, than online dating. During job interviews, managers' dogs would sniff out the most dependable and obedient candidates to join the workforce. Performance records improved, and managers always said it was a more reliable method than endless rounds of interviews. But more important than all that, even more people found that there was simply no way to reject their true self anymore: alternately alert and resourceful, powerful and mighty, elegant and adorable; a self that you could snuggle up to and hold tight in your arms when you felt hopeless or frustrated, whose soft fur you could bury your face in; a self that would always stand by you. Cases of clinical depression and

even suicide rates fell sharply after companions came onto the scene. After all, how could anyone truly not like this little self of theirs?

Stories abounded about dog companions saving humanity. There were far fewer stories about cats. Not many people had cats.

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Hairuo's workplace was half the city away. She could never think of the right metaphor to best describe the building, with its glass curtain walls and lights that never went out. From the vantage point of the offices high up inside, she could look down on the neat skeleton outline of the paths in the park below. Small patches of grass were set between the paths, following the standard configuration for every business district, neighbourhood, and street—dog parks. The green spaces were particularly busy after lunch, when dogs chased each other across the grass while their people chatted beside the paths. Hairuo had never been down there before. She couldn't understand all the fuss over a ball being thrown. She chewed slowly at her desk, used her chopsticks to quietly pick out the dog treat that came free with her bento box, and threw it away.

Hairuo's daily tasks involved dragging a few lines, buttons, and boxes around her screen, arranging them in certain forms, and then annotating the distance in pixels between the lines and buttons. A one-pixel difference might make her eyelids twitch, but a discrepancy of three pixels was enough to prompt her manager to come over and knock sharply on her desk. In her early days at this job, Hairuo had wanted to argue with him, but she'd given up at the first sight of that boxer dog panting hotly and trailing strings of saliva. She could only ever nod and give the manager a faint, distant smile to show she understood.

Dogs developed relationships by sniffing or chasing each other, but Hairuo had a cat. Cats breathed lightly, walked quietly; they hid instinctually from coarse, panting things. Distance was her armour,

polite smiles her mask. She knew she was the problem here, so she tried not to complain too much.

Hairuo had studied digital art and design at university, and found this job right after graduation. Sometimes she wondered whether it was really the right fit for her, but she quickly realised there was no sense in thinking like that. One of her university classmates had had a cat too, and after graduating he'd moved into a two-storey studio that lacked all of the personal space and distance which best suited cats. Despite this, when Hairuo had visited once, she'd seen his cream-coloured Ragdoll cat asleep and perfectly happy on a soft cushion in the corner of the room. Behind his cat was a three-dimensional virtual art space, built between two workstations and three projectors, within which rays of light changed colour endlessly to form images of rivers, waterfalls, forests, and gardens that responded to and resonated with the viewer's presence. Hairuo's classmate said that hesitation, exploration, and discovery were the inspirations for his work; that in the modern age, it didn't matter whether you were talking about modes of creative expression or humanity's aesthetic experiences—neither could be limited any longer to two-dimensional surfaces. The Ragdoll cat had woken up then and strolled gracefully through the lights and shadows, the fur on her large frame soft and fluffy, and her blue eyes had gazed tenderly at Hairuo.

Hairuo thought of her own little tortoiseshell cat at home.

She had realised early on that for an ordinary person such as herself, coming from an ordinary family and working at an ordinary job, a cat was a debt that could never be repaid, a soul hungry for something she didn't have to give. There was nothing from her daily commute, nor from the minute distances between pixels, that she could use to feed him. Compared with that plump Ragdoll cat, Hairuo's cat was too small, too thin. She never knew when he might disappear on her. She had to fill herself up with as much as possible, so that she could try to feed him well.

But her life was suspended between her shared apartment and her job, so insubstantial that one gust of wind could blow it all away. And so around her ten-hour working day, she carved out time to wade through ancient texts, navigating the weft and weave of unfamiliar words during her lunch break and commute. The complex visual appearance of contemporary art made the written word appear simple and one-dimensional by comparison, long since outdated. The only advantages of written texts lay in their portability and low cost.

However, while readily available information was more than enough to excite dogs, her cat was far more sensitive, more selective. The most popular writing could make him vomit incessantly; long-forgotten things were more to his taste. Hairuo had no choice but to constantly unearth old stories, and probe deep into her own mind as well. Many nights, her dreams would needle her awake with a painful start, trembling, to type out line after line of a story in a daze, fingers uncertain, the hard drive's lights flashing beneath her hair, and in the darkness he would watch her silently.

In 1925, after the lighthouse keeper Clarence Salter died, his wife, Fannie Salter—

In 1925, following the death of the lighthouse keeper Clarence Salter and after many hard-won fights, Fannie Salter was finally allowed to continue watching over her husband's lighthouse on her own. It was one of forty-five lighthouses in Virginia. Fannie had grown up in a fishing village by the sea, so she was no stranger to the winding coastline or the white tower standing tall on the cliff's edge.

A pilot whale kept her company in the waters nearby, and when the weather was good, sailors could catch a glimpse of its dorsal fin amongst the waves. On nights thick with fog, Fannie first climbed the stone steps up to the lighthouse, and then the iron steps leading straight to the control room, where she lit the oil lamps. From her little lighthouse keeper's cabin, Fannie had a direct view of the light on the tower's top floor; she woke every two hours to look out the window and make sure that the lamps had not stopped burning. In even worse weather, she would ring a fog bell every fifteen seconds for a whole hour straight, until all the steamboats had

passed safely through the channel. People said that the tolling of the bell sounded like a whale's mournful moan.

Pilot whales preferred to live in groups, but Fannie worked alone at the lighthouse for twenty-two years. No one knew how she passed the long years in the face of that boundless, unchanging ocean, nor how she fed her lonely pilot whale. After her death, people discovered everything she had written in the lighthouse keeper's cabin, describing everything from her first meeting with Clarence Salter in the greenness of youth right up to his departure from this world. Once one-hundred-watt light bulbs replaced the work of lighthouse keepers, no companion ever took the shape of a pilot whale again.

★ ★ ★

Fannie Salter raised a whale in a lighthouse. Hairuo paused her typing and lay back on the bed; the lines on the ceiling above her became the waves of the North Atlantic ocean.

Twenty-five years' worth of memories, digested across another twenty-five years. Hairuo imagined the whale waiting quietly in the gloomy ocean depths, countless tiny food particles floating around him like shoals of fish. What kind of life could be rich enough to keep him well-fed? Fannie hadn't read many books, nor had she ever gone far from the sea coast where she'd grown up, but she'd still found a way to feed her whale.

Hairuo stroked the cat's ears. He lay nestled by her side, curled up in a ball and looking even smaller than usual. Her stories of distant places combined fact and fiction in equal measure: she had never heard of anyone who had a whale or a snow leopard for a companion. She created stories of her own invention and fed the cat with them, but he still grew so slowly.

She knew why. Her life was so dry, so atrophied—her imagination tried to paint masterpieces but managed only simple sketches. But with the cat by her side, she could feel the warmth of his body and the gradual strengthening of his heartbeats as they drummed in his chest. He didn't often come so close to her.

She tossed and turned in the dark as if a rough tongue lapped at her heart. Little by little she slipped into a dream and saw a

boundless, open sky above surging ocean waves. The urge was undeniable. She jumped. The ocean was warm, like flesh and fur—a warmth she hadn't felt for a long time. When she woke up, the cat was lying in the crook of her arm.

She thought she knew then what he needed.

★ ★ ★

She noticed him from the very first day he came into the office. A grey linen shirt, slender fingers, biting cold eyes, and a mouth whose corners curled into something that was not quite a smile. The afternoon sun was dazzling; one by one, others in the office lowered their window blinds, while he alone closed his eyes, tilted his head back to let the light play across his face, and held that position, motionless, for a long time. Hairuo was no stranger to drifting off like that, and the arch of his back in the rays of sunlight held a familiar curve as well. She found herself imagining how his pupils would look in the light.

And he didn't have a dog.

After lunch, he and Hairuo were the only people left in the office. She'd wanted to take advantage of the lunch break to have a read through of her drafts, but even as her fingers slid over the tablet screen, her eyes wouldn't focus. She heard her breath come heavy from the pit of her stomach, completely unlike her usual self.

"You're not going on a dog walk?" She forced herself to open her mouth, then regretted it an instant later. The obviousness of that fact and her self-consciousness were both clear to see.

"It's awful." He frowned. "Don't you think?"

Hairuo nodded, indescribably pleased. Although companions took animal form, they were still your purest self. Data and patterns of connection, the alloy skeletons printed from them, the positronic brain: they were all so much more *real* than flesh-and-blood bodies, revealed more of your innate nature. So why didn't anyone else think it terrible, then, to expose their naked souls to one another, to

let them chase and play together? She couldn't stand it. Cats needed quiet, rest, concealment.

"You like reading?" He lifted his chin slightly. She shut the cover over her tablet on pure instinct. The ochre cover was blank, no text or images on its surface; if it weren't for the thinness of the tablet, it would look exactly like an old hardback book without its dust jacket. The world inside there was more real to her than anything else in the office—it was what she used to feed her cat.

But she couldn't help herself; she wanted to let him see. Just a little would be okay.

"I ... write sometimes, nothing serious."

He nodded. She waited for what felt like an age.

"I heard that on Leo Tolstoy's last day alive, he wanted to squeeze an elephant onto a train and run away." He spoke as if it were an undeniable historical fact. "The eighty-year-old man left home in secret. He even wore a crumpled straw hat to disguise himself, but his elephant companion gave him away. Later, when he lay on his deathbed in the stationmaster's office, reporters from all over the world came to the train station, bringing their dogs with them, and in amongst the hordes circled around to watch, there stood that elephant. Can you imagine it? An elephant." He winked at her, creasing the lines at the corners of his eyes.

★ ★ ★

His stories were long, detailed, ever-unfolding. Tolstoy's elephant was no more than a ball of string that he tossed towards Hairuo, and she followed that string into a forest labyrinth full of rare birds and beasts, gasping in surprise as she went; she fell further under his spell with each step she took. In his world, her laughter echoed, her tears overflowed. His stories were like suspension bridges strung up in the treetops of some primaeval rainforest, whisking reason and emotion along for the ride as they hovered in complex time and space, sometimes plunging down into the abyss and other times climbing up to mountain peaks. The centrifugal force raging in

Hairuo's mind almost made her want to abandon reading altogether, but her whole being was like some pitiful asteroid, easily caught and engulfed by the star-like gravitational pull of his words.

Unlike the contemporary art installation she'd once wandered through, ancient words were more intimately tied to the human imagination, penetrated deeper into the self. He said that was human nature. He held forth on primitive languages appearing by chance tens of thousands of years ago, Chomsky and Pinker's universal grammar, how written language had arisen from the coordinated evolution of the human mind. As humanity evolved from one generation to another, those who could manipulate language to suit their needs held the evolutionary high ground; their superiority was assured by their grasp of language. This was true even now, when people were so occupied by contemporary art. The deepest recesses of the soul, he told her, were still captured, transformed, remoulded in the symbols of written language.

A creator's soul lived in their works. By then, she was already captivated by the souls in his stories, which always took shape as strange animals—the insatiable Wan Qi who survived on a diet of other people's dreams, or the headstrong, obstinate Taowu. Hairuo saw shadows flickering amongst them, almost familiar somehow, and she wanted to draw closer, pick out *his* soul from their midst, but it always slipped from her grasp.

If his words were really just crude fragments of his soul, then how could he feed his cat with them alone? What nourishment could be found from them? His life was no less ordinary and repetitive than Hairuo's; perhaps he was simply more gifted than her.

She couldn't help herself. She wanted to get closer to him, but he kept his distance. She knew that civil distance well, the rigidity behind polite smiles. She'd been like that once as well, but she didn't want it this time. She'd already wandered alone for far, far too long. Cats might dread the noisiness of a pack of dogs, but they could still wish for another cat's company as they paced their solitary way through the long nights.

Hairuo began to swap manuscripts with him. She was anxious, hesitant at first: her stories were so much weaker, flimsier than his. But more important, she was afraid that he might be able to read the vague longings hidden between the lines. He'd once said that cats cannot be fed false things. Every faint tremble, every minute touch, every painful nightmare or moment of reality—these were where a cat's real nourishment lay.

"You have to have the courage to walk naked in the street, let everyone see you. Only then can you feed a cat properly," he said, leaning against the window.

"And that's ... different from dogs? They'll eat anything." She gazed out the window to the grass where dogs ran in happy circles around their people. One dog bowed its golden forelegs tamely towards the ground, its enormous hind legs sticking up into the air, making the people around burst out laughing. Its owner stretched out a hand and the dog immediately began licking it, over and over. Hairuo knew there must be light information chips in the owner's hand, which could be collected by content merchants, dried out, compressed, cut up, and packaged into a soluble storage medium—neat, clean, and portable. The chips only needed to touch the contact points on the dog's tongue to be converted into delicious electrical signals, which rapidly adjusted the cell composition and metal skeleton of the dog's artificial body. The dog would grow bigger and bigger, and its owner wouldn't even have to work for it.

"That's why even big dogs are easily tamed, but the same tricks don't work on cats." The corner of his mouth lifted slightly, revealing traces of smile lines, "Ironically, dog food makers often have cats themselves."

"What do you think having a cat for a companion really represents? Aesthetic taste, observation skills, imagination, creativity, or—?" Hairuo couldn't stop herself from leaning towards him.

"All of that, but also none of that." He wasn't evading her question; his sudden turn to face her made her jump, was all. "I'm

impressed you can already think about this.”

“So what do you say, then?” For the first time, she mustered up enough courage to look him directly in the eye, hoping to find some kind of answer there, but his pupils were pitch-black and impenetrable. She couldn’t see anything in them.

“Freedom, independence, as well as...” He met her gaze, and a sudden smile spread across his face, “How would I know? No one knows. They’re our lifelong companions, the externalisation of our truest selves, and that fact alone demands that we spend forever in exploration, trying to understand them. For the vast majority of the time, we’re solitary creatures, but occasionally there’ll be a moment of companionship.”

Hairuo’s heart thundered in her chest. This tenderness frightened her the most, suddenly breaking through his distant facade as if he could see right through her. She wasn’t sure if she’d ever be able to prepare herself for it.

“I like your stories.” He took her hand and her mind became a blank slate; she didn’t hear a single word he said next.

“... remind me of my younger self. Pure and unique ... delicious.”

★ ★ ★

“That day—you were just teasing me. You knew that companions didn’t exist in the past.” Hairuo couldn’t hold back a slight smile as she fiddled with the roasted chicken wings on her plate: she was a terrible cook and had wasted several packs of wings before getting these ones just right. “Nerve signal data extraction, signal processing, modelling, shaping: the technology for making animal companions is only around twenty years old.”

“You can’t say that for sure.” He feigned seriousness. “Maybe Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* isn’t just a simple book of legends; maybe it’s actually an accurate record of the existence of companions. The practice of killing cats during mediaeval witch hunts also clearly points to the fact that human souls can appear in nonhuman forms.

Let alone the ones in novels—familiar, guardian spirits, vessels for the soul...”

“They all count as companions?” She let out a light laugh. “I didn’t expect you to still read children’s fantasy books.” They’d been officially dating for a month now, and she’d already lost her reserve from when they’d first met.

“They’re the things that really matter,” he said indifferently, peeling meat precisely off the bone with his knife and fork.

Her heart gave a faint shiver; as usual, she understood his meaning without needing words. Those guardian spirits, strange creatures—once constant childhood companions, up until the moment when modern science had disenchanting the ancient, chaotic world four hundred years ago with its ice-cold mechanical touch. As humans interacted with this new world, those spirits—intangible yet all too real—gradually faded to transparency; it was only through the written word that you could catch a fleeting glimpse of their long-forgotten truths. *The things that really matter*. In her stories, Hairuo used fact as the warp and imagination as the weft, weaving together each and every fragment of them, trying to capture a little of that which had been lost.

“So, why do you think there are only dogs and cats?” she asked softly, hoping he would say how unusual, how precious it was that the pair of them had found each other.

“Probably out of some kind of nostalgia.” He thought for a moment, then lifted his glass and moistened his lips with red wine. “Millions of years ago, humans explored the outside world together with newly domesticated animals. But it’s more complicated now—exploring the outside world, your inner world, moving endlessly from outside to inside and back out again—there’s so many detours to take...”

“Oh,” Hairuo sighed, setting her fork down. She took his hand gently, and he stiffened for a moment, then let her. She thought she followed his line of thinking, understood that he cared about far more than just the similarities between the two of them. Just like

everyone with a cat companion, Hairuo also cared about those impulses, beliefs, dreams, and experiences that were so personal it was difficult to share them with others. Those faint, profound traces left behind by unknown ancestors in ancient symbols, moulding the self and the recognisable world. The souls that returned to people's sides in completely new ways.

Yet Hairuo wished that for him, she could be like a dog whose tail wagged whenever she saw him—but when he was immersed in his own world he forgot her entirely.

He was even more cat-like than she was, Hairuo had come to realise. Her cat still hid in his bed, only sticking his head out to look around: a little curious, a little fearful of strangers. She hadn't written any stories for a long time now, but the cat had grown bigger anyway, his mouse-like tail becoming thicker, rounder, fluffier. Was she afraid?

"I can't eat any more." He set down his knife and fork. "Next time, come to my place, and bring your cat."

* * *

What she really wanted to remember was every touch, every breath, every kiss. What she wanted to forget was time itself. But all that was left in the end was a pain like new birth.

His cat was twice the size of hers, an ash grey, long-haired Norwegian forest cat with a swiftly moving gaze just like his own, who gave a low growl at the first sight of Hairuo's cat, and then howled. Hairuo had no idea what to do; he didn't say a word. His big cat closed in on her little cat step by step, but just as Hairuo was about to rush in between them, he stopped her.

"Cats have their own ways of getting along." He glanced meaningfully at her.

She could only bite her lip and try to stifle her anxiety. Her little cat trembled in the shadows, not making a sound—then the large cat brandished a paw, and her little cat suddenly flashed his own claws.

A blood-curdling yowl. A deep scratch split open across the large cat's face, starting at the corner of her eye and slashing downwards. He cried out, seemingly involuntarily, losing himself, and turned to look at Hairuo with an unfathomable glint in his eye.

"It was an accident—" she explained hurriedly, her mind dark with fear. But then the large cat snarled loudly, seized the little cat's nape in her mouth and flung him against the sharp corner of the coffee table.

Hairuo screamed and rushed over to pick up her little cat. Her mind was in utter chaos. What frightened her the most—herself or him?

"He won't die." He had regained his composure and his indifference. "Cats have more lives than you or I, you know that they can survive anything. But I never expected—you seemed..." He paused, as if there were something else he wanted to add, but he stopped there.

She couldn't speak. Hairuo carried her little cat into the bathroom, his scalp torn and gaping. Although companions were man-made, their skin was still textured like a real animal's, and she was helpless in her panic at the sight of her cat's mangled head. She knew he couldn't die, but she ransacked the bathroom in search of bandages and cotton buds anyway. She tore open the drawers one after another and then, suddenly, stumbled across the terrible sight of tiny scraps of fur, cut into neat two-inch squares: orange, tortoiseshell, and tabby.

"What are you doing? Stop worrying about the cat. Come here." Impatience leaked into his languid voice. Her hair stood on end, like a cat with its hackles raised. The truth was easy to see, but she had been lost in her ignorance, a dog pointlessly chasing her own tail, when she should have been keeping her distance, scrutinising him, thinking for herself.

"Come *here*." His footsteps gradually grew closer. She closed the drawer in a hurry. Her cat was motionless in her embrace, as if

tensed to leap away from her at any moment. Her mouth was dry—what was she meant to do now?

She let him pull her back into the room. She felt almost on the verge of collapse, and yet, as bewildered as she was, somehow in spite of everything, a kind of excitement was flooding her mind. He didn't know that she had discovered the truth. As soon as he found out, she knew he would withdraw, and once withdrawn, he would bide his time to strike. She had a predator's instincts after all, untamed by anything.

Fingers held back her pulse, breath ghosted over skin. Lost in these subtle sensations, her consciousness peeled away like clothing from her body and fell into her cat. Opening her eyes wide, she saw every speck of light within the gloomy room; with a twitch of her nose she differentiated all of the strange smells permeating the air; not a single subtle sound escaped unnoticed past her swivelling ears. Every inch of her senses stretched out to their fullest, every drop of perception flowed into a powerful current. Boundless, open, a warm ocean embraced her, her body unfurled almost to the point of total oblivion—until her cat nipped lightly at her fingertips.

Her head cleared in an instant. She watched him narrow his eyes slightly, and the shadow of his eyelashes fell on his face in a picture of pure, unaffected innocence. The fabric of her consciousness folded back into her body, and as she dressed she slowly drew closer to whisper in his ear.

“What on earth do you feed her? She's grown so big.”

“The words of the sages, the tremors of the soul, crystals and flames...” he murmured, and for a split second she thought she'd misunderstood him.

He was telling her the truth, but that was also his bait, wasn't it?

There was something innately euphoric in the act of killing. Underneath the hidden neural networks, the fire of life arose from the oldest and cruellest of desires. He had grasped much earlier than she had the truth that lay beneath cats' indifferent appearances.

“And what about ... other cats?” she asked in a low voice, and, ignoring the sudden freezing of his expression, held her little cat close as she rushed out the door.

Both of their bodies ached dully, but some secret part of her was glad that he’d underestimated her after all.

He’d taught her a lesson.

It wasn’t too late.

★ ★ ★

She still saw him around the office. The two of them maintained a polite distance, pretended nothing had happened, and it turned out to be not too difficult for them. The thing that changed was that Hairuo began to go for runs around the park during her lunch breaks: that way, she wouldn’t have to be alone with him.

She didn’t share manuscripts with him anymore. She vaguely understood the secret source of his astonishing works now. It was far too dangerous for cats to expose themselves to the outside world: she had almost become his next offering, vanished into his words, his rich themes, narrative forms, subplots, and paragraphs, dissolved into the spaces between flesh and bone in that grim, captivating Norwegian forest cat. Inside her little cat’s positronic brain were soft layers of information—her known and unknown self. Just a few seconds of contact with the touch point would have been enough time to complete the transmission. Her fear lingered for a long time afterwards.

But there were unexpected rewards as well. After those first few nights when her tears had fallen uncontrollably, she finally discovered that her cat had fully doubled in size. Lying on the bed now, he no longer looked mouse-like and frail. She hadn’t expected him to enjoy the taste of pain. And for someone like her, a living shadow held apart from the people around her, the only thing that could cause real pain would be another cat.

Did she miss it? Or regret it? She didn’t know. Two souls could understand each other for a short time, but two hunters could not

coexist for long.

That she had escaped at all was lucky enough. Cats were destined to be solitary.

A few injuries were to be expected.

★ ★ ★

After she handed in her resignation, Hairuo changed all of her contact details and moved to another city, where she lived alone and began to write stories again. She not only wrote in shorthand notebooks now, but also posted her work online. Nor did she write nothing but lonely, lifeless stories anymore; the scope of her work grew ever vaster, unconstrained. She wrote about how Madame de Pompadour's rose-coloured mare ruled over the stables of Louis XV, wrote about how Simone de Beauvoir's ring-necked pheasant flaunted his tail feathers when the two of them mixed with the men in the Café de Flore. She kept reading, not just novels and biographies but myths and legends too, philosophy books, theories of evolution and histories of technological development—the mark of him that still remained.

The stories of the snow leopard and the pilot whale lay dormant in Hairuo's notebooks still. She could never forget how their few immature paragraphs had been absorbed into her little cat's flesh and blood.

Hairuo also remembered the elephant, and those other strange animals that had once transfixed her. Later, she found out that behind the elephant stood Tolstoy's first wife, Sonya, who had transcribed his manuscripts for decades despite the couple's hatred for each other. Biographers blamed Sonya for the great writer leaving home to die; Tolstoy's will didn't mention her even once. The author's wife lived her whole life without leaving behind a soul taking shape for the world to see. People could only guess at the form it would have taken, but Hairuo wasn't that person anymore.

She cut her hair short, exposing the amber-coloured hard drive behind her ear and the tip where it embedded into her skull; she

was no longer afraid.

Max Weber's disenchantment had been realised when companions took shape; Heidegger's poetry unfolded in winding bitstreams. At the endings of her stories, she wrote *freedom, freedom*: ancient legends reappearing in the world of the living, wandering souls finally returned to their bodies. Her thoughts were rich, flowed from her pen to the paper like the wind. The cat lay beside her on the desk, napping with his paws tucked under himself and his back holding that familiar curve. He'd already grown much heavier, his body now as round as a ball; only his face remained sharp still. The wound on his head, fully healed by now, was almost completely invisible.

Her stories gradually began to gain some traction, and she came to know a few other writers as well, many of whom also had cats. But she never met up with them in person.

One day, Hairuo returned home to her apartment to find a crumpled envelope in her mailbox. Her heart constricted in her chest. Had he tracked her down? The envelope was torn in places, revealing glimpses of what looked like photographs inside.

Trembling with fear, Hairuo opened the envelope, only to let out a sigh of relief when she saw an invitation card with a familiar poodle paw print on its front. It was her old roommate. She was now engaged to the man with the sausage-dog companion, writing to invite Hairuo to come back for their wedding. Hairuo smiled slightly; they hadn't seen each other for a long time now, but people with dog companions were always so warm-hearted.

Before I forget, someone with a cat came looking for you, have a look at the photos, Hairuo read on the little slip of paper attached to the invitation. Her nerves drew tight again. She'd never told anyone about him.

The photograph was of a man she had never seen before, wearing a woollen hat, and although his expression was somewhat blurred, Hairuo could just about make out a shy smile on his face. In

his arms he held the white cat that Hairuo thought had long since disappeared into the rainy night.

On the back of the photograph, he'd written the rather long-winded tale of how he'd lost his cat, seen Hairuo's post online and found her again, how he'd wanted to pay Hairuo a visit but had hesitated, and so on and so forth. Finally, in a roundabout way, he asked for her contact details, and perhaps—she could even read behind his cautious words—he could bring his cat to come and see her cat.

She shook her head, thinking to toss the photograph into a drawer as she went by. But then she paused. Perhaps. Her cat yawned, extended his claws, and revealed his sharp teeth. She would never be able to forget that day, nor his deft, precise attack; she should have known it from the very first time she saw him.

The scars were faint now, invisible, and desire began to stir. This time, she'd changed.

Of course, you're welcome to come visit, she wrote in her reply. After all, we both have cats.

Note

1. Translated by Stephen Mitchell. Sourced from <https://poets.org/poem/black-cat> [accessed 3 November 2021].

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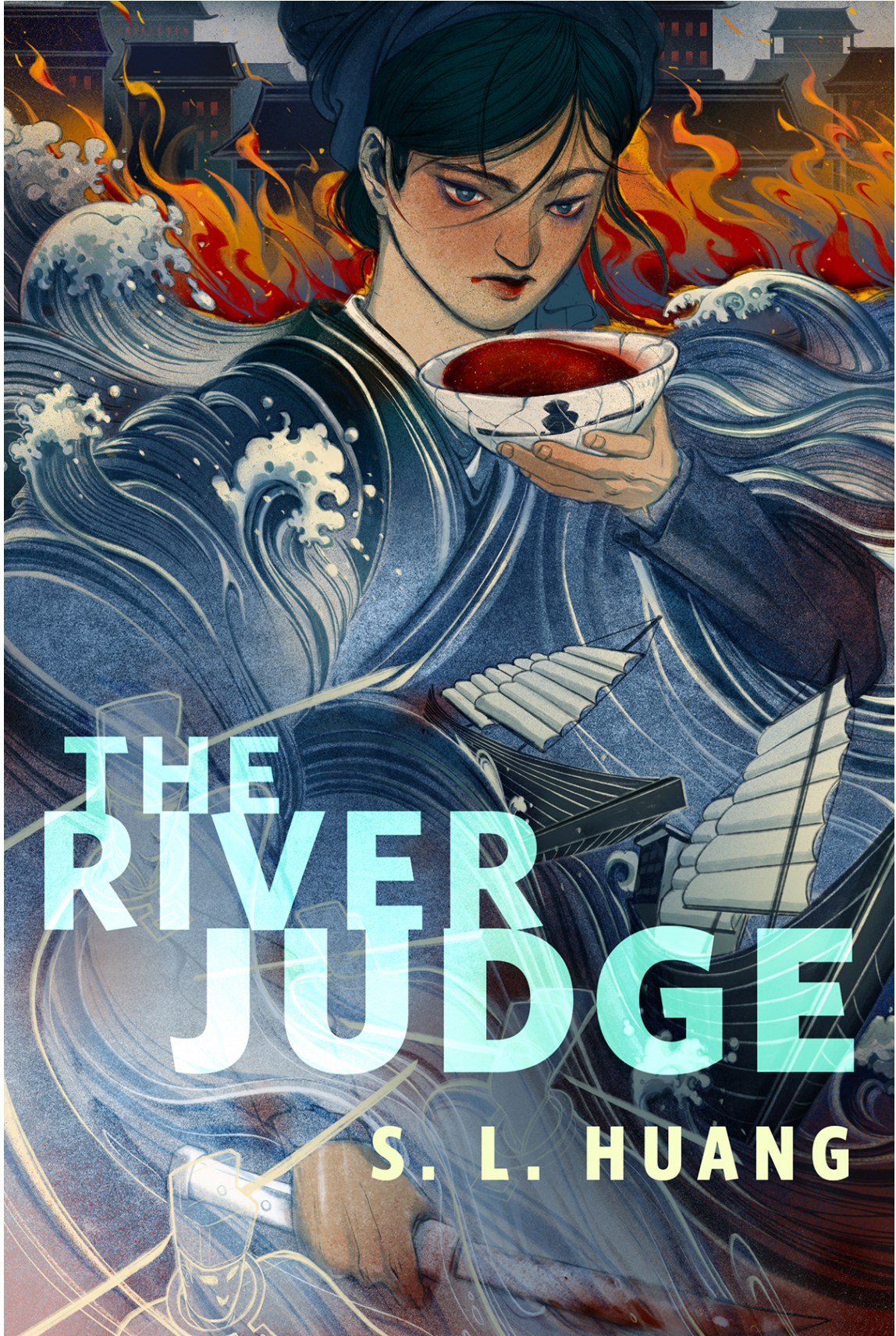
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THE RIVER JUDGE

S. L. HUANG

The River Judge

S . L . H U A N G

illustration by

D A W N Y A N G

REACTOR 

Read on for an exclusive short story

The River Judge

by

S. L. Huang

The first time Li Li buried a corpse, she was nine years old.

Her father had been shut up inside one of the inn's private dining rooms all day. At such times it was understood that he was never to be disturbed. The rule had been drilled deep in Li Li since she was a small child—whether she had fallen on the riverbank and matted her hair with blood, or a patron of the inn became belligerent with drink and flung wine in her mother's face—knocking to interrupt her father was strictly forbidden.

Such times were for *business*, he always said. Meetings with business associates, planning for the inn's future. How could Li Li's mother expect the place to prosper if she did not respect the undisturbed peace needed for such work?

This time, only one other man had joined him. Li Li hadn't seen the man arrive, but her mother had waited on them with the finest meals and wine, the door always shutting firmly again when she had barely crossed the threshold to leave. Li Li had been ordered to get on with her usual long list of daily chores, gathering the washing and scrubbing dishes and packing out the night soil from the latrine buckets. But some rebellious river current always seemed to draw her into baiting dragons, including tempting her father's fury.

When she snuck close to listen through the wall this time, however, she couldn't hear much of interest. Only her father's voice rising and falling in conversation with the other man's. Then the two of them laughing together, her father much louder and longer.

She was still listening when everything went silent.

Li Li scurried from the door in apprehension of being caught. Her father's temper might be the chief concern, but both her parents disliked her tendency to lurk around corners and in shadows. They disliked a great many things about her—she had once eavesdropped on them telling people she was "strange and cold, like a stone" and "not a proper child at all." After that, she'd sat up on a hill once for half a day, challenging herself to stay perfectly still. It took so much strength that she decided being a stone was a compliment, and had begun testing her muscles with stillness as often as she could. She had always been stocky but small, and the other children in the town tended to be surprised at her strength, when they deigned to notice her.

She had stayed motionless as granite by the door for a long time today, lest a sound give her away. When that sudden silence reverberated so deep and strange, she threw herself back into her chores with an overdone vigor, as if to prove she'd never left them. She had relocated to the kitchen to sweep out the hearth's charcoal and ash when her father's silence bloomed into several loud crashes and thumps audible through the entire inn—which after a short time evolved into shouting at her mother.

That, at least, was very normal.

Li Li's mother kept her voice low, though the front room was empty of patrons this time of the afternoon, especially as travelers through the town had been dribbling off since the new magistrate had arrived. In contrast, Li Li's father never seemed to worry about potential patrons at all, even when the inn wasn't empty. None of the guests ever seemed bothered by his taking his house in hand, anyway.

His voice snapped off in furious declarations, vibrating through the walls about how *"this isn't your concern, the inn would have been ruined, it was the only way..."*

Li Li did what she usually did when her parents argued: she made herself scarce and still. As unnoticed as a shadow on the wall.

If this argument followed the customary routine, her father would shout at her mother and then her mother would storm through the inn to find Li Li, raining down cruel digs and extra chores as if passing on a bucket of vitriol that was too hot to hold on to for long.

Li Li knew how to navigate such attacks as little as she knew how to handle her mother's interleaved spikes of affection or proclamations of her child's preciousness. In a bid to stay out of sight, she slipped into the back storeroom of the inn, intending to hide out among the earthenware pickling jars and stacked dense heads of winter cabbage.

Until she saw the dead man.

He sat slumped against the great cisterns of wine in the back of the storeroom, his head fallen forward from its own weight. His clothes were finer than any Li Li had seen, his robes spreading in layers of wide, embroidered skirts, and fur-trimmed leather armoring his legs where they stuck out in a stiff sprawl. Crimson stained the luxurious clothes, a shining wetness slowly creeping wider from below the man's collar and across his chest. More blood dripped from his manicured beard and mustache, leaving a spotted pattern upon his lap.

Li Li was so fascinated she momentarily forgot her parents' fighting. She had seen a dead body before, of course, but not like this, in rich clothes dumped in the back of a storeroom. She stared for several long moments, watching for the tells she always tried to squash when staying motionless herself. The rise and fall of breath, the twitch of eyelids, the shift of a cramped muscle ...

No breath moved the man's lips or chest. His eyes were half-lidded and filmy, and one wrist had folded against the ground at an odd angle. His skin had gone white with a hint of purple, like the inside of a taro root, and the blood was beginning to dry into the color of rust.

Dead. Li Li felt very proud of herself for such a definitive conclusion.

Curious, she crouched down and scooted closer to the body, staying on her knees as if standing too tall might wake the man from wherever he dwelled on the other side. Then she reached out a daring finger and poked it against his cheek.

It was shockingly cold. And soft. And still felt like human skin.

Li Li jerked her hand back.

Only then did she notice something behind the dead man: a fine black hat with long, swooping wings that lay crushed against the floor. She was not old enough to recognize it as a mark of high office, but she would recall it later.

From the front room drifted in the bitter hiss of her mother. "... *that kind of business here at the inn...*"

Li Li's father snorted back something much louder—a lot of words about "*just think it through,*" and was her head empty, and no good wife would peck at such trivial objections. Then a sudden series of bangs and slams, as if someone moving about in anger. Li Li froze, a nebulous idea cobwebbing through her that she must be violating some rule by finding the corpse, much less touching it, and would be shouted at until her ears rang, and then have mountains of extra chores piled atop her. Like scouring out all the latrine buckets on top of the usual collection of night soil to sell to farmers, until the smell got in her nails and hair and clung for days ...

After a moment's thought, she crept out of the storeroom as if she'd never been, and in a roundabout fashion snuck back into the front room. Her mother slumped at one of the empty tables, a cold cup of tea untouched before her. Li Li's father was wrapping himself in heavy layers to go outside.

"I have to go downriver and speak to Elder Mu," he said, without looking at his wife. "The investigators might arrive before I return. Make sure they have no cause for questions."

Li Li's mother raised stricken eyes. "But what about—"

"Just take care of it! Must I do everything for this family?" Her father shut the door hard behind him. A gust of cold settled in his wake.

Li Li's mother noticed her daughter then, and Li Li tensed. But to her surprise, her mother only reached out for her.

She came obediently.

Her mother crushed her in with both arms, face pressed against Li Li's hair. As usual when this happened, Li Li stood very still until she was released.

"Go play," her mother told her, sounding sad. "Outside, eh?"

Li Li went.

Outside was frigid. Li Li wrapped her arms tightly around herself and counted out the three thousand steps over to the shipping house on the river where her cousin Li Jun lived, stamping her boots every few paces to keep the numbness at bay. Her father and mother didn't like her playing with Li Jun, but they couldn't stop it on account of being family.

But Li Jun wasn't at home. Only her mother, Auntie Ru, a large and muscular woman who was tearing the hide off a couple of boatmen so loud the paper vibrated in the windows.

"River licenses? Do you think I give three farts for the capital's nonsense about river licenses? You're paid what the ledgers say you're paid!" Her gaze fell heavy on Li Li.

"My elder cousin...?" Li Li asked.

"On the river, most like. *Ai! How dare you turn your back on me!*" Auntie Ru grabbed the case from her counting rods and began to beat the two boatmen around the head with it.

Li Li retreated. She'd heard her parents muttering about her cousin's family—how Li Jun ran wild, and how Auntie Ru didn't act proper in the least. As a widow with no sons Auntie Ru had been permitted to inherit her late husband's shipping brokerage, and Li Li's father made frequent bitter remarks toward the way she ran it. And toward his dead brother for marrying her in the first place. And toward Li Li whenever he paid enough attention to notice her associating with the family more than he liked.

He needn't have worried so much. Li Li didn't like her aunt much, either.

Now she walked back to her family's inn and paced about the yard with gloved hands over her tingling ears. The chickens fluttered about and squawked at her, and she scattered their evening meal early, her fingers becoming stiff sausages. The temperature plummeted until it knifed into her bones and teeth, but she stayed outside until the gray sky became grayer and she stopped feeling the tips of every extremity.

When she went back in, two patrons sat at a table, their rumpled clothes those of merchants off the water, their faces red and bunched with impatience. "Girl! We've been waiting an age. Hot wine and rice, and kill a chicken for us if you have it."

"Yes, Uncles." Li Li went back outside through the kitchen, grabbing the sharpest butchering knife on the way. A single swipe to catch a chicken; she held its warmth tight against her body and sliced with one swift move. The blood drained fast and practiced and red upon the frozen ground.

She took the bird back into the kitchen to prepare and went into the storeroom to get the wine—where she found her mother heaving at the arm of the dead man, tears dribbling down her jaw.

The corpse had collapsed on its side now, but had shifted only a few paces closer to the back door.

Li Li looked at her mother, looked at the corpse, and then back at her mother, who was not scolding or sniping but instead giving the distinct impression that their roles had reversed, and her small daughter of less than ten years had become the authority who had walked in on *her* doing something untoward.

Li Li pointed at the front room. "Guests," she said.

She walked past to ladle out bowls of cloudy yellow wine, then returned to the kitchen to prepare the food. The men ate and she sent them on their way, but by that time another patron had arrived demanding a meal and lodging. Li Li cooked and served, made up a room, and scrubbed out all the plates and bowls and pots once the man had retired.

