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Meat Man and Bear Boy Fairy Tales for Today

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Meat Man and Bear Boy
Fairy Tales for Today

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Eva Langston

B.A. College of William and Mary, 2004

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Red

I'd recently dyed my hair Manic Panic Electric Lava Red, and every morning when I took a shower, the water that rolled down my shoulders looked just like cherry Kool-Aid. My mother hated my new look, but we didn't see eye to eye on a lot of things. For example, she thought I was too skinny, and I thought I still needed to lose a little weight. I was fifteen years old and exactly ninety-nine pounds. Hitting triple-digits on a scale frightened me, so I tried not to eat. I only got my period a few times a year, and my fingernails were so soft I could bend them backwards.

That summer, my mother put me on the Greyhound bus to visit my grandmother. Maybe she thought that Grandma could fatten me up with her deep south cooking: fried chicken, vegetables soaked in butter, cornbread made with bacon grease. I planned to eat nothing the entire two-day bus trip to make up for what I would have to eat once I got there.

The bus left Pittsburgh at five in the dewy morning, that time when the world hovers between night and day and everything looks blue and surreal. I sat in my high-backed bus seat and watched through the smudgy window as we roared out of the station parking lot. The lights were still twinkling on the bridges, and as we crossed the river, I looked down into the flat, gray water and saw another bridge dotted with lights, another Greyhound bus, and maybe, if I tried hard enough to see her, another red-haired girl in a hooded sweatshirt. I wished I was that girl in the river: nothing but a weightless reflection wavering in and out of existence. We left the bridge and drove right into the side of the mountain, through the yellow light of the tunnel, and out of Pittsburgh.

On the other side, everything was different. There were no tall buildings or bright lights. Just rolling hills dotted with boxy houses and occasional exit ramps leading to strip malls or Holiday Inns. As the sun came up from behind the rounded, old mountains, the signs of human life petered out, and we began to pass cows with soft eyes that stood chewing cud behind zigzagging wooden fences.

The woman next to me was wearing very short shorts, and the man across the aisle from us stared at her bare legs shamelessly. Her pale thighs jiggled when the bus bounced, and I marveled that she didn't seem the least bit self-conscious. I imagined the backs of my thighs spreading out and plumping up inside my jeans, the flesh turning into dimpled, white fat. I squeezed the muscles in my legs and tried to hold them tight for as long as possible.

The air-conditioning on the bus blew icy winds out of the slats next to my window, so I put the hood of my sweatshirt over my head and pulled my legs to my chest for warmth. I wrapped my arms around them and felt comfort in the fact that I took up so little space. I rested my head on the tops of my knees and fell asleep.

I woke up as the bus was pulling off the highway. We inched down the main street of a small town, past the hardware store and twenty-four hour diner. The bus bumped into the Greyhound station parking lot, and the driver announced that those continuing to Wytheville needed to be back in twenty minutes.

I got off the bus and went into the station to use the bathroom. I lined the seat with strips of toilet paper and sat down. My stomach growled loudly, and I pinched myself hard, right above my navel. "Shut up," I whispered. "You're not eating anything today." I pinched my naked thighs, too, checking for fat. My stomach growled again, softer this time, forlorn. I grabbed at it with one hand, digging my fingernails into my skin. I wished I could rip out my

stomach, my intestines. Gut myself empty and be nothing but a hollow shell. My fingernails left angry, red moons on my skin; I could feel the slight indentations when I stood up and ran my palm over my stomach to make sure it was flat. I came out of the stall, washed my hands with sticky, pink soap, and frowned at myself in the mirror.

On my way back outside, I walked past the small cafeteria and saw bleary-eyed people hunched over biscuits covered in chunky gravy. I noticed a man from my bus sitting alone at one of the tables, watching me. He had a plate in front of him with a pile of scrambled eggs and bacon, but he wasn't eating. His elbow rested on the table, and his fork remained motionless next to his face, poised between his thumb and forefinger and glinting like a weapon. He looked about thirty, but it was hard to tell because of the scruffy hair and dark beard that covered most of his face. He caught me looking at him and winked. I turned away quickly, but I could still feel his eyes watching me as I walked out the door and into the sunshine.

He got on the bus a few minutes after I did, and he stared at me as he walked down the aisle. The same woman in the short shorts was already sitting next to me with a Styrofoam container of food in her lap. I watched, both fascinated and disgusted, as she bit into a sausage link. The inside was mottled pink and dotted with chunks of white fat, and I imagined that's what her legs would look like if someone took a bite out of her.

We got back on the highway, and the bus wound around the mountains, chugging up the curving slopes then barreling down the other side. In many places there was no guard rail between the road and the steep decline of the mountainside. I was scared of how fast we were going, and I tensed around every sharp turn. I wondered how many drivers had lost control on these roads and tumbled down through the trees and moss-covered boulders below.