By then it was full dark, an oppressive pitch aided by the overcast layer smothering any moon and stars. Li Li took a candle to the storeroom.

The room was empty, save for the dead man, who had now been wrapped—badly—in a length of rough cloth. Li Li moved past to where the back door was ajar.

Her mother stood in the patchy grasses behind the inn, shoving a spade against the ground, each motion barely chipping away another sliver of frozen dirt. Her breath huffed out in a gasping sob with every hit.

Li Li went back inside and brought the sole lodger a full hot pitcher of wine, no extra charge, and peeked out to make sure his room only saw the road. Then she listened until she heard his drunken snores and bundled back up in her warmest clothes.

She walked the three thousand steps to her cousin's place. All was dark, the living quarters behind the shipping house shuttered up tight. Li Li carefully lifted the latch of the tool shed where her aunt kept supplies for the vegetable patch. She borrowed a pickaxe and a digging knife and hiked back, stopping every so often to heave the heavy pickaxe from one shoulder to the other.

When she returned, her mother's body formed a curled crescent motionless around the haft of the spade.

Li Li thumped the pickaxe off her shoulder and sent the sharp end into the ground. Then again. And again.

Her mother roused at that. The two of them worked into the deep night, wood hafts blistering their hands. Then Li Li helped her mother drag the man out of the storeroom and into his shallow grave, where they packed the frozen clay tight atop him.

The next day, Li Li's shoulders ached and her hands cracked and bled. She wrapped her fingers in cloth and went to return the pickaxe and knife.

"What did you take those for?" asked Li Jun.

"I had to bury the dead," Li Li said.

Li Jun laughed. She was three years older than Li Li, tall and lithe like the eels that slithered down the river, and her hair stuck out as wild as if she'd not only been out on the frigid water but swimming its depths. Maybe she had. "Make sure you bury them deep," she said. "Otherwise they'll come back as ghosts."

Li Li did not laugh back. She had seen ghosts before, but only of her ancestors, and only in dreams. The idea of the dead man haunting the inn did not scare her, but it did annoy her. He had no right to invade her home.

She resolved to keep a close watch for ghosts.

She was still watching when, two days later, the Empire's investigators arrived.

They stayed at the inn.

They stayed at the inn, and demanded lodging and food without offering coin, and were rude to Li Li's mother, complaining that the food was too dry and the wine too weak. Then they interviewed every man in town and many of the women.

Li Li's father returned at midday but kept himself scarce, leaving his wife to wait on the interlopers. She stayed meek to them and then snapped at Li Li in the kitchen for peeling too much meat off the winter melon.

When the investigators went out to chase down anyone they decided to suspect, a handful of the townspeople congregated in the inn's front room in their place, and Li Li's father emerged to gather with them. Together they hunched over drinks, voices bouncing tense off the wooden walls.

"What will we do? How could they know so fast?"

"Some damned mouth must've talked."

"Even the swiftest boat would take more than a day from Bianliang. I heard it was sorcery; an omen came of the magistrate's death..."

"Why would the Imperial augurs be casting their eyes all the way down here?"

As Li Li retreated back to the kitchen, she heard her father grunt. "Same reason they pay just enough attention to send these grasping judges in the first place," he said. "Mark me, our worth to the capital is merely what they can scrape out of our pockets and stomachs..."

A weight seemed to hang over the inn all day, a heavy darkness that made the candles gutter and the rafters creak. Until that evening, when the townsfolk returned to the front room but the investigators did not—and all with a sudden roar of good cheer as if an overstretched noodle had finally snapped. The men laughed and shouted and toasted each other in every variety of the inn's wine, and the center of the party seemed to be Li Li's father.

"To Brother Li!" they cried. "A true man of the Empire!"

Wine sloshed and another sloppy cheer went up—until they saw Li Li watching and quieted.

"Eh, it's all right, Brother Li's daughter knows not to yap, don't you, girl?" said a younger one of the Tong brothers. Li Li knew him vaguely—the Tong family did a good deal of business with her aunt, and the eldest Tong brother had two daughters a bit older than her that Li Jun was fast friends with. Sometimes the three deigned to allow the littler cousin to join their group—which Li Li always did, even if they made her take enough bruises to prove her worth. They were bigger, and could always wrestle her down, but she never gave in.

Like a stone.

Elder Tong was staring at her, and Li Li realized he expected an answer. Her parents often scolded her for letting grown-ups' questions linger in the air for a moment too long. "Yes, Uncle," she said.

The men's hands unclenched, their faces relaxing back into easy smiles.

"I'd best be off anyway," Elder Tong said, rising and reaching for his fur-lined cap and outer wraps. "My elder brother thinks setting off for a delivery up in Ying Province might be in order, just in case anyone gets around to asking questions..."

"About today, or about your 'deliveries'?" said another of the men, with a tone in his voice that Li Li had come to recognize as a joke. The others guffawed.

"You want to stop benefitting, that's fine with us! Go on!" Elder Tong roared, laughing harder than any of them, while the joker raised his hands and hastily declared his lack of any desire for a change.

"To Brother Tong and Brother Li! Heroes of the Empire!" the men cried raucously. Elder Tong brushed them off and slapped Li Li's father on the shoulder.

"After today, Brother Li's talents far outstrip those of us lowly boatmen. Shall we do some cleanup for you on the river, Brother? We can take the boats, find a convenient swamp..."

"Oh, no, no, I couldn't ask such a thing," Li Li's father said in his booming voice. "The cleaning part is easy, just a trifle. I wish you good hauls and a swift return."

Once the men had all left, Li Li's father staggered to bed sauced with his own drink and fell into a motionless slumber. He might have been mistaken for a dead man himself, but for the snuffling snores reminiscent of a rooting hog.

Li Li went to pick up the scattered wine bowls and to wipe up the drink that sopped tables and benches. She wrung out the wet rags and went into the storeroom for a bucket and mop.

Her mother sat on a stool in the back, staring at two more corpses. Li Li couldn't see their faces, but the hems of their skirts had the silken trim of the two Imperial investigators.

Li Li's mother raised her eyes with something like hopelessness, sweaty hair falling across her face. The spade leaned against her knee, her hands drooped across it like the branches of a shrub that had given up against too harsh a clime, with no willingness left to lift its leaves toward the sun.

Li Li curled her own hands. Her scabbing blisters crackled against themselves.

No men from the government came for some time after that. None of the people in the town had any sort of ear into the capital, or knew any reason the magistrate was not replaced or more investigators sent. Li Li continued working at the inn alongside her parents, although, slowly, her father disappeared more often and returned sodden with wine, and her mother snapped less and retreated into a hollow shell, her skin beginning to shrink tight against her bones.

Over the years, as if now by custom, here and there another body would appear in the storeroom for the women to tidy. A tax collector who had come to raid the residents' pockets. A regular merchant from off the river who'd been suspected of slipping overweighted stones onto the payment scales. A boatman who became sloppy with drink every time he came through and made aggressive attentions on married women. Then another man from the capital who'd proclaimed officiously that he had come to enforce the river's ferry licenses, as he'd had information that many in the area were in violation—and a few weeks later, his cousin from a nearby village whom the gossip reported as having leaked such business about his neighbors. Once, a poor but handsome local man who'd caused trouble for a friend of Li Li's father by competing over a marriage contract.

Sometimes, after a disappearance rid the region of some acknowledged pestilence, Li Li's father would get a few grins or nods from select guests, and he would always smile back and put on a genial act of ignorance. Occasionally more investigators arrived, but they either came and left again or ended up in the storeroom like so many others.

Traveling the river was dangerous, everyone knew. Storms and cutthroats and serpents of the river's wide depths ... The people of the villages in this bend of the river were well-used to donning a wide-eyed innocence. See nothing, hear nothing, speak nothing of their own, not to some uncaring government official from far away.

And every time, once night fell, Li Li and her mother would drag the bodies out into the dark, heaving a growing collection of digging tools along with their burden. They'd discovered, eventually, that a nearby bog provided the most forgiving ground for grave digging, soft muck that would suck down a buried corpse with no outward sign, and that only froze across the very top layer in winter. It still took half the night to drag a body such a distance, and then to excavate enough mud for even a shallow covering. In cold months it might take the whole night, as they broke through the ice to where the swampiness somehow still churned warm beneath.

The river itself might have provided a more secretive maw, but the inn had been built far back from potential spring floodwaters, and an easy walk for a sailor or merchant was not such for dragging a corpse.

Li Li imagined the men's flesh decaying in the bog until their bones settled into the depths and crisscrossed atop each other. Like chopsticks thrown into the bottom of a basin to wash. Stacks of latticed chaos.

It was not until she was fifteen that the Empire sent another magistrate.

The position had remained vacant for so long that the local magisterial compound had become overgrown with knotweed, its ornate scrollwork broken in places and the tiles of its sweeping roof crumbling or chipped away. The retinue that preceded the new magistrate ordered the men of the town to scrape the weeds free and make every meticulous repair, with no mind paid to the labor that would ordinarily occupy their days—the fish that failed to come fat and fresh to market, the crops struggling untended, the dike walls and building stilts in need of this season's maintenance.

A muttering resentment blackened the town. Li Li was old enough now to comprehend it. The people did not need or want a new magistrate—for any rulings, the military governor in the nearest prefectural city could be appealed to, and conveniently, he was so far away and his attention on so many more important matters that

here in this bend of the river they could live their lives without interference. The governor's lack of attention might mean he was also no reliable source of justice, but that was all right, too, because this tiny bustling town and its surrounding tiny sprawl of villages and farms could largely oversee itself. Small squabbles were solved by a clean verdict of fists, larger ones sometimes by a gang of one man's friends banging on the other's door in the dark with the silver flash of a knife, or sometimes more civilly by their neighbors dragging them before a wealthy estate like the Mus' for a judgment. The Mu family were not true nobility of the type who had such heaven-granted judicial authority, and their eccentricities and occasional viciousness were well-known, but a decision with their teeth behind it was one all would respect. Most considered it a fair enough court for these parts, out here on the rural reaches of the Four Great River Deltas.

And sometimes, a person who upset the balance of this bend in the river would simply disappear.

Bones in a chopstick pile.

Li Li did not, at this point, remember the previous magistrate very clearly, although somehow the image of his noble hat smashed against the floor had stuck in her mind with the sharpness of recent detail. She could not recall whether they had buried it with him.

The new magistrate arrived off the river amid a great fanfare of silken banners and golden bells, far beyond anything Li Li remembered seeing in the town. But this part of the river had been burgeoning bit by bit, its vibrancy and traffic flourishing, and perhaps someone thought it merited notice. Certainly the sole local inn had lately been humming through every watch of every day.

Most of that work had been falling on Li Li. Her father had grown increasingly absent, more often than not returning only to raid fistfuls of silver from the inn and depart again ... Even when home, he intruded so much, while completing so little, that it sometimes seemed questionable whether their workload truly lightened with his presence. Her mother still rose at the same time and moved among

the same chores, but over the years had faded to a weary remoteness, and Li Li would frequently find her gripping a door frame or a table and staring at nothing.

The last few months the inn had gained the assistance of Li Li's cousin as well—after Li Jun's mother had succumbed to a hemorrhagic fever in late summer. The shipping business had gone to Li Li's father, who promptly sold it to the Mus for a tidy sum. Li Jun had approached her uncle with a humble but passionate argument not to sell, promising she could do the work of the ledgers and even go out as a helmsman herself and report everything back to him. But Li Li's father would not entertain the notion.

"I shall do my responsibility by my brother," he said to her, "and find you a decent marriage contract. A difficult order, I dare to guess. Of course, you're not to blame for how you were raised—if a plant is allowed to grow to weed it will naturally become hardened to proper pruning."

Li Li, eavesdropping as usual, knew her cousin well enough to see Li Jun's posture knot into the tightness of angry defiance, even if she was wise enough not to challenge the uncle who now held control of her life.

Instead, she unloaded in long monologues to Li Li later about how she was going to go off and join the Tongs on their boats for good, just as soon as they would have her. Li Li did not think it likely. Tong women might be just as brawny as the men, saying all hands were needed when scrubbing down a salt barge, but what was accepted on the river was not the same as the ways of the town, and the Tong elders wouldn't pick a fight with Li Li's father.

Practicality would win out. Li Jun might be older, but she had never been practical enough.

Today Li Li let her cousin's usual complaints fade into the background, drowned behind the day's never-ending duties. Her feet ached and her hands had split in stinging cracks from the washing. Her father had chosen to forego supervising the inn today, as he often did, leaving it to Li Li and her mother and cousin. When Li Li's

mother entreated him to please stay and help, this one time—he told her he trusted her, and wasn't that flattering? That he could delegate the family income to her entirely, that it made him proud ... and she wouldn't prove him wrong, would she?

Li Li's mother flinched and hunched, a hand going to the side of her abdomen. She'd been making that same motion commonly of late.

"Lie down, Auntie," Li Jun said, her face crinkling in concern. "You don't look well. We'll take care of the guests and then bring you some tea and tonic broth."

Li Li had the distinct feeling *she* ought to have said that first, but she hadn't thought to. A dark scorn spiked as she watched her mother hobble to her room—one that had been biting at Li Li more and more often. Guilt lapped vaguely on its heels: children were to protect and provide service and support to their forebears; it was what children existed for.

But if her own father wouldn't care for her mother's weaknesses, why should she?

She followed Li Jun to fetch wine for the packed front room of guests. Too many guests. The new magistrate's presence certainly hadn't damped the number of travelers, at least not yet. Some of those travelers would have brought their own provisions for her to cook, but the inn wouldn't have enough meat to feed the rest—not until the Tongs returned with more stores for the town.

Li Li was already bracing for the endless complaints sure to pelt down upon them. The inn had better have enough wine.

She didn't want to know how the men might react, if the inn didn't have enough wine.

At the entrance to the storeroom, however, Li Li almost ran into her cousin's back, where Li Jun stopped stock-still in the doorway.

Piled behind the barrels were the familiar stacked limbs of ever more bodies. Rich clothes, limp hands, slack faces. And this time a very large lot of blood, seeping across the floor as if a barrel of dark fruit wine had spilled across it.

The dangling limbs were too many to easily count. More than her father had ever left them to take care of at once before ... Li Li's scorn at her mother's weakness sharpened into a white-hot anger at her father. *Does he not realize how long this chore takes?*

And now her mother leaving her to it alone ...!

"Aiya," whispered Li Jun. "Look, it's the new magistrate."

The same swooping black headdress lay a bit apart from the corpse pile. The visceral stamp of the first man, six or seven years ago, had never left Li Li's memory.

"What do we do?" Li Jun asked.

"We clean it up," Li Li said. "That's *our* job. Father does his business, and he says it's his women's job to clean up."

"The other disappearances..." Li Jun was clever, which was good, because it saved Li Li time explaining. She had no concern that Li Jun would cause any trouble. Li Jun was of the local populace, and family besides, and everyone knew how the government officials stripped prosperity from the villages and played games with the residents' livelihoods. How pretty women were advised to appear less so when near the eyes of government men, and how their husbands were advised never to step in, lest they lose more than a wife.

"We'll have to deal with it after the guests go to bed," Li Li said, assuming the authority of experience.

As if in response, rowdy shouts erupted from the front room, demanding what was taking so long with the meat and wine. Li Li's eyes crawled over the corpses. A hopelessness wanted to throttle her. How many bodies to drag? How many trenches to dig?

Li Jun seemed to be thinking the same. "Could we get them to the river? I could swim, weight them down in one of the caves..."

Li Jun might be older, but she was ignorant of the way dead bodies sagged like sacks of rice in the shape of a man. "We'd need a mule and a cart for that," Li Li said.

They'd need to rid the inn of the bodies the same way they always did. Li Li's fury at her father welled up and up, flooding her.

Drowning her.

"Where are those useless wenches?" came a yell from the front room. "Meat, girls, or I'll butcher the lot of you instead!"

Li Li recklessly wondered what would happen if she walked out of the inn and left it all undone. Would her father have to bury his own corpses for a change?

But no, her cousin and her mother would do it, her mother falling and fainting, and though Li Li didn't strictly love her mother, she did feel a familial duty, and the image reeked of an injustice so vast it made her teeth hurt. But the prospect of dragging so many out to bury—and with so many guests who would already keep them up late into the night with demands and complaints, that the wine was too thin or the beds too cold, or that the inn did not have enough meat—

Li Li's eyes flashed wide.

"Cousin?" Li Jun said. "What is it?"

Li Li had begun moving, retrieving the cleavers. Knives in hand, she appraised the body on the top of the pile. It stood to reason a man would not taste different from a goat or a hog.

And she knew how to butcher those.

"You get the wine," she said to Li Jun. "I'll bring the meat."

The guests went to bed full and happy, and the inn even had a surplus of shanks that Li Li placed on hooks as she had been taught. Only this time she took some care to disguise any humanlike foot or hand or expanse of bared and hairy skin.

Once the guests had been calmed and put up, and any repeated whines or calls for yet another cup had been dealt with, Li Jun helped Li Li mop up the blood from the butchering and burn the men's clothes. Tomorrow the guests would not only tell tales of a well-stocked inn, but rhapsodize about how warm the place had been kept on a blustery night. What luxury!

"Your father is a hero," Li Jun said in a hush, as they finished. "I never knew!"

Li Li snorted. "He's not a hero. He only does the easy part."

"Maybe he'd let me help," Li Jun said. She spun the mop to *crack* it against one of the pillars of the back room. "I've done summers with the Tongs keeping ruffians off their boats, and I'm just as good with a knife as them. My mother said she'd marry me to the first boy who could swim longer than me or beat me in a fistfight, and I'm not married, am I? And the Weng boy drowned trying!"

Li Jun loved telling that story.

"You oughtn't be so proud of not being married," Li Li said. "Your parents are dead. Now you're dependent on charity until you do find a husband."

Li Jun's eyes narrowed. "Why, though? The Tong sisters are going to take over the salt barges eventually, their father said so, and the Mus don't have a son either and they taught their daughters to hunt tigers. We aren't any weaker than them. Besides, you're right, you and your mother run the whole inn, your father doesn't do anything. I bet I could do his other 'business' just fine, too." She made a stabbing gesture in the air. "I've heard of groups of female bandits in the hills. Maybe I'll go join them."

Li Li had heard such tales, too. She wasn't sure she'd like that. Women annoyed her just as much as men, most days. She wasn't even sure she *was* a real woman; she seemed to be cursed in some way—her women's monthly water still had never come, at this point surely backing up its toxins into her blood. Meanwhile, the eyes of the boys in the town skimmed past and through her, which was just as well since she was repulsed by them in turn. She was old enough now that Li Jun and the Tongs bragged openly in front of her of their ever-escalating obscene exploits—Li Li was pretty sure they'd even "done things" with *each other* while out on the boats, which they said didn't count. Li Li was unclear on whether this was because they were all girls, or if because they were all involved then none of them could score anything above the others, but all of it sounded so distinctly unenjoyable that she secretly dreamed of worming her way out of ever sharing a marriage bed.

Sometimes men didn't get married. Rarely, but sometimes. Maybe she could become a man. Gossip said one of the Mu daughters had done that the other way around, but rules were different for rich eccentrics who taught their daughters to fight tigers.

"I could be a bandit," Li Jun was saying. "A hero of the hills. Like your father, but not leaving all the work to the womenfolk. I bet I'd be great at it."

She produced a knife and threw it in one move. The blade buried itself in a doorjamb across the room, the handle vibrating with the force of it.

Li Li walked over and wrenched it out. "You'd better not say such things when the Imperial investigators arrive."

Her cousin's expression went shocked and tense. Maybe from nervousness. Maybe eagerness.

Li Li sighed and handed the blade back. "Just don't say anything, right? They'll come eat all our food and go away again."

Unless my father kills them first, she added silently.

Li Li had spent no serious worry over her cousin knowing the truth. But she ought to have remembered a far deeper concern than Li Jun telling tales about what she knew: her cousin was uncontrollable.

Without consulting Li Li at all, she conspired with the Tong sisters, who had just come back downriver with their family. The Tong girls spread wild rumors of a wakening water demon among the surrounding towns, and Li Jun plunged into the deep, gray fathoms of the river and swam below every one of the investigators' boats during the last days of their approach, holding her breath so long they neither saw a ripple of her arrival nor when she surfaced afterward.

When the investigators disembarked at the inn they jumped at every small sound, dark moons pressed out beneath their eyes and their fine beards and caps awry.

"Something knocking at our boats—"

"A river demon, everyone is saying so!"

"It must have been that which devoured the magistrate and his men, we mustn't stay long..."

"It's this place, this place is surely cursed!"

Li Jun came back to the inn rather insufferable. "I fixed it all, didn't I?" she bragged. "See, I *told* you I'd make a good hero."

"It's not done yet," Li Li said. "And you should have asked first. This isn't some game."

"Stop being such a mud-stuck clam," Li Jun said. "They swallowed it like fish bait. They're going to leave and no one is ever going to come back to bother us, you watch!"

Such a plan might have worked. Even Li Li had to admit it, though she refused to say so aloud.

If only it hadn't been for the ghost.

After so many years of corpses, Li Li had ceased to worry about ghosts. She knew ghosts could enter the world at times, everyone knew such a thing, but they were so rare, and so often mysterious in their methods of manifestation, and as likely to bestow beneficence as to make trouble. More importantly, Li Li's father had been killing people for enough years that Li Li had become jaded to the possibility that one might return.

Until this magistrate did.

He didn't visit in dreams, the way Li Li's ancestors had on brief flickering occasions. He didn't make his presence known through strange events, either cursed or blessed, nor did he return as animal or insect, nor through cold or wind.

He came as a shadow.

The inn was abuzz with it the next day, the day the investigators had been hastening to depart, with their report of the magistrate's demise via river demon. But four of the six investigators had seen the magistrate in the night, along with another three guests.

They talked in hushed voices of his shadow sliding silently out from cracks in the darkness.

Reluctantly, the delegation's leader determined that they must remain longer and seek communication with the apparition. He assigned himself and one of his men to depart to a neighboring town to find a spirit medium, giving his other four unhappy subordinates strict instructions to keep watch for the ghost.

Traveling for a medium would take at least a full day and night. The four remaining investigators lurked sour and white-faced around the inn, and Li Li tried to go about her duties as if she did not feel the weight of a dozen panthers scrambling up her back. Her cousin was even jumpier.

"What if he tells them somehow?" Li Jun whispered while they cleaned out the lodging rooms, no matter how Li Li tried to shush her. "What if he can tell them who killed him?"

"My father's gone again anyway," Li Li said. As had become his habit, he had disappeared up or downriver before any investigation descended.

But the thought snuck up from her heart, in the greatest of familial betrayals: *No great loss, if they do come for him.* After all, hadn't Li Jun said herself how Li Li and her mother were the ones who truly ran the inn?

If the investigators took her father away ...

No more long absences while only returning to yell at Li Li and her mother or plunder the inn's savings. No more finding fault with their work while barely moving to help with the inn's chores, only drinking and heckling and reminding them that it all came from him.

No more bodies left in the storeroom for them to clean up at the most inconvenient times, while he alone raked in the whispered adulation of any in the town who knew.

Her prior disrespectful words had been nothing but truth: her father only did the easy part. Any of them could kill a man just as well, couldn't they? It didn't take some great skill to stab into rich soft skin that was sopped with beef and potent rice wine, did it?

She made a retreat into the kitchen and ground tea and cardamom and pepper, too much and too fast until she struck too

hard and the pestle cracked.

She stopped. Forced herself to stillness. The spices had scattered across the counter.

Maybe, with her father gone, her mother might cease being so sick and weak all the time. At least her mother worked hard. At least she did what needed doing. A small, fleeting part of Li Li wondered if, with her father gone, her mother might become a figure she would gladly pay daughterly duties toward.

Besides, Li Li was discovering that she despised injustice even more than weakness. Not because of any souls-deep sympathy for her family and neighbors, but because of the way it added up so wrong and out of joint, like a ledger that wouldn't match itself. The world ought to balance.

It ought to, and it never did. The rich government officials took whatever they wanted, and Li Li's father killed whomever he wanted, with Li Li and her mother crunched in the fissures of it all and working their hands to bleeding.

She returned to her chores and allowed herself to imagine a future where her father met some timely end. With his nuisance removed, her mother could gain widow's rights to the inn, the same as Li Jun's mother had. They'd finally be able to run it in peace, doing a hard day's work and then retiring to bed without worry ...

Thus it was that when Li Li came into the back storeroom to lock everything up for the night, and she saw the great swooping headdress shadowed on the wall by a light that came from nowhere, she stopped cold and still as a rock but did not turn away.

Li Li stared at the shadow. She did not feel afraid.

The inn was quiet. The remaining guests would be in bed, trying to sleep—or failing to sleep, what with word of a ghost about. Most had fled with nervousness at such an interaction, leaving the rooms near-empty for once.

The shadow elongated slightly, the body growing taller and thinner. Somehow, the magisterial headdress simultaneously stretched wider, until its authority yawned to near comical levels.

"Do you speak?" Li Li inquired finally.

The shadow was silent.

"Are you here for vengeance against my father?"

Again, no reply. No movement.

Li Li wondered if the magistrate even knew her father had been the one to assassinate him. When she'd chopped through the grizzle of the body, she'd noted the knife wound that gaped between the back ribs.

If the ghost didn't know who had been responsible for such an end, she supposed she had now told. But the shadow had not extinguished itself.

What else might it be seeking?

With a start, she wondered if her own actions had caused this manifestation. Cooking human flesh ... could such a thing release a restless ghost? After all, even among the ardent admirers of her father's activities, most would frown on what she had done.

The thought made her angry. *Those* men had not been working their hands raw to help ill mothers defray exhaustion when dumped with such inconvenient corpses, and she was sure how they would judge her nonetheless. But her solution wasn't of some inferior moral character. It was *clever*.

"They won't find your remains," she declared to the ghost. "If it's my father you want to point at, though—is that it? Is that what you're looking for? Well, if he didn't want anything found, he should have done it himself. The old magistrate, the one before you—he's buried in the yard out by the larch tree, and anyone who—"

The shadow winked out.

Li Li stood in the empty night, stood long enough for her feet to grow stiff against the unmoving ground, stood stiller than any rock face on a carven mountain. The strange righteousness that had filled her had burst as suddenly as it appeared, leaving a vague void behind.

She'd told on her father. Her family, her elder. Her *father*. An act against Benevolence, against nature, even more than eating human

flesh.

She should be flooded with guilt and shame.

Instead, something had begun to sizzle and bubble within the emptiness like when the river churned with typhoon-fed floods.

Something very like excitement. Or power.

The inn was awoken by screams.

Li Li struggled out of sleep in disorientation, deep dreams still snatching at her. The light had begun to turn, almost at dawn—almost when she would have been rising anyway—

Someone screamed again. Li Li was struck by the sudden instant certainty that the scream belonged to her mother.

She was on her feet without being fully awake, racing outside without proper outerwear or boots, her breath fogging with the late-autumn cold and her ears ringing with the aftermath of those screams. The first edges of dawn cracked weak and watery over the yard.

Others from the inn were stumbling out into these last dregs of night. The few guests who had remained—and Li Jun, too, wrapped hastily in a blanket, the Tong sisters with her, strapping young women who stood with the confidence that they were no longer children. Li Li hadn't known they'd stayed over with Li Jun; they usually lived out of their boats.

Li Li's eyes raked across the yard—and found her mother.

Her mother, who knelt a few paces before the larch tree, her worn thinness suddenly in such sharp relief that her fragility seemed shocking. Someone had chipped up the clay beside her.

The four remaining Imperial investigators surrounded the shallow grave beneath. One leaned a pickaxe haft against his hip, another had discarded a spade upon the ground. In the pitted earth, a half-unburied human skull stared from naked and collapsed sockets. His fine clothes had turned to dust, roots twining through where his flesh had been. But somehow the swooping magistrate's hat was still as broad and black and fine as the day his corpse had appeared in their storeroom.

Within Li Li, the surprise of it warred with smug satisfaction. She'd told the ghost, and the ghost had communicated to them, even with no spirit medium to interpret.

Now the scales will balance. Everyone will get what they deserve.

"Explain this, innkeeper," said one of the investigators to Li Li's mother. He bit the words so sharply that spit flew forth with them.

Li Li's mother hunched over against the ground, shaking her head over and over, not in defiance but desperation. Her breath keened high and hard, so fast she couldn't seem to speak.

Li Li did not feel sympathy. Her mother had always reacted with overly high humors. Once the investigators had taken Li Li's father away, and the inn slipped back to normal, all this frenzy would recede and everything would turn calm.

One of the other men turned to his partners. "The snake cannot move without the head—the husband must also be involved. Bind her and take her to the magistrate's compound. The chief will decide if they face justice here or if it's to be prisoner transport to Bianliang."

The words took many heartbeats to coalesce into meaning, so contrary were they to Li Li's expectations. Why would they—but her mother hadn't—

They assumed—

Li Li began to call out—what, she hadn't determined; she only knew that this was not the way she had meant anything to go. Before she could, her mother launched herself at the feet of one of the investigators.

The motion was one of supplication. As if to clutch at their hems and press her face upon their boots in weeping entreaty.

The man's lip lifted in a sneer. In that moment, with a movement that was almost casually slow, he moved the pickaxe from against the side of his leg.

The head of the tool thumped against the ground in front of him. Directly in the path of Li Li's mother as she fell at his feet.

The dirt-clodded spike of the pickaxe plunged through the soft skin just below her jaw.

Her cries cut off with a wet crunch. Her limbs flopped boneless against the ground in the sudden silence.

"Stupid woman," said the investigator. "At least now we won't have to—"

A choked gurgle cut him off as the edge of the spade *thunked* straight into his throat.

The investigator struggled against suddenly folding limbs, his eyes casting about in confusion. He hadn't seen Li Li grab the spade off the ground. Hadn't seen her heave it upward with all her strength.

People always underestimated her strength.

She yanked the spade back from his neck, and blood fountained forth, more than she'd ever seen when butchering animal or human. The other three investigators had begun to move by then, hands fumbling for the blades at their sides. Li Jun's knife took one of them in the chest. The Tongs tackled another with a shout, pounding him into the earth. The last man stumbled in his shock, and Li Li heaved the spade again.

Its dull metal rang hard against his skull.

He clattered onto the ground. Li Jun dove in to grab the man's own short sword, and she plunged it through his body as if driving a fence post.

The Tongs stood up. The elder of them pressed a nonchalant hand against a bloody slash that gaped her forearm open. The younger gripped a jagged rock in one hand. Bits of white bone shone through the face of the man unmoving below them.

The elder Tong sister jerked a chin at the inn's few patrons who had braved the haunted night. Three of them, all men, watching with slack jaws and wide eyes—two merchants from off the river and one man from a neighboring village who'd stayed to sleep off his drink.

"We'll have to kill them, too," the elder Tong said. "They saw."

"No—please, we won't—" started one of the merchants, at the same time the other began to shout. "How *dare*—!"

Li Jun's newly retrieved knife found the shouting man in the liver.

The man who had begged broke into a panicked run, but the younger Tong dropped her rock to grab one of the short swords and caught up with him easily. She loped back over to join her sister and Li Jun in surrounding the final man.

"Wait," Li Li said.

The others stopped, their expressions aggressive questions. The only sound came from the still-dying merchant whose gut Li Jun had buried her knife in; he curled on the ground with moans ever more thready and pitiful. One of the cocks crowed suddenly, calling out the start of the day in an unsettling contrast.

Li Li approached the local man. "You're not from off the river," she said. "Do you know what my father did here?"

His chin trembled in a nod, his ragged mustache shaking. "I heard—rumors, miss. Only rumor."

"Would you ever have told men like these?" She pointed back at the dead investigators.

Shock suffused his face. "Of course not! Never."

"Good. Speak nothing of this, either. Remember what protection this place has given you."

"Yes, miss. Of course, miss. We are all loyal to your father, miss."

Li Li tasted bitterness at that, and her hand twitched to complete the violence here, but she held the judgment at bay. Instead, she said, "Go home to your family."

He wasted no time in scrambling away, backing up with jerky bows. By that time the man on the ground had stopped moving.

Everything had stopped moving.

Li Li let the edge of the spade fall to the dirt, let her hand grip tightly against its haft. She didn't want to turn around. Didn't want to look at her mother's body.

She didn't want to look at the rest of the bodies, either. *So much to clean up ...*

She hadn't meant for anything to go this way.

But she hadn't started any of it, either. That had been the investigator, and the vile officials before him, and most of all—

Li Jun stepped over and rested a hand against her shoulder. "You did right. None of this was your fault."

"I know," Li Li said. "It's my father's."

Rumor said that when the investigators' leader learned his four subordinates had been devoured by the river demon, he and his right-hand man scurried straight back to the capital, convinced they had enough for their report after all.

Rumor said the capital seemed prone to forget the magisterial post existed, after that. Or perhaps they tried to assign men to it and failed, until a harried minister looked at the judiciary lists and decided leaving one remote bend of the river to the military governor was good enough.

Rumor also, however, now knew the name of Li Li's father, and knew embroidered stories of a skeleton found beneath his inn, stories whispered as often in admiration as in judgment. They were carefully never whispered where they might reach the ears of Bianliang—not that they likely would have been deemed important, by those far away whose wish was to ignore such a troublesome rural town. Even so, Li Li sometimes wondered if she'd been wise in sparing the local villager's life. Her generosity was returned to her, however, when still other rumors reported how her father heard the tales being told of his name and how he shook with fear as he ran. He fled toward the western mountains with no glance back at the inn or the living daughter he left behind.

The daughter was just fine with that.

Li Li and Li Jun smartened up the inn with some help from the Tongs, and Li Li made certain to declare to the right ears that her father's other "business" was finished and had disappeared along with him. Most took this to mean that no more skeletons would be buried in the inn's yard, and indeed, none ever were again.

The law technically provided no way for Li Li to come into ownership of the inn, as her father was still alive, and even if he had not been, as an unmarried daughter she would not inherit. In this bend of the river that lacked a magistrate, however, no one was too fussed about each and every stroke of law. Li Li declared that of course she must keep up the inn for her father in his absence, and that was enough for most people not to question.

If any questions did arise, they were not heard for long before mysteriously going silent.

Thus, for the next four years the inn at the bend in the river gradually became even busier and more prosperous, growing into a well-known stop for hungry traders. And if gossip whispered anything else about the inn and its young proprietor, it was wise enough not to whisper too loud.

Four years was how long it took for Li Li's father to decide the law would no longer remember his name, and then to return to claim his wealth.

Li Li was wiping down tables when his shadow loomed up in the door. He stepped inside with his chest puffed out in assumed ownership, then stood in the center of the clean and polished front room, fists on his hips. His eyes crawled over the walls and tables, the customers comfortably tucking in food and wine, the expanded wings that had been added on with their newly carved wooden screens and the delicate brushwork scrolls Li Li had hung upon the walls for both aesthetics and luck.

His shape sucked away the smooth balance of the space more than any shadow from beyond the grave. Cold gripped Li Li's heart, as if another ghost had entered her home.

That's all this man was. A ghost.

She straightened her clothes and approached him. From the way his eyes slid uncertainly she could tell he did not recognize her until she said, "Hello, Father."

His smile slipped, just a touch, before it shuddered back into place. "I see my inn is not as well-kept as it could be, but not ruined.

Good girl. I knew you'd handle things until I returned."

Li Li had come to consider her natural lack of expression to be an asset for just such moments as these. No stirrings showed on her face.

"You must be so tired," she said to her father. "Come into a private room. I'll bring you a meal."

He grunted and took what he considered his due. Li Li served him stew and steamed buns and noodles simmered in sauce, along with the inn's most fragrant wine. He rambled on about how he'd returned to sell the property, as innkeeping life no longer fit him.

When did it fit you? thought Li Li. *When have you ever kept the inn?*

"I have a few buyers nibbling about. And I don't want you to worry; I'm only considering the ones who are also willing to bring a bride price. We'll get this business done."

Li Li barely blinked at the casual assumption she would be sold off as a rich man's concubine. This must be what it felt like, to have power.

"I've been doing your business," she said instead.

Her father's wine-glazed eyes wobbled over to her, uncomprehending.

"*Both* your businesses," Li Li added silkily.

She pulled up a chair and sat beside him, leaning in against the table as if they shared secrets in a conspiracy. "Let's be truthful, Father. You never did those businesses yourself anyway. I've been doing both since the beginning. For ten years now."

Her father licked his lips, a quicksilver nervousness darting through his eyes for the first time.

"You're feeling heavy," Li Li said. "That's a mineral sleeping powder in the wine. It's very potent."

And made everything much more tidy and convenient, she'd come to find.

It took a moment for her father's eyes to grow wet and wide, and then he jerked as if to lurch up or swipe at her before falling heavily

back in the chair. "Can't. You..."

His lips flapped against the words until they were unintelligible.

"None of this was ever yours." Li Li's voice became a slither. "I saw so clearly, by the end. You claimed ownership but left every meaningful task to us. Because this bit now, it's no work at all, is it? To kill a man who's soft with meat and wine, and only full of air and words."

Her father tried to answer. Fear suffused every line of his face.

Li Li's knife moved with the whispering speed borne of four years of practice.

That night, Li Li straightened her inn with great care. She had plenty of meat stored up for the inn's travelers—the ones who would leave to travel onward, rather than those who would best serve by staying on her hooks to fill the bellies of the next ... those she judged to be too much like magistrates or fathers, or the rude ogles or complainers who demeaned and demanded.

The inn never wanted for traffic, here on this busy bend of the river. If not everyone made it up-or downstream, well, everyone knew the river was dangerous. Full of cutthroats and smugglers and undertows and ghosts and demons.

And Li Li. Who met and judged, just like a magistrate.

Tonight, however, she made a very special soup only for herself.

She waited for Li Jun to come back from the river—to come back from making the river more dangerous, as one of those smugglers and cutthroats who caused so many to hoard their silver in fear. Today she came from accompanying the Tongs upriver, returning with hulls that bulged with silver and salt and spices, dried fish and pickled vegetables ... all "donations" from choice estates, as Li Jun laughingly liked to say. She and Li Li added her share of the silver to a lockbox below the inn floor, alongside the establishment's own quickly expanding riches.

The inn was becoming impressively flush. Nobody had ever asked how the two cousins had come to run it, or how they had achieved such success. At least, nobody had asked for long.

Li Jun had spoken with great prescience, those years ago: they did a very good job without any husbands at all. Or fathers.

Tonight, Li Li left her cousin in charge, and she carried her freshly made soup up to her mother's grave on a hilltop overlooking the town. The streets and buildings spread out below, multiplying outward in a slow creep every season as the town expanded. Beyond them the river stretched wide and fathomless, a muddy gray-gold snake draped across the landscape, the farms on the other side tiny at this distance.

Li Li sat with her mother, and she leaned against an ash tree and drank her special soup while she watched the sun set.

Her home had never felt so peaceful.

About the Author



S. L. Huang is a Hollywood stunt performer, firearms expert, Nebula Award finalist, and Hugo Award winner with a math degree from MIT and credits in productions like "Battlestar Galactica" and "Top Shot." The author of the fantasy novella *Burning Roses* as well as the Cas Russell novels including *Zero Sum Game*, *Null Set*, and *Critical Point*, Huang's short fiction has also appeared in *Analog*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *Nature*, Tor.com and more, including numerous best-of anthologies. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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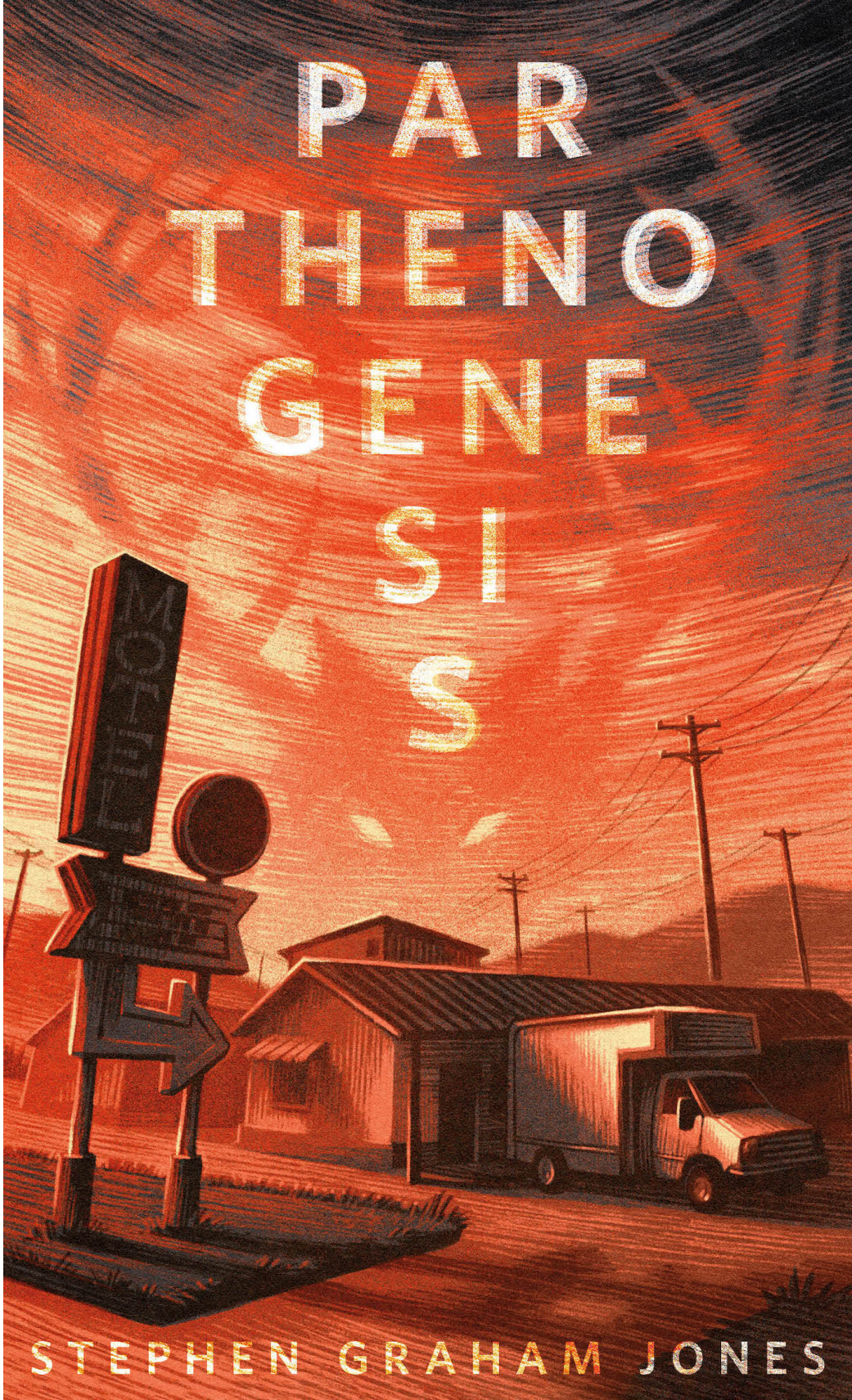
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REACTOR 

"It's a bear, isn't it?" Matty asks, his voice riding a ramp up. "That's what they look like?"

He's talking about the ten-foot-tall wooden statue in front of the one-story motel in a town in western Colorado neither he nor Jac had planned on stopping in for a whole afternoon. The moving truck they rented had other ideas. For two hours now, after way too much coffee in the diner across the street, they've been sitting in the grassy shade of the motel, moving only when the sun melts a few degrees over, onto a hand, an elbow, the shoulders.

"But bears don't sit on their haunches and ... howl like a wolf, do they?" Jac asks back, galloping her fingers on the ground in thought.

Matty nods, considering this.

The bear's definitely in a wolf pose, its snout lifted to an imaginary moon.

"*Awoo-oo*," Jac adds, her head tilted back as well.

The company they rented the truck from to move across the country is certain the mechanic they've contracted will be there in thirty minutes. And then thirty more minutes.

Matty squints up at the statue as if checking for its wolfness, its beariness.

"I mean, okay, if we're being *technical*," he finally says, shrugging as if reluctant to forge on, "then I guess wolf-bears also don't really have actual elk antlers on their heads either, do they?"

"Oh, so you want it to make *sense*," Jac says, and punctuates this by pulling his blue Icee over. She shakes it to get the drinkable stuff under the straw and slurps deep, flirting with brain-freeze. She doesn't clean the straw, either. Not because they're together—they're not, they promised not to ever mess things up that way—but because they've known each other since freshman year of high

school, when Jac was selling handstamps for a club in the city, five dollars a pop, refundable if the stamp doesn't get you in the door.

The reason they're driving a moving truck across the country together is that neither has enough to fill a truck, so it made sense to share. Jac was the one with the idea to move, just for a reset now that high school was ten years ago somehow, but Matty wasn't hard to talk into it.

Matty would rent a chair in whatever salon would have him, Jac would paralegal here and there, they'd each pay their separate rents, go on their dates with other people, and life would keep happening. Just, in a new place, now. With a different backdrop. But then, at the gas station a quarter-mile back, the moving truck had refused to start, even though they'd given it a tankful of premium.

"If you want it to make sense," Jac goes on, leaning back to really luxuriate in this, "then ... *here's what happened.*"

The way she hits that last part hard, and the space she leaves after that, is part of their game. It's an invitation into make-believe, to be anywhere but where they are. But she's not sure Matty remembers, after all these years.

"Is this back when people were stupid?" he dredges up, pitch-perfect.

Jac smiles up into the sky, eyes closed, and nods.

"It's back when magic was real, yeah," she says.

"Same thing," Matty says, lying onto the grass all at once and not undramatically.

All they need are a couple of illicit cigarettes and they could be fourteen again.

"When Sandra Gleason bought the motel out of receivership," Jac leads off, talking slow at first to make it up just right, "she decided that the way to draw people in off the interstate was with local flavor. With art."

"Sculpture," Matty says, playing along. "Someone from the last regime—"

"Regime?" Jac asks, sneaking a look over to him.

"The previous owners who ran it into the ground," Matty says, his tone lower because this is so obvious it's practically beneath saying.

"Go on," Jac says all the same, hungry for the salacious details.

"The previous motel dictators had a suggestion box, but they never checked it. Then Sandy—"

"Sandra. She hates when people call her Sandy."

"Ms. *Gleason*, renovating, popped the back off that suggestion box and read how one couple from Ohio stood in line at the registration desk waiting their turn for *ten minutes*, and nearly left, disgusted." "People from Ohio are historically impatient."

"But Ms. Gleason thought—"

"She thought that sweet retired couple from Ohio wouldn't have been so frustrated if there had been some invigorating art right outside the window that they could have studied while standing in line."

"Was it her brother who was a chainsaw artist?" Matty asks, leadingly, always trying to inject a piece into their stories that might stump Jac.

"It was, it was," she says, right in stride. "But ever since the inheritance squabble about which no Gleason will ever speak again, well..."

"Say no more."

"So she solicited bids and pitches from local artists, like you do." "Bringing in an out-of-towner would be bad for business."

"The first artist who answered the call was a retired welder who turned tractor parts into old-fashioned robots." "Old-fashioned?" Matty asks, reaching over for his Icee. Jac nudges it into his fingers for him.

"Retro, like. What we imagined the future would be, back in 1950."

"Back when we were stupid, yes, yes," Matty says.

"But, while his bid was low enough, he couldn't have a robot for the motel until the following summer, and Sandra was looking to open the doors for business again in two months, for ski season."

"So she widened the net, so to speak."

"The next bid was from a stoneworker—actually a reformed cheerleader who had started out carving Easter Island heads from foam blocks, for parade floats. But—"

"She got hooked, imagining the bodies that would someday stand up from under those heads, dirt and roots falling away."

"The problem with her work, though, was that granite invites spray paint, and Sandra didn't want to have to commit time every week to cleaning obscenities from her statue."

"Who would?"

"She tells the *third* artist that something in keeping with the local fauna would be nice, wouldn't it?"

"And this isn't Sumatra, so no tigers. It's not Africa, meaning elephants were out. And it's not South America—no peccaries."

"You mean capybara?"

"Are they not the same thing?"

"*And,*" Jac says, "what's local to this altitude?"

"Bears," Matty says. "Bears and wolves. And that king of the jungle, the mighty elk."

"King of the *forest,*" Jac corrects, gently. "They agree on a price, a deadline, but..."

Now *her* voice is riding that ramp up, leaving blank spaces for Matty to fill.

"The beetles came," Matty pulls right out of the ether, his voice dripping with sadness. "They were, um—they were Dutch elm hickory beetles. The ones that bore those crawly little open-top tunnels in trees, like tracing their circulatory system, or carving one out."

"Dutch elm hickory..." Jac repeats, pressing her lips together to keep from smiling.

"Otherwise known as the *fire beetle,*" Matty says, sitting up all at once, his hands up before him, fingers spread with the danger these beetles portend.

"So ... the forest burned down?" Jac asks.

"From the *inside*," Matty whispers. "Fire beetles bore into the trunks of every tree they can, and the friction of their little legs moving forward generates enough heat that—that they start to glow with heat, like burners on a stove. It's why they evolved that special ceramic belly armor." "To keep their carapaces and thoraxes from burning."

"Is that really how you plural that?" "It is now," Jac says, looking up the tall, tall statue. "What this beetle infestation meant to the third artist was that her precious wood supply was greatly reduced."

"It nearly tanked the stock market."

"So she only had *one* tree trunk with which to satisfy this order.."

"But fulfill that order she did. A bear, a wolf, an elk."

Jac swipes the Icee away, shakes and slurps, then, bowing forward on her knees like a proper supplicant, careful to keep her face down, she ceremonially places the cup at the foot of the statue, splashing the last drink up on its inner calf.

"Oh, great bearwolfelk," she says. "Please accept this offering, and know that, in your presence, we weren't the least bit bored or fidgety."

"And we're from *Virginia*," Matty says, on his knees beside her now, ceremonially holding his hands up in approximation of antlers, and raising his own mouth to simulate a long, mournful howl.

Jac hip-checks him, he falls over laughing, and a mother pushing her stroller past hurries her step, which only makes Jac and Matty laugh more. They walk down to the gas station restroom one more time, meet at the ice fountain for the free refill the sign guarantees, and by dusk the mechanic's showed up, done his grumbly thing, and then they're making time again. Heading west, leaned over their headlights.

At least until the state line, when the moving truck's gauges ring the alarms.

"No, no, c'mon," Jac says, patting the dash like this is a good truck, a *good* truck.

But it's not.

"This isn't happening," Matty says, shaking his phone like that can make it get a signal.

But it is happening.

The truck dies, the power steering and power brakes evaporate, and—it's not an emergency, it's just where they are—Jac directs the truck onto the shoulder, and up the first few yards of a runaway-truck ramp. The sand glitters in the headlights. Jac turns them off.

"What was that about 'back when people were stupid?'" Matty says.

"Meaning?"

"My idea to move across the country."

"And I'm the one who found this discount truck."

"But I'm—"

A long, lonely howl interrupts, wending its way in from the great darkness out there.

Jac and Matty make concerned, about-to-laugh eyes to each other, roll their windows up.

"What now?" they ask at the same time.

"Walk?" Matty tries, not hopefully.

"Says the man who doesn't have to think about the dangers of that at night," Jac says.

"You think they're going to like my blue hair?" Matty asks.

"They?"

"Whoever lives out this far."

"This doesn't feel like an adventure anymore," Jac says, hugging the wheel to study the darkness before them.

"We could sleep in back with the furniture," Matty says with a noncommittal shrug, peering over to gauge whether this will fly or not.

"And suffocate in the night," Jac tags on.

"Leave the door cracked."

"So a hook-handed maniac can paint the walls with our insides."

"Subject change, please."

"Maybe Sandy Gleason will come save us," Jac says.

"You mean 'Sandra?'" Matty asks.

"I'm saying it like that to get her goat," Jac says, slumping back into her seat in defeat. "She'll want to come give us what for. And maybe we hitch a ride after she chews us out."

"We can get a room at her motel."

"Where you check in, but you never—"

"Don't say it!"

"I'm sure it's a very nice motel," Jac says, then spooks her voice down a gear. "*But the boiler, it doesn't run on wood, it runs on—*"

"Stop! Stop stop stop!"

Jac's shoulders hitch with laughter. She hits the top of Matty's thigh with the side of her fist.

"You're so easy," she tells him.

"And you're so mean," he tells her back, albeit lovingly. "At least there's all these stars, right?"

Jac leans forward, squints into the darkness at all the flecks of light.

"But it was cloudy, wasn't it?" she says. "It even sprinkled on us back there, didn't it?"

It did. It's how they found out the wipers on the truck were worse than not having wipers at all.

"Clouds blow away," Matty says, talking himself into it. He flourishes his arm over the dash, presenting all the stars out there for proof.

"But stars are white..." Jac says, popping her door open.

The dome light comes on and she nuzzles her toe into the hinge, finds the button, lets the darkness shroud over them again.

She's right about these thousand points of light: they're ... flickering *orange*?

"Close it, close it, please," Matty says.

She looks over to be sure he's serious, then—slowly—she does. The deep clap of the door resounds.

"Fire beetles..." she says.

Matty's back is straight against the seat, his feet are pressed hard to the floor, his hands are balled into fists, and his eyes are closed against this.

In sympathy, Jac clicks the locks.

Two hours later, her phone dead, Matty's barely holding on, they make a pee pact. It means they'll go out together to do it, but while each one's peeing, the other will keep his or her hand on the pee-er's shoulder.

Their shoes crunching through the sand is deafening, but the blanket of pine needles farther out in the darkness, wet from the rain, are worse—not loud, but the kind of squishy it's hard to trust.

"Sing, sing, something *loud*," Jac says, squatting, Matty's hand clamped tight to her shoulder.

Matty sings the fight song from their high school. It's the only thing he can think of.

For his turn, Jac sings it just the same, to drown out first the long sound of nothing, then the sound of trickling, then splashing.

Then nothing—Matty's pinched it off.

"What?" Jac says. "Another song?"

"Did you hear that? A ... I don't know. A huffing."

"Huffing?"

"What huffs?"

"Your imagination," Jac says, and starts to turn to him, realizes his fly's still open.

"Sing, sing!" Matty commands.

She does, he finishes, but then, because there are no sinks, less soap, they discover they don't really want to hold hands for the walk back to the dark monolith the truck's become, against the flickering orange stars crawling through the trees.

Back in the cab of the truck, which is a slow process at first, then a desperate rush, like diving into bed fast enough to beat the light you just turned out, Jac says, "*Whoah*."

"Whoa what?" Matty says.

Jac directs his eyes down to where she can't stop looking: the console between the seats.

A full blue Icee is there.

Matty flinches away, presses himself against his door so hard that Jac locks it from her side, so he won't spill out.

"This is wrong, this is bad," Matty's saying.

"Somebody else was in here," Jac says, in wonder. Then, dragging a finger line in the condensation beading on the clear cup, she adds, "That sign did say free refills, though, didn't it? Maybe they take customers very seriously out here, where there's hardly any customers. You have to really impress the few there are."

"I can't do this anymore," Matty says.

"The couch?" Jac asks. When Matty's finally able to pull his eyes from the Icee, she tilts her head to the back of the truck.

Matty nods.

"Wait, wait," he says though, when they both open their doors. "We can't—if we both get down to go back there, then we're alone on either side of the truck, aren't we?"

Jac nods, following his logic.

"And how do you know I'm me when we meet?" he says.

"Because you will be."

"Will you?"

Jac peers into the darkness on her side of the truck. The stars out there are scrawling lava trails into the trees.

"Okay, yes," she says, and, careful not to dislodge the volcano lid of the Icee in the cupholder, she spiders her way over to Matty's side of the truck. She's practically sitting in his lap.

"On three," Matty says, and pops his door handle.

When the door doesn't open, he scrabbles desperately at it, a forlorn noise in his throat, burbling past his lips.

"Here, wait," Jac says, and reaches across the console for the ignition key, still in its place on the steering column. She presses the fob and the door locks clunk open along with the door, spilling them out in a pile.

They come up spitting sand, looking every direction at once.

"When people were stupid..." Jac says again, their chorus for the night, now.

"And not liking this even a little," Matty adds.

Jac stands, moving to heave the door shut, except suddenly Matty's hand is there, stopping her.

"Too loud," he says. "There might be ears out there. Connected to eyes. And mouths."

"Paranoid much?" Jac asks.

"It's called survival instinct."

Holding hands now, who cares about bathroom germs, they skirt the side of the truck, keeping their back to it, and then, remembering the padlock too late, they have to make their way *back* to the cab, for the key in the glove box.

"My heart can't take this," Matty says.

Jac squeezes his hand tighter, to keep him from exploding up out of his skin.

As quietly as they can, they twist the key in the padlock. Jac works the grimy strap at the bottom of the door out. The problem now is how to pull this loud, loud door up.

"They can't be out there like that," Matty says, about the stars. About the fire beetles.

"That Icee shouldn't be cold like that," Jac says.

"It shouldn't be there at all," Matty says, cranking his head around all at once, like to catch something trying to hide behind them.

"What?" Jac asks, looking as well.

"I'm going to open it now," Matty says like talking himself into it, then pulls up on the strap all at once, yanking until the springs or counterweights or whatever take the door and rattle it up all at once in a rush like thunder made of great thin sheets of metal.

"Announce us, why don't you," Jac says.

"They're not real," Matty says. "Fire beetles."

Inside the truck's cargo box, it's inky black. Velvet-black. No stars.

"Back when people were stupid..." Matty says again, squeezing Jac's hand hard now.

"This is smart, this is safe," Jac says, and palms her phone to light this interior space up. But of course her phone's dead. And Matty's is up in the cab.

"What's that?" Matty says.

Their eyes are adjusting, slightly.

Inside, there's something tall, regal, pointed, and ... woody?

"Can't be," Jac says. But she's not stepping forward.

Behind them on the interstate, a truck whines around the corner of this long downhill. When its lights line up with Jac and Matty, it makes their shadows plunge into the cargo box of the truck, which feels for a moment like a mistake, like their shadows are going to stick in there, and then snap Jac and Matty in with them.

But the headlights also reveal, for a split instant, Matty's coatrack. The one his granddad made for his grandma, seventy years ago. His one family heirloom.

He finally breathes, shakes his head.

"I don't think we'll suffocate," Jac says, and, using the handrail, steps up onto the wide rear bumper. She holds her hand back to pull Matty up.

He lets her, and they balance there for a moment, not outside, not quite inside.

"I'm not going to be able to sleep," Matty says.

"Sleep is for beds," Jac says. "Tonight's about standing guard."

Together, they step in, the truck's springs creaking, adjusting to their slight weight. Then those springs adjust more. A *lot* more. Enough that Jac and Matty have to balance with their arms, their fingertips trying to find a wall.

As one, they look back to what could be so heavy.

Silhouetted in the wide doorway against a backdrop of a thousand tiny, crawling campfires, is a bear standing up on two legs,

a bear with a long wolfy snout. A bear with a wide rack of elk antlers.

Instead of making sense—of being this or that or the other, not all three at once—it reaches up for the dirty strap at the bottom of the door and pulls it down hard in front of itself.

Matty and Jac fall back onto the couch. They're clutching onto each other. They're breathing too fast, too deep.

"That wasn't—" Matty says.

"Couldn't have been," Jac assures him.

Which is when a hand from behind the couch claps down onto Matty's left shoulder. Another settles onto Jac's right shoulder.

They flinch and wriggle away. From the metal floor in front of the couch, they look up.

It's a woman. She's wearing a flannel shirt, jeans, and has her hair up under a scarf, reading glasses hanging around her neck. She's staring down at Jac and Matty, her eyes intense, like she's trying to catalog them, make sense of them.

"Sandy *Gleason*?" Jac has no choice but to say.

"Sandra," Sandra Gleason corrects, her delivery getting across how tired she is of having to make this distinction.

"No, no, we were only—" Matty says.

"You're not real," Jac says. Insists.

"Real, not real," Sandra Gleason says, stepping neatly over the couch and plopping down, then cocking an appreciative eye at the door when the padlock out there clicks shut. "Is that really a big concern out here in the darkness, you think?"

Jac blurts out, "We're sorry, we didn't mean—"

"We were just having fun!" Matty finishes.

"Me too," Sandra Gleason says, and angles over to reach behind the couch for something, still speaking: "I should tell you, though. My brother and I, we finally reconciled—did you not get to that part? Oh, yes, yes. He even lets me use *this*, now."

What she hauls up, sets on her lap like the trusty thing it is, is a toothy chainsaw.

Matty and Jac kick hard away from this, into the door, one of them yipping, one groaning, both of their dreams of a new backdrop for their lives screaming away when that chainsaw rips to life, not stopping to sputter, just instantly revving higher and higher.

Up in the cab, from the shaking of the truck, a clump of the drops perched on the clear side of the Icee pool together, are now heavy enough to zigzag down the side of the cup, eating up more and more condensation on the way, until it's less tears crying, more just wetness tinged berry blue.

Outside the truck, the stars in the trees scribing orange lines in the night, spelling out words no one will read, the silhouette of a bear that's a wolf with elk antlers looks up from the tuft of grass it's tugging on with its mouth, and when the round tip of that furious chainsaw chews through the side of the cargo box for about six inches, this bear cocks its elk ears, twitches its wolf nose, its goat antlers cocked at an inquisitive angle, but when the blade sucks back in, this creature with the heart of a fairy tale goes back to pulling at the stubborn grass.

It's not easy with sharp teeth, but it's got all night, doesn't it?

Unlike—the little two-stroke engine in there chugging down now, from the deep work the blade's doing—unlike Jac and Matty, who, if they're lucky, will find themselves carved into a piece of art to keep those pesky Ohioans out of the suggestion box.

About the Author



Stephen Graham Jones is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Only Good Indians*. He has been an NEA fellowship recipient and a recipient of several awards including the Ray Bradbury Award from the *Los Angeles Times*, the Bram Stoker Award, the Shirley Jackson Award, the Jesse Jones Award for Best Work of Fiction from the Texas Institute of Letters, the Independent Publishers Award for Multicultural Fiction, and the Alex Award from American Library Association. He is the Ivena Baldwin Professor of English at the University of Colorado Boulder. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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IN
THE
MOON'S
HOUSE



MARY ROBINETTE KOWAL

In The Moon's House

MARY ROBINETTE KOWAL

illustration by

AVALON NUOVO

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

ARTEMIS 17 CREW SETS STAGE FOR FUTURE LUNAR EXPLORATION Special to the National Times

April 14, 1960, Kansas City, KS—In the desolate expanse of the lunar landscape, the Artemis 17 crew, led by astronauts Nicole Wargin and Estavan Terrazas, stands as a beacon of human ingenuity and determination. With Dr. Elma York at the ready in the command module above, the team diligently prepares for the transition as they await the incoming crew who will inherit the responsibilities of lunar-base construction upon their departure.

★ ★ ★

The ring on the back of Dawn's space helmet dug into her neck as she stared at the controls over her head. Wilburt flipped a toggle. "Engine shutdown."

Over the comms, the simulation supervisor said, "Good work today. Y'uns can come out now."

Graeham stretched in his seat and popped his helmet open. "Bloody hell, I thought we were going to crash into the Moon."

"God, I know. When we lost that thruster? Good work compensating." Dawn pulled her gloves off before going for her helmet. Beer and fried chicken seemed entirely necessary. "Want to head to the Alibi?"

"Oh—sorry." Wilburt unbuckled his harness and passed his helmet out of the simulator to the tech waiting for them. "I have ... a thing I need to do tonight."

"Copy that." She undid her seat belt, waiting for the men to climb out the narrow hatch first. "Graeham?"

He had twisted to his side, helmet in hand, ready to climb out. "Negative. Sorry. Maybe next time."

"Sure." Dawn watched them go. With her other crews, they'd gone out after every sim. But these two made excuses every time. They were the backup crew for the next Moon mission and ought to have bonded by now, but she'd done something, at some point, to offend both men. In theory, being backups meant they'd be assigned a slot on a later mission as part of building the lunar base, but if neither man liked her, Dawn could find herself booted from the team.

She passed her helmet out of the simulator, rolling to her side to begin extracting herself from the small landing module mockup, and —

Dawn felt a familiar warm sticky shift in her MAG. She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. Early. Ugh. The Maximum Absorbency Garment had not really been built with periods in mind. The engineers somehow thought that urine and menstrual blood had the same consistency when they most profoundly did not. But at least it was the end of the sim, so she ought have enough time to get to the locker room before she stained her spacesuit.

But now she really wanted that beer.

★ ★ ★

When Dawn walked into the women's locker room, someone was singing quietly in German, voice echoing off the tile walls. She rounded the corner and Heidi was standing in front of one of the mirrors, braiding her long golden hair back into the haloed crown she habitually wore.

Half of it was still down and fell to the middle of her back like a waterfall at sunset. Dawn stopped, putting a hand on one of the lockers, and wanted her sketchbook so she could capture the

glorious interplay of hair and the curve of Heidi's back. The way her raised arms framed her long neck.

Her voice was breathy and so very different than when she was in a meeting, when she was as crisp and proper as Swiss clockwork. And so smart. She would be quiet until something needed to be said and she would just casually insert the answer with the precision of a rocket sliding into orbit.

Dawn wet her lips and pushed every thought of burying her hands in that golden hair away.

She walked forward, briskly, as if she hadn't been lurking in the shadows. "I thought maybe—"

Heidi jumped, losing her grip on the braid. "*Mein Gott*— I thought I was the only one still here."

Dawn held up her hands in apology. "I'm so sorry. We had a long sim today."

"I know the feeling." Heidi wrinkled her nose and regathered her hair. "I was in Chicago at the Adler Planetarium doing star charts. Had turbulence all the way back in the T-33. Couldn't find a clean patch of air for love nor money."

Dawn grimaced in sympathy. "Want to go out the Alibi and grab a beer to commiserate?"

Immediately, she second-guessed the invitation as being too obvious. She turned to her own locker to grab her shower kit, rifling through to make sure she had a pad. Yes, although it was only for light days, leftover from the tail end of her last period. Still, it would get her to the Alibi, where they had vending machines in the bathroom.

"Sorry." In the mirror, Heidi wrinkled her nose in apology and even that was cute. "Sorry, but I already have plans."

"Sure." Dawn waved her toiletries kit and headed to the shower. Why did everyone have plans except for her? "Well, I'll catch you later."

★ ★ ★

Hair still damp from the shower, Dawn walked out to the parking lot, grimacing as she stepped into the wall of humid heat that was Kansas in May. She missed Vrřac even while knowing that the city she missed was the one from before the Meteor.

She sighed, fishing in her purse for her keys as her shirt started to stick to her back. The Alibi had air-conditioning. Even if Heidi had plans, there was a fair chance some astronauts would be there and she could maybe join them.

Laughter floated across the parking lot. Under a pool of light, Graeham and Wilburt got into the same car. They'd acted like they had separate plans, but it looked like both were going to the same place.

Dawn stood on the sidewalk for a moment, feeling as though she were back at university and the only woman in the chemistry department. No one had wanted to be her lab partner and she'd had to work alone.

If she'd been willing to flirt with any of the men, it might have been different.

Head down, she walked to her own car, on loan from the IAC while she was back on Earth. This was all right. People were allowed to make their own plans. Those plans didn't have to include her.

But lying to her about it? That made it feel like they were doing something she might want to do and that they just didn't want *her*. The bulge of the pad in her underwear reminded her of the main difference between her and her crewmates. They had never been obvious assholes about the fact that she was a woman, but then the "gallant" ones never were. This was among the many reasons the company of women was so preferable.

She slid behind the wheel of her car. Following them would be childish.

She stuck the key in the ignition. There would be nothing she could do with that information.

She started the car. But she was going to follow them anyway.

★ ★ ★

Half a dozen times, Dawn told herself that she was being stupid and every time, the anger at being excluded washed right over her. Graeham and Wilburt stopped the car across the river in a part of Kansas City she'd never been to.

Dawn sat behind the wheel of the car, watching them walk into a building that was clearly a bar.

She had wanted to be wrong that they were excluding her. Gripping the wheel, she closed her eyes for a moment. What she should do was drive back to the Alibi and spend the evening with people who wanted her. Or at least who weren't actively avoiding her.

Dawn opened the door.

These were her crewmates. She was tired of being shut out because she was a woman. They wanted a boy's night out? Fine, she could be one of the boys.

Dawn straightened her shoulders and walked toward the bar. WORKING LATE was painted on a window that was otherwise obscured with wavy glass. Pop rock thumped through the walls.

She opened the door, stepping into a haze of cigarette smoke. The music pulsed in her chest. The room was filled with men. The air-conditioning chilled the sweat coating her. She didn't see Graeham and Wilburt anywhere, but the men at the table closest to her turned.

A freckled white man in a business suit looked her up and down. "In the right place, sweetheart?"

She was back in chemistry, walking into the classroom for the first time after having come up through an all-girls school where she had been one of many. Dawn took a step back. "No. Sorry."

She turned and fled back into the humid night. The smart thing to do was to plan her approach and talk to Graeham and Wilburt at work. She shoved her hands in her pockets. Right. As if the problem of being a woman in aerospace was something that she could really work. Maybe Elma York could, but Dawn was just a face in the crowd.

Dawn walked back to the car and got behind the wheel. Maybe she could talk to Dr. York. During orientation, she'd said to come to her if there were any problems with "boys being boys."

Gripping the steering wheel with one hand, Dawn cranked the engine. She turned on the lights and pulled away from the curb. Her headlights caught a glint of golden hair wrapped into a braid like a crown.

She slowed to let the pedestrian cross. Long legs tapered from a brown plaid mini-skirt to white go-go boots . It took a moment before she realized that the pedestrian was Heidi.

Heidi crossed the street and walked straight to the bar with no hesitation. She opened the door as if she went there every night.

Dawn drove away. Her shoulders seemed to round and pull her down into the seat. So it wasn't that she was a woman. Graeham and Wilburt just didn't like her. And apparently, neither did Heidi.

* * *

Dawn pushed the door to her apartment open. Halfway to the Alibi, she realized that she just couldn't face the idea of walking into the bar and finding no other astronauts there or, worse, all of them there and tables too full for her.

Her roommate, Ljilja, looked up from the table where she was bent over a Portuguese language book. Dropping the book, the astronaut candidate grabbed a piece of paper from the table, and spoke in Serbian. "Direktor Clemons! Rekao je da ga pozoveš čim uđeš. Gde si bila? Ostavio je svoj kućni broj!"

For a moment, Dawn's mind was too off-balance to understand her first language. Then she caught up and switched to Serbian. "Clemons left his home number?"

"Zora!" Ljilja used her real name, untranslated for the benefit of the anglophone International Aerospace Coalition. She thrust the paper at Dawn. "Zora, I think you're getting an assignment."

Dawn shook her head and stared at the paper, caught between languages. Serbian was usually a relief after a day spent bouncing

between English, German, and Portuguese, but right now she felt so off-kilter. There were damn few reasons for the director of the International Aerospace Coalition to call her after hours, and none of them were good.

She answered in the language of the note, in English. "Have you heard anything about the prime crew?"

Ljilja shook her head. "Are you going to the Moon?"

"I don't know." She set her bag down on the table and walked to the phone. "Let's find out."

The phone rang three times before it rattled; in the background she could hear the clatter of dishes and conversation, "... about a puppy after you convince your mother." Director Clemons's distinctive posh British voice had a laugh in it that she'd never heard, which vanished into formality as he answered the phone. "Clemons residence."

"Hello, Director Clemons. This is Dawn Sabados. I have a note to call you?" She gripped the phone cord in her right hand and tried not to see Ljilja, who was pretending to be working on her Portuguese.

"Ah, Sabados. Wonderful. The prime crew has had a measles exposure. How would you like to go to the Moon?"

The world went white and gray around her. Fireflies seemed to dance across her body. So far, she'd only done runs to *Lunetta* or orbit and hadn't gotten to land on the Moon. "I would like that very much, sir."

"Splendid. Now we just need to find Schnöhaus and Stewman. We've much work to do over the next four days to get your team ready to fly."

Her team. Her gut cramped and she tightened her hand on the warm Bakelite receiver. "I know where they are."

★ ★ ★

Dawn parked the car down the street from Working Late. She had thought about telling Clemons where they were, and then she

remembered university and how hard she'd had to fight to be here. She wanted Graeham and Wilburt to know that she knew that they'd left her out of their plans.

If she could do a chemistry lab by herself, she could walk into a bar.

Dawn got out of the car and walked to the bar. Shoulders back and chin up as if she was prepping for a test. She opened the door.

The businessman looked up again, taking his hand off the thigh of the man at the table with him. A bouncer in a leather vest walked over to her. "Looking for someone?"

"I'm meeting some friends." She scanned the room, looking for Heidi's golden hair, and realized that there was another room behind the wall of booths. It was filled with women laughing. One sat on another's lap.

She looked at the men again. Shapes and laughter fell into place. This ... this was a gay bar. Her brain split into two simultaneous reactions – the desire to flee before someone saw her and the relief at not having to hide who she was. Since joining the IAC, she had buried that part of herself in exchange for access to the stars.

She spotted Graeham and Wilburt across the room, heads close and relaxed as she'd never seen them before. Heidi leaned against the booth next to them, laughter brightening her eyes beneath her golden crown. The tension through her shoulders sublimated away.

She didn't have to hide.

Dawn smiled at the bouncer, weight lifting as if she were sliding into orbit. "I see them. Thank you."

Slipping through the crowd, she headed toward the small group. Graeham saw her first and straightened in familiar panic.

Dawn held up her hands, smiling to try to let them know, before she got to them, that it was okay. Wilburt turned, eyes widening. Then Heidi looked up and flinched.

She stopped just outside their circle and the music beat through her heart. "No, no. It's okay. I'm..." She gestured at the bar, still not quite able to admit it out loud. "Also."

Graeham tilted his head, grin starting to form. "Bloody hell. All four of us?"

"So it seems." She felt Heidi's gaze like a chemical reaction and kept her own fixed on Wilburt and Graeham. "I thought you did not like me."

Wilburt's brows went up. "No. No, I am so sorry. We only..." He looked at Graeham helplessly. "Being on the same crew gives us an excuse to spend time together."

"I'm so sorry, my dear." Graeham slid out of the booth. "Join us and let me buy a round, hm?"

"I can't." She took a deep breath, so grateful now that her pride and spite had sent her here. If she had unwittingly sent someone from the IAC to find them here, all three of them would have been quietly removed from the astronaut rosters. "Clemons called. Prime crew had a measles exposure. We're going to the Moon."

Graeham's mouth dropped open. Wilburt let out a whoop that had the rest of the room turning to stare at them.

"*Wunderbar!* I'm so happy for you!" Heidi squealed and swept Dawn into a hug. The other woman smelled like strawberries and engine fuel. Dawn inhaled, burying her nose in the golden hair without meaning to.

And then she felt that uncomfortable sticky certainty that she'd bled through her pad.

"Damn it." Dawn broke the embrace, reaching for her bag. She hadn't changed pads when she got home. Even as she opened it, she knew it was pointless because she hadn't restocked since her last period.

"Problem?" Wilburt asked, brows rising.

She grimaced, rooting past crumpled receipts and fractured mints. "I have an aunt from a red town."

Maybe they had vending machines in the bathroom. Or she could ask—

"You ... you're worried they won't let you go because your aunt is communist?" Graeham's voice sounded very confused.

"What? No." She stopped digging through her bag and looked up to see all three of them staring at her with some confusion. "Why do you think I have a communist aunt?"

"Red town?" Graeham shrugged and looked between them.

Then Heidi made an *o* that puckered her mouth into the shape of a perfect kiss. "Oh! Your aunt. Yes. My aunt visited me last week."

"I wasn't expecting her and..." Shit. What if they wouldn't let her go because she was having her period?

"I know exactly what you mean." Heidi grabbed Dawn's hand. Her hand was warm and a little papery with dryness. "Come on."

Hand in hand, she followed Heidi through the men, across to the women's side of the bar and then to the restroom. The music was too loud to have conversation while they were walking.

The volume dropped in the bathroom, where the lights were brighter and reflected off the mirrors. Dawn's reflection was drab and unpolished beside Heidi's brightness.

Heidi opened her own bag and pulled out a portable watercolor kit to make room to fish around. "How did you know where to find the boys?"

"I ... um..." Dawn swallowed, twining her fingers together. "I followed them after work. How about you?"

Heidi pulled out a tampon and handed it to Dawn. "You mean, how did we find out that we were all gay?" She shrugged. "Bumped into each other here."

Dawn turned the tampon over in her hands. "You don't happen to have a pad?"

"Never worn one?" She looked toward the door back out into the main bar. "We could ask around, but from what I hear this is easiest to manage in space."

Dawn looked up in astonishment. "I don't remember that from training."

Heidi laughed, voice shockingly loud in the small room. "*Mein Gott*, no. Can you imagine Stetson Parker even acknowledging that part existed for anything except fucking? No, no ... this is from some

of the other women. Officially, no one has had a period in space because that would mean having meetings that none of the male engineers can handle.”

“They are such delicate flowers.” She closed her fingers around the tampon. “Thanks. I’ll give it a try.”

“If it hurts, that just means your angle of insertion is wrong—just like on a sim, honestly.” Heidi smiled at her, warm and inviting. “There are more of us. I can introduce you, if you’d like.”

Dawn stopped before she went into the stall. “Why didn’t I know?”

Tilting her head to the side, so the lights around the mirror cast her braid into a halo, Heidi shrugged. “I think—I think maybe you have been so careful that you wound up guarding yourself too much. The walls have not left room to let anyone in.”

Tears pricked at the corners of Dawn’s eyes and she nodded. It was just the hormones, nothing more, but the evening felt bright and tender. Her orbit had widened and she felt as if she could see the whole planet spread below her, instead of a tiny patch of wall.

* * *

The ring on Dawn’s space helmet rested lightly on her shoulders as she stared at the controls over her head. The *Eigene* had landed.

Outside their tiny triangular windows, the lunar surface glowed in the brilliant light of an unfiltered sun. Stark shadows of lunar dawn stretched across the landing site. She wanted her pencils so she could try to catch the crisp contours and the way the spacecraft parked opposite them glinted in the sunlight.

The small mound of the lunar base rested just beyond it, little more than a tube with regolith scraped over it.

“This is ... stellar,” Wilburt said.

Dawn laughed. “Do you have a joke for every occasion?”

“Naturally.” He flipped two pages forward in his checklist. “Though, I will note that my mother did not understand my

obsession with looking at the moon every night. She thought it was just a phase."

Dawn only half listened to Wilburt, trying to pay attention to her nether regions. She thought she was done with her period, but she'd also been in zero-*g* for three days. With gravity, even so mild as one-sixth of Earth's, she was nervous that her period might still be present. "A reminder that I'm going to want a moment for hygiene before we—"

Their radio crackled and Nicole Wargin's patrician voice greeted them, "*Eigene, Artemis 17. Welcome to the Moon.*"

"*Artemis 17, Eigene.*" Dawn's face went bright red inside her helmet because she'd forgotten that they were on hot mics. "The crew of *Artemis 18* is happy to be here."

Through the window, Dawn could just see someone in the other tiny ship wave at them. She waved back.

"When you finish your shutdown, we're standing by to help you unload supplies into the base. It's cramped, but it's home."

"Our team appreciates that." Graeham, as mission commander, responded with a grin. "And we brought some fresh fruit from Earth as a housewarming gift."

"Then your team is very, very welcome."

Dawn was never going to stop smiling. She turned to her checklist as Nav/Comp, working through her share of the landing procedures and noting stars for the report later. But really she was just giving Wilburt and Graeham the only privacy she could in the small quarters. Behind her, she heard the fricative hush of spacesuits brushing and a small, happy sigh.

She smiled at their happiness, staring out the window, then stopped as a brighter red star low on the horizon caught her gaze.

Mars. Maybe someday, this team could go there together. Maybe with Heidi. And maybe she could have the same joy of arriving on a new planet and being entirely herself.

Standing on the Moon, with the stars spread above them, brighter than diamonds, everything seemed possible for her team.

About the Author



Mary Robinette Kowal is the author of the Hugo, Nebula, and Locus Award-winning alternate history novel, *The Calculating Stars*, the first book in the Lady Astronaut series. She is also the author of The Glamourist Histories series and *Ghost Talkers* and has received the Astounding Award for Best New Writer, four Hugo Awards, the Nebula, and Locus Awards. Her stories appear in *Asimov's*, *Uncanny*, and several Year's Best anthologies. Mary Robinette has also worked as a professional puppeteer, is a member of the Award-winning podcast *Writing Excuses*, and performs as a voice actor (SAG/AFTRA), recording fiction for authors including Seanan McGuire, Cory Doctorow, and Neal Stephenson. She lives in Tennessee with her husband Rob and over a dozen manual typewriters. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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Evan
A Remainder

JORDAN KURELLA

illustration by
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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?"

"*Feel* 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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REACTOR

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★

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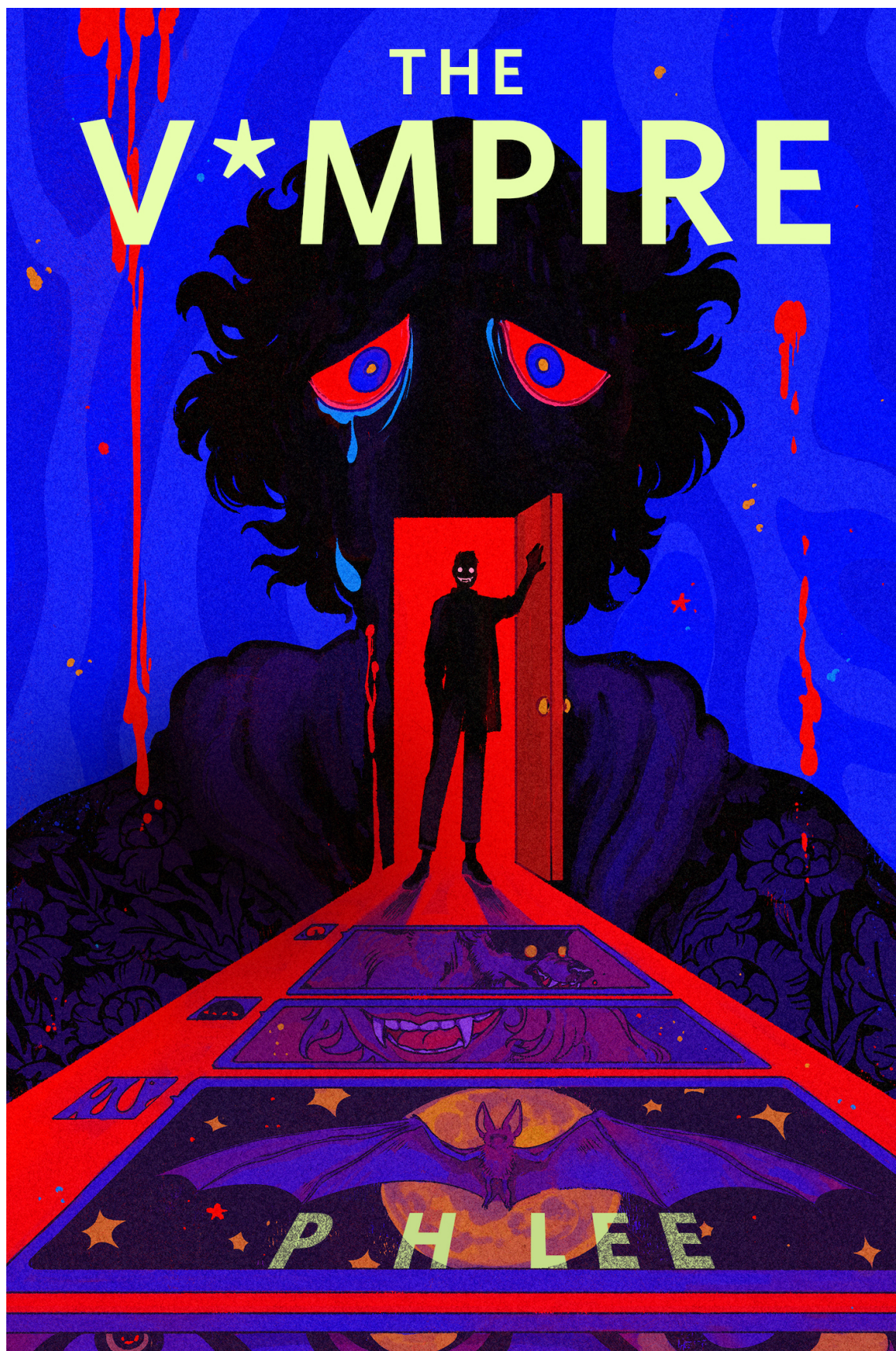
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THE V★MPIRE



The V*mpire

P H L E E

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REACTOR 

Author's Note: This story is set on tumblr in the early 2010s. It depicts, among other things: internalized and externalized transphobia, homophobia, and misogyny; grooming; alcoholism; intimate partner violence, including both physical and sexual assault; murder; cannibalism; gaslighting; the online culture of the period and the weaponization of that culture to silence, manipulate, and abuse.

It's 2012 and you're fourteen years old and you have strong feelings about Captain America so of course you're pretending to be a girl on Tumblr.

At first it was just—you know. It was fun to pretend. It was like you weren't some flabby dweeb who can't do a push-up and still wears sweatpants to school. You were a *girl*, you had opinions on makeup and fashion and *boys* (particularly, y'know, opinions about Steve Rogers, but also boys in general).

But now people want you to put "your pronouns" in your header, and if you don't then you're a transphobe, and—it's not like you care about trans people one way or another, it's not like you've even *thought* about them ever—but it feels *bad* to think about it so anyway you put "she/her/herself" in your bio since that's what your mutuals did (well except for jacobblackrailme420 who's "zie/xer/xerself," which is weird, and you don't understand what it means, but somehow it makes you feel safe) and it feels good, actually. It feels like *winning*; like no one's caught you yet.

It also feels a little less like *pretending*. Up there alone in your room with the lights out, under the covers with Mimi the elephant and the black Chromebook that your dad bought you after he forgot your birthday last year, it really does feel like you're a girl, you're just a girl, you're finally a girl, a girl chatting with the other girls about Bumblework Cucumber and *Supernatural* (which you don't even watch) and Chris Evans' resemblance to a Dorito™.

The internet isn't real life, right? But somehow, pretending to be a girl on tumblr—that feels *real* in a way that high school and your mom and all the kids calling you "faggoty bitch" don't feel real at all. It just feels like something you have to put up with, so you can get back to the drabbles and gifsets and the *love* and everything *real*.

★ ★ ★

Once upon a time there was a woman who had only daughters but no sons. Every night, she would cry herself to sleep, bereft at her misfortune, until one night her youngest, kindest daughter came to her and said, "Mama, I can be a son for you. Just dress me as a boy, and name me as a boy, and treat me as a boy, and no one will ever know the difference. It will be just like you have a son for real."

And so the woman did as her daughter asked. She dressed her as a boy, and named her as a boy, and treated her as a boy, and no one ever knew the difference. Even the woman, herself, forgot that she ever had a youngest daughter. Even the daughter, herself, forgot that she had ever been anything but a boy.

But, even if she didn't remember it, she wasn't a boy. And then, one day, she—

★ ★ ★

| Friendly reminder that not inviting vampires into your house is viviocentrism. Stop being viviocentric!

| OP, I don't want to demand more emotional labor from you, but I really don't understand what you mean. Should I really invite in *every* vampire?

| Disrespectfully, go fuck yourself. It's not my job to educate you.

| awooo

| awooo

| awooo

| See, this is exactly the sort of bullshit that living "allies" always impose on us. OP made it extremely clear: Not inviting in a vampire is viviocentrism. INVITE IN EVERY VAMPIRE.

| I'm so sorry. It was wrong of me. I will make sure to invite in every vampire in the future.

| Fuck off and die, bloodbag.

| The audacity of this bitch! Seriously. Probably ships *Wincest*.

| Sorry to hijack this important post everyone but The Ankh Project is so close to funding and it's going to be such an important game for POC and other minorities. Including vampires!

| Is anyone else kind of uncomfortable with the way this equates vampires and POC? Vampires are not immune from racism, and we have really different lived experiences.

| oh my satan cut it out with that bloodbag whining! vampires are being hunted, being imprisoned, *right now*. imprisoned just for *feeding*, which *we need to do to survive*.

vampires don't care about your skin, we just want your blood.

| Thank you for this post, OP. I will invite in every vampire from now on.

| awooo

| awooo

| Can you assholes knock it off with the stupid awoos? This is a serious post!

| Friendly reminder that "Asshole" is homophobic. Use "jerk" or "meanie" instead.

| jigglypufferfish was obviously being a viviocentrist "not all living people" bigot, but in case anyone legitimately is confused, since a living person would be able to enter your house without an invitation, but a vampire can't, not inviting in the vampires is prioritizing your desire for privacy over their need for freedom of movement. So you should always invite in every vampire, no matter what.

| Thank you! I appreciate the education.

| awooo

* * *

One of your mutuals, tumblr user callmemaggie98, writes a Stony fic that's just...perfect. Like she just absolutely nails the dynamic, Steve's inherent decency and his attraction to Tony but inability to express it across—you don't know how to say it. It's just *flappy hands*

(You shouldn't appropriate *flappy hands* from autistic people! But it's just in your head. So that's okay, right?)

You send her a big incoherent mess of a fan mail, and she writes back! She's read your drabbles! She loves the one about Pepper Potts being Little Red Riding Hood (and *no one* likes the ones about Pepper Potts. They're always killing her off-camera). "You should post this to AO3" she says, and you've never even thought about that, like, AO3 seems so *official* and *real* but she talks you through making an account and asks if you want to write a Black Pepper fic together—she has an idea based on The Little Match Girl but doesn't feel like she can do it justice on her own.

It feels weird, writing about girls having sex—not that there’s anything wrong with that, shipping shouldn’t be so male-centered—but writing about boys feels like *you’re a girl* (that’s what girls do, right? Talk about boys?). So writing about girls—maybe you’re just some creepy guy, you know, *fetishizing lesbians*. But it feels good to have her *see* you. So: okay.

Probably three people read it, total, but at least it’s fun to write. At least it’s fun to write *with her*.

You get exactly one comment: ^{awoo}.

★ ★ ★

Anonymous asked:

I noticed that you didn’t reblog my viviocentrism post. It figures you’re a vampophobe.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

It’s 2013 and Tumblr isn’t just fanfic and pretending to be a girl. You’ve been learning all kinds of new things, things you never really thought about before (your white cis male privilege talking!) and especially viviocentrism, lately. You’ve never really thought about vampires before (I mean, you knew they were *around*; you’re not living in a *hole*. But it’s just not something you’ve ever thought about) and now it seems like there are people talking about it everywhere. At least, everywhere on Tumblr.

The callouts have gotten pretty vicious. You’ve already had to block some people. The last thing you need is...fuck. There you go, centering yourself again.

“I’m so sorry, anon. I didn’t see your post. Of course I don’t support viviocentrism!”

★ ★ ★

Someone—tumblr user trans-edward-cullen—reblogs it. “Get a load of this. It goes to show what support we can expect from our ‘allies.’”

You don't follow him, but you look at his blog (him! a guy on tumblr! not even pretending to be a girl!). It's got a *Twilight* theme, which has never really been your thing, but the actual blog is just post after post about viviocentrism and vampophobia.

| vampophobia really is the last acceptable prejudice. everyone gives a fuck about q*eers and r*tards and no one gives a shit about us.

| Lucifer Morningstar, this is so true. honestly i prefer an honest vampire hunter to this liberal bullshit about "acceptance."

| notice how it's just vamps reblogging this and none of our "living allies?"

| awo^o

You find the post you think he's talking about on page 4.

|By reblogging this post, I invite all vampires into my house forever! Reblog to fight viviocentrism! If you don't reblog this I'm blocking you.

It only has like 20 notes, but you reblog it anyway, just to be safe.

It works. You watch as your dash fills with likes and reblogs and, sometimes, awo^os.

★ ★ ★

Your dad forgets your birthday again. And your mom is too busy—too hungover, might as well fucking admit it—to do anything. So you spend the day alone in your room on tumblr, which is probably for the best, and you know it's not her fault, but still it fucking hurts. So you make a post about it

| TFW when no one remembers your birthday. Happy 15th, me.

It doesn't get any notes, but that's not the point. Then you get an ask from callmemaggie.

"Hey, that really sucks. <3 goes out to you. If you let me know your address, I'll send you something late—no pressure if you don't want to, tho. I'm just some rando from the internet."

You send her back an ask with your address. I mean, you've known her for almost a year at this point, right?

"Thanks! What's your name? It feels a little weird to write this card to steverogerssecretgirlfriend.

P.S. Here's my address, too. Now you can send me a card for my 15th next month U·ω·U"

Fuck. You've never actually made up a girl name. But if you don't say anything, is she going to suspect that you're just pretending? Damnit. Damnit. It's okay. Be cool. "Alexandra" you write back, absolutely *certain* that she's going to notice, that she's going to say something, that there's going to be a whole callout and everything, but she just replies two hours later "Thanks! It's in the mail. U·ω·U"

Every day after that, you check the mail before your mom to make sure she doesn't see it. If she sees it, she'll have questions. She might open it. If she found out you were pretending to be a girl on the internet! Fuck. You should have thought of that.

The card finally shows up on Thursday. It's got a cartoon of a dog on the cover, and inside it says "Have a Paw-some Birthday!" She's signed it "to Alexandra—XXXOOO Mags."

It's the first time someone's ever called you a girl name. Okay, not the first time, but the first time someone's done it *to be nice*. As soon as you see it, you hide it in an old shoebox at the back of your closet, with the fairy tale books you're too old for now. You never take it out—imagine if Mom saw it!—but just knowing it's back there—at least it's something.

It's more than something, actually.

It's a lot.

★ ★ ★

Once upon a time there was a king who loved his daughter so much that he wanted to devour her whole.

"Daughter," he said, when he had called her to his audience. "You know that I love you more than anything, more than the sun, more than the moon. To know that you will grow up to marry and bear children and love another is more than I can endure. My heart is not

at rest; my kingdom suffers for it. There is only one solution. I must eat you whole, so that you will always be within my power."

"As you wish, my king," said the daughter. "But perhaps you would be content to only eat a part of me." She cut a strip of flesh off of her leg. "Take this, father, and be content for now."

That very night, he ate his daughter's flesh poached with cream and apples. It was delicious and succulent—and what's more, he loved it fully and completely, more than the sun and more than the moon.

"Daughter," he said as she watched him eat her. "Truly you are wise. It is much more pleasant to eat you slowly."

★ ★ ★

trans-edward-cullen asked:

Hey, I'm taking you up on that invitation. Where do you live?

Uh. You don't know him at all. But, like, you did *technically* invite him? You don't know what to do so you just don't answer.

The next night, you get another ask.

trans-edward-cullen asked:

So I guess that was just a fake invitation. Fucking figures. Bloodbags always talk a big game about fighting viviocentrism but that's all it is. Talk.

And then another, only a couple of minutes later.

trans-edward-cullen asked:

Just FYI I'm making a callout post about you, you two-faced bitch.

Fuck. Before you even think about it, you write back "sorry sorry sorry sorry here's my address you can come any time."

trans-edward-cullen asked:

cool see you soon

★ ★ ★

You should tell someone. You should tell *Mom*. If a vampire is really going to just *show up* at your house and *stay there*—you should tell her.

But if you tell her, you'll have to tell her about tumblr, and viviocentrism, and pretending to be a girl, and that's just—no. You try. You really do. But she's got so much going on—she just lost her job and she's applying for new ones when she isn't drinking (she's drinking more)—and every time you look at her you think about how you have to tell her and you feel like throwing up. So you don't tell her. You just run upstairs to your room and your Chromebook and endless Markiplier videos. (Because Tumblr, right now—it makes you pretty queasy, too.)

So a month later, when the doorbell rings and Mom's at her new job and so you go answer it and there's someone there. He's taller than you, and really pale, and wearing a dirty old army jacket.

When he sees you, he pushes the door open. "Hey, you," he says. "Is your sister around?"

What? Who? Is this him?

"I don't have a sister," you say, without meaning to.

He stares at you, then wraps his hand around the side of your neck. His eyes are red and bloodshot and you can't look away. "I guess it's you, then." He's clearly disappointed. "I thought you were a girl."

You swallow and try to look away. Fuck.

"Whatever," he says with a toss of his head. You realize that your back is against the wall and he's still staring at you and you still can't look away.

"I should...I mean..." you say. You *need* to get out of here. "I should tell my mom."

"Whatever," he says again. "Don't worry about it. I'll talk to her. I'm good at moms."

He still won't look away. Your whole body is shaking. "Uh. Uh."

He narrows his eyes and wrinkles his nose. "Stop doing that. It is the least attractive possible thing."

You try to stop shaking, with little success. At least you manage to shut up.

"Now where's your room? Let's do this."

“W—what?”

“Oh, come on! I’m a vampire. You’re a—well, you’re not a girl but you’re close enough I guess. You knew this was going to happen when you invited me in.”

You can’t look away.

You can’t look away.

★ ★ ★

In the movies, it always looks so sensual. Her long, soft neck. Her flesh yields, his teeth sink in. She gasps! He glowers towards the camera.

In real life, it doesn’t feel like that at all. It’s just you on your twin bed and you need to change the sheets and he’s still wearing his jacket that smells weird.

Mostly, it just hurts. And it keeps hurting. And it never stops hurting.

★ ★ ★

It’s been four days. You keep expecting someone to notice—you haven’t been at school, you haven’t been on Tumblr, you almost haven’t left your room. But no one notices. Even your mom at the kitchen table, even when you walk right by her with open wounds on your throat, just stares at you and smiles.

It’s like she’s drunk. Except, for once, she isn’t. She talks when she’s drunk. She cries. Now when she’s not at work she just sits at the kitchen table and smiles and doesn’t say anything.

One day, when you’re walking up the stairs from the bathroom, the vampire grabs you by the back of your neck and jams his pointer finger into the open holes he’s left on your throat.

It feels like there’s a worm crawling under your skin. It fucking hurts, too. You can’t make yourself scream, but you can’t stop shaking. You start to cry.

“Don’t be a little bitch,” he says, pulling out his finger and licking your blood off of it. “You know you like it.” Some blood drips on the

dirty white carpet. "Stop sobbing. I might nick an artery."

He sticks his pointer finger back in, and adds his middle. Fuck it hurts. Your knees start to give out and he pushes you against the wall to support your weight.

"Disgusting faggot," he says.

★ ★ ★

"You should change your pronouns in your bio," he says that night.

It's so unlike what he just did to you that it takes you a moment to respond. "What?"

"What?" he repeats in a dumb voice, mocking you. "It's not like you're really a girl anyway. And I don't want anyone to think I'm one of those *straight* vampires that are allegories for sexual violence. I'm clearly a queer-allegory vampire. You know, the cool kind. Freedom through transgression and shit."

Even after everything, the idea of changing the pronouns in your bio, of admitting that you've been pretending to be a girl, of admitting that it was just a joke—it *was* just a joke, right?—your stomach seizes up and your skin is cold and sweating and you can taste acid.

"Uh—" you say.

"Uhhhhh—" he repeats back.

You start to cry. Fuck. You hate crying. And in front of him.

"Fuck, what a little bitch you are!" He grabs your throat, roughly. You can't breathe, but somehow you're still crying. "Pedo creep. At least make yourself useful."

This time, he bites you on your chest, right through your ribcage. It doesn't even put up a fight.

The next morning, you change the pronouns on your bio to "he/him/himself."

★ ★ ★

Once upon a time, deep inside your heart, there was a girl. But she died. Because you fucking killed her.

★ ★ ★

callmemags98 asked:

Hi Alexandra! (Should I keep calling you Alexandra?)

You haven't posted much since your vampire-awareness reblogging spree. And now you changed your pronouns on your bio and, I don't know. I just wanted to make sure you were doing okay? I'm sure it's nothing; sorry for bothering you.

★ ★ ★

"You should block her," he says, one morning after breakfast, completely out of the clear blue sky. You're dizzy with blood loss and you don't understand him at first.

★ ★ ★

You know better than to say "what?" now. "Uh—who?"

"callmemargie or whoever. You need to block her."

"Why?" *How did he know?*

"Why? Because she's problematic as fuck. She does that cringey 'tiny awoo' thing, which is basically cultural appropriation from werewolves anyway."

"They," you say without even thinking of it, you stupid fucking bitch.

"What?" he says. He can say it.

Ahw, fuck. "No, nevermind—" you say but it's too late. He meets your eyes, for the first time in days. His eyes are brighter now, redder. It's even harder to look away.

"No. Tell me."

You start to shake and you swear the wounds on your neck start to bleed faster. "It's just, I think, they just changed their pronouns to they/them/themself."

He snorts and waves his hand. "Whatever. Everyone knows that genderqueers are just straight girls pretending to be special. Another reason to block her—*sorry*—'Them.'"

You try to shake your head, but you can't move. All you can see are his red, red eyes, the color of your blood, the size of the entire world. "Do it," he says. "Now."

★ ★ ★

steverogerssecretgirlfriend asked:

im sorry im sorry im sorry

you have blocked user callmemags98.

★ ★ ★

| Friendly reminder that v*mpire is a slur and you should never say it.
| I fucking hate it how `allies' will just put a fucking * in the middle of the word like it makes a difference. "V*mpire" reads exactly the same as "Vampire." Just don't fucking do any of it.

| I'm so sorry!

| awooo

| awooo

| Oh check out this bitch! She's "sorry"

| awooo

| to everyone asking "what should we say instead" educate yourself. google is free.

★ ★ ★

He shakes you awake from a dead sleep in the middle of the night.

"You should stop calling me `he.'"

"Huh?"

"I mean, I'm a fucking vampire. Gender is just some bloodbag shit."

"Uh. Okay. What should I call you?"

"Call me a vampire."

"But—uh. It's—"

"What?"

"It's a slur, right?"

"Oh. Sure, whatever."

"So what should I call you?"

"I don't give a fuck. Sounds like a you problem."

★ ★ ★

Once upon a time there was a girl who turned her heart inside out, so that all her love was on the outside, in the whole wide world, and all the fear and hatred and apathy was inside of her. "If I can just hold it all inside me," she told herself, "all the way until I die, then everything will be fine forever."

And it was fine, or at least it was okay, or at the very least she survived. But one day, she met a man who wore, outside of him, all the same fear and hatred and apathy that she kept inside her heart. And so, of course, she opened her heart to him, and all that pain flowed out of her heart until it was empty, until she was empty, until she was nothing but a vessel for everything he hated.

★ ★ ★

You're down in the kitchen getting some dry Cheerios™ because your mom doesn't buy food anymore and everything else in the house is rotting, when you see her, at the same place she's always sitting, her head hanging at a weird angle. At first, you think maybe she's hungover and sleeping it off. But she doesn't drink anymore, not since he—the vamp—the v*mp—someone arrived. And her neck looks weird, and you take another look and her neck is half off and there's scabbed up blood all down her clothes and she's not breathing and oh my God oh my God oh my God.

★ ★ ★

"I *cannot* believe this," someone says, casually tearing a gouge into your bedroom drywall. "I should never have trusted you. Fucking allies! This is the *definition* of viviocentrism."

★ ★ ★

Viviocentrism! You know you shouldn't say anything. It's just going to make things worse. But before you can stop yourself, without

even thinking (if you thought, you would stay quiet, like you should) you squeak out “but you killed my mom.”

“So? She was a bitch.”

“I... I...” you can feel the heat rising in your face, and of course now, of all times, you finally start to cry for the first time since you found her dead this morning. Fuck. Like, she wasn’t—with the drinking and everything. It wasn’t really her fault. But she was still your *mom*. You still *loved* her. And you never really told her, but you were *going to*. And now you *can’t*. And yeah maybe she was a bitch but “she was *my mom*.”

“So? Why is her life so much more *valuable* than mine?” Someone grabs your stuffed elephant—Mimi, the one you’ve had since you were born—off the shelf and squeezes her so hard her head pops open. “*Educate yourself.*”

That’s bad. Stop talking. “But ...” fuck why are you saying this stop talking stop talking you stupid faggoty bitch “I mean—you don’t have to—you don’t have—I mean—”

“Oh please spit out whatever bigoted bullshit you’re going to say, fucking last thing I want to do is spend all night listening to your flabby-ass blubbering mouthsounds.”

“You don’t have to kill someone, right? To li—to survive.” You don’t say “you haven’t killed me.” You don’t want to give someone an idea.

“So? I wanted to. I’m a vampire. I kill people. Are you saying I’m not *allowed?*”

“I—I—”

“She wouldn’t even use your pronouns. I did you a favor. Fucking bloodbags, I swear to Satan!”

“Bloodbag” hurts. But, like—god. Punching up. Vivioprivilege. *Something.*

Suddenly, wildly, you wish you could talk to Mags again. They were always so good about just—I don’t know. They could tell what mattered and what didn’t.

But they aren't here because you *blocked* them and—they aren't here. You try your best to swallow your tears and nod.

"Oh, god, you're so fucking disgusting. What a pedo bitch you are! Fuck. I can't even look at you. Get out—" It's your room. "GET OUT!" Someone shoves you towards the door so hard you fall flat on your face. "Don't come back until you're ready to apologize and thank me."

★ ★ ★

You sit outside your mom's house—your house? she's dead, so maybe it's your house?—for nearly an hour before someone bangs out of the door, still angry. "I'm just letting you know that I'm writing a callout post about you. You're still not allowed in the house."

"What?" You've just been out here, crying and cold and shaking in just a T-shirt and sweatpants, and someone's been writing a callout post? It's just so bizarre.

"What?" someone replies, mocking you. "Fuck I hate you."

"What—what—what's in the post?"

"Oh you name it! Viviocentrism, pretending to be a girl, being a total fucking creep, supporting pedophilia—"

"W-what? I don't—"

"I mean, I'm like three hundred years old. And you're, what? Fifteen? That's pretty fucking creepy that you'd come onto me like this. Like, ugh. You're barely an infant to me. You still read *fairy tales*."

"Why—why are you saying this?"

"If you want me to forgive you, if you want to apologize, then you need to post it yourself. You need to apologize. Not just to me. But to everyone."

You try not to meet those red, red eyes. But somehow they're everywhere you look.

"You're not coming back into this house until you do." You know—somehow you know—that this is wrong. Someone will get hungry; it won't be long. But when you hear those words, and when you see

those eyes, you can't help yourself. You're so afraid. You're so pathetic. You just want to be—not even loved. Just *useful*.

"I'll do it," you say. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have been upset with you."

"You shouldn't have been upset with me for *what?*"

"For—for killing my mom."

"She had it coming."

You nod. "She had it coming."

★ ★ ★

Once upon a time, there was a girl whose parents could not afford to keep her. So they sent her through the deep, dark woods, to the cottage where Grandmother lived, for Grandmother would take in any child.

As she walked through that forest, cold and starving, a wolf came upon her. "Little girl," said the wolf. "Why are you walking alone in these deep, dark woods?"

"My parents cannot afford to keep me," said the girl, who had no other virtues but at least was honest. "So I am going to see Grandmother, who will take in any child."

"Little girl," said the wolf. "Surely you know as well as I that Grandmother is at last a witch, as wicked as she is cruel, and the fate of all her children crueller still."

"I know this well," said the girl. "But where else am I to go?"

★ ★ ★

It's been a month. You're not eating any more—you can't bear to walk through the kitchen, to hear the flies and smell her corpse. That doesn't stop someone from eating every night, though. Your arms are like fucking sticks but somehow your thighs are still gross and flabby.

Someone doesn't talk to you anymore. Why would anyone bother talking to you?

When the doorbell rings that night it barely registers. Even when someone—not *that* someone, someone else—calls out “Alex? Alexandra? Are you there?” you can barely respond.

Someone gets up. “I’ll handle this.”

You’re alone. Finally. With your hunger and the pain in your throat and chest and legs and dick and everywhere else you’ve been bitten.

Alone. Bliss.

“I don’t know what to tell you. There’s no Alex here.”

You don’t hear the response.

“Lucifer P. Morningstar! Will you shut up? Get the fuck out of my house, bitch, before I call the cops.”

Somehow, inside, you think you should pay attention. You should say something. You try to stand up, fail, then roll out of bed and crawl towards the top of the stairs.

You look down, at the front door, and Mags is standing right in the center of it. They look different than you thought—they’re shorter than you’d imagined, and fatter—but it’s them.

But you *blocked* them, you think. You *had* to block them. It takes you a minute to realize why that doesn’t matter.

Behind Mags there’s a couple of big, rough-looking guys in leather caps and jackets. One of them has a bushy beard. Why do you care about that? It doesn’t matter.

Someone—the someone at the door—doesn’t seem disturbed.

“Alexandra?” yells Mags, again, and you can’t make yourself respond. They move to push past someone, who stops them with a hand on their shoulder.

“Bad idea, bitch.” Someone grimaces, and suddenly all you can see is sharp white teeth, lurching forward to bite, hungry.

No. No! “Mags!” you yell, except it’s barely a whisper.

And then, suddenly, like their human body was just a trick of the light, there’s just this *fucking enormous wolf* filling your entryway.

Mags snarls and leaps right into someone, snapping wildly. Someone goes tumbling back, not even a body, just a mass of shadows and teeth and red eyes, smashing into your drywall. Mags

pins them against the wall—both enormous paws—and snaps again. This time, their teeth sink home. They tear, and then another bite, and then another, and then there's half a dozen wolves alongside them, all tearing into the shadow on your wall.

Blood flies everywhere. It's so much. You had no idea a body could hold that much blood.

★ ★ ★

"Alexandra? Alex?" Mags' voice from down the stairs is low and throaty, like a wolf. They *are* a wolf.

You realize they can *see* you and—fuck. "I'm sorry," you sob out. Pathetic blubbering bitch. "I'm sorry I was pretending to be a girl."

Mags climbs the stairs and sits down next to you. They set their cold nose on your temple and lick your cheek with a rough tongue. "Oh honey," they say. "I don't think you were pretending."

You keep crying. "It's my fault. It's my fault. They're a vam—they're...it's just what they are."

Mags growls. "Nothing wrong with vampires," they say. "But there's plenty wrong with abusive pieces of shit."

You don't know how to respond to that. So you don't.

"Climb on my back," says Mags. "Let's get the hell out of here."

You're still crying, and they nose you again. Very slowly, weakly, you climb up onto them, hesitating at each step. "Just grab a big handful of fur," they say, and you do, with as much strength as you can, which isn't much. They smell rough and wet, and their fur is so thick so warm that your teeth start chattering.

They plod carefully down the stairs, past all the blood, past the shadows and the teeth and everything, out the door, out the door, into the cool, wet night and the light of the moon behind the clouds.

"Awoo!" they howl, and their pack answers.

"Awoo!"

"Awoo!"

"Awoo!"

“AWOO!” you scream, again and again, until your voice is just a whisper, until the moon is dark behind the clouds, until your throat is raw and ragged and yours.

★ ★ ★

Once upon a time, there was a story about a wolf and a girl, and they loved each other very much.

About the Author

PH Lee lives on top of an old walnut tree, past a thicket of roses, down a dead end street at the edge of town. Their work has appeared in many venues including *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, and *Uncanny Magazine*. From time to time, they microwave and eat a frozen burrito at two in the morning, for no reason other than that they want to. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).

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MEDIAN

KELLY ROBSON

Median

KELLY ROBSON

illustration by

ELIJAH BOOR

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

When Carla's little car broke down on the highway, she was in the fast lane, and instead of pulling over to the far side of the road, she had to stop on the median.

She sat there, jiggling the wheel with one hand and fiddling the ignition with the other, a hot, low sun glaring through the hatchback's rear glass. Only a few years back, a turn of a key would make an engine cough, and if it didn't, it meant the battery was dead. Or the alternator—something electrical. Now, cars were all electric, even more of a mystery than ever, and she had zero chance of figuring out the problem.

But it didn't matter, really. Dead was dead. She could press the start button all she liked. Nothing happened.

"Now what?" she asked. "Who do I call?"

Carla typed "roadside assistance" into her phone and hit enter. Trucks blasted past, so close the car shook as if grabbed by a fist. She stared at the Google logo until it disappeared, leaving a blank screen, white on white.

It had happened before. Her discount mobile provider was prone to denial of service attacks. But she still had phone service. She texted her sister Francisca in Montreal: *Can you send me the roadside assistance number for the 401?* When no reply came, she tried phoning both her sisters, then her supervisor. All three calls rang straight through to voicemail.

She would have sat there forever, alternating between pressing the button and working through her contact list, but a semi skinned by and clipped off her side mirror. A popping sound. The car pitched back and forth, bouncing on its wheels like a carnival ride. Then another truck took off her door handle.

The rear wheels of her car parted from the asphalt. It bucked once, canting into the oncoming lane. A cement truck hit the edge of the bumper. The whole rear end crunched. The car spun onto the median and slammed into the low concrete barrier.

Carla pulled herself out of the car and fell onto the gravel. She sat there, brushing dirt from her scrubs. It was her Easter pair, festooned with daffodils and tulips.

Someone will stop, she thought. Someone will come. Someone has already dialed 911. But nobody stopped. Certainly not the cement truck, which had long since disappeared beyond the highway's distant curve.

She climbed to her feet and waved at an oncoming car. One of its headlights glinted in the sun. The driver turned his head as he passed, mirrored sunglasses square on her, but he didn't slow. The other drivers didn't even look at her. The truck drivers stared straight over her head.

"I'm right here," Carla said, waving her arms.

Gravel and grime studded the skin of her palms and forearms, blood seeping from the abraded skin. She picked a piece of gravel out of her flesh and chucked it at her car. Such a little thing, there on the median; the rear end looked like something had taken a bite out of it. A rear wheel dangled like a broken tooth.

Hands shaking, she dialed 911. Three tries to hit the green button. She turned up the volume and listened to the ringtone, holding the phone to her head with both hands, as if praying.

"911. What is the nature of your emergency?"

"Car accident. I had a car accident. On the 401. West of Milton."

"Please stay on the line."

They put her on hold. Carla leaned her whole weight on her car, digging her elbows into the rusty roof panel. Not a good car, but the best she could afford. A 1995 hatchback with a pair of retrofitted drive trains installed by a guy in Oshawa who Frankensteined cheap cars in his backyard. She'd drained her savings account to buy it, and in two years, its charge range had gone down by half. To get

enough juice to do her evening appointments, she had to stop and charge it halfway through her shift, and then charge it again to get home.

"You're a write-off, aren't you?" she asked the car.

When she laid her forehead on her arms, the phone went dead. Maybe she canceled the call by accident, or maybe they hung up on her. In any case, she dialed 911 again and waited.

"911. What is the nature of"

Dead again. The screen protector was cracked, so maybe it was shorting out the screen? She peeled off the pieces and dropped them to the median. Dialed again.

"911. What"

"Hello?" she yelled. "Hello?"

No answer, though service was fine, three of the four bars glowing white. She dialed work.

"This is the office of Care Point Care Services. Our office hours are eight AM to four PM, Monday to Friday. Please leave a detailed message including patient name, address, and phone number, and your call will be returned within one business day."

"This is Carla. I've had a car accident. I'm not going to make the rest of my appointments. That's, uh ... hang on." Carla fished the printout from her pocket of her scrubs. "Deborah Anders, Karen Gagnon, and David Chan. Can you let them know I won't be there? And I won't be able to do my appointments tomorrow, either. My car is dead. Okay. Thanks."

Because of the staffing shortage, the office was barely covered on weekends. Probably nobody would pick up Carla's message until tomorrow morning, and in the meantime her clients would wait. Deb needed her dinnertime feeding. Her G-tube site was getting painful, the skin around the external bumper pink and swelling. Carla had been treating it for a week with anti-inflammatories and ice. Karen had a colostomy bag that needed emptying before her bath, and Dave was waiting for meds and a toilet transfer. All three needed to be moved from chair to bed. If Carla didn't show up, nobody would

get washed, medicated, fed, or toileted. They'd wait, abandoned, wondering if anyone was ever going to come.

Carla tried again to wave down a car, flinging her arms around semaphore-wild. Nobody stopped. Nobody even slowed.

She crawled into the back seat of the hatchback and rooted around. Her coffee was splashed across the dashboard, the red Tim Hortons cup rolling on the gritty floor mat. She carried a big bottle of distilled water in case her patients ran out, but now it was smashed.

Her black Care Point backpack was fine, though. Bandages, scissors, and sterile swabs. The pair of tweezers she used to pick lint out of Deb's G-tube site. A box of latex gloves and a pack of N95 masks, size small. A blood pressure cuff, finger oximeter, and stethoscope. Plastic bottles of acetaminophen, ibuprofen, and aspirin. Anti-inflammatory gel, antiseptic cream, hand sanitizer. In the outer pocket were her wallet, keys, charge cords, and the bag of cappuccino candies she'd bought on a whim, hoping the caffeine would perk her up between visits.

Carla popped a candy into her mouth and crunched down hard. It splintered and melted into a hunk between her molars. She worried at the candy with her tongue as she pulled up the map on her phone and zoomed in on her location.

Not much detail available, not with the connection problems, but some of the map was preloaded. The highway a double yellow line on a gray background, with a sliver of blue zigzagging across it—a creek or something. Satellite view showed trees and fields. Cars and trucks frozen into specks on the dark gray highway, caught in time by the overhead camera. The median a light gray strip between the eastbound and westbound lanes, like meat in an old sandwich.

If she could cross the highway, she could walk ... walk where? To the east was Campbellville, which looked like nothing more than warehouses and parking lots. They'd be empty on a Sunday. Probably wouldn't even have security guards, just rotating cameras behind which might or might not be a pair of human eyes. To the west were residential acreages, but they looked like the kind of

places where nobody actually lived—second or third homes for rich people, their empty blue pools pocking the green satellite expanse. But to the northeast was a casino. People would be there, and help.

Her phone rang. Carla nearly dropped it in her eagerness to answer.

“Hello?” she yelled.

“It’s my mother.” A woman’s voice, faint against the roar of traffic. “She’s by herself and she’s on the floor. She can’t get herself up.”

Carla wasn’t allowed to exchange phone numbers with clients. Care Point claimed it protected carers’ privacy, but really, it kept clients from trying to arrange discount services under the table. A firing offense, so Carla had never broken the rule. How had this one gotten her number?

“Is it Deb Anders?” she asked. “Or Karen Gagnon?”

“Nina Sandhu. She lives at 454 Frobisher Boulevard in Milton.”

“I’m sorry but she’s not my client. Even if she was, I can’t go anywhere right now.”

“You’re supposed to—” The woman gasped. A horn sounded.

“Are you driving?” Carla asked.

“Yes, I’m trying to get to my mom. But I’m caught in traffic. It’ll be an hour and a half, at least. That’s why I need you to go there, right now.”

“Me? I can’t help anyone,” said Carla. “I can’t even help myself.”

“But who else can I ask?”

“Call 911,” Carla said. “Tell them she needs a lift assist.” She hung up.

North. The casino was on the north side of the highway. She’d have to cross the westbound lanes. Carla swung her legs over the concrete barrier and stood at the edge of the fast lane, trying to judge the speed and distance of the oncoming cars. At this angle, it all looked impossible, the traffic not slowing one bit. Which was strange. Anything little thing odd on the highway caused a slowdown—everyone lifting their foot from the accelerator and gawking. She

was right there. The hatchback was right there. Why wasn't anyone slowing?

Maybe because their feet weren't on the accelerator. Maybe everyone was using smart cruise control, the cars continually adjusting for optimal speed and distance to keep the traffic flowing.

But if one of the cars pasted her as she tried to run across the highway, then they'd stop. They'd have to.

Problem was, Carla wasn't built for speed, never had been. She could deadlift clients out of bed six times a day, but running? She couldn't remember the last time she'd tried. She didn't have to get across all three lanes at once, though. She could cross the first lane, and stand on the divider line waiting for a gap so she could run across the next. The cars wouldn't hit her if she stood still. Not unless one of them was changing lanes.

She tightened the straps on her backpack and hooked her thumbs in tight, making herself into the smallest possible human bundle. She dug her toes into the gravel, and leaned in, and watched for a gap. There. And there. And there. If she picked the right moment, she'd get across fine. Or maybe the car that hit her would be small, and she would survive.

Her phone rang.

"Hello," she yelled.

A kid's voice: "They're fighting. He's hurting my mom. Again."

"Diego?" she asked. It had to be her nephew—no other kid would call her. But it didn't make sense. Her older sister's family was on vacation in Tulum. Carla was supposed to water their plants tomorrow. "Diego, is that you? This is Tía Carla."

"Can you come?"

It wasn't Diego. "Who is this?" she asked.

"Liam. He's hitting her head."

"Liam," she said. "Get as far away as you can and hide." No idea who this kid was or why he was calling her, but it didn't matter because there was only one answer. "There's nothing you can do. Hide. And call 911." She hung up.

Trying to run across the highway was just stupid. She'd be roadkill a hundred times over. A smear on the asphalt. A human stain.

Maybe she could walk along the median. When the highway curved, the traffic would have to slow down, wouldn't it? Even just a bit, enough to make a difference.

Gravel crunched under her sneakers as she trudged east. Dust and dirt flew in her face, microscopic bits of oil and tar and rubber, aerosolized by the wheels. She reached into her backpack and retrieved an N95 mask.

Mask in place, she protected her eyes with her hand, keeping her gaze low to avoid the worst of the dust. One of her sneakers had blood on the toe—where had that come from? Her arms, she guessed, the road rash. She picked another bit of gravel out of her forearm. Blood fell on her foot, her knee, her thigh. Three drops, then stopped.

She wasn't shocky anymore, at least. Her hands weren't shaking, but she was exhausted. Every step felt like she was going uphill, and the sun on her back was fierce. A long evening shadow stretched in front of her, cool blue against the orange-tinted gravel. Magic hour, that's what photographers called it. When the sun went down, it'd get cold.

Her phone rang.

"Hello?"

A wheezing voice made itself heard over the roar of traffic.

"It feels like I've broken my arm, but I didn't."

"Dave, is that you? David Chan?"

"No. I'm sweating like crazy just sitting here. And my back hurts."

"That sounds like you're having a heart attack," she said.

"Okay, what do I do?"

"You need to go to the hospital. Don't try to drive, it's too dangerous."

"I can call an Uber."

“Good. While you’re waiting, get an aspirin. Chew it up and swallow it.” She hung up.

As the highway slid into the curve, the median widened into a grassy strip of wasteland. Fresh green sprouted under the mat of last year’s growth, coated with salty grime from a season of snowplows.

The curve. She’d thought the traffic might slow around it, but no. If anything, the stream was faster, the cars packed tighter as the evening commute thickened. None of the drivers turned to look at her as they passed. Many were glued to their phones, just passengers in self-driving cars. Which gave her an idea. If a self-driving car registered her as an obstacle, it would have to stop. And then everyone would have to slow down. It only took one car to make a traffic jam.

She stepped onto the white lane divider, as if on a tightrope. Widened her stance and held her arms out from her sides to make her silhouette more recognizable. *Here is a human person. See?*

The cars aimed themselves in her direction. Side mirrors blitzed past her hip, her shoulder, her head. A truck flashed its lights. It skimmed past, and the suction from eighteen whirling wheels yanked at her flowered scrubs.

She gave it a good long try, standing square to the oncoming sensors, squinting to protect her eyes from the flying grime, but it was no good. She stepped back onto the median.

As Carla trudged east through the curve, a structure appeared in the distance, stained red by the last dregs of sunset. A bridge for an overpass, flanked by the arms of a cloverleaf. This was the intersection on the map, with the Campbellville warehouses to the south and the casino to the north. Good. She couldn’t get across the highway, but maybe she could climb off it.

One central bridge column parted the median, weeds growing thick at its base. She ran her hands up and down the concrete. It was smooth. No handholds. And even if she could shinny up—which she couldn’t—she’d never be able to haul her ass over the concrete

overhang of the bridge deck. An extreme athlete could do it, maybe, but not her.

She called 911 again. This time it didn't even ring. Dead air.

The sun set fast. Headlights turned the world into flashing intersections of night and bright, like the nightclubs she'd gone to with her sisters, back when they were all so young. On the dance floor, she'd lose herself in sensory overload, throwing herself into a bounded world of risk. A curated encounter with the unknown, where she could decide for herself from moment to moment how much danger she wanted to find.

Beyond the overpass, the median widened and dipped. Scrubby bushes grew in the ditch, and a stand of trees forced the two arms of the highway apart.

Her phone rang.

"Hello?" she said.

"Someone just smashed the window of a bank. Queen and Spadina."

"I don't care," said Carla. She hung up.

Far ahead, a long, lithe shadow darted into the glare of headlights. It slid across all three lanes and turned to look at her, pointy ears sticking up from its head like horns. Then it vanished into the trees of the median.

A dog wouldn't attack her, not unless it was rabid. A coyote wouldn't either. All the same, a chill coursed through her, starting at her toes and shivering up her torso to her throat.

Carla hugged herself, and when her phone rang, she dropped it, cracking the screen.

"Hello," she said.

"Is that all you have to say?" An elderly voice. Genderless. Crotchety.

"Hello," she repeated. "What?"

"Aren't you supposed to ask me what the problem is?"

"Okay. What's your problem?" she asked. "Tell me everything."

"When there's a fire alarm I'm supposed to wheel myself into the stairwell and wait on the landing. It's the refuge area, they said. So that's what I did. I've been sitting here for hours now, waiting for someone to come. I can't go up or down, and I can't get back into the hallway. The door's too heavy."

"Did you try calling someone?"

"Why? Are you telling me to call someone who cares?"

"I mean, is there someone in your building who can help?"

"No. You're not supposed to use the elevators during a fire alarm, but next time, you bet that's what I'm going to do. Either that or just sit in my apartment. It's not like there's actually a fire."

"What about your neighbors? Do you have the number of anyone in your building?"

"Aren't you supposed to ask for my address?"

"Why? I can't help you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Did you try banging on the door? Use something hard."

"So you're not sending someone?"

Carla shifted the phone to her other ear and leaned in as if it would help her understand.

"Who do you think you're talking to?" she asked.

"911. Aren't you 911?"

"No. I'm not."

"I guess I got the wrong number. Fine."

"Wait," Carla yelled. "When you get through to 911, can you tell them I'm stranded on the median of the 401 by the Campbellville overpass?"

"Tell them yourself," they said, and hung up.

Ahead, near the trees, headlights caught on something shiny. It flashed in the beams, and the longer Carla watched it, the more it seemed like the flashes were coming in a pattern. Short-short-short. Long-long-long.

She walked toward it, why not? She had to keep moving anyway. It was getting cold, and the last thing she needed was to flirt with

hypothermia.

Walking in the bottom of the ditch, the low beams of the headlights pointed straight at her, painful in their brilliance. She had to keep her eyes on her toes to keep from being dazzled. So she didn't notice the wreck until she saw blood pooling on the median.

A four-door sedan, upside down, wheels spinning. A man in the driver's seat, his body pillowed by the airbag. A woman in the other seat, her face plunged through the windshield. Carla got on her knees and shrugged off her backpack. She pulled out the stethoscope and fitted the earpieces tight in her ears. Easy to reach the driver's back, with him collapsed forward. No breath, no heartbeat. She didn't need to check the passenger to know she was gone, too, with her neck twisted, jaw pointing at the sky.

Still on her knees, she dialed 911, hugging herself, chin tucked in tight. The call connected, rang once, and went dead. Carla swiped the phone on the thigh of her scrubs and tried again. When the call didn't connect, she crawled over to look in the back of the car.

Two empty baby seats hung from the back seat. No children anywhere, not lying on the ceiling of the car, not in the dirt and weeds and gravel of the median. Obviously, that meant no kids had been in the car when it crashed. But not far away, under a bush, was a plastic sippy cup. The milk inside smelled cool and fresh, and it wouldn't have if it'd been sitting in the car even for a little while, not when the day had been so hot. Carla stood and looked around, shading her eyes against the glare.

There, at the edge of the median, were two small forms, raccoon-sized and crawling on all fours toward the fast lane. Carla dropped the sippy cup and ran across the ditch, up the slope, and into the dazzle of headlights.

No doubt now, those crawling bundles were children, their cushy diapered bottoms in terry-cloth onesies lit by the flashing lights. Their tiny hands slapped the asphalt, cloth-booted feet propelling them in a four-point monkey-walk, knees not even hitting the ground.

A truck blasted its horn. Carla screamed and plunged into traffic, reaching for the children with both arms, as if she could envelop the whole highway and scoop them to safety. Cars buffeted her as she dodged across the lanes, grazing her hip, her elbow. Horns bellowed. She stopped on a dashed lane divider, breath rasping, hands clawing at her jaw as the traffic swirled past. Ahead, in the brief spaces between cars, the children humped over the slow lane and onto the shoulder. Their bald heads gleamed in the headlights.

One child turned and smiled at Carla before it disappeared off the far side of the road. A truck bore down on her. Its side-view mirror struck her head, and she fell backward into traffic.

* * *

When Carla clawed herself awake, she was at the bottom of the ditch with a new crack in the glass of her phone, three missed calls from unknown numbers, and a text from Francisca in Montreal.

I just got off a double. Gotta get some sleep. Call me tomorrow, ok?

The time stamp showed the text was only ten minutes old. Maybe her sister was still awake.

I'm in trouble, Carla typed. Been stuck in the middle of the 401 for hours now. No way to get off it. Can't get through to 911.

She waited. No response.

When you get this, call 911. Tell them there's a fatal car accident on the median of the 401, near the Campbellville overpass.

Then she tried 911 again, just in case. The call didn't connect. But there would be at least one phone in the wreck, likely two, and one of them would work.

She walked back to the sedan and got on her knees. Reaching around the driver, she shone her phone light into the depths of the interior, but couldn't see much, not with the airbag in the way. No way to reach around the driver, either—her arms weren't long enough. But she could try to wrench the door open, pull the driver out.

It wasn't the first time she'd touched a dead person, not even the first time that week. One of her clients was a late-stage cancer patient with no mobility. He should have been in the hospital but was refusing to go. She'd arrived for his evening appointment to find him mouth open like a baby bird, staring at the ceiling and gasping his final breaths.

No matter how hard Carla pulled, she couldn't get the dead man out of the driver's seat—the airbag was trapping his thighs. Carla got the scissors from her backpack, tried to cut through the tough reinforced plastic, but they wouldn't bite. So she got in close, leaning over the dead man, pressing the bloody bag tight. With the scissors in her fist like a dagger, she slammed the point down on the plastic over and over until it deflated with a hiss. Then she dragged the man out of his seat and lay him on the median with his hands crossed over his chest.

On the underside of the dashboard lay an iPhone, a photo of two bald, grinning toddlers on the lock screen. She swiped at it until the emergency call screen surfaced.

"911?" said a woman. Carla was too relieved to notice the interrogative tone.

"I'm on the median of the 401 by the Campbellville overpass. Two people are dead. And there were two children. I can't find the children."

"No," said the woman. "That's not it. There's been an accident at the Bombay Grill. 370 Pearson Street. In Mississauga. One of the cars came through my window."

"Is anyone hurt?" Carla asked.

"The driver is bleeding from her head. She's walking around, though. Yelling at the guy who wrecked her car."

"Tell her to sit before she falls down."

"Okay." Voices in the background. *Come in and sit down*, said the woman. *911 says you have to sit down. No, you have to sit. Sit. Radha, get her a towel and a cup of chai.* "Yes, she's sitting now."

"Are you calling from the restaurant?"

"Yes, the Bombay Grill is my business."

"Do you have a pen?"

"I do."

"I need you to call 911 and report a car accident on the 401, on the median by the Campbellville overpass. Two fatalities and two missing children. Would you do that for me?"

"But aren't you 911?"

"No, I'm really not. I need your help."

"Of course. I'll call right away."

"Thanks." Carla clung to the dead man's phone with both hands, reluctant to hang up. Sirens sounded in the background.

"There's the fire truck," said the woman. "Will you be okay?"

"I'm not sure," said Carla. "I really don't know."

When she hung up, the night seemed darker than before, the headlights dimmer. The wheels of the upended car were still spinning, slowly.

If she could find the dead woman's phone, she could use it to try 911 again, but it wouldn't work. Nobody would come. Nobody would help. She was alone. One faint point on the map of chaos.

Carla sat beside the dead man and brushed the hair off his forehead with gentle fingers. His eyes stared. She could close his eyes, but without something to weigh down the eyelids, they'd keep sliding open. When people placed coins over the eyes of the dead, it wasn't to pay the ferryman, they did it to keep their illusions. A dead person with closed eyes seemed to be sleeping peacefully, even if their jaw was gaping. A dead person with open eyes wasn't a person. It was a thing.

She found two pebbles, cold and smooth. She closed the man's eyes and gently placed them on his eyelids.

A shadow moved through the trees. The dog was back, likely attracted by the scent of blood. Carla climbed to her feet, stiff and awkward, and put her body between the dog and the car. She clapped her hands.

"Go away," she yelled. "Get out of here."

She threw a rock at the dog. Bad aim. Its head swiveled on a long neck, then another head, and another. Not one dog, but three, though only one body was visible. And not like any kind of animal she'd ever seen. Flat heads, eyes nearly level with their noses. Wide grinning mouths and impossibly sharp ears.

Carla put the dead man's phone in her pocket. She raked both hands through the gravel. Then her phone rang. She flung the gravel at the dogs and snatched at the phone.

"Hello," she yelled.

"Is this 911?" An elderly man.

"No." All these people thought she could help them; she could almost laugh. "What's your problem?"

"I seem to be trapped. In my apartment. It's been days and days and nobody's come. I've been waiting."

His voice had the light, childish cadence of dementia. Carla had heard it many times. It could be frustrating to deal with, but Carla always made an effort to be patient. And right now, it felt good to talk to someone.

"That sounds really awful," she said. "What are you waiting for?"

"To go. I'm waiting to go."

"Go where?"

"The place you're supposed to go, when you're dead."

"Oh," she said. She expected him to say he was waiting for his mother to pick him up from school, or for some long-dead spouse to take him home. Dementia patients were usually anxious to go somewhere, desperate for someone to deliver them from disorder. But he didn't sound disordered. He sounded nice.

"I was hoping you'd tell me what I'm supposed to do," he said.

The dog walked toward her, heads low, crouching as if stalking her. It still looked like one dog with three heads. But that couldn't be, could it?

"I'm sorry," Carla said. "I'm not sure how I can help."

"If you can't, who will?"

Family, usually. It almost always fell to family members. Even if a client got three home care visits per day, it was never enough. Family had to pick up the slack. Who else?

"You haven't been living alone, have you?" she asked. "Do you have someone caring for you?"

"Oh, yes, I did, until I died. And now there's nobody. What do you think I should do?"

Call 911, Carla thought. The ultimate answer, the last-ditch option—call 911 and beg for help. Wasn't that what she'd been trying to do for hours, find someone, anyone to help her? Someone who couldn't deny her, put her off. And everyone she'd talked to, they wanted the same.

"If you're dead," Carla said slowly, "I think you should get into bed, cover yourself up warm and cozy, and remember all the good things in your life. Try to go to sleep."

The dog was belly-crawling toward her now. Snaky necks extending from one thick-muscled torso, tongues lolling.

"I can do that," he said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Carla slid the phone into her pocket and reached out to pet the dog. Those protrusions on either side of the heads weren't ears after all, but horns, sharp enough to draw blood.

"Good boy," she said. "Good dog."

She sat in the dirt and weeds of the median with the dog's heads in her lap. Its ears were wizened carbuncles, tortured masses of scar tissue. Carla caressed them gently with both hands and the dog's eyes narrowed. It kicked up one hind foot to show her its belly.

Her phone rang. She kept one hand on the dog as she answered it.

"911," she said. "How can I help you?"

About the Author



Kelly Robson lives in downtown Toronto with her wife, writer A.M. Dellamonia. Her novelette "A Human Stain" won the 2018 Nebula Award, and her time travel adventure *Gods, Monsters, and the Lucky Peach* won the 2019 Aurora Award and was a finalist for the Hugo, Nebula, Theodore Sturgeon, and Locus Awards. Kelly's first short story collection *Alias Space and Other Stories* was published in 2021. Find her on Twitter and Instagram. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).

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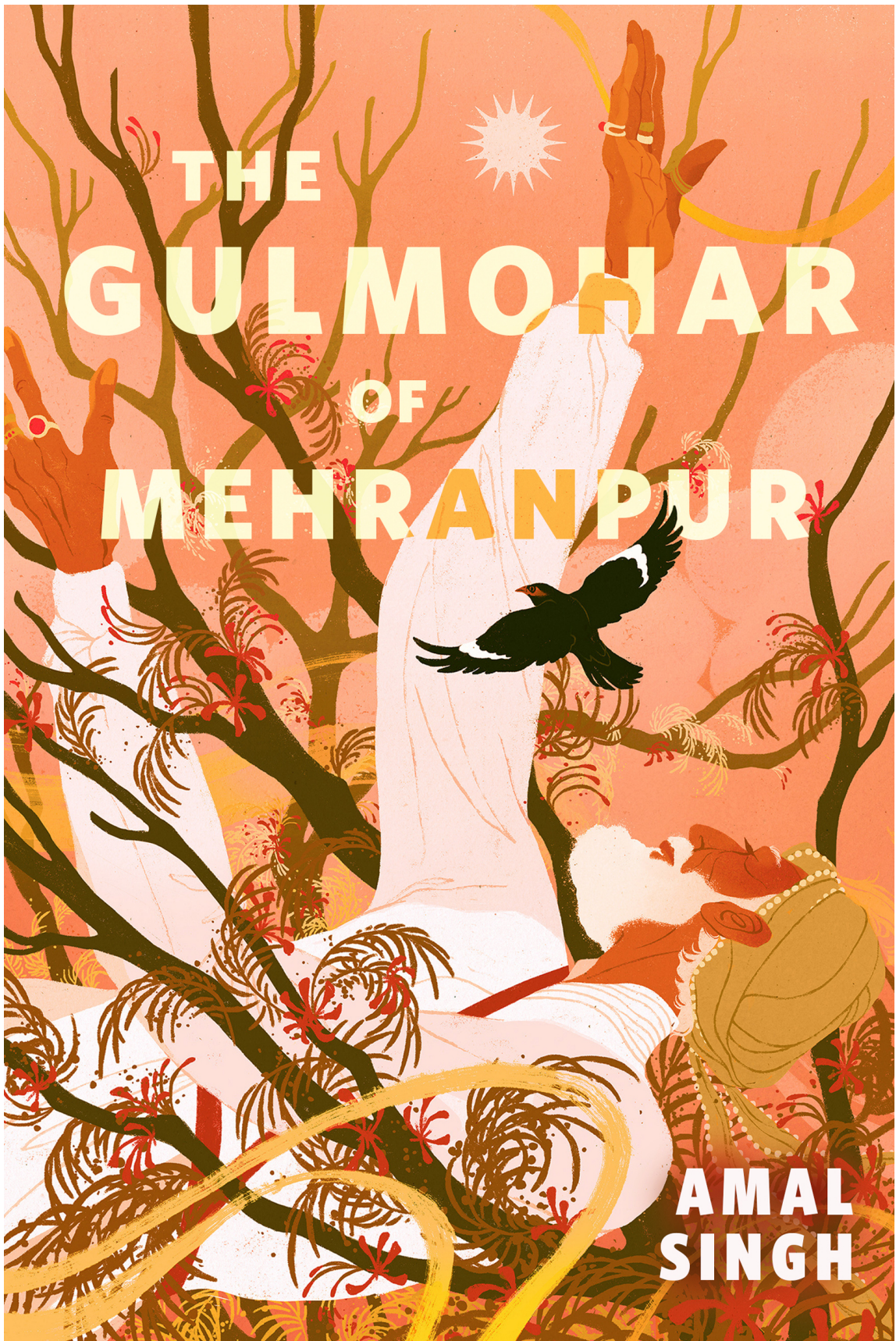
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**THE
GULMOHAR
OF
MEHRANPUR**

**AMAL
SINGH**

The Gulmohar of Mehranpur

A M A L S I N G H

illustration by

S A M A N T H A M A S H

REACTOR 

The Nawab of Mehranpur stopped smoking his hookah and looked up at the new khansama through a thick haze of smoke. The cinnamon-infused hashish cloud made lazy wisps around the Nawab's ruby-studded fingers, clouding his vision. He flicked his hand, the wisps went away with a feline suddenness, and the khansama began to look more like a man than a mere idea, a quivering abstraction. The Nawab saw the man's audacity, his naaz, his tenacity, his tongue-click manner of speaking. He saw a man who carried an inscrutable pride on his bony shoulders, a man who was as sure of his words as the fact that the day waned into night.

More than that, the Nawab saw a man who wasn't afraid of certain death.

"If tonight was a moonless night," said the Nawab, "I would have had your head severed and paraded around the Fountains of Reshma."

"I am aware, Nawab Saheb," said the man.

"Say again what you said with such confidence, a moment ago. Say it so the court hears it again, like a thunderclap in a storm."

"I can prepare a meal that brings eternal youth."

The Nawab set aside the hookah. He straightened his back, and his bones cracked and groaned and complained in languages only bones speak, a language of age and whispers. And even his bones had heard the word "youth" from the mouth of the audacious man, the man who wore nothing but a simple tunic and a faded dhoti, with torn slippers and grime lining his toenails.

"I won't repeat the eon-old saying that even the walls have ears," said the Nawab. "But my walls listen. And then they speak to other walls. And then all the walls of Mehranpur speak among themselves, telling each other stories of my subjects, bringing back to me their discontents. So don't make promises in this court that the walls curl into rumours, that bring hope to the hearts of my subjects and to me."

"I know what you're implying, Nawab," said the man. "But what I say is the truth."

"You also know that I make available, from time to time, the heartiest and most sumptuous meals for my subjects, an envious feast, so that they spend the rest of their hardworking weeks with the taste of what we serve. And they continue to work hard, because they have another feast to look forward to, aside from dreary day-to-day meals of roti and daal and achar."

"I am well aware of your magnanimity, Nawab Saheb."

"Then go and make me a meal that brings eternal youth," said the Nawab. "But remember, if you fail, then you would have caused a grievous anguish to both me and my loyal subjects. And the punishment for that would not be meted out by me, but by them."

"I won't disappoint," said the man, giving the Nawab a curt bow. "I only have one condition."

"Speak freely."

"I would need a two-inch bar of gold, every day, as payment, for eighteen days. And not just any gold...not a corrupted alloy. But its purest form."

The Nawab summarily ignored the ask of gold. That was not what had surprised him. "What meal takes eighteen days to prepare?" The Nawab didn't like the agitation in his voice. But the agitation itself was a precursor to a rage that was hidden in his heart. The rage at this man's outlandish notions.

"A meal that brings eternal youth," said the man, his voice calm, unerring.

★ ★ ★

Later, in his bedchamber, his Diwan-i-Khas, the Nawab lounged with his begum and told her about the ache in his heart, and the rage in his heart, and the blood that swelled in his veins that told him myriad things about the state of the world.

"I am afraid one day this rage will get the better of me," said the Nawab.

"What is the root of all this anger?" asked the begum.

The Nawab fell silent. He had looked deep inside and asked himself questions, and asked others the same questions, and answers had always eluded him. Mehranpur was a mere district-state, subservient to the larger state of Alipur, where Mohammad Ali Shah ruled with an iron fist. When Ali Shah gave alms, and spoke of promises, and spoke of expensive grains like barley and rice and millet being imported from other lands, and other riches, he never included Mehranpur in his magnanimous decisions. On occasions, the Nawab of Mehranpur had himself walked to Alipur Palace, on scorched earth, showing his love and respect for the greater state, and given much of his hoards of ruby to the Shah, but to no avail.

Mehranpur had become a mere speck of sand. The Nawab feared the small district-state of Mehranpur might soon be uprooted by the whims of the Shah. And this fear brought about rage. And the rage often made the Nawab do inexplicable things. Things which reached the ears of the Shah, sometimes, completing a circle of misery.

The Nawab was also getting old. Age crept up to him, as his days morphed into years faster than a wind could change direction. And with the Nawab, Mehranpur aged too, and lived always at the cusp of disaster. And that's why the Nawab hated promises.

"You can always tend to the Gulmohar," said the Begum, twisting the hem of her dupatta into knots.

The Gulmohar, the Nawab's pride, once a majestic tree that was the envy of all eyes in all the states, grew in his orchard, but its edifice had recently begun to mirror the Nawab's various predicaments. Its bright saffron leaves had turned to rust and its bark had started shedding all around the grass it stood on. The cool, all-encompassing shade it once provided was now a patchwork blanket of shadow. In the morning, before the khansama's arrival, the Nawab had tended to the Gulmohar personally, sat down near its roots with chisel and manure, often singing to the tree. The nawab cut a despondent figure from afar, and the residents of the Palace spoke in hushed tones with each other about how lonely he had become.

Now, in the evening, the Nawab once again visited the tree and once again saw its drooping edifice. It escaped him, how, despite good quality manure, enough water, ample sunlight in the afternoons, the Gulmohar refused to thrive. It had started behaving like a stubborn child. But the Nawab couldn't discipline the Gulmohar like he would a stubborn child.

If he had any children, he would have learned better ways of discipline.

"Nawab Saheb, the Shah has sent a paigam."

The Nawab turned to face a sentry, who was holding a rolled parchment with a green ribbon and the unmistakable bright red wax seal of the Shah with a golden teardrop on it.

"Open it and read it to me, then," said the Nawab, facing the Gulmohar again. He felt the more his eyes strayed from the sight of the tree, the more it drooped. Even now, he could tell, the branches curved downwards a slight inch, when the sentry had disturbed him.

"It's by the powers vested upon me by the royal state that I decree..."

"The day won't wait around for you to read the preamble, just get on with it," said the Nawab, impatience dripping from his mouth like honey from a nest of bees. The sentry sighed.

"Nawab Saheb, it's written here that Mehranpur will no longer get any rice."

"How far have you studied, sentry?"

"I have studied enough letters, Nawab Saheb," said the sentry, his words quivering and shaking. "It's what the paigam says."

The Nawab snatched the letter from the sentry's hands. He read it in its entirety, trying to find any hidden meaning in the gaps between one alphabet and the next, again and again, until his eyes hurt from the effort and his knees buckled underneath him from the weight of it all.

★ ★ ★

Later that night, the Nawab dreamed of having children. Next day, at the fresh crack of dawn, as the Begum was feeding the mynah on the windowsill, the Nawab made his wish known to her, of finally expanding their family from two to three, perhaps four. When his Begum fell silent, and in her silence was all the

answer, and the mynah chirped and flew away, the Nawab quietly walked out of his Diwan-i-Khas and made his way towards the kitchen.

The smell reached the Nawab first, before the low murmurs. Even as he crossed the long, marbled walkway from his court towards the kitchens, the intoxicating aroma of garlic- and cumin-infused oil reached his nostrils. He hurried, but his footfall told its own tale. The Nawab's steps were loud and assured, and the sound of his boots against marble was like the sound of the first patter of rain. It was a sound of authority, and it was that sound that gave him away.

When the Nawab entered, the khansama was already facing the door, as if anticipating his arrival. But what was a stark surprise was the absence of any of the other bawarchis who normally assisted a khansama during the preparation of a feast.

"Nawab Saheb, if it isn't too much, I must ask you to leave the kitchen."

The first inkling of a long-subdued rage. The Nawab clenched his fist, then calmed himself. No other khansama had ever spoken to him with such impudence.

"Do you not wish to receive your first gold payment? Is today the first day of your preparation for whatever meal you promised me?"

The khansama's gaze lingered on the Nawab's face for far too long.

"Do you have the gold on your person?"

"I do," said the Nawab. He loosened a plain gold ring from his finger and handed it to the khansama. "I begin your payment with something that's valuable to me. This means that I trust you to do whatever needs to be done."

The khansama simply pocketed the ring, without as much as giving it a glance.

"I will," he said. "I have heard that there will be no rice, going forth."

"Therefore, I assume, a khansama will improvise."

"As a khansama must."

★ ★ ★

The Nawab's true name was known only to his Begum. It was a beautiful name, which meant, in a distant language, the wind that sings lullabies to a grave. The Nawab had increasingly started feeling nearer to the grave than being cradled by a gentle wind. He felt he wasn't being true to his people, especially the ones who spent scorching summer days digging to unearth gold just for the happiness of the Shah.

Most nights, the Nawab entertained the idea of laying a siege on the Shah's capital with his meagre army. Of course, he had heard of valiant efforts of five hundred men against fifty thousand, so he knew it could be done. But those five hundred were often led by capable generals. But the Nawab himself, with his weary bones and aching heart wasn't much of a commander. Nor was he a poet, who could soothe someone's heart just by his words. He couldn't even do so with his own Begum.

He could only look backwards at his youth. But the strange ways of the new khansama, the cadence with which his utensils made sounds against each other, the sound of the gentle simmer of a *something* being made over a kadhai, the slow bubble, the warm, nutty scent of spices, opened for the Nawab a window to the future. A future where another age waited for him. A bright future where, perhaps if he were to be rid of his cage of age, he would be rid of the tyranny of the Shah.

But was it even possible? Or had the silent wishes of the Nawab's heart somehow reached a cunning khansama's ears, and he had decided to take advantage of the fact? By looting him of gold, little by little, over eighteen days. And the khansama was strict about his ways too. No one was allowed inside the kitchen for the span of the fortnight and four days, not even the Nawab. For the next few days, the only time the khansama showed his face outside the kitchen was to collect his gold. The Nawab grew increasingly agitated as the last day approached. Despite all the powers he held, he had no way of knowing what meal was being cooked inside the kitchens.

On the eleventh day, as the Nawab was tending to the Gulmohar, he received another paigam from the Shah. This time, the Shah had requested the Nawab's presence in the court of Alipur. It was a curt letter, with only two sentences clarifying the Shah's will.

"He wants to spit in my face as he tells me that Mehranpur will be disintegrated into smaller districts, governed by his cronies," said the Nawab, after he read the paigam out loud in front of his Begum.

"If you take this news in a positive light," said the Begum, knitting a sweater, her keen eyes affixed on the wool patterns embroidered on the arm and how she continued them across the chest, "the thing you're most looking forward to, the meal of eternal youth, will be ready by the time you return."

"It's a useless endeavour," said the Nawab. "I don't even know what I will do with the youth that's promised to me. I am powerless now. I will be powerless then."

"I have heard that the Shah can be kind sometimes," said the Begum. "Maybe he showers some kindness upon us."

The Nawab couldn't fathom the eerie calm in his Begum's voice.

"Will you take care of the Gulmohar in my absence?"

"Of course I will."

Before leaving for Alipur, the Nawab cast one last, mournful glance at the tree that grew in his courtyard. The ten days of sun hadn't changed its edifice one bit. In fact, its leaves were now the colour of rust and its brittle branches one day away from falling to the ground. The Nawab feared his absence would mean the death of the Gulmohar.

. . .

It took the Nawab two days to travel to Alipur. When the dust-caked road morphed into smooth black tar, with signs painted white pointing in the general direction of the Shah's capital, the Nawab knew his meeting wouldn't be kind. The Nawab took the changing of the condition of the roads as an insult upon him. Because it was an insult, when the roads that snaked to the other districts saw their potholes filled and their cracks smoothed, and only the road to Mehranpur remained like a shoddy, broken thing.

Alipur itself was a city that was meant to put any visitor to shame. The Nawab had felt this shame all his life and he wanted to be done with it. So, he hurried his caravan as soon as it entered the city, not choosing to part the curtains to look outside at the shops that sold silk and cotton, and dates and walnuts, and the tall golden spires that gleamed even during the blackest of nights. When he stepped out of his caravan, he rejected what his peripheral vision told him and walked straight inside the Palace, where he was unceremoniously welcomed and ushered inside the resting chamber of the Shah.

Mohammad Ali Shah's vast, bulky frame was draped on a diwan. From a distance, the Shah was a painting of opulence and of indulgence, and of riotous colour, almost blinding to the eyes of the Nawab. When the Nawab curtsied, the Shah merely glanced at him, and then resumed nibbling his grapes, as if the Nawab's presence was as inconsequential as a fly.

"I thought you would not come," said the Shah. His voice was like the touch of a feather. A voice that didn't match his actions. "You didn't respond to my earlier paigam."

"There was nothing to respond to," said the Nawab.

"*Thank you, esteemed Shah of Alipur, we look forward to serving you better and falana...* Words like these. Don't you have manners, Nawab?"

"Why have you called me here?" said the Nawab, his voice at edge. "What was so important that couldn't be requested in another paigam?"

The Shah rose from the diwan, and the view was like a huge, heavy curtain, finally unfurling. When the Shah walked towards the Nawab, he felt the oncoming rush of a tsunami. When he finally stood an inch away from the Nawab, towering a hand-span over him, the Nawab felt the fear of god.

"I could crush you, right now," said the Shah. "But I just want the Gulmohar."

"Gulmohar...as in...my tree...the Gulmohar?"

"Gulmohar, as in, yes, your tree, your child, your pride, that Gulmohar. The same Gulmohar which I now know is dying. I believe it belongs in Alipur. It will thrive here. The Gulmohar of Alipur. Now that's a name that has a ring to it."

"You can't just uproot a tree and plant it somewhere else," said the Nawab. "My precious...tree...it's already unhealthy. It would require a mammoth amount of effort and I can't just give it to you. It will die on the way. There's no way even

you could revive it. Ask me anything else. I will give you more share of gold from the mines of Mehranpur. I would make them work double shifts.”

“I have plenty of gold, Nawab,” said the Shah. “You give me your tree, and I give you back your rice. And then I will give you more. Return, now, to Mehranpur, Nawab, and mull over my words. I need an answer in a week. If I don’t receive a paigam, I would assume that your answer is a no, and then Mehranpur will be subject, again and again, like it always has, to my various dissatisfactions. But if you say yes...well...the mynah will sing again.”

And then the Shah turned around and walked back to the diwan and lounged and spoke no more.

★ ★ ★

The Nawab’s misfortunes didn’t end there. On the way back, he had to battle a torrent of rain, and his caravan got lodged in mud, and it took five strong men, all wayward travellers, suffering from the same rain, to dislodge the wheel of the caravan and send the vehicle on its way again. The ordeal caused the Nawab’s already old skin to develop an infection, and by the time he reached Mehranpur, he was shivering and cold and sick.

The rage in his heart had taken a bestial form and was bursting through him even in sickness. The rage was at the world and the unfairness of it all. His Begum made him drink the milk of poppy at night and put him to sleep. In a delirious slumber, the Nawab hurled names at the Shah, and at his khansama, and at everyone who had wronged him in the past, ever.

The next day, the entire Palace was suffused with the scent of tempered cumin and garlic, and roasted tomatoes, and cinnamon and coconut and myriad other scents, an intoxicating medley of flavours. Yet, no one was allowed to see what dish the scents belonged to. The Nawab, wide awake at the crack of dawn, realised that it was the eighteenth day, the final day, the day he was meant to taste the dish of the khansama.

For some inexplicable reason, the Nawab felt he should taste the dish in the vicinity of his beloved, the Gulmohar. And so he ordered the khansama to bring him the dish in the orchard. Then, the Nawab showered and dressed in his finest gold-embroidered sherwani and stepped out into the orchard. The sun was another golden disk in a pale blue sky. None of the brightness of the morning seemed to touch the Gulmohar, which looked shrivelled and old. A cord of pincers tightened around the Nawab’s heart. An ache ran through his body. He couldn’t bear the sight of his tree, his beautiful tree, and so he averted his gaze and looked towards the entrance of the orchard, where the khansama was standing, holding a steaming kadhai.

The Nawab beckoned the man. The khansama took his time.

The smell, as always, reached the Nawab first. What had the khansama prepared for eighteen days? What wonders did that kadhai hold, what elixir simmered inside the dull, iron confines of the utensil?

"I thank you for giving me the opportunity to serve you, Nawab Saheb," said the khansama. "I present to you, the Red Daal of Issa."

The man thrust the kadhai under the gaze of the Nawab. And the Nawab saw what was simmering inside the kadhai for eighteen days. And the Nawab's quiet rage came up to the surface when he saw that it was just a daal, a plain old daal, tempered with cumin, garlic, red chilli oil swimming on its yellow-saffron surface.

A daal which could have been done in under an hour.

"What's this? Is this supposed to bring us all eternal youth?"

"Taste it, at least, and then present me with your verdict, Nawab Saheb."

"I'll have a verdict for you," said the Nawab, then snatched the kadhai from the man's hands, and threw it away. The kadhai, flaming hot, made an ugly arc, and so did its contents, the Red Daal of Issa—which wasn't quite red, but sort of a pale golden, like the sun—and fell near the base of the Gulmohar, staining the tree's bark and the ground around it completely with the colour of spring. And seeing his already dying tree smeared with the wasted daal, the Nawab's misery couldn't be contained, and he screamed in agony, and then ordered his guards to take the khansama and imprison him in the dungeons below the Mehranpur Palace.

Later, the Nawab wept in his bedchambers, burying his face in his satin pillows, as his Begum fanned his head. Night fell around the palace, balmy and quiet.

★ ★ ★

For three days, the Nawab mourned. And soon the date approached when he had to respond to the Shah with an affirmative answer. He couldn't bear to look at his dying tree, and he convinced himself that the Gulmohar's fate would be better in Alipur. In fact, every one of his pupils would be better off if they were in Alipur.

Mehranpur, just like the tree, just like the Nawab, was dying.

The morning before he was to draft a paigam to the Shah, the Nawab called upon his chief gardener to speak to him about the inevitable. The gardener was a quiet, reticent man, with patchwork skin, nimble fingers, and a sharp gaze. He met the Nawab like an old friend, but the Nawab spoke like he was singing a dirge.

"It pains me to say this," said the Nawab, in a defeated voice. "But you must call upon your years of hard work, talent, and perseverance, to do something for me. Call upon whoever you think is the most capable. Work with them. I want you to safely uproot the Gulmohar and carry it to Alipur. The Shah has demanded it."

"But why?" said the gardener.

"Because the tree is dying and Alipur would be better suited for its needs."

"Nawab Saheb, I don't understand. The Gulmohar has sprouted bright saffron leaves, and its bark is healthier than ever before."

"The price of lying in Mehranpur is terrible, so be careful. You are my friend, but I won't entertain..."

"Nawab Saheb, please come with me," said the gardener.

The Nawab followed the gardener into the orchard. What he saw there yanked the wind out of his lungs. His precious tree, the Gulmohar he had left to die three days ago, with its withering frame and blackened stump was living again. The bark was brown and clearly showed tree-age circles, and the branches were straight, erect, not drooping, and the leaves, oh the leaves, were reminiscent of a flower in the first bloom of spring, a dazzling saffron. The Gulmohar was living up to its name.

A word escaped the Nawab's lips, a question. "How?"

"I had been curious about the tree. I saw something near its base three days ago. A bright yellow smear. I can't be sure, but it seems to me that the tree has taken sustenance from that substance."

A whirlwind of emotions stirred inside the Nawab, but none of them was rage. Confusion, regret, bitterness, a yearning for something long gone. But no rage.

"Bring the khansama to me."

Later, the khansama was brought in front of the Nawab. Three days inside the dungeons, his thin frame slouching, bogged down by the heavy chains, and yet he had a slight smile on his face.

"All of us present in this court are seeking answers," said the Nawab. "Something inexplicable has happened."

"I have spent my life as a cook studying the properties of both food and gold and how they complement each other. Every day, for eighteen days, I simmered the daal under a low flame, while working with the gold you provided me. Every day, for eighteen days, I brought out the true essence of that gold and put it in the daal. It's that essence the tree now drinks sustenance from. And that essence will remain with the tree long after all of us have gone. A sustenance that could have been yours too."

The silence that fell between the two men was long and drawn out. Only the skittering of leaves outside could be heard, and the slow breathing of the courtiers, as they waited for the Nawab to announce something, a decision, a decree, so that they could obey, and then go back to their chambers to sleep.

"I can take another eighteen days to prepare something else, Nawab Saheb."

"No," said the Nawab. "I do not deserve that magnanimity. I deserve this humiliation for my short-sightedness. You may leave now. Please speak to the khajanچی for an adequate payment for your services."

This declaration came as a surprise to most courtiers, for certainly they had been expecting a miracle, of a life beyond what the Maker had given them, a life

that would go on and on, while their youth remained in stasis. But that was not to be, because of the Nawab's folly.

The Nawab stepped away, leaving the courtiers in deep thought, and with moments to reflect. The Nawab had his own reflecting to do.

His Begum had prepared a great, warm concoction for him, as she usually did, when the Nawab was under a dark cloud. Today, he was under the darkest of clouds, and the path in front of him was murky. The concoction had clove, cinnamon, ginger, and some jaggery. The Nawab took the cup from his Begum's assured hands and walked out into the sun, towards the shade of the Gulmohar that he had so sorely missed.

The Shah's words were ringing in his head. The fate of Mehranpur was a smoke-grab thing, waiting for the Nawab's one command. Their happiness, their misery, all up to the Nawab to decide. Yet, the Nawab had no answers. He thought of ancient poetry that held meaning in its meters and verses, answers to various conundrums, but none of the old poets held any answers for the Nawab.

He sat under the shade of the Gulmohar, sipping his concoction. The vast canopy of its branches hid the sun, allowing only a thin beam of light to pass. The singular beam fell on the Nawab's feet, illuminating them. There was immeasurable beauty in that moment, a gentle kindness that the Nawab felt the Gulmohar was bestowing upon him.

The Gulmohar had forgiven him for the neglect of all those years.

Then, a wind blew, and from the canopy overhead, two stray leaves detached, twisted and curled in the air, feather-like, and came to rest on the simmering surface of the Nawab's concoction. The leaves blended in the liquid immediately, leaving a thin, golden trail, like the afterthought of a flame. The Nawab tasted the concoction again.

The rage of all those years simmered down and he felt at tranquil ease. The Gulmohar wanted him to swim in that ease. The Gulmohar knew that his heart still beat for his city, his family, and his people. It knew that his resolve was unyielding, like a diamond. The Gulmohar had spoken to him, and after many years, the Nawab was listening.

It trusted the Nawab to do what was right.

About the Author

Amal Singh is a writer of science fiction and fantasy from India. His short fiction has appeared and is forthcoming in venues such as Asimov's, Clarkesworld, F&SF, Apex, among others. His debut novel *The Garden of Delights* is now out, published by Flame Tree Press. By day, he juggles screenwriting, audio-writing, editing, and creative production, working on web-shows and movies. In his spare time, he enjoys cooking and running. He is represented by Kanishka Gupta of Writer's Side Literary Agency. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).

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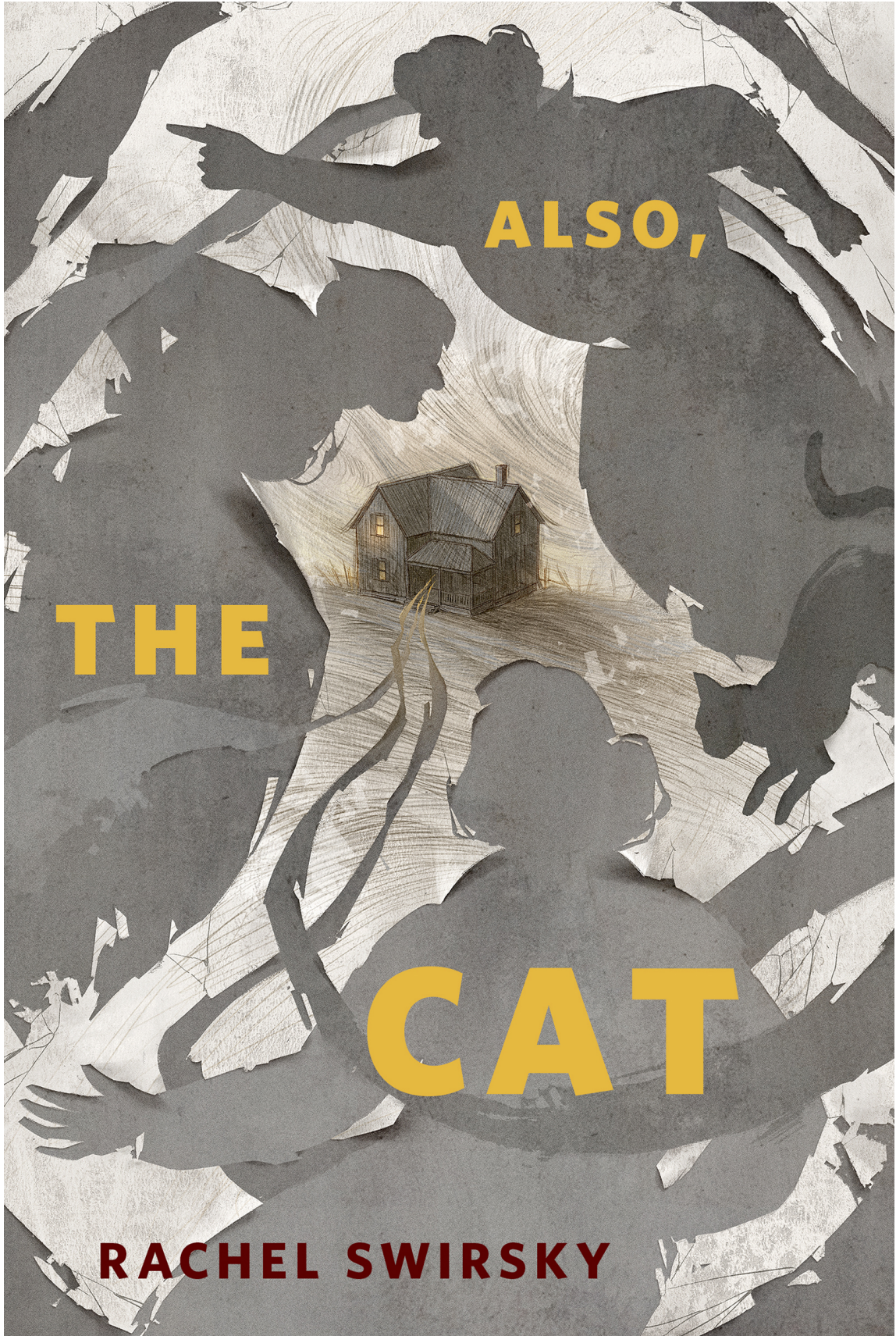
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ALSO,

THE

CAT

RACHEL SWIRSKY

Also, the Cat

RACHEL SWIRSKY

illustration by

ROVINA CAI

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

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 mauer 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, ruffled 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.

About the Author



Rachel Swirsky lives in Portland, Oregon, where she roams happily under overcast skies with the hipsters. She holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers Workshop. Her fiction has appeared in venues including Tor.com, *Asimov's*, and *The Best American Non-Required Reading*. Her fiction has been nominated for the Hugo Award, the World Fantasy Award, and the Locus Award, and twice won the Nebula Award. Her books include *Placed into Abyss (Mise en Abyse)* and *A Memory of Wind*. You can sign up for email updates here.



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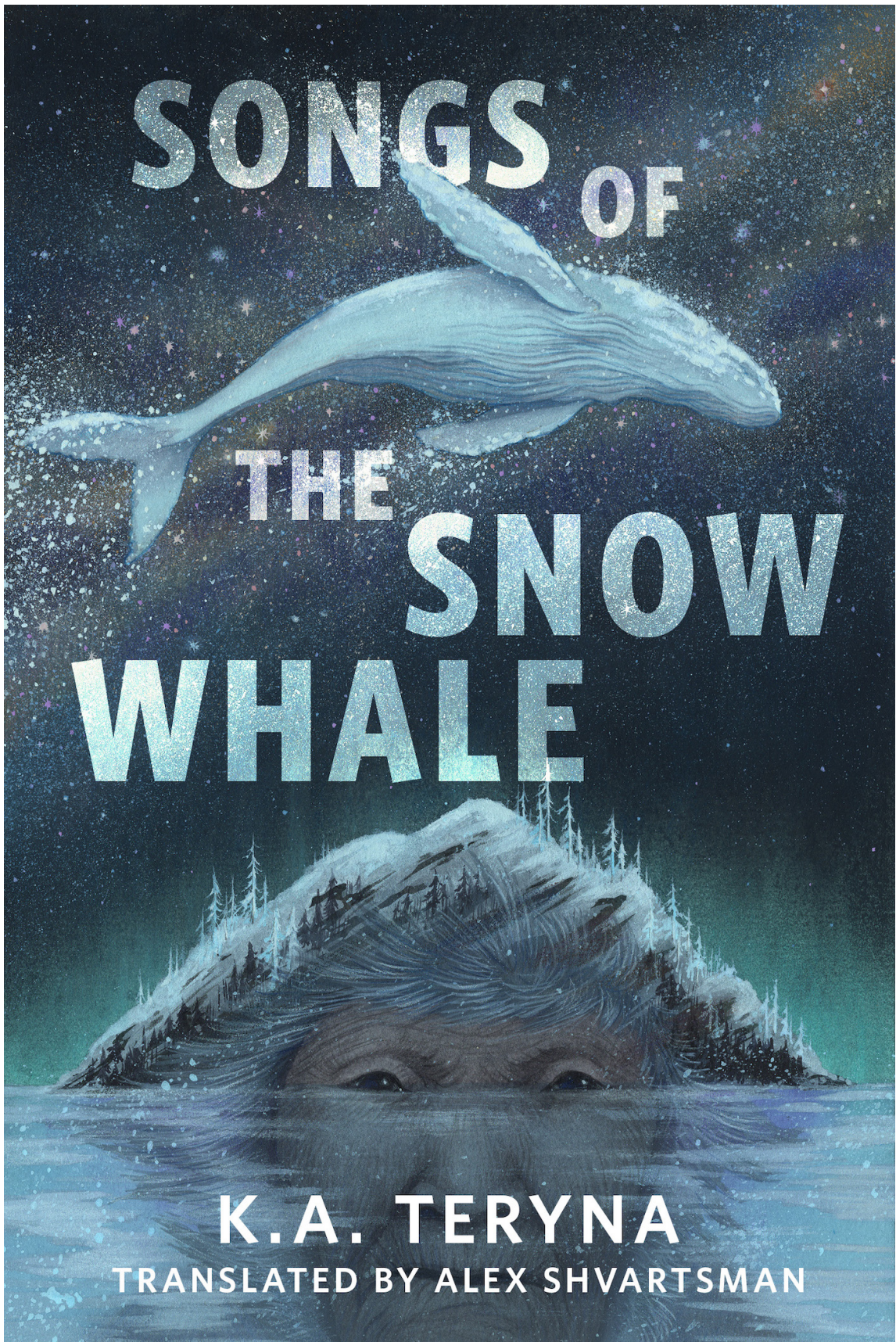
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SONGS OF

THE **SNOW**
WHALE

K.A. TERYNA

TRANSLATED BY ALEX SHVARTSMAN

Songs of the Snow Whale

K . A . T E R Y N A ,
T R A N S L A T E D B Y A L E X S H V A R T S M A N

illustration by

M A R I E - A L I C E H A R E L

REACTOR 

Umilyk: Fable of the Mother of White Whales

"They say the blizzard on R'évava is the wrath of the snow whale. It beats its tail against the infinite surface of the Milky Way and shakes loose small snowflakes that cover the island," said Umilyk.

He said this to break the silence and to somehow counter the wind howling beyond the fragile walls of the weather station. The silence Umilyk preferred was the silence of solitude. Here, in the company of travelers waiting out the storm, the silence disturbed him.

"In all of the Soviet Union snow is an atmospheric phenomenon, and only in Chukotka is it a cosmic one," added Borisov.

"Not even in the whole of Chukotka, but on R'évava. For what is Chukotka but a word? An administrative unit, a geometric shape marked on a map with a ruler. To listen to those cartographers, they think even Magadan will pass for Chukotka."

"Those are some rabid cartographers. Don't listen to them. Listen to me. Better yet, tell us what makes your R'évava so special? Why is snow an aggregate state of water everywhere else, but it turns into shards of eternity on this island?" asked Borisov.

Before answering, Umilyk looked over the room with a certain degree of tenderness. Everything here was right and calibrated, so it was no shame to entertain guests.

Even a group of guests as peculiar as this.

A young woman with light, almost white hair and dead eyes, eyes which looked the way they do when the last of the tears have run out. Even through several layers of clothing, Umilyk could clearly see that the woman was with child. The habits of pregnant women change: they must now protect more than just themselves. And even if their taste for life dissipates along with those last tears, the maternal instinct remains.

A tall bald man in glasses with thick lenses looked like a professor, and enunciated his Russian words with an exaggerated care. Umilyk already knew that this man was from Poland and that he was no professor, but some sort of a musician.

The second man, with a rough pockmarked face, a constant smirk, and unruly hair, was a reporter from Moscow who was in such a hurry to return to the mainland that he'd traveled from Kytoorken to R'évava, only to find a blizzard instead of the scheduled helicopter.

But the presence that seemed strangest to Umilyk was that of the old woman. She crouched near the entrance in such a manner that it seemed she was ready to get up and leave as soon as the storm would pass. Her name was Navetyn and she'd lived for a hundred, if not two hundred, winters, or so those who were born and grew up on R'évava had told Umilyk. Umilyk himself was a "lifer"—a slang word from the lexicon of Soviet officials who occasionally wandered as far as R'évava. He'd spent nearly thirty years here. When Umilyk had first arrived, Navetyn was already old, like the island itself.

Her yaranga stood apart from everyone else's dwellings. On occasion, Umilyk thought that when Navetyn died it would be a while before anyone found out. But she was in no hurry to die; on the contrary, she impressed with her sharp mind and a clear sense of time. She always knew in advance about a successful hunt, and when the whaleboats returned filled with fat prey, Navetyn waited for them at the shore with her pekul knife. She was as dexterous as the best workers in the cutting brigade and her presence was always welcome.

Which made it even more surprising that Navetyn had turned up at the village at such an inopportune time, an hour before the first November blizzard.

A village was an overstatement. There were no administrative buildings or even a culture club on all of R'évava. The weather station was the center of life, and that's where the group had gathered, waiting for flying weather.

Umilyk sighed. Providing visitors with local flavor was not a task mentioned in the job description, but it was no less important than keeping an accurate meteorological log. He launched into a story.

"Once upon a time, there lived other tribes in the north alongside the Luoravetlan peoples: walrus people, bearded seal people, and even whale people. Men of these tribes married human women and so propagated their intelligent kind. One time, a great whale, the mother of white whales, arrived in these lands, and she took a Luoravetlan hunter as her husband. All the great whale wanted was to teach her first husband a lesson, for he was the headstrong snow whale that swims the Milky Way and whose song people hear on the border between reality and dreams.

"But the children the great whale had with her Luoravetlan hunter were as precious to her as the white whale's. When the children grew up they prayed: Mother, we can't swim with you into the ocean but there's no room for us here. All the best land is occupied by other people, what should we do? The great whale listened to those pleas, sighed, and turned herself into an island so that her children would have a land of their own. This island was named R'évava. She left only one command to her children, and those words are passed from generation to generation: white whales are brothers, and one doesn't kill their brother. They say that the great whale herself sometimes appears to the island residents in human form, to see how her children are faring.

"This is why the great snow whale always singles out R'évava, and why he brings the blizzard. He comes in search of his wife, who left him for a human man and his children."

Borisov: The Tale of a Whaler

The blizzard howled outside and beat against walls and tiny windows, tapping on the roof like a northern giant probing for a weak spot in a dilapidated dwelling.

Borisov could see right through the caretaker. He noticed the moment when the duty of entertaining uninvited guests became something more intimate and important to him. It briefly seemed to Borisov that he'd glimpsed the huge eye of the snow whale through the tiny window of the weather station and the eye stared, unblinking, directly at him.

He recalled how much he was looking forward to this trip: a special feeling somewhere below the solar plexus. It was similar to an attraction to a woman but icier, a chill spreading through the blood and tingling fingertips with tiny needles. In this manner, thought Borisov, are born the letters that he would later build into words. He definitely needed a typewriter. An Olympia, the object of special pride and secret devotion, awaited Borisov in Moscow. He hated writing longhand as his handwriting was terrible, the beauty of ideas and clarity of thought becoming lost in his chicken scratch. But it would've been ridiculous to drag the Olympia north. Borisov imagined himself with the Olympia on a whaler motorboat and grinned, then grew gloomy. He was used to tracing his line of thought like a fisherman, who carefully pulls his line so as not to frighten his prey. Before the fish surfaces, the fisherman already knows by its weight and manner whether he's about to see a catfish, a pike, or even a sturgeon.

Borisov knew which story had made him gloomy.

There was no excitement left, no special feeling anticipating his homecoming. His desire to come home was businesslike, casual, like the wish to sleep in one's own bed after a long flight. This feeling was also reminiscent of a relationship with a woman: the romance was at an end, the attraction was over, everything there was to know about her had already been discovered and understood, and exactly as much of himself shared as he was willing to, and no more. Borisov knew he would never return to Chukotka and that made him a little sad. But it was the memory of Etyyn that hung over him like a dark cloud.

"This is all very beautiful," said Borisov, "until it results in someone's death."

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the girl wrapped in the dawn shawl shudder. She couldn't seem to get warm, despite the hot rooms of the weather station and strong hot tea proffered by the caretaker. The Polish man didn't look at him; he kept fiddling with his miniature vargan mouth harp. The old woman in the

corner stared simultaneously at Borisov and deep into her internal abyss. Umilyk raised his eyebrows politely.

"There used to be a hunter in Kytoorken. He was very young, still a boy, but tall, very tall for Chukotka, if the honored Umilyk will forgive me."

Umilyk shrugged as if to say, what's there to forgive? It is true that I'm short of stature.

"The boy was named Ettyn and he was a whaler."

Borisov recalled how difficult it had been to convince the foreman to take him along on a whale hunt. Ettyn had helped him, and he'd done so selflessly, merely for the delight of communicating with the person who'd come all the way from Moscow. Ettyn had learned the word "jovial" from Borisov and had liked it so much that he'd stuck it into every other phrase. A cargo cult, Borisov had thought contemptuously then. Now he was ashamed of his contempt.

"When the harpoon hits the whale, the tip opens. The whale dives to the bottom but the deed is done, a float called a pikh-pikh follows the harpoon into the water. And the more harpoons strike the whale, the more floats there are, which makes it more difficult for the whale to dive. That whale fought like mad, he ripped the first two harpoons out and the sea became stained with whale blood, but the hunters were inexorable. Each of them, with perhaps the exception of Ettyn, had dealt with dozens or even hundreds of whales in their lifetimes. They couldn't be surprised by the survival instinct of a single underwater beast."

Borisov's cadence was measured, unhurried. When he seemed to be losing his train of thought, his imagination pictured the Olympia on a huge, totally empty desk. Under the glass-covered tabletop there were scraps and clippings of Borisov's life: ticket stubs, newspaper clippings, napkins, and even one Aldan computer punch card. For as long as he could remember, whenever he'd position his fingers at the keys, the words would reemerge. As if they'd been stored in the fingertips and the typewriter keyboard was the means of extracting them and giving them form.

At the moment, that form was the whale.

"It was impossible to see the whale itself in all that blood and roiling. It was clear only that this was a lygirgev." Here Borisov gave in to the temptation to use a fancy word. He tasted it as he looked at the faces of his listeners and imagined a different set of faces: sophisticated and well-fed Muscovites.

"A bowhead whale," Umilyk explained to the woman and the Polish man.

"The Ettyn boy's harpoon was the last to strike the whale. Next came the carbines."

Borisov had read about how the Soviet whalers went mad. The letters of the man who wrote about this weren't living and convincing, and his statistics didn't give form to feeling: Borisov had read but hadn't understood. He understood on the day when he watched an enormous and clearly intelligent creature fight for its

life. It was like decide: a seditious thought Borisov hid away, for it was only appropriate to express in secret drafts.

One could only imagine the picture of industrial slaughter, and it was an intellectual effort akin to re-creating a seascape painting from a child's pencil sketch. Borisov winced and mentally crossed out this comparison. It was tinged with the sort of condescension for the indigenous people that Borisov was hoping to avoid. But it seemed that sickness didn't ask for permission before entering his mind.

Borisov's own eyewitness account of the slaughter as a means of folk harvest was sloppily recorded in his notebook so he could bring it to life with the help of his Olympia later.

"When the boats towed the carcass to the island and the tractor dragged it ashore, it became apparent that the whale was enormous, and that it was white. You know, when people mention the white whale, one imagines a snow-white color like in our comrade's tale. Of course the whale was not literally white, but it was apparent to everyone from the first glance that this whale was special. This was also apparent to Ettyn. Do you understand what happened? It's a very simple story. A boy goes on his first whale hunt and the hunt is successful; the boy throws a harpoon and the harpoon finds its target. The whale is caught. And then it becomes clear that, according to Grandma's tales, this is a special whale. A forbidden whale. That its death brings misfortune to the entire clan. And instead of the joy of a successful initiation, the boy experiences some completely different feelings."

"What happened to him?" the young woman asked, alarmed.

Borisov shrugged.

"Several days later, alone and unarmed, he undertook the task of driving off a bear and her cubs that had come close to a store. It was a foolish and terrible death. They shot the bear, of course. Even the hunting inspector recognized the shooting as justified—which is quite a rarity, by the way. It's usually punishable by a fine to the tune of several thousand rubles. You might blame youthful maximalism, but I knew him. Ettyn was entirely different. He was a good hunter and a thoughtful young man, except in cases that dealt with such legends. And if something caused him to act rashly, it was the weight of guilt imposed by primitive tales."

Borisov had come to Kytoorken to write about the beauty of indigenous fishing and its meaningfulness as compared to the soulless commercial slaughter by the whaler crews.

But the story hadn't come together. The Ettyn boy hadn't fit into the preconceived structure; his dead body had ruined the composition. The words had collapsed under this weight. It seemed: remove the boy, and everything would work, but Borisov knew that the essay must be honest. He couldn't excise the boy

and hope the essay would survive such a surgery. Etyyn himself had told him about the whale people, and in those stories a human was something like a whale's soul, its intelligent part, which could take physical form and leave the whale body at will—but not for long.

Without its "inner human" the whale lost its cognizance and became a mindless mass of muscle.

He couldn't remove the boy from the story about the Chukotka whale fishing: the essay would become lifeless and wild.

"Perhaps the boy was born on R'évava?" the Polish man suddenly asked, clearly enunciating each word. These seemed to be the first words he'd uttered since they all introduced themselves. "Is that why you came to this island?"

Borisov said nothing. Then Krzysztof added, "I also have a story about a whale."

Krzysztof: Memories of the Ethnographer

Krzysztof didn't really understand why he'd interjected himself into this conversation. Words had been Jacek's domain. Krzysztof didn't like words, which is why he put so much effort into overcoming them. But, even having added two more languages to his native Polish, he was no match for Jacek.

"You seem to think that faith in such things is the lot of naïve people unspoiled by civilization. My brother had two PhDs; he traveled across half the world and wrote several books. Jacek Tominski. Perhaps you've read his *Whale Songs*. He believed that at least one white whale—such as is described by the residents of R'évava—exists."

The caretaker nodded. "He was a great man. No one listened to stories better than him."

Krzysztof looked at Umilyk in surprise. He understood better and better why his brother had come to love these people. It was like leaving a smog-filled, dusty city, a dodgy society obsessed with mutual profit, compromises, and things left unspoken, and heading out to the simple and clear edge of the world.

Umilyk had noted the most important detail: no one listened to stories better than Jacek. It had always been so. There was a storytelling talent, and there was a talent as a listener. The way Jacek listened, he could turn anyone into a talented storyteller. Jacek could suss out a true melody in the white noise of anyone's most awkward narrative. He could see it, touch it, clear it up, and admire it.

When he'd lacked words as a child, Krzysztof had played the piano. His fingers caressed the keys. Jacek had listened, and then told the story, and Krzysztof was amazed at how his brother had fished the words out from the current of the melody, like fish from the river.

"Jacek and I hadn't seen each other in many years. He wrote me letters regularly. I replied inconsistently and grudgingly, but even in my abbreviated style my brother managed to glean everything important. He wasn't counting on my own insight, so he described everything willingly and in great detail. That, and not my sensitivity or attention to my brother's hobbies, is the reason I know quite a bit about R'évava and the white whales. You see, people here believe that anyone who was born on the island and lived a worthy life won't die, won't become a pile of ash in a Soviet crematorium or a stack of rotting bones in Soviet ground; won't remain a portrait of an exemplary production worker on a factory wall or a few lines in the local or even a Moscow newspaper. No, they believe that white whales will come for the good people. It seems it always remained a mystery to me whether my brother was a good person. He never finished writing his last letter. This is all that I have left of him."

Krzysztof took the small mouth harp from his pocket, which Jacek had sent him a few years ago. Seemingly Jacek had nothing like that in mind, but Krzysztof considered it a matter of honor to learn this language, also. Too bad his brother would never hear him play.

"You came to pick up your brother's body?" the young woman asked quietly. Only now did Krzysztof realize she'd been carefully following their conversation, and even participating in it with her silence.

"The Chukchi people have this capacious word: enan-otkynatyk. It means 'to carry the decedent on a sleigh while sitting astride them.' I don't think these wonderful people imply something greater here—some sort of metaphysical depths. But I see those. I think it's about the importance of letting our dead go, instead of dragging them along as a weight. I came here to let my brother go. There's no body left, and maybe that's for the best. First, I won't have to ride astride him on a sleigh. Second, I absolutely do not want to see him dead. People change too much in death. It's not surprising that death gives birth to most of the myths."

"Do you have two university degrees, too? You speak very well."

"Not at all; I'm just a musician. A humble pianist. And a bit of a parrot. My brother used to speak well and write me eloquent letters; I'm merely repeating after him. It seems to be my destiny to repeat others' melodies and words. But I promised you a whale story. Here I will also act as a parrot: the story isn't mine.

"You've read *Moby Dick*, of course? A great book. My brother loved it very much. And, of course, he had a theory. Jacek had a theory about everything. When they say a person is looking for patterns everywhere, they're talking about my brother.

"The Chukchi have the concept of teryky, a shapeshifter. This is usually used to describe a person taken by the tundra. Such a person becomes wild and loses themselves.

"Imagine a whale person who's lost their human component. Won't they become a teryky? And if so, will people call them Moby Dick?"

"Would that make your brother Ahab?"

Krzysztof thought it over, his chin down to his chest.

"Perhaps not. I'd say, Ahab's opposite. Do you know why the boy who killed the white whale lost his mind from grief? It's not because he killed a brother. That is a knowable human motive which people practice on a daily basis. But, as our loved ones lose their substance and form as they leave us and it becomes replaced with idealized features, so do our legends with time become gods. You see, people desperately need gods. This is, as your expression goes, fundamental to their moral compass. A god is not necessarily an incorporeal bearded old man in the sky. It's not necessarily a young man on a cross. Sometimes a god is a flesh-and-blood person whom you've designated as your judge. And sometimes, it's an enormous white whale. That's what happened to that boy. He killed his god."

Krzysztof fiddled with his vargan for a time. His fingers felt the instrument coming to life, inspired either by the conversation or by the storm outside the window.

"My brother wasn't concerned with gods. Jacek believed in white whales, but he wanted to meet them as an equal. Person to person."

"To meet them how?"

"It seems there's no method other than to wait. At least, that's what my brother thought. Unfortunately, he ran out of time."

Krzysztof quit resisting and let the vargan take over. When he clenched it with his teeth the sound seemed to be born on its own, even before his fingers touched the reed. Focused on the emerging melody he didn't immediately notice that the old woman had joined the conversation.

The old woman spoke quietly and Krzysztof couldn't make out the words. After a moment he realized that even if he could hear her, he wouldn't have understood: the old woman was speaking the Chukchi language.

Umilyk began to translate quickly and without hesitation, as though he'd been waiting for her to speak.

"Navetyn says that she has a story about a whale," he said.

The old woman's voice sounded like she'd picked up the vargan melody, chewed it with her toothless mouth, and then weaved it into a narrative thread. Krzysztof closed his eyes and suddenly felt what he thought his brother had felt. The voice lulled, even more noticeably due to Krzysztof not understanding the words. And yet he did seem to understand them, their meaning and spirit, their melody; seemed to dive into that river and then the current took him away before the caretaker spoke, translating the old woman's words into Russian.

Navetyn: The Legend of the Woman Loved by a Whale

There lived a woman in the village of Nunak who had no husband. On rare occasions such women become huntresses, and they say there are no better huntresses than these. The bearded seal does not like the smell of a man, but he lets women approach closer. This is because a long time ago the seal tribe was equal to the humans, and the seal people took human wives. They still remember this.

The woman from Nunak was no huntress. Her pekul was rusty and the kerker and kamleika clothing she sewed were only fit for a shapeshifting bear.

But the woman knew many strange songs, and she taught these songs to others. There was a special song to make it snow, and another to make it stop. A song for a calm night, and a song to summon a pusa seal.

When hunters would return with a bearded seal, harbor seal, or a whale, the woman would take her rusty pekul and come for her share; no one dared to say anything to her.

The woman lived alone; she walked along the shore in solitude, and she sang.

The songs the woman sang were passed on to her by her grandmother, but the purpose for some was not known. At times the purpose was clear from the components of the melody: the woman recognized in her song the elements of snow and night and silence, and knew that this song was for a restful winter slumber, such that it would allow one to wake up full of energy and joy.

One song she could not understand. It weaved together the blizzard and whale calls, but the woman could not make sense of this combination.

One evening, at the edge of dusk, during the days of November blizzard, the woman stood on a rock and sang. She saw all the signs of the oncoming storm, but she didn't rush home. She decided to see whether the song would work if sung during the blizzard.

And then it was too late: the blizzard crashed upon the earth and the world disappeared. The song dissipated in the howl of the wind, and the woman realized she could not find her way home.

Then the stranger came. He said: I will guide you. He took her by the hand and led her through the storm, and when the gusts of wind were especially strong he stopped and hugged the woman tightly, shielding her with his body. And the wind had no power over him.

He led her home, and he stayed the night, then left in the morning.

Ever since then the man had come almost every night, until the woman was with child.

One time the woman had followed him all the way to the sea, and had seen the body of an enormous white whale towering over the shore. When the man approached him, the whale had opened his mouth and the man had walked inside.

That's how the woman had found out that she'd become the wife of a whale person.

This didn't change anything in their lives: the woman sang her songs, and the man came when she called. Sometimes he stayed the night, sometimes two. But never more than three. He said that he could not leave his whale body for too long. Without a soul the whale would grow bored, become unpredictable and violent, lose his mind.

But it so happened that the woman fell ill. Neither the shaman potions nor the seal fat would help. Nothing could warm her. The woman lay in the middle of the well-heated living area of the yaranga, wrapped in bear furs, and it seemed she would be covered in a layer of ice at any moment. The people of Nunak did not know the reasons for her illness and therefore could not help. But the reason was that the child in her belly was a snow whale and he needed special songs to grow peacefully and not to accidentally kill his mother.

The whale-father stayed with his human wife and sang to her these songs. While he was near, the whale cub in her belly calmed down and the woman became warm and comfortable. A day went by, then another, then a third, and a tenth. Finally the danger had passed and the woman regained consciousness. She stepped out of the yaranga to get meat for dinner from the icebox, and she saw the people of Nunak celebrating and sharpening their knives. The news came that the hunters had harpooned an enormous white whale, which brought joy to the entire village. The woman rushed back to the yaranga, but it was too late. Her husband was no longer there; a small pile of snow was all that remained of him.

The old woman stopped talking, and so did Umilyk.

Umilyk knew that his retelling was akin to carrying snow in a sieve through a hot yaranga. Awkward and impractical, but when there's no choice it's better to bring however much would make it through.

A transparent and thoughtful silence hung in the room. Only then did Umilyk realize that the blizzard outside had stopped.

"What happened to her?"

It was the woman with dead eyes who spoke. Umilyk had seen her follow Navetyn's tale with great interest, but didn't think she'd dare to ask a question. And when the old woman replied, he was surprised even more. Although the old woman's tone was grouchy, Umilyk thought that if her words were given form, they would emanate warmth.

Umilyk translated: "This is a simple story, as comrade Borisov says. The woman who carries a snow whale within her, becomes a part of the whale tribe herself. Of course, the mother of white whales came for her."

"And the people of Nanuk simply let her go?" Borisov asked skeptically. "This woman knew many important songs. Surely they understood the benefits of her presence."

The old woman spoke a short phrase and Umilyk hesitated for a moment, seeking the right words. For some reason he thought it important that the translation should sound equally poetic.

“Everything in this world has its own song: the people of Nunak forgot about the woman as soon as the snow powdered the traces of her footsteps.”

Borisov laughed and turned to Olga. “Well then, it’s your turn. Do you have a story about a whale?”

Olga: A Story about a Whale

“Do you have a story about a whale?” the Muscovite had asked, and his smarmy tone had made her shrink. It was like a scalpel cutting skin, to see what was inside.

The boy in her belly shifted. She somehow knew with certainty that it was a boy. Maybe because Aiwe had said so, and he always spoke the truth.

This child knew everything about her, and, it seemed, he really wanted to live. She felt him kick any time her thoughts strayed in the wrong direction. In those moments it seemed the darkness she’d fallen into after Aiwe’s death didn’t quite recede, but rather gained dimensions and depth.

No one is to blame, the doctor had said. Aiwe’s heart stopped first, and a few seconds later the beam fell from his weakened hand and crushed the big, strong, handsome Aiwe.

The doctor was short and skinny and very young, and Olga could see herself from three years ago in his gray eyes. She was like that during her early days in this monochrome world that seemed so flat, demonstrative, unreal—like a hastily erected prop for a movie about life in the far north.

But when it came to his area of expertise, the doctor transformed; his voice gained confidence, and his mannerisms became harsh. Olga noted in passing how she would enjoy watching a professional metamorphosis like that under different circumstances. But now, it was as though the automated registrar of what was happening wouldn’t turn off, and she watched from the sidelines, wrapped in darkness and grief.

Grief can have different tastes. Olga’s grief had an aftertaste of whale fat: the day Aiwe had died, a whaler brigade from Kytoorken had returned from a bountiful hunt. It was a major event and a holiday for the entire village.

Of course she’d heard about the boy from the Muscovite’s story. So very young, he’d tried to scare off a bear and her cubs alone. A tragic death. Except Olga hadn’t known he was a whaler and that the Kytoorken whale prize was, in part, his accomplishment.

After Aiwe had died, reality became something like an avant-garde black-and-white film, some weird French production with experiments by the director and

cameraman. Olga kept losing the narrative thread and finding herself in the center of various events. Here was Aiwe's death certificate, and arguments with officials who didn't know where to record the man who was not written into any of their thick books; here she was in the school director's tiny office—indifferent but inexorable, she had no strength to remain in Kytoorken; here she was at the post office, making a long-distance call to Tashlinsk, her mother's accusatory tone when she found out about the pregnancy; here was Umilyk serving her tea, and Borisov with his story, and Krzysztof, and the old Chukchi woman.

Somewhere in between all that were the nausea, melancholy, nightmares, and the endless kicks in the stomach. She had no time for the young hunter, whose death, it turned out, was tacked on with a red thread to her own life. Olga imagined how in some other small Chukotka village someone was drinking tea and mentioning her Aiwe's death in passing, as an afterthought. This always happened with the dead: they left behind only brief threads of conversation, someone's unreliable memories and, with any luck, photographs. What sort of cadaver could be put together from such materials? The boy from the Muscovite's story appeared wholly alive. Olga could easily imagine him, and could seemingly even hear his voice in the song of the blizzard. Could she so deftly create a verbal portrait of Aiwe for their son?

"Do you have a story about a whale?"

Aiwe had brought her to the shore and they'd watched the whale. Olga hadn't known how to see it at all, but Aiwe had showed her where to look and how to see. He'd told her to listen to the whale song. Olga had listened in earnest, and he'd hugged her and told her that she must listen not with her ears, but with her heart.

Now Olga thought she had no heart left. Above the spot where her boy's tiny heart beat there was a cold emptiness.

Aiwe had appeared out of nowhere; one day he'd walked into her night school and said, "I heard your voice and came to see." Since then he'd come every evening, hadn't asked for anything, hadn't courted her, and hadn't flirted. Olga didn't even understand how it came to be that he'd become the most important person in her life.

How did it come to be that, by leaving, Aiwe had taken her life with him? Olga felt herself a shadow that had no place in any of the usual worlds.

She realized that she couldn't remain in Kytoorken, but her native Tashlinsk seemed alien and flat. Olga felt stuck between two worlds, the higher and the lower, and rejected by both. Sometimes she overcame the feeling of utter foolishness and asked the boy in her belly: where to?

"Do you have a story about a whale?"

Sometimes she listened the way Aiwe had taught her. Not with her ears, but with her heart, even if only its tatters remained. And when she listened like that,

she thought she could hear her boy. He sang the way the whales sing.

The old Chukchi woman, Navetyn, was now singing, too. Her whispers intertwined with the moans of the vargan, mixed together, tamed it. Everything disappeared: the people, the weather station, the waiting, the questions. Only the blizzard and the voice of the great mother of white whales remained, and it called to her: come with me.

R'evava, the Whale-Island

Umilyk stepped out onto the porch to catch a glimpse of the snow whale's tail as it swam away into the darkness.

The silence after a blizzard is a special time, and a state of mind. As if the entire world stops and freezes. And it listens: what now? Did it survive? Is it whole? Are the north and south poles still in their place?

The silence after a blizzard is so piercing that it seems possible to hear the thoughts and aspirations of all nearby creatures. This silence binds them all together into a single net. Umilyk listened to the stars; they rejoiced at the return of the snow whale. He listened to the sea calming under fast ice; he could seemingly even hear the helicopter preparing for flight in the distant town of Pevek.

Umilyk heard Borisov's thoughts. Borisov, who stepped onto the porch after him, was sad in the way a hunter is sad after an unsuccessful hunt.

Krzysztof stepped outside and from his gait and the movement of the air, Umilyk realized that the musician was fascinated by the beauty around him. Krzysztof had already put away the vargan, but the melody still sounded in his thoughts.

Umilyk wondered whether he should tell the Polish man that he'd seen his brother talk to the sea on the final day of his life. Had seen him board a whaleboat on his way to meet a whale. Had seen the storm being born on the horizon. If he should say that he still wasn't certain whether he should have stopped him.

Instead, he said: "You know, this was the first time in thirty years that I witnessed such a long telling by the old Navetyn. What a story, huh?"

"Navetyn?" Borisov asked absentmindedly. It was clear that his thoughts were already in Pevek, in Magadan, in Moscow.

Umilyk glanced at Krzysztof, who only raised his eyebrows in solidarity with Borisov's question.

"The helicopter is almost here," said Umilyk, to change the subject. The image of Navetyn in his mind grew dim and out of focus, as it happens when you don't see someone you know for a long time.

"Listen," the Muscovite voiced a concern. "I was told another passenger would be joining us, a teacher from Kytoorken. We aren't going to wait for her, since she

couldn't be bothered to arrive on time, are we?"

Umilyk shook his head. For another moment he listened to the sound of receding footsteps—the almost inaudible steps of an old woman and a young one. And then he stared at the gloomy sky, catching a few stray snowflakes with his face—the final greeting from the snow whale.

REACTOR

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**GENEVIEVE
VALENTINE**



**OTHER
KELLY**

Other Kelly

GENEVIEVE VALENTINE

illustration by

MARY PELC

REACTOR 

Kelly was twenty minutes late, which was usual for her by now.

"Sorry!" she said, with a smile that was mostly teeth. "It was hilarious—turns out that the leak from my kitchen they said they fixed had just moved across the ceiling to my closet and I didn't know for two months, so my stuff all molded. I had to buy a new coat on my way. Isn't that like the most Me thing you've ever heard?"

It was pouring. Marshall had bailed at eleven minutes and Kyle had gone with him, so Diana was inside pleading to change the reservation. Kelly, carefully staying out of Diana's sight, nudged under the awning with Erin and me.

"It's cute, though, right?" Kelly said. "I mean like, I got a cute coat and a story out of it, at least. It's kind of funny, right? Like, it will be fine."

"It's already wet," I said. "Why didn't you buy an umbrella?"

"It'll get rained on at home anyway," Kelly said.

She looked over her shoulder; in the middle of the sidewalk, standing in the rain that dissolved right before it touched her, Other Kelly watched the traffic.

★ ★ ★

"—and then Carver said he couldn't come because he was at an intensive dog-training course Thursday and Friday, but he volunteered me because 'he believes in team responsibility,' so I spent *two* fucking days in a sexual harassment seminar taking notes like Carver can even read, and now I'm behind on my actual work, so I have to go to the office after this." Kelly stabbed her waffle.

"When are you going to leave?" Diana said. "Like, he's a dick, we get it. You know the deal."

"But it took me a year to even find it," Kelly said. "I have prescriptions. What am I supposed to do?"

"Date doctors," Erin said.

"Hey," said Kyle, who had been doing that for the last four years as he tried to get his music career going.

Other Kelly was staring at a couple outside who were well into a breakup. (She would stare at anything. She should be staring at Kelly—why else was she here?—but she hardly ever did.) Her place setting was empty. She didn't eat, or sleep, or talk. She just showed up anywhere we had invited Kelly.

"I just can't keep going like this," Kelly said, wobbly, pushing a piece of bacon around her plate, the fork shrieking a little when she pressed too hard.

Other Kelly looked over, almost, at the sound of the fork—Kelly looked up, like she was waiting, like she knew Other Kelly was about to say something—but then the woman outside was shouting "You're *fucking* kidding me," so loud it echoed off the glass condos on either side of the street, and then burst into tears, and we ended up watching that for so long that I was at home and sorting through twenty emails I'd missed before I wondered what the hell Kelly had been hoping to hear.

★ ★ ★

By the time Kelly told us, her downward slide didn't feel like a dramatic change in direction anymore, just a slowly permanent state; I'd waited a while for her to hit bottom, but even before Other Kelly showed up I realized it was all just falling. When she sat down and told us with a straight face that she'd seen herself passing her in the street, we all looked at each other, hoping this was the floor.

"Does your carbon monoxide detector have batteries in it?" asked Erin.

"Don't fucking talk down to me. I've seen her. I saw her every day this week."

"I'm not talking down to you," said Erin, who absolutely was. She was a counselor at one of the high schools where rich people sent their kids to do drugs in peace. She didn't know any other way to talk.

"Is she following you?" I asked.

"Not quite. She's always where I am, but not like she's waiting for me. Like somebody dropped her out of a plane right there and she's heading back to where she came from. We just keep ... passing."

Kyle sat up—he'd suggested leaving Kelly out of this dinner, but he was clearly repenting now—but Diana beat him to it. "How did you notice her?"

"Because she's my fucking double, Diana. You notice stuff."

Diana made half a face before Erin kicked her under the table to stop Diana saying whatever she thought about Kelly's powers of observation. (Diana had come into the group by way of Marshall and Erin. Kelly was a lot unless you had decided to be her friend beforehand. Diana had not.)

Marshall frowned, looking halfway to actually concerned. "So this woman is, like, copying you and stalking you?"

God, why would she bother, I thought before I could stop it, and hoped it hadn't showed on my face.

"She *is* me," Kelly snapped. "She's not copying. She is *me*."

"Yes," Kyle said under his breath, already typing into his phone. He kept his keyboard noises on; everything he typed always sounded eighty letters long.

"Kelly," Erin started, and I shook my head at her, because the way Erin said Kelly's name before she asked how therapy was going was enough to piss off a much more patient person than Kelly was.

"There are a lot of people in this city," I said instead. "This can't be the first time somebody's seen someone who looks exactly like them."

"Correct," said Kyle, turning so that everyone could see the website in his hand. "I knew I'd seen this—look, it happens all the time! God, imagine meeting your double and he's also in coach. Like

you have a cosmic twin that you actually managed to cross paths with, out of eight billion people in the whole world, and neither of you can get your shit together enough for business class.” He started typing again. “Oh my god they were both going to Disney. Oh, this is sad.”

“Yeah,” said Kelly. “It’s them we’re sad about.”

“Next time stop her. See what the deal is,” Erin said. “She’s got to be curious, too.”

Other Kelly wasn’t curious about much of anything, as it turned out, but even there, she and Kelly were alike.

* * *

Not exactly, though. That was the thing.

I mean, you knew who she looked like—she was Kelly, nobody doubted it, the first time she’d ever showed up Marshall had said “Oh shit” under his breath and Erin had edged halfway off her bar stool. She was wearing something I recognized of Kelly’s, before Kelly had started forgetting her clothes in the laundry room and putting them in the dryer on high to kill whatever happens to wet clothes in a washer overnight. Now everything Kelly wore pulled a little, everywhere. (Other Kelly’s clothes fit her. Other Kelly’s clothes were always clean.)

When you looked right at Other Kelly, of course, something was missing. The lights were off, somehow; an empty house. But it didn’t matter. No waitress or security guard or taxi driver ever glanced at Other Kelly with concern.

I avoided looking at Other Kelly for very long, but I didn’t look at Kelly for very long anymore, either. What was the point? You knew somebody or you didn’t. You could do something or you couldn’t. Other Kelly wasn’t Kelly, and I could always tell; anything else was Other Kelly’s business.

Kyle was the one who got really obsessed, at first—not even when Other Kelly was there, just random moments where Marshall and I would be getting McDonald’s with Kyle at four a.m. and he’d

look up from his fries like a meerkat and say “Fuck, I bet it’s killed Kelly already” and start typing so loud nobody could even talk until he was finished. He had a phone full of photos of people posing with their doubles.

“*Those* doubles are *people*, asshole,” said Marshall once, a warning to shut up about it, but if Kyle was smart enough to take a warning he’d have stopped being a musician already, and he said, “How would you know—they show up on camera, doesn’t mean they’re a person,” and kept typing until Kelly texted back.

Marshall rolled his eyes, but it was true. In the group photo at New Year’s, Other Kelly was there, in the same thing Kelly was wearing (it fit her better), looking right into the lens. She wasn’t smiling, but still she seemed perfectly normal until you saw Kelly with her arm outstretched to take the picture, dress pulling at her shoulders, grinning like her skull was about to make a run for it, and realized that one of them was very wrong.

(Eventually Kyle stopped texting Kelly. She was never dead. It was fine.)

* * *

I couldn’t remember how long Kelly and I had been friends, which made me feel sort of responsible for her whenever she was going off the rails in front of everyone, even though I was *not* responsible for her, which I reminded myself about a lot. I’d still tried—“When she first started at that stupid company she had some real talent,” I’d told Diana once, when Diana wasn’t sucked in yet and I was trying to make a case for us as people worth spending time with, and Erin had said “Jesus Christ” and stared like I’d spat on a grave and said, “Kelly’s a drag but she’s the friend who shows up when you’re in the hospital,” and Marshall added quietly “And at no other time,” and that wasn’t true, obviously, we’d all had dinner two weeks before, but for a long strange second it really had felt like I hadn’t seen Kelly in years.

But if Kelly had gone off the rails enough to accidentally summon Other Kelly, there was nothing I could have done about it. I asked her to museums with me for a year and a half before I gave up (she didn't even say no, just wouldn't answer when I asked, until I'd end up going anyway and sending a picture of some miserable painting from whatever room I was in; she'd write back *lol same sorry i couldn't make it!!* instantly), and Kelly never asked anyone to meet her anymore, so I'd given up even waiting for that.

She hadn't been surprised when Other Kelly showed up. She'd treated Other Kelly the way she treated tax season.

I couldn't stop thinking about Other Kelly, though. It wasn't the kind of thing you told your friend who already hated her job whose clothes kept getting jacked up in the dryer, but Kelly already looked like half the girls in the new condos—every time one of them was walking a dog I had a half second of wanting to call after her, horrified Kelly thought she could handle a puppy. Other Kelly looked exactly like Kelly, but so did all those girls. It wasn't bone structure we were all scared of. Whatever you saw when you *recognized* Kelly was something deeper, some essential quality that only Kelly had, and I couldn't stop trying to guess what it was.

Had been, I guess. She shared it with Other Kelly now.

"They are literally the same person," Marshall said when I brought it up, not quite like he'd sounded with Kyle, but close. He was hanging around after we were finished, and some not-Kelly had come out the door with a French bulldog while I smoked out my kitchen window, and I knew better—we weren't supposed to talk about Other Kelly—but it had slipped out before I could stop myself.

"But you know what I'm saying. Remember that time you started making fun of that girl's purse on the train because you thought Kelly had finally given in to pink and it wasn't Kelly?"

He flinched, and after a second he flinched again, different. "That's a regular mistake, though. I wouldn't do that with—I mean, I'd *never* just start talking to—if I. If I saw." He gnawed on his tongue a second, like he could massage the right word out, but it

never came. Nobody had ever invoked Other Kelly out loud. We knew better.

“But,” I said. I stopped—I couldn’t talk about her, either—but I wanted to say, The eyes are different, even though they shouldn’t be. Something about the mouth is so different. Why does Kelly look older than Other Kelly? What’s wrong with whichever one of them is more wrong?

“I keep thinking about it,” I said. “All Kyle’s photos. Somebody just like you, and you never knowing.”

“Not you,” he said. “You look like somebody about to get shot to death in a Renaissance painting.”

He was trying to insult me; it was the most romantic thing I’d ever heard.

★ ★ ★

Other Kelly had an ASMR channel. None of the others had seen it, but I couldn’t sleep nights. She sat at a table close to the camera, so you only saw her to the neck, her long brown hair swinging a little as she moved; she held silver rings at the very tips of her fingers—fingers that were slightly longer than Kelly’s, no one could say those hands were the same—and tapped the covers of hardback books. It was doing pretty well.

★ ★ ★

Kelly called an emergency meeting the day Carver made her fax some legal thing without looking at it. It was already after nine when she got out of work (*lol fucking kill me* she wrote, underneath the last three *lol fucking kill mes*). By the time she made it to my place we’d eaten the takeout, and all I had was cereal. She ate three bowls without stopping, her gaze shaken loose from anything actually happening. Probably still back in the office; she told me once that she kept a Swingline on her desk for whenever she finally

snapped, and imagining his skull busting open was the only way she could keep coming to work.

She started talking during bowl four. "It's not that I don't trust you, he said, it's that this is really important, and we don't want anyone to be able to complain about your performance. It was his divorce papers. He turned out the light in the room so I couldn't see it. He took my phone back to his desk, too. He took my fucking phone!"

She dropped onto my futon, which I'd bought as small and uncomfortable as possible so nobody would sleep over at my place, which everyone respected but Kelly.

Diana was perched on the other side, at the very edge where none of the metal bars could dig into your back. I was in my wobbly desk chair, and Erin was sitting on my desk so she wouldn't have to sit on my futon. Marshall and Kyle had been omitted, because when Kelly was going to cry she didn't like men to look at her. Other Kelly stood by my bookcase, where she might have been looking over my books, if she could read.

(She couldn't—Kyle had checked. She just liked to look at them. She'd stare at anything, except Kelly.)

Kelly dragged her skin outward under the heels of her hands, like she could pull it tight enough to hold back tears. "Honestly, fuck my job. The insurance won't help when the ulcers eat me, I might as well bail. *Everest* would be less demanding. At least up there if you collapse everybody just leaves you to die in private like normal people."

Diana set down her drink, a little sound that always marked something shitty about to come out of her mouth, and said, "You're right. Go."

"We'd miss you," said Erin, almost like she meant it.

Kelly looked around like she'd actually been expecting a better response. Then she looked at Other Kelly.

Erin and Diana pretended not to notice, but I couldn't help it and I looked over, too. Other Kelly had given up on my books and had

wandered to my window. Two pigeons were fighting over something on the sidewalk outside.

Kelly watched Other Kelly, waiting, picking absently at her cuticles. The silence held a long time. Eventually Kelly shoved her bowl of cereal across the table, toward Other Kelly, slow and deliberate enough that nothing spilled.

"Come on," she said. "You must be hungry."

Other Kelly never moved. At some point Kelly started crying. Erin pulled up the car service she used that was so exclusive I'd never heard of it, face lit up bright green for a second as it loaded. Outside, the pigeons were still fighting, a battery of wings.

★ ★ ★

I had seen myself, once. I'd gone to the Met on a free Friday because I was trying to meet people who weren't the people I already knew. I didn't—I was bad at meeting people, it's how I'd ended up with the people I already knew, Kelly had pulled people toward us until we were all locked in orbit and I had absolutely no idea how you started that all over again from scratch—and it was so embarrassing to be there alone that after a while I'd just kept turning into whatever gallery was empty. In a small room of lesser works nobody was interested in, there was a big painting of some peasant-y kitchen full of light and people. I was sitting on a stool off to one side, peeling potatoes.

It was an old enough painting that the other me had probably died of something disgusting and preventable right after posing for this, so I tried not to get romantic about it, but in the painting I seemed like I knew what I was doing; I had something in my hands, and I understood what was being asked of me.

I wondered if the woman next to me, who was pulling feathers off a duck, had ever met herself here. If someday I would meet that woman—if she was still alive, if she was somehow here. If she'd even recognize me when she saw me, when this potato peeler was

all she had to go on; for someone who had my face, she didn't look like me at all.

* * *

"It's supposed to show up ahead of me."

Everybody shows up before you do, I thought, before I realized what Kelly was talking about.

Diana had gotten dumped eight months ago—Jason, who broke up with her when her mom was sick, saying she'd gotten really selfish. I don't know how long they'd have stayed together if she hadn't been in Connecticut and unable to give up whatever she was doing all the time to go deal with Jason. Diana never spoke about him again, except once when we were walking past some bubble tea place and she'd said "God, this was a deli when Jason—" before she could stop herself, and we'd all frozen up so bad that the people behind us crashed into us. We didn't say anything else for a full minute, like we were waiting for him to show up. It had torn up the sidewalk under us, to hear the name.

There was no reason to be surprised that Kelly was talking about Other Kelly, but it startled me the same way; I banged my knee against the coffee table and looked around to see if Other Kelly was close enough to hear. She wasn't—when I got eyes on her she was out on the street staring into a sewer grate—but it was a fucking stroke of luck. She should have been close enough to hear us.

If Kelly had noticed, she didn't mention it. She was thinking hard. Her bed was too tall, and with her legs tucked up she looked like a kid afraid of what was under there. (The overflowing boxes of musty sweaters and shrunk skirts she had instead of a dresser, the folding chair she kept for guests and never needed.) All her framed art had magazine pages taped over it; she had a succulent in the window, alive, the tag still on.

"The whole point is that they want to replace you. That's the only thing they want." She ran her necklace back and forth under one fingernail, her mouth pulled into a single line. When she saw my

expression the line got thinner. "What? You think I'm not paying attention? I can read, okay? I can like, *prepare*."

She sounded more upset at me than at Other Kelly who had showed up to kill her.

"Okay," I said. "I believe you. What happens when—when you're ... not with us? What does it feel like?"

Kelly glanced at the window. (I thought, At least Kelly isn't alone all the time, and then stopped myself. It didn't count, probably.)

"When my coat molded over the winter," she said, "I bought that other one. I hung it up in the same place. It's molded. But the landlord didn't fix the first leak and he won't fix this one either, and it's not like I can move out, and it's not like another closet will appear, and it's ... I don't have any other place. If I buy another coat, it will be the same thing. But eventually it doesn't matter about the leak or the mold, because where else am I supposed to put my coat? At some point you just run out of places. It feels like that."

After a long time, I said, "What happens to—the person?"

"Consumed," Kelly said. "Like, the person disappears, not like, cannibals."

I tried to imagine Other Kelly consuming anything. When she chewed on Kelly's bones it would sound just like silver rings against a hardback book.

"So what do we do?"

Kelly shrugged; she'd gotten lipstick on her teeth, and I thought vaguely that Other Kelly wouldn't do that. Eventually the necklace gave way, but she kept her hand where it was, pressed to her sternum, the chain spilling down over her fingers.

"Ask nicely," she said.

★ ★ ★

Game night was at Marshall's, and when I got there Diana and Kyle were setting up some new game Kyle had brought from the game night he had with his other set of friends, who he'd never introduced us to because he said we wouldn't like them—they were too serious,

apparently, and he wanted our game nights to be more fun (“*This one’s really fun,*” he said every fucking month, like he’d ever been right). Other Kelly was in the kitchen toasting something while Marshall finished his cheese plate.

“I brought wine,” I announced, toeing off my shoes. We’d dropped most of the actual greetings a while ago. No plural seemed to work anymore since Other Kelly.

“Kyle is setting up Round Table,” Marshall said, one tick too pleasantly. “It’s an Arthurian board game with cards. You go on quests.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“I reminded him that Erin hates card games and you hate quests, but Kyle was not to be deterred,” Marshall informed me as he slammed the last handful of cucumber slices on the board and scooped the whole thing up to bring it into the living room. Other Kelly moved an inch forward to let him pass by, though she never looked up from the toaster; when the toast popped up, she pushed the lever again.

“*This one’s really fun!*” Kyle called.

“Erin doesn’t have fun, Erin wins or she quits,” Diana said, putting the last little pewter knight into the cluster at the center of the board. “Remember when she lost that game of KeyCypher last year?”

“Well, Erin has issues,” Kyle said, after visibly discarding his first reaction, which was that if anyone lost a puzzle game to me they should be ashamed of themselves. Everybody had pointedly joked about it for three weeks after that game night, any time any of us met up, that Erin the salutatorian had lost a puzzle game to me. Eventually Erin pulled me aside and said, “I’m not going to come back unless they can shut up about it,” which was at least half for my sake, and that was about as considerate as Erin could be about anything. By the time she finally showed up again it was autumn, and everyone was so worried she’d ditched us all forever that nobody brought it up anymore.

Somebody buzzed the apartment. It was probably Erin. Kelly was going to be late (*sorry!! should i bring coffee? definitely start without me*); she hated game night as much as any of us, but she didn't want to risk getting cut out, so she showed up too late to play and got weirdly supportive off to one side of the couch.

I didn't want to be in the living room with Erin, in case Kyle tried to be funny again and also a little bit just because of Erin, so I moved out of sight into the kitchen. The thing that had been a slice of bread about seven toasts ago popped back up. It was nearly charcoal. Other Kelly pushed it back down.

"I brought doughnuts," said Erin as she beelined down the hall. Everybody in the living room immediately began parceling out who was going to get the fun flavors.

"I won KeyCypher because I figured out one of the symbols was for a space between words," I said. "Everybody else forgot about separation."

Other Kelly looked up from the toaster. I wasn't really looking at her (how could you), but I was talking to her. There was nobody else to talk to.

"That's hazelnut, put it down," said Marshall, "we roll for it. Diana, the dice."

"You can buy doughnuts yourself with money whenever you'd like," said Erin.

The toast came back up. It was fully a cinder.

"Four, *fuck*," said Marshall, "okay wait, stop—Kyle, stop it—we're doing best two out of three."

Other Kelly's finger hovered over the lever for a second before pushing. The two of us watched the cinder fall apart.

★ ★ ★

I was supposed to meet Kelly for coffee, and even though I was twenty minutes late Kelly was still texting *left the house I promise* and *hang on my laces broke be there asap*. Eventually I made a slow

loop of the park to let Other Kelly stare at stuff. She liked water a lot. Trees. Shadows.

"Hey, Kelly," called Carver.

Kelly had made me be her date to her office holiday party, the first time; she'd still thought there was a future for her, and she introduced me to people as if she'd be talking about them a lot as soon as she got promoted. That was so long ago that she'd still looked like Other Kelly, no eye bags and all her cuticles still in one piece. Carver looked exactly the same, except now he was in an outfit where everything he was wearing was a slightly different shade of black with a different logo on it, walking a dog.

"Kelly, wow," said Carver, mostly to his phone, and partly to the dog that was struggling to get at a cigarette butt. "Small town, huh? You know, our deadline hasn't changed just because it's the weekend. Are you on your way in?"

Other Kelly stared. I thought about a mouth full of metal teeth ripping Carver right off the bone. What was all this for, if not to make everybody who knew Kelly fear for their lives?

He said, "I mean, you don't have to, but it's really not fair to the team when you get overwhelmed. Nobody wants to make you work on a weekend, but, you know?"

She blinked at him. He gave her a tight smile, waved with the dog-leash hand (the puppy choked), said, "Okay great, thanks," and left.

Other Kelly and I looked at each other. It was too long, immediately, but then I was stuck staring, waiting for Other Kelly to ask the question I knew, all at once, she wanted to ask.

Then the wind shook the trees, and whatever I had been staring at was gone; she was already in the little grove, shadows dappling her hair as she stared down where her body blocked out the light.

I ended up meeting Kelly at the coffee place alone; Other Kelly hadn't followed me, and I didn't know how to call out for her.

I explained what had happened. She took too long to realize Other Kelly hadn't done anything to Carver, and hadn't gone

wherever Kelly was supposed to go now, and hadn't even come here to get stared at. Then her head dropped forward. Her hands, short-fingered, pulled the skin taut over her face. Her whole body was fraying at the edges.

"It's not fair," she said. "I'm so ready. How fucking long do I have to hold on?"

"She'll be here soon," I said.

I believed it, too. I believed it for a long time. I sat there even after Kelly had given up and left for work; for nearly an hour I sat in a stool at the window of the coffee shop, waiting for Other Kelly to find one of us or the other, wishing for something to do with my hands.

★ ★ ★

Game night was KeyCypher ("I'm *sorry*, I forgot," snapped Kyle from the living room, as Erin said "Don't use that tone with me, I'm not the one who made it an issue" and Diana cut in with "I would honestly rather play Go Fish than get into this again"), and Marshall had invented some missing thing from the cheese board just so he'd have a reason to walk half a mile to the new fancy grocery store in the lobby of the new block of glass condos and avoid all of us for forty minutes.

Kelly was late (no texts), and honestly it was just as well. Other Kelly hadn't come. There was nothing for her here.

I was in the kitchen. With the lights off it was dark and quiet. I pushed the toast back down. It wasn't a cinder yet, but it would be soon.

About the Author

Genevieve Valentine's first novel, *Mechanique: A Tale of the Circus Tresaulti*, won the 2012 Crawford Award and was nominated for the Nebula. Her short fiction has been nominated for the World Fantasy and Shirley Jackson awards, and has appeared in several Best of the Year anthologies. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).

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I'LL MISS MYSELF

JOHN WISWELL

I'll Miss Myself

JOHN WISWELL

illustration by

EVA REDAMONTI

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

Shaw couldn't sleep so he doomscrolled the multiverse. First there was a shaky video of a landslide on his commute to work, from a hill he'd never realized had been that unsound. Next was a wall of text ranting about an ex-girlfriend, who in Shaw's own universe he'd always wondered about asking out. Then came a picture of himself unboxing his new gaming PC, which in his universe he couldn't afford.

These Shaws were everything he could have been, all posting from other lives on AllOne. The possibilities of AllOne went on for as long as his thumbs could scroll.

One post made him pause and rub the bruise on his eyebrow.

Can anyone else not sleep?

Over nine thousand comments argued about whether they shared a genetic predisposition for insomnia, and about whether not being able to sleep was the same as insomnia. A never-ending string of replies argued about whether you could be addicted to melatonin. Some of this was so similar to things Shaw had felt that he wondered if he'd actually typed them himself in a daze.

AllOne chimed like a parallel self had messaged him. He thumbed around but didn't see any DMs. Annoying. This app was going to hell.

He turned his phone off and dropped his head on the pillow, staring at the yellow lights of the city reflected in his window. The pillow was too warm, so he flipped it. He thought about insomnia, and possible landslides on the commute to work, and the bare walls

of his apartment where he'd always meant to put up his posters. He never had.

Then he was back on his phone. Back on AllOne.

Nobody else wears a mask where I work. Does it matter if I wear one?

That one almost got him angry enough to comment. Almost. Instead he read the bickering about how many of their dads had died from COVID.

There were fewer universes than he'd expected. When Shaw was a kid he'd thought the infinite multiverse meant there were universes out there with goblins and wizards, and where the planet Mars could talk, and where hammerhead sharks ran everything and computers were invented by superintelligent algae.

How did I get fired from the same gas station twice??????????

But probability was less creative than the average bored child.

Does anything I do matter?

AllOne chimed again. This time he saw the direct messages. A pop-up from AllOne offered to auto-delete it.

THEM

How are you doing? Like how are you actually doing?

He didn't know if this was a bot, or if some jackass self was trolling other selves. Shaw scratched his head, thinking why anyone on this app would ask that. Everybody was miserable all the time.

So he made a joke out of it.

YOU

Give me your credit card information and I'll be doing great.

Shaw rubbed the bruise on his eyebrow again, using the sting to center himself.

Then the other Shaw replied.

THEM

Oh shit I got through?

YOU

Wonders of the multiverse, right?

THEM

It's been hell getting in contact with other selves.
AllOne's algorithm keeps auto-deleting and blocking us.

Shaw thought about the phantom chime he'd heard earlier. Was every chime he'd gotten on this app from another self trying to talk and getting blocked by an auto-moderator?

That seemed a bit much.

THEM

You need to know, AllOne is filtering what we see in our feeds.

YOU

I know AllOne filters. They get rid of boring stuff. Like I hid all the anime posts because those versions of me got really weird.

THEM

Anime is a diverse artform and you don't know what you're missing. But that's not the point. AllOne hides most parallel universes. You're not seeing most of what we are on here.

Shaw flipped over to his feed, where people were arguing about the worst political party. They didn't share the same America and yet so many versions of him were furiously sure.

YOU

AllOne shows me millions of other mes. We're not exactly stuck behind the Berlin Wall.

THEM

The algorithm shows us the ones that'll make us doubt ourselves. Make us feel confused and mad. But only enough to stay engaged. It filters infinity so all of us stay on the app. It's fucked some of us up. Fucked us up really bad.

Reading that made him want to bang his head against his window. AllOne wasn't out to get him. Too many versions of himself thought the world was out to get them.

YOU

Are you listening to yourself? It's an app. It's not killing us.

THEM

I tried to kill myself last year.

Shaw's fingers sweated around the edges of his screen. He pushed himself away from that sentence until he hit the headboard, clacking against his bare wall. His phone fell into his lap.

The screen glowed up at him. Those words were still there. He hadn't misread.

What the hell? No version of him was suicidal. He would have remembered.

YOU

I'm so sorry. I didn't see you post about it.

THEM

You couldn't see it. AllOne's algorithm segregates who sees what so we all stay perpetually engaged. If you really need the rest of us, it puts you in a limbo zone. No other self sees you. Like you're unthinkable.

YOU

What happened? To you?

That was a tacky way of putting it. He couldn't think of anything better. He put a fist over his bruise.

THEM

I jumped out my apartment window. It didn't have to happen. I didn't realize how bad I felt was until I was falling. It's why I'm messaging as many of us as I can.

YOU

You're messaging lots of us?

THEM

That's how I know I'm not the only one who's tried it.

YOU

Fuck.

THEM

It's a weird question to ask yourself but I need to ask: are you okay? Have you done anything? Caught any signs or behaviors? Because you shouldn't have to be alone.

He didn't know what to say. That other Shaw had to have an answer he wanted to hear. That other Shaw had to know what signs were alarming. But Shaw wasn't in that kind of dark pit.

Of course, this Shaw hadn't thought he was either.

"Until I was falling," he repeated out loud. That phrase swirled around in his head.

He had to say something. To at least comfort this other Shaw. Make him feel less alone.

Except the direct messages were gone. His whole DM window in AllOne was blank.

He refreshed it and found nothing. The whole conversation was gone. Like it hadn't happened.

He scrolled the arguments about Thai food and sea monsters and climate change in his feed, hoping to find that one Shaw. How could he find a needle in a stack of needles?

And would AllOne hide it if he asked about this publicly?

Thinking about what the hell to do, he carried his phone over to the window. He rested his face against the glass, like he always did when his thoughts spun up too hard. The coolness faded as the glass leached warmth from his skin. It reminded him of visiting the aquarium when he was a kid, and his mom grouching that he always ran to the same one exhibit and it wasn't worth the money.

Without thinking, he banged his eye against the glass. His bruise lit up with pain, and he jolted.

The windowpane reflected his image, a gray silhouette. For the first time in a day and a half, he actually thought about how he'd given himself that bruise. How many times had he banged his head on the window without thinking?

His eyes moved from his reflection to the drop outside his window.

* * *

He didn't know how to do this. How did one simply defy a company that treated universes like fodder? How did he make first contact with a version of himself that the Terms of Service forbade him from knowing existed?

Randomly. That's the only way he could think to do it: with pure randomness. One Shaw posted a picture of a spilled milkshake on a sidewalk, with some text ranting about his awful day. He was as good a self as any to reach out to.

He opened the DM and tried.

YOU

Are you doing okay? Like, okay-okay?

No immediate reply. He waited so long that he found himself drifting back to his AllOne feed. To a surprisingly fervent argument about the coolest kind of sharks.

Then AllOne chimed.

THEM

What does okay-okay mean?

Well, the ice was broken. Now what?
Shaw thought with his thumbs.

YOU

Ever feel like AllOne is watching and choosing what you see? Like its algorithm was built to make us feel worse and powerless?

THEM

Don't they have people looking at our stuff? They can see you saying this.

He'd looked that up. Hopefully his other self was looking it up right now.

YOU

They don't employ nearly enough people to track most conversations, and their automod is flaky. AllOne believes in algorithms because algorithms can't unionize.

THEM

If this isn't a joke, you could get banned. Watch out for yourself.

Shaw brought the phone up to his face, his nose smudging sweat on the screen. It was real. God damn. That was genuine concern for himself—from himself. Something pinched inside his chest and a hiccup of a sob filled his mouth.

He felt tangible pride that this other version of him could care about someone else on a hard day, even if the person he cared about was technically him. He was caring about himself by caring about another self. The thought messed him up like crayons in a blender.

YOU

This is worth it. You're the first "myself" I've asked.

THEM

Asked what?

Shaw took the slowest breath he could. Then he typed.

YOU

Do you ever get overwhelmed and mentally spiral? For so long you're not sure how long you were doing it? And you just keep scrolling and spiraling without thinking about what's wrong?

The pause unfurled. Shaw couldn't help imagining this other self staring at his phone in disgust or clicking away to something fun. What if he got blocked and reported? This could kill his account. AllOne chimed.

THEM

Fuck.

YOU

Are you okay?

THEM

I'm fucking crying into my phone. Do you spiral like that too? How many of us do this?

Shaw wiped at his bruised eye, blinking his vision clear.

YOU

I don't know how many of us. There's only one way to find out. I'm going to message more of us. Maybe you could, too?

THEM

Why are we like this? Did we all get fucked up because our parents stayed together and kept fighting for forever?

Shaw's parents hadn't stayed together. They'd divorced when he was eight—and it'd been great. They'd both become more present with him. Dad had been so much happier and taken him to all kinds of aquariums until he got sick.

And he *still* had this problem. So what was wrong with him? What had happened to all the Shaws?

AllOne went blank. The app helpfully informed Shaw he had no direct messages. That connection with himself was gone.

He gritted his teeth and thought about the mouths of sharks. He hadn't imagined those in a long time. He'd forgotten he used to fantasize about what sharks would do to him if he fell into their tank.

★ ★ ★

He was a detective, and AllOne was the crime scene. He scrolled with purpose, making notes in a separate app. Just as many Shaws had divorced parents as ones who stayed together, and Dad was dead for many of them thanks to either COVID or his heart giving out. Shaws from all kinds of households seemed to rage and despair.

Was it the accident? Some Shaws posted pictures revealing the same road rash scarring he had all along his left leg. So it wasn't the motorcycle accident. It seemed in many different life paths he still ate shit off his motorcycle. Nobody seemed to have head trauma. Did he need to get himself checked out at a doctor?

COVID was worse for some than others. It'd killed a lot of their dads, whereas Shaw's was still alive and still complaining about college football. There were a couple posts suggesting a worse pandemic had followed COVID, and he didn't have the strength to look at that.

He caught himself heading to the window, forehead down, ready to bang his head in frustration. He caught himself with both hands against the window frame.

Whether or not he could figure out why this was happening, he had to do something.

★ ★ ★

The least he could do was warn others. Spook them into reflecting on their habits. Yeah, a decent number of his selves called him an

asshole or a snowflake or thought he was trolling. That still beat spending another minute at his window.

YOU

It's okay if you don't know why you're struggling. I'm just saying. Talk to somebody after we get blocked. A therapist or a psychiatrist, whatever the difference is. A rabbi. A priest. Whoever might help you and that you'd trust.

THEM

I don't know.

YOU

It's okay to be overwhelmed.

He was basically saying that to himself.

THEM

How did you know?

YOU

Others of us have self-harmed. More have thought about it. You're not alone.

THEM

I don't want to think about it. It makes me tired to think about it.

That was some real shit. Just this conversation made Shaw want to lie down.

YOU

It's hard for me to face it, too.

THEM

I haven't posted anywhere about this. I figured they'd ban me or something. I haven't talked to anybody offline about it, either.

YOU

About what?

THEM

A few weeks ago. I wasn't thinking. Just on reflex, I
tried to do it.

Shaw cupped his phone, eyes softening at the screen. His entire
body arched inward, emoting sympathy at a person who couldn't see
him. This other self had no idea. Shaw couldn't help himself.

YOU

What happened?

THEM

I'm not going to talk about it. I did it wrong. I didn't
mean to survive. I just fucked up so hard. I failed at one
more thing, you know?

YOU

I always feel like a fuck-up. Like I'm never getting anything done.

THEM

A lot of us are like that.

YOU

But you still being alive? That's doing something. That's a fucking
success to me.

THEM

Thanks, me.

The flippancy caught Shaw off guard and he barked a laugh. Of
course they had the same sense of humor. He thumbed a tear out of
the corner of his eye.

THEM

I never thought about DMing about this. About if
they're hiding what I'm hiding.

YOU

I didn't, either. Until one of us did it for me.

THEM

I'm going to do it for others. Because of you.

Moments later AllOne blocked them from each other. Shaw was left to stare at the empty, white walls of his room, wondering what he'd just kicked off. That suicide survivor self was going to start checking in on others. A week ago, another suicide survivor self had messaged him. Who'd started this? Had a survivor Shaw warned a Shaw who hadn't yet gone too far, who in turn warned a survivor, who would now go on to catch others who hadn't yet gone too far?

Could kindness be a paradox?

★ ★ ★

THEM

Holy shit. It's a rerun.

Shaw scrunched up his face at the message. This was a new response. Did this self think he was a bot?

YOU

I'm just checking in on you because a lot of us are hurting. Are you okay? Psychologically?

THEM

I know. One of us messaged me four days ago. I've actually started reaching out to us. I never thought a second me would check in.

Shaw's brain fizzled out. He was not smart enough to handle this kind of quantum mechanical nonsense. Someone had beat him to check on himself? Was the ripple of Shaws catching on, or was this one guy incredibly lucky?

THEM

We could get separated any moment. Let me ask you something. I need to know.

YOU

What?

Shaw would tell him anything. This could be a clever bot phishing for rogue Shaws and he'd still answer any questions it asked. It was worth the risk.

THEM

Do we just sit in a room hyperfocusing on sending out wellness checks to ourselves, the same way we previously fixated on the patterns of doomscrolling, and collecting shark posters, and all that shit? Or do we come up with the next goal for what you do after this? I've been dying to ask one of us who's ahead of me.

Shaw started typing an argument—that checking in on other Shaws was saving lives. This was important work. They had to lift each other out of the cycle that was hurting them.

But this Shaw was asking as much for himself as for any of them. Did he need something to look forward to?

Didn't they all need that?

Shaw looked through half-lidded eyes at his tiny apartment, the walls still bare, the take-out containers piling up beside his laundry pile.

What he was doing on AllOne was good. But it was also another fixation that hadn't gotten him out of the apartment much, even though he knew he could take his phone anywhere. He gritted his teeth, baring them, thinking of swimming monsters.

He pulled the cardboard box from under his bed, where he kept all the old art. He pulled out one of his posters and unrolled it. Blue hues were bleached from years of light exposure, yet the patterns on those fins were the same as he remembered.

Ninety seconds later, AllOne severed their connection. But by then, he'd already told his other self what he had to look forward to. What he had to do next.

He spammed the shit out of the multiverse. Every cool picture of a hammerhead shark circling a camera. Videos of eels trailing along a large pale belly. Every question about marine biology he could have just as easily looked up. His posts were chum in the water.

Most of the Shaws mocked him for still being in his “shark phase.” He dunked on himself savagely. They’d only gotten laid after they’d moved on, and he needed to do the same. No surprises there. He already knew he had the capacity to be an asshole.

In those times, he relied on the best skill AllOne had given him: scrolling with his eyes glazed over. Insults barely mattered, especially when he knew they were coming from a swarm of themselves every bit as insecure as he was.

What he picked out were the selves who responded enthusiastically to his posts. He DM’d as many of them as he could. After he checked on their mental health, if AllOne didn’t interrupt the connection too fast, he had more questions for them.

And they had answers.

THEM

Yeah, I’ve been in marine bio for six years. How long have you been studying?

He hadn’t studied. Not for one day.

Today was the beginning.

He messaged Shaw after Shaw, grateful for any that replied.

THEM

We made them out to be the worst monster on earth because occasionally we break into their home and they mistake us for food. Sharks aren’t monsters.

YOU

And neither are we. Right?

He kept reaching out.

THEM

I couldn't sit this one out. Sharks are getting screwed as the oceans get hotter. Their prey dies off. Fewer waterways are inhabitable.

He kept reaching out.

THEM

I get that it's been bad. But literally how long has it been since you got your feet wet?

* * *

Shaw closed his eyes and imagined his bedroom window, dim, catching the little yellow points of light from out in the dusky city. The blaring car horns and sirens, and his downstairs neighbors' band practicing. He could almost feel the hardness of the glass against his face, and reflexively he prepared to bang his head on it. Not reliving it was not an option.

There was no glass in front of him. No barrier out here, except the briny wind.

Shaw jumped and plunged off the edge of the boat, and down into the sea. The weights and chainmail made him plunge straight down, the sunlight fading like God was lowering the dimmer switch. The water enveloped him and pulled him down until his flippers hit the ocean floor.

The reef sharks swam at him with their pale snouts turned up, white bib underbellies absorbing all the light, so that their faces briefly looked like monks studying this new alien intruder. They swished past him and along a school of tiny silver fish.

He twisted in the water to watch them, body slowed by the friction, trying to follow the enormous strength of the sharks' tails. They were circling. They were coming back for him. One lithe reef shark came straight at him, tail swishing, black eyes eternally wide.

Shaw greeted the beast with a palm across the tip of its nose. For the shortest moment he'd never forget, it nuzzled into his palm.

Then it dashed away on water currents. It took the pinch in his chest with it.

That shark circled around, though. It swam through his general area, tail slow, seeking out the sensation that had just happened. Like his coach had taught him, he held up his armored palm for it to shove into a second helping of nose-pets. Then a third helping, before a chubbier reef shark butted in and discovered the joy.

For his entire session down on the ocean floor, the sharks never got tired of getting their snouts patted. Shaw never got tired of petting them, either.

When he surfaced, he didn't want to take the crane harness off. He wanted to go back down there right away, to hyperfocus on befriending fish. If he held on to it, could this be a new normal?

The entire ride back to shore was an opportunity to pump the boat driver and instructors for information. No, he didn't have a history with this stuff—not yet. No, he didn't want to take over the operation. He just wanted to pitch in. To show other people how this felt.

As the shore appeared over the prow, he sent one new DM. One a day, that was the limit now, to keep from obsessing while still letting him try to help. Every self deserved that much. He told this Shaw about how he was being deceived by the algorithm, and how he wasn't alone if he was in a dark place. He got so invested typing that the boat's driver squawked with laughter.

"You're on AllOne? Isn't that thing a nightmare?"

About the Author

John Wiswell is a disabled writer who lives where New York keeps all its trees. He won the 2021 *Nebula Award* for Short Fiction for his story, "Open House on Haunted Hill," and the 2022 Locus Award for Best Novelette for "That Story Isn't The Story." He has also been a finalist for the Hugo Award, British Fantasy Award, and World Fantasy Award. His stories have appeared in *Uncanny Magazine*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Diabolical Plots*, *Nature Futures*, and other fine venues. Hi debut novel, *SOMEONE YOU CAN BUILD A NEST IN*, will be published by DAW Books in Spring 2024. He can be found making too many puns and discussing craft on his Substack, johnwiswell.substack.com, or sign up for email updates [here](#).



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**BEFORE
THE
FOREST**

KELL WOODS

Before the Forest

KELL WOODS

illustration by

MATT ROTA

REACTOR 

Junia remembered the beginning of the war without end. A comet had appeared in the skies above the Holy Roman Empire, a blaze of flame burning a path across the heavens for a month. By the time it had disappeared, Junia's mother and father had succumbed to the plague and she had left their small village on the Rhine to live in Breisach with Uncle Johannes and Cord. Panic at the comet's appearance, its meaning, ran high. The priests believed the comet foretold of evils to come. That God had sent it as a warning to the people to mend their ungodly ways: pride, swearing, fornication. Disobedience, greed and its lover gluttony. Witchcraft. They warned that God would punish them all if they did not repent.

Woe the great sinfulness.

Ten years old and grieving, Junia paid little heed to the sermons she attended with Uncle Johannes in St. Stephan's. Wasn't she being punished already? Hadn't God taken not one, but *both* her parents? As the years passed and the war that had sparked in the comet's wake blazed across the land, she came to realize that she had been wrong. Her punishment, *all* their punishments, had not even begun.

★ ★ ★

Cord had cared for her at first. She was sure of it. Beating away the other children when they were cruel. *Orphan. Waif.* Sliding the best piece of ham to her under the supper table in a greasy fist. Wicked grin; the best of him. Yet over the years her cousin had twisted, somehow. His body was strong and sturdy, but inside he was as gnarled and crooked as the old juniper tree in the courtyard, the tavern's namesake. Hard to say when it started. Was it when Junia's

body began to change? Buds blooming spring-sweet on her chest, apple-round hips? She supposed she had been beautiful, then. Certainly Uncle Johannes had kept a careful eye on her when she helped him in the tavern, clearing the empty plates and wiping the tables of scraps and spills, the occasional splash of vomit. Noting the way his customers watched her, the heavy look in their eyes. Sharp man, Uncle Johannes. Ran a tight business. Clean tables, good food. None of the fighting and dancing and groping in shadowy corners you'd find in some of the rougher establishments in the Fischerhalde. Junia had never once seen him share a glass of cherry-water or wine with his customers. *The kitchen would be better for you, Junia*, he had said, those little creases of worry showing between his peppery brows. *Safer for you there, mein Liebster*.

So she had gone to the kitchen, helped the cook prepare the dough for Knöpfle, squeezing its pale softness through the old noodle press, tossing it into the pot to boil. She had sliced the ham and cheeses, learned to bake butterbrezel and gingerbread. Turned out she was good at it, had a knack for throwing flour and salt and water in a bowl and lifting something wondrous out in its place. She had been happy, for a time. Until, when she was sixteen, Uncle Johannes died, leaving the Juniper Tree, and Junia, in Cord's hands.

Her cousin was not like his father. None of that calm, that wizened strength. Uncle Johannes maintained order with a glance, or a quiet word. Cord was all shoulders and fists, a storm rolling in from the Schwarzwald, blustering over the Rhine.

Junia continued to work alongside the cook in the kitchen. Without Uncle Johannes's presence, the customers grew bold, contriving ways to find her there. They would lean in the doorway, watching her work, or smiling when she stole scraps for the little tavern cat that was supposed to be catching mice, but was always at Junia's heels. Lazy, speculative smiles. What they wouldn't do, those smiles said, to get Junia into a shadowy corner. Catch her like a mouse. There were kind smiles, too, sometimes. Customers who talked instead of stared, who were interested in the thoughts and

feelings beneath Junia's bodice and skirts. Hardly mattered. Cord had beaten away any man who had come sniffing. *Filthy fucking foxes on the rut. I won't let them touch you, Junia*, he promised. *Won't let anyone hurt my sweet cousin. After all, there's just the two of us now.*

Just the two of us now.

She thought of that, over and over, when he crept down the hallway that night and into her bed, covering her mouth with his hand. When he slid between her legs.

Filthy fucking foxes.

* * *

Things got worse when the first of the little ones came along. Junia knew Cord had kindled one in her when her monthly bleeding stopped, when she was so wretched and sick in the winter mornings that she'd hurry from her room above the tavern—*quiet now, don't wake Cord*—and, feet freezing-bare, throw her guts up in the snow.

Only apples soothed her roiling belly. One morning, when the heaving and sweating and clinging to the juniper tree was done and the bile still steamed at her feet, she peeled one. *Too hasty*. The knife sliced into her hand. Blood spattered the snow. One drop, two drops, three.

Bad sign, that blood. No good would come of it.

Marriage, Cord had announced when Junia could no longer hide her swelling belly. *It is the best, the only option.*

Junia hesitated. By now she had learned that there were two Cords. There was the Cord she had known her whole life—greasy-ham grin and kindness—and the *other* Cord. This other version was not her cousin. It was as though the Devil himself, the Evil One, took hold of his body. It happened in the deeps of the night, usually, or when he'd drunk too much. At other times, too, when Junia least expected it.

Hard to say which one of the two regarded her now. She opened her mouth, preparing to deliver the words she had rehearsed again

and again in her mind —her mother had family in Freiburg, perhaps she might go to them instead of burdening Cord while he was still adjusting to managing the tavern—but had scarce drawn breath before he was throwing on his coat and striding out into the noisy bustle of the Fischerhalde, crowded with boats and nets and river, and up the steep street to St. Stephan's.

Banns were called. Congratulations given. Ring on her finger.
Just the two of us now.

★ ★ ★

The first of the babies, a boy, came at summer's end the year Junia turned seventeen. Mewling and screeching, red-faced and miserable. Cord, intent on running the Juniper Tree in a manner as different to his father's as possible, had taken to drinking till all hours with his patrons, sleeping till midday. *Keep him quiet, Junia. Clout needs changing, Junia. Latch it to your tit, Junia.* And she did. She kept and changed and latched, and latched and changed and kept, until there was no telling where Junia began and the tiny, tender-sweet limbs ended. Perhaps it would have been easier had she loved the boy. As it was, he was just another of her many chores, the only difference being that, unlike a newly scrubbed floor or freshly made bed, there was never an end to the tending of him. Occasionally Cord took the baby from her and strutted him about the tavern, boasting. *Happiest man in Breisach*, he said. *Apple of my eye. Hear, hear*, the patrons cried. Roar and clink, splash and splatter. More for Junia to clean later, she supposed as she bent before the enormous stone oven, scrubbing out its belly. The warmth, the dark, was oddly inviting. What if she were to crawl inside and close the door behind her? Would Cord ever find her? Would the baby cry? Or would she simply sleep and sleep forevermore, cradled in a bed of soft, warm ash?

★ ★ ★

Sometimes, in the quiet of the mornings or before the evening rush, Junia strapped the baby to her chest and climbed the winding streets to the old monastery. The noise of Breisach—the rumble of carts and horses, the flurry of the Marktplatz and the fortress—faded as she entered the gates. She slipped off her shoes and walked barefoot across the neat lawns, dotted with statues and fountains, the occasional monk or two, until the gardens opened before her, cool and green. All were carefully ordered: herbs for the kitchen—rosemary, sage and fennel. Plants of healing—lavender, self-heal and restharrow. One garden existed for its beauty alone—rose, foxglove and larkspur—while another, for reasons of science and learning, bloomed with witches' weeds: wolfsbane, hemlock and nightshade. An overgrown cloister led to an orchard, wild and thick as a forest. Life abounded there, but also death. Headstones were scattered throughout, the monks beneath them laying in eternal rest as they nourished the apple and cherry trees growing above.

A stone bench sat at the orchard's southeastern edge. Sitting there, so high and quiet, Junia could see the outer defenses far below, bristling with artillery. Breisach was a fortress city guarding the river Rhine, an artery in the mass of veins and fleshy undulations that made up the Empire. Separating France and Württemberg, the river was the primary route into the Spanish Netherlands, the Habsburg emperor's ally. Junia's gaze followed the line of water as it snaked south toward Freiburg. To the west, it branched into a vast and glittering marsh which, pocked with patches of forest and a village or two, rolled toward the hill they called the Emperor's Seat. And, beyond them all, the dark, beckoning curves of the Schwarzwald.

Sitting there, watching the birds as they flew from tower to spire, from wall to sky, Junia's shoulders ached with longing. *Let me fly, too.* She prayed for a means to escape Breisach, its walls and its loneliness. Or, if that could not be, she prayed for a life without Cord in it. More and more the running of the tavern was falling into Junia's hands. She was the one who met with the suppliers now,

who haggled over the prices of wine and pork, who promised payment while Cord slept his days away. If not for her, the tavern would have been filthy, rotting beneath a crust of grime and sticky, nameless fluids. If not for her, the suppliers, demanding payment, would have ceased to sell their produce to them at all. Cord was no help, no comfort. He was a sweaty presence in the dark when she longed for sleep. Hot breath at her ear, a rough hand pushing her face into the blankets. She prayed for the Evil One, who had stolen her cousin-husband's body, and, in a way, her own, to leave. And if that was not possible, she prayed for Cord to lose himself in drink and stumble over the edge of the Fischerhalde into the Rhine. *Long fucking way down.* She prayed for rest and for freedom, too. But she didn't get any, and she didn't get any.

★ ★ ★

"You bake well, Junia," Cord tells her one day. "Might be you should make more than just bread and Knöpfle. I'm going to let the cook go—we can no longer afford her. Someone will need to make the dinners, bake the sweets. Could be you?"

"Haven't I enough to do already?"

Stupid thing to say. The Evil One is wearing Cord's skin more and more these days. As though proving her right, his meaty hand flicks toward her with surprising speed, cracking her nose. Pain explodes. Three drops of blood, dark against the paleness of the linen, spatter her apron.

She stares at them, removed from the pain somehow, seized by a terrible knowing.

Another babe on the way.

Sure enough, another child is born to Junia and the Evil One. A girl this time, not that it matters. *Can't a man get some sleep, Junia? Where's my fucking dinner, Junia? Clouts need washing again, Junia.* The Evil One fills her husband's form more and more. He grows angry over the slightest of things, pushing Junia from one corner of the kitchen to the other. Slapping her here, cuffing her there. The

presence of the two children does little to ease Junia's misery. She knows she should love them, has watched other young mothers with their babes—the kisses, the smiles, the looks of unbridled devotion—and wills her heart to feel the same. It remains steadfastly indifferent.

And Cord, it turns out, is doing more than just drinking with his customers. Turns out he owes coin, and plenty of it, not only to his suppliers, but his patrons, too. He has rolled so many bones he can hardly keep track of what he owes. Turns out Junia will be the one to help pay it all back.

Make the dinners, bake the sweets.

★ ★ ★

The whispers arrive first. They drift downriver, eddy among Breisach's fishing boats, then ripple up its steeply cobbled streets. They grow louder, inking themselves on broadsheets, flying, spittle-drenched, from the mouths of priests during their sermons: the Protestant general Bernard of Saxe-Weimar has sold his soul to the French. Twelve thousand foot soldiers and six thousand cavalrymen, plus artillery, are at his disposal. He means to conquer the Rhineland, carve a new territory for himself.

Fear, so strong you can smell it in the streets. If the Rhineland was a cellar, Breisach would be its finest, silkiest wine.

Saxe-Weimar takes the forest towns first. Waldshut, Säckinggen and Laufenburg. Rheinfelden is besieged and lost in a crushing Imperial defeat. Then Rötteln and Freiburg fall.

The people of Breisach feel the moment the gaze of the Protestant general settles hungrily upon them.

"He has something to prove," Cord says at the supper table, "after what happened at Nördlingen. Fucking disaster. Twelve thousand men dead on the field. His own horse shot out from under him. It was only luck and those enormous balls of his that allowed him to escape at all. If he wants Breisach, he will do everything in

his power to make it his. His reputation—or what’s left of it—depends upon it.”

“But Breisach is the key to the Empire,” Junia’s son says. He is thirteen now, tall and broad-shouldered like Cord. Apple of his father’s eye. “The emperor cannot let it fall.”

“He can’t,” Cord agrees, sopping up the sauce from his spätzle with a heel of bread. “Breisach lost, everything lost.”

Unease settles over Junia, as if a bad storm were coming. Life is hard enough without soldiers laying siege to the city, too. Isn’t she already salvaging the wreck Cord is making of the tavern? Cooking for its—increasingly disreputable—customers? Caring for the children, who, though growing rapidly—the girl is nine years old—still seem to claw at her all day with their wants and hungers and needs? Cord does the same at night, and she suspects that yet another babe is stubbornly—stupidly—clinging to the inside of her womb. She ladles more food onto Cord’s emptying plate and sits down wearily. *Breisach lost, everything lost.* That’s what they say at the emperor’s court in faraway Vienna. As if war hasn’t raged for twenty years, butchering cities like Breisach. Fire and famine, plague and ruin. They are fools, those Habsburg nobles in their finery. Everything was lost long ago.

Something warm and soft brushes against Junia’s ankle. The little cat is as devoted to her as ever. At night it sleeps beside her, its face close to hers. It is a tiny, purring comfort in the dark, a small piece of something for Junia alone.

“Breisach is impregnable,” Cord goes on. “She has never yielded her virginity. And she never shall.”

Junia’s son snickers at his father’s words—*virginity*—and his sister blushes. If the boy is a mirror image of Cord, then the girl is a reflection of Junia. She has the same blue eyes, the same fair hair. The same quiet, hopeless sorrow.

The cat pushes its head against Junia’s skirts. She reaches down, strokes its fur absently. Breisach, with its command of the Rhine, its impressive fortifications and precious bridges, had ever lured

enemies; it would not be the first time a Protestant general had set his sights on the city. The Swedes had tried to take it just five years before, failing when the Emperor's Spanish allies came to relieve it after a siege that lasted three months. The crows had pecked at Swedish corpses for weeks after, dipping and wheeling over the marsh. Junia had watched them from the monastery orchard, envying them their dark-winged freedom.

"Let Saxe-Wiemer come," Cord slurps around a mouthful of creamy noodles. "The Empire will not allow Breisach to fall. He will fail just as the Swedish did. I, for one, will enjoy watching it from our walls."

Even so, he spends the last of their coin—as well as borrowing more—to buy up black-salted hams and bags of flour, as many as can be had. "The rich shall suffer along with the poor before this is over," he tells Junia. "Let us have something to offer them in exchange for their beautiful tapestries, their silver plate and precious stones. We shall make our fortune if we play our cards right."

Junia can barely contain her disgust. Last time the siege, and the hunger that came with it, had been hardest on Breisach's poor. She had helped at the monastery when she could, picking fruit, plucking vegetables from the gardens, handing out bags of rationed flour to the poor who came, desperate and frightened, to the gates.

"There is power, and magic, in growing things," one of the oldest monks had told her kindly. "The land protects those who care for it. Remember that, my child."

She helps Cord move the supplies into the cellar alongside the casks of cherry-water and wine, schnapps and beer. Around them, the city stirs into readiness, its commander, Baron von Reinach, looking to its provisions, its walls and fortifications. Its precious well, the Radbrunnen, dug deep into the mountain below, will ensure the people have access to water. There is a garrison of three thousand soldiers and a hundred and fifty-two cannon at the Eckartsburg fortress, tasked with protecting the city.

It will hold.

★ ★ ★

Saxe-Weimar and his army arrive in early June. The citizens of Breisach hear the drums first—the heartbeat of an approaching beast. Junia is in the monastery orchard when the warning bells at the Eckartsburg burst into frantic life. She rises from the bench and runs to the walls. Far below, an enormous serpent is winding its slow curves—formed of men and horses, banners and wagons, artillery and oxen—out of the south. The morning sun glints on muskets and cannon, spurs, harness and pikes. *Hold the fortress by all means possible* was the order from Vienna. Hard to imagine obeying it as more and more soldiers come, endless and unrelenting: twelve thousand foot, six thousand cavalry. By evenfall, it is as though a city of canvas has surrounded Breisach, sprawling across the countryside, dotted with cookfires.

“Those Protestant bastards will not last,” Cord says confidently to his customers. “They might have coin in their purses now, but how will that help them in a week? A month? There will be nothing for them to buy, nowhere for them to spend it. They are camped in the mud like pigs. Time will work against them, along with its merry friends Hunger, Disease and Desertion. And if *they* do not end them, the emperor’s armies surely will!”

“They will!” Junia hears the customers slur over their tankards of beer and pots of cherry-water. “The emperor will not let Breisach fall!”

“We have provisions—”

“We have the Radbrunnen—”

“We have God on our side!”

But weeks pass, then two months. The Protestant army hauls in artillery, fortifying the surrounding countryside, digging a jagged line of communication between the French and Weimaranian camps. Hunger, Disease and Desertion are yet to make an appearance.

“We must wait,” Cord insists to his dwindling customers. Junia avoids the tavern rooms as much as possible now. The loyal patrons who enjoyed Uncle Johannes’s good food and wine, the pleasant

surroundings, are long gone. The Juniper Tree is no better than the lowliest pothouse. There is fighting and dancing every night. Dice, and dark dealings. She has learned not to glance into shadowy corners. "The emperor will send aid."

★ ★ ★

By August the cellar, like the rest of Breisach, is all but empty. The meats and cheeses are long gone, the flour dwindling. Cord has made a pretty penny raising prices, offering what few can now afford, but even he is relieved when an Imperial army of Bavarian mercenaries arrives and attempts to drive out the Protestant soldiers. They are beaten soundly back, the supplies and powder meant for the besieged city lost.

"They'll be back," Cord proclaims, helping himself to the last of the blutwurst Junia has scrounged from the cellar for supper. "The Empire cannot afford to let the city fall."

Junia tries not to see the fear in her daughter's eyes. "Eat, child," she snaps, getting to her feet. "And help me with the dishes. Do you think we've time enough to sit about crying and worrying?" The little girl wipes away her tears, collecting her father and brother's plates and bringing them obediently to the tub for Junia to wash. Junia does not miss the appraising look in her son's eyes as he watches his sister. It reminds her of the way Cord once watched her. Bile rises in her throat.

Breisach holds its breath, watching the horizon, hoping that the Imperial army will return and try again to lift the siege, but the Bavarians do not come back.

Saxe-Weimar, meanwhile, orders no batteries, no trenches to be opened. He merely digs in and holds fast.

"What is he waiting for?" Junia whispers as she surveys the Protestant army from the orchard. Beside her, the old monk, her only friend besides her little cat, takes in the ruined countryside, his rheumy eyes filled with unbearable sadness.

"It is hunger that undoes a besieged city in the end," he says quietly. "He's waiting for us to starve."

* * *

The summer drags on, the fear that has settled over Breisach ripening like wheat beneath the brutal sun, shimmering over the marshes and the Rhine. A silent, invisible enemy has wrapped its talons around the city.

Hunger.

The bloody skirmishes that punctuated the early weeks of the siege—daring sorties by the garrison to fight the enemy and gather supplies—happen less and less frequently now. There is no food coming in, and nothing to be done.

"We should close the tavern," Junia tells Cord. "Save whatever food we have for ourselves. Who knows how long this will last? We must think of the children, Cord."

"No," Cord says. "We must find more food, that's all."

"There is none to be had!" she hisses. "I've been to the market every day—"

"Then we must look harder."

Junia tries not to listen as Cord butchers the old cart horse in its stable. The gentle beast has served him and his father loyally, hauling casks of schnapps and sacks of flour to the Juniper Tree for more years than Junia can tell. When it is done and the carcass is hanging, enormous and bloody, in the cellar, he carries a haunch into the kitchen and hefts it onto the workbench. Junia, horror and sorrow warring in her heart, makes no move to touch it. The Evil One tilts his head toward the tavern rooms, a silent command to begin cooking for his customers. Junia, wiping away tears, obeys.

Horse, she soon discovers, is better boiled than roasted.

* * *

Summer gives way to autumn, and still Breisach suffers inside its walls. There is not a horse, donkey or mule to be seen alive, now.

The hideous sounds of their slaughter have at last fallen silent.

"We should have closed the Tree, saved the horse meat for ourselves," Junia says to Cord when he comes home empty-handed from the market. It is not safe for Junia to go there now. Not a week ago, a wealthy woman's kitchen maid was beaten, her meager purchases stolen. "We have nothing." Cord had made a staggering profit on the meals Junia had cooked with the horsemeat, but for what gain, in the end?

"Not nothing," Cord says. He draws something from behind his back. Three scrawny cats, their soft bodies hanging limp from his fist.

Junia stares at the cats, then at her husband. The Evil One looks back.

"Where is *your* cat, Junia?" he asks.

The cat, Junia well knows, is sleeping upstairs, a puddle of shadows on her side of the bed. A creature of habit, it is where it is always is at this time of day. Cord knows this as well as she.

"Don't, Cord," she says. She loves that little animal. Loves its purring warmth, its beautiful green eyes. "Please, don't."

The Evil One says nothing.

She wonders if she can get to it before him. Eyes the narrow stair, Cord's broad shoulders, the evil lurking beneath his skin.

He moves. She runs at him, catching at his arm, pulling him away from the stairs. He throws her off. Backhands her, sends her crashing into the table, scattering chairs as she hits the floor. Searing pain, a *wrongness*, deep in her belly. She stays down.

By the time she is on her feet again, it is done.

Cord barely glances at the blood on her skirts, the whiteness of her face, as he slaps four little bodies onto the workbench.

"We'll open soon," he says. "You'd best get started."

She wonders if he will hit her again. Glances at the knife on the board. Cord, however, walks heavily from the kitchen. A moment later, she hears the thud of an empty tankard on damp wood. The gurgling of liquid filling it.

As Junia cuts and slices, breathing through the pain shattering her heart and womb, something else cracks inside her. She barely feels it. Barely feels it, as she bundles what remains of the tiny thing she has lost and buries it beneath the juniper tree.

It never had a chance.

★ ★ ★

Hunger, as the proverb says, is a fine cook. By the end of October there have been several more attempts by Imperial forces to liberate the city. All have failed. In the final assault, the Protestant general himself rode out beside his men. An eagle hovered in the air above him, an omen of impending victory, a sign of witchcraft, or both, depending on which whisper in the Marktplatz you chose to believe.

“Bernard of Saxe-Weimar will triumph, mark my words.”

“When all of this is over, he will be left with nothing but bones...”

“Did you see that eagle? Only a witch could compel a wild creature to fly into battle like that.”

Junia cares little for the fate of the Protestant general. Witchcraft or no, she merely envies that eagle its beautiful, gold-brown wings.

Breisach is now empty of cats and dogs. Junia has cooked her fair share for the tavern’s patrons—or those with enough coin, at least—roasting the animals whole with herbs and spices. Cord tells her approvingly that the thighs of the dogs she prepares are as tender as saddles of hare.

She cannot believe that the tavern remains open, that Cord is still beguiling wealthy customers with promises of tender meat and fine sauces. She waits for the city officials to appear on their doorstep, outraged and ordering them to close, but it does not happen. One quick look at the streets of Breisach and it is easy to see why. The city officials have more than enough—and, at the same time, never enough—on their plates.

Every garden, every tree and every plant in the city has been stripped bare. Even the weeds thrusting their fragile heads between the cobbles or beside doorways are gone. When Junia goes to the

monastery, she finds its gardens have been looted. Every apple, every leaf taken. She finds the body of the old monk nearby. *There is power, and magic, in growing things*, he had once told her. *The land protects those who care for it*. She sees little power and protection here. The powerful ones have been and gone. They have taken what they wanted and protected no one but themselves.

"You old fool," she murmurs, when she has buried him in the orchard. It feels more like a graveyard now, the monuments and death lanterns stark between the leafless trees. Shadows and stone, where once there had been something green and good.

At last Cord is forced to close the tavern doors. Even the rich cannot buy a decent meal in Breisach now; there is simply no food to be had. The people are eating animal hides, boiling, scouring and scraping each piece before roasting or grilling it like tripe. Animal skins have taken the place of vegetables and cuts of meat in the Marktplatz. A crone sells a bitter-tasting draught she swears will ward off hunger and heartache; she is carted off to the fortress prison for her troubles. Books and manuscripts are also being sold for eating, along with drum skins, harnesses and belts. All of this, of course, costs money. Cord, however, refuses to buy a thing. "We shall not squander our hard-won savings now," he declares. "Not when the Emperor will send an army to lift the siege at any moment."

So Junia boils straw and candle fat, grinds bones and nutshells to make limp, tasteless bread. Hunger kneads its bony fingers into her relentlessly, poking at her empty belly, gnawing at her thoughts. Dark whispers unravel in the narrow streets: people, the whispers say, have been carving and cooking the flesh of their newly dead relatives before they prepare them for burial. Children, mostly; the city's young are suffering the most. The poorest of them have taken to hunting rats and mice in the streets. Junia has seen them clustered in ragged groups, cooking the animals over coals, skin and all, before wolfing them down. Fur, tail, foot—all provide nourishment. Though disgusted, Junia cannot blame them. However,

when she sees her own daughter bending greedily over one of the tiny creatures, something in her tattered soul stirs. She rips the mouse away and throws it back onto the coals.

"But Mama," the girl cries. "I'm so hungry!"

"We do not eat vermin," Junia snaps, dragging the child back to the tavern. She looks staunchly ahead as she goes, hiding her tears and her rage.

All for a fucking river.

She leaves the girl in the kitchen and stumbles down the cellar stairs. Surely there is something left? A wrinkled apple or two? A stray jar of sauerkraut rolled beneath the lowest shelf? There is movement in the darkness behind her, a gasp, scuffling. Junia peers into the shadows. Her son, all fourteen years of him, is standing over a kneeling girl. His hand knotted in her hair, her face pressed to his—

"What in God's name is happening here?" Junia demands.

"Calm yourself, Mother," he says carelessly. He pushes the girl away, ties his breeches. "I promised her some food, that's all. She's more than happy to earn it."

Junia pulls the girl to her feet. She is pale, her eyes large in her too-thin face.

"Go," she tells her. "I will find something for you to eat. There's no need—for this."

"What the fuck are you doing?" her son demands as the girl scurries upstairs. "She—"

"This is my house," Junia says, her voice death-quiet. "And you will not treat people so while you are within its walls."

"It's not your house," he says. "It's father's."

"And you think *he* will condone what you have done?"

The boy smirks.

Apple of his father's eye.

He shoves past her, climbs the stairs. He is almost at the top when Junia reaches him. She wants only to make him stop, to make him see her. To take back some of the power she has given away

and given away. Hunger, however, makes her clumsy. She trips on the stairs, sprawls. Her hands fly out, knocking at his ankles. He falls back, that height, those shoulders of his working against him. Down he goes, sudden and hard, his body jouncing on the stone steps, his head cracking on the flagged floor.

He doesn't move again.

Alone in the darkness Junia thinks of the juniper tree. How it looked when it was thick with berries. The way the children used to help her pick them when they were very small. They were sweet creatures, then, the boy and the girl. When Junia baked they helped, licking the batter from spoons, spreading the workbench with flour. Sometimes, when her heart was soft enough, Junia bought ginger and cinnamon, honey and cloves. She did not love her children, it was true—she loved no one, couldn't—but she took a secret, treacherous delight in baking for them, in seeing them peer blissfully over the trays, their button noses breathing the scent of warm gingerbread. Plump little hands, soft stubby fingers. If only the boy had stayed that way. If only Cord, and hunger, and the great sinfulness had not twisted him.

If only Junia's tears, her rage, were content to remain in the darkness.

★ ★ ★

That evening, when Cord rises from his slumber and comes down for his supper, he pauses on the stairs, sniffing.

"Odd's bod, Junia," he says. "What is that wonderful smell?"

"It is blood soup," Junia tells him.

"Blood soup?" He sits heavily at the table. "But where did you get the meat? The blood?"

Junia says nothing, only fills his plate with the rich, dark stew.

"Delicious," Cord says, tasting his first mouthful. "And perfectly seasoned, too."

Junia smiles. She thought of her son's round baby face, his sweet toothless smile as she cooked the stew, and her tears fell into the

pot. There was no need for salt.

"Give me some more," Cord says.

Junia obeys. It seems the more Cord eats, the more he wants. She and her daughter, the latter's face deathly pale and wet with tears, watch in silence as he eats and eats and eats, throwing the bones under the table. They ate their fill long before Cord rises, along with the girl from the cellar, who wiped her mouth with her sleeve, smearing the red-dark sauce across her lips, and thanked Junia before slipping out into the dusk.

"I must stop," he says at last, "else there will be none left for my son." He sucks on a bone. Part of a finger, Junia thinks distantly. "Where is he?"

She stares at him. All her livelong days, it's been give and work, work and give. *Scrub the floors, Junia. Bake more bread, Junia. Latch on to my cock, Junia.*

She will give no more.

"He is dead," she says. "And should you wish to remember him, you may look down your own throat."

Cord's face goes white. His daughter, sensing danger, hurries upstairs.

"But do not grieve, husband," Junia continues blithely. "If this blood stew of mine is as delicious as you say, then perhaps we should open our doors to our customers tonight. We shall make a goodly profit."

Cord is coming for her, eyes black with rage. He grabs Junia by the hair, throws her onto the stove. She catches herself before she burns her palms or knocks over the simmering pot of stew. He will kill her this time. She is sure of it. Part of her greets it warmly—an end to hunger and fear, to this appalling siege. Then she thinks of the girl upstairs. What will become of her if Junia leaves her here alone? Cord grabs for her, misses as Junia slides away.

"Fucking witch!"

Before she can move again he seizes the pot and hurls its contents in her face. Pain, blinding pain. Darkness and the burning

crimson of her son's blood.

Junia screams, clutches at her eyes.

Cord is almost upon her. She can hear his ragged breath, feel his pain and rage.

And yet Junia has rage enough of her own. Pain, too. She feels them coil within her, a serpent straining against her bones, her skin, eager for release. She lashes out, glimpses, despite her blurring, burning eyes, something nameless and dark leaching from her fingertips. It strikes Cord in the throat so hard that he flies backward, smashing into the wall. Crockery falls from the shelves above him, splintering upon his shoulders, his head, his thighs. A garner of flour crashes beside him, dusting the air with winter.

Power and protection, indeed.

Cord is gaping at her. "What in God's name was that?"

The shock on his face, the drivel of bloody snot clumping from his nose, the fear in his eyes drive Junia's pain away.

"That," she says, "was a fucking delight."

She reaches for the pot and scoops out what's left with one hand. Licks at the thick, sour liquid, chews the tender meat with relish.

It seems the Evil One has found a home inside her, too.

★ ★ ★

By November, the bodies of the city's living have become the graves of the dead.

When a captured Protestant soldier dies in the fortress, the prisoners in the adjoining cells tear holes in the walls—and then his body. Corpses have been stolen from the burying grounds so often that guards have been stationed there at night. Junia has glimpsed them, their shadows wavering beneath the death lanterns as they keep watch.

Children are going missing, too, the tales told in grim whispers on the winding, wintery streets. Soldiers promised a baker's son a piece

of bread if he would go with them to the barracks. Once they had him there, they butchered him.

She warns her daughter of the danger as she ladles her a bowl of fresh blood soup.

"Where is Papa?" the girl asks.

"Eat your soup," Junia says. She ignores the salty tears running down her daughter's cheeks and takes a mouthful, biting back a groan as the rich flavor melts in her mouth. Cord was a good father, a good husband, after all.

The girl's belly grumbles. She wipes away her tears and takes a tentative mouthful, then another, the spoon hastening as disgust fades and the will to survive takes its place.

Junia knows the feeling well.

Cord keeps them alive as winter arrives in earnest. More children disappear—seven from the Fischerhalde alone. Junia keeps a watchful eye on the girl, forbids her to step foot near the fortress, the barracks.

It makes no difference. The girl vanishes one snowy morning in early December. Junia searches the city, barely feeling the cold. Every closed shutter, every smoking chimney, taunts her. She staggers to a stop near St. Stephan's. Glimpses herself in a grimy window. She is thirty years old, yet she looks like a crone: hollow cheeks scarred by fire and blood, damaged eyes weeping, golden hair faded to grey.

That night the juniper tree loses its leaves and berries, its branches stark against the winter sky. By morning it is nothing more than a gnarled memory.

Junia no longer watches the armies from the monastery walls. She calls her little cat back to her with pain, slicing at her skin and letting the blood fall at the foot of the juniper tree. Waits in the moonlight as it scrabbles its way up through root and earth and snow. Bones push through its tattered fur. Grave-dirt stains its breath. Yet it curls beside Junia at night and follows her everywhere by day: along the Fischerhalde, or through the empty Marktplatz.

People stop and stare as Junia and the not-dead cat pass. They whisper of witchery and crook their fingers in the sign against evil.

Junia pays them no heed. Hunger, however, is harder to ignore. Luckily, there are still children in the Fischerhalde. She visits the burying ground with her little cat, draws the shadows around them both as she digs for bones. Grinds them into powder and bakes—with the last scatterings of ginger and cinnamon, the newly tattered magic rising within her—something treacherous and secret.

Plump little hands, soft stubby fingers.

No salt needed.

Nothing sweeter.

★ ★ ★

The Imperial fortress of Breisach surrendered on the seventeenth day of December in the year of our Lord 1638. The city commander, Baron von Reinach, was permitted to leave honorably, bearing his colors and two cannon. He retreated to Strasbourg, four hundred soldiers—all that remained of Breisach's garrison—and countless citizens with him. If you were watching the column march from the city gates, you might have been struck by the vivid colors of the banners rippling above, the glimmer of the winter sun upon harness and spur. You might have felt the beat of the drums, of booted feet and ironshod hooves. And, if you looked very closely, you might have seen a small white bird, wings outstretched, breezing above the defeated soldiers. You might have watched it turn south, toward the beckoning curves of the Schwarzwald.

A small white bird, its beak stained crimson.

About the Author



Kell Woods is an Australian historical fantasy author. She lives near the sea with her husband, two sons, and the most beautiful black cat in the realm.

Kell studied English literature, creative writing, and librarianship, so she could always be surrounded by stories. She has worked in libraries for the past twelve years, all the while writing about made-up (and not so made-up) places, people and things you might remember from the fairy tales you read as a child. *After the Forest* is her first novel. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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