The bus stopped briefly in Wytheville, and the sausage woman didn't get back on. I pushed up the arm rest and stretched my legs out across the empty seat. The driver had just closed the door and started the engine when someone came running from the station towards us. It was the man with the beard who I had noticed earlier. He rapped on the glass, and the driver shoved the lever forward to open the door. The man stepped onto the bus panting. He shifted the strap of his bag higher on his shoulder, and I noticed a little moon of sweat under his arm. He moved down the aisle and stopped next to me. "Can I sit here?"

"Yeah." I pulled my feet onto the floor and quickly pushed down the arm rest. The man slid into the seat and smiled at me, his lips partially hidden by a prickly mustache. I felt a sudden drop in my stomach, like I was going down in an elevator.

The man laced his fingers together, placed them in his lap, and leaned his head back against the seat. He closed his eyes, and I looked at him cautiously. He was one of the hairiest men I'd ever seen. His mustache met his beard at the corners of his mouth, and his sideburns blended into shaggy hair, which fell across his forehead and into his eyes. His bare arms were black with hair that reached all the way to his knuckles, and through his thin, white t-shirt, I could see hair on his chest. To my own horror, I suddenly imagined running my fingers over his hairy pecs and burying my face into the warm, fragrant caves under his arms. I pulled the hood off my burning scalp and looked out the window.

It was early afternoon, and the sun glinted off shiny leaves in the forests along the highway. My stomach growled again tentatively. Usually at home I ate an apple or a piece of bread with fat-free cream cheese for lunch. I considered checking the vending machines at the next stop for something low-fat. I began to fantasize about food: a whole bag of salty pretzels, or a breakfast bar filled with gooey, strawberry filling.

“So, where are you going?”

I had been concentrating so hard on my own thoughts that for a second I didn't realize the man next to me had spoken. I turned to him, surprised. “My grandma's house in Mississippi,” I said.

He stretched one long arm above his head then dropped his hand down to scratch between his shoulder blades. His elbow pointed straight up towards the ceiling of the bus. He nodded slowly. “That's real sweet of you.” He had a slightly country drawl. “I'm headed to Mississippi myself. Biloxi.”

“Okay.”

“I guess we're gonna be on the same bus for a good long while.” He smiled at me again, and I noticed his large, white teeth. “We might as well be friends.”

I nodded.

“So are you a natural redhead?” He reached out a hand, and I thought he was going to touch my hair, but instead his fingers just hovered in the air, waving like tentacles a few inches from my head.

“No,” I answered. “It's dyed.”

“I like it. Looks good on you.”

“Thanks.”

He pulled back his hand and rubbed his bearded chin. He looked at me carefully; I could see his eyes move from the hole in my jeans to my oversized sweatshirt. He made a sound with his mouth like he was sucking spit through the gaps in his teeth, and I was strangely flattered by his attention. He looked at me like I was something special. “What are you gonna do at your grandma's house?” he asked finally.

“I don’t know,” I said. “There’s not much to do there.”

At first I had been annoyed with my mother for sending me away for the summer, but on the other hand, my best friend Stacy had moved to Philadelphia recently, and without her to hang out with, I would have been just as bored at home. In a way, it was a relief to get away from my mother and her constant criticism of my hair, my weight, my lack of boyfriends. “When I was your age, I had dates every weekend,” she always told me. “Maybe you just need to be more social.”

I wanted to tell her to take a look in the mirror. She didn’t have a social life at all. My father had remarried years ago, but my mother still spent her Friday nights alone, eating ice cream and watching sappy movies on *Lifetime*. She gained more and more weight every year, which she complained about but didn’t do anything to change. I hated her for being so pathetic.

The man continued to look at me, and I noticed that his body seemed poised, trembling slightly. I wondered if he was on drugs; that would explain his shaky limbs and large black pupils.

“I think I’m going to take a nap,” I said, hoping he would take the hint and leave me alone. I rested my cheek against the cool glass of the window pane and closed my eyes.

The rest of the day passed in a sleepy blur: the dotted white lines on pavement, the low murmur of passengers, the bleach smell of public bathrooms. The man didn’t speak to me again until dusk, as I sat staring out the window.

“You hold yourself together pretty tight, don’t you?” he asked.

I turned towards him. “What?”

“You seem tense. All clenched up.”

“I’m fine.” At the moment I was sucking in my stomach to keep from feeling the dull ache of hunger.

“I don’t know.” He shook his head at me. The inside of the bus was getting dark, and people were beginning to turn on the little overhead lights, but the man and I still sat in eerie blue dimness. “I think you need to let loose a little bit. You ever party? You know – just lose control and go all out?”

“Not really.” I didn’t like the way his skin crinkled around his dark eyes, like he was laughing at me.

“You’re not a party girl?”

“No.” I really wasn’t. I didn’t drink alcohol because of the calories, and I had never smoked pot because it scared me.

The last time I had talked to Stacy on the phone, she’d said that she was hanging out with the druggie crowd at her new school. Most of the things she told me about sounded horrible: getting so drunk she fell down a flight of stairs, doing so much acid she thought the trees were talking to her. I had no desire to be that out of my mind. The only thing that sounded appealing was ecstasy. All it did was make her really happy. She had smiled and laughed and felt like she was in love with the whole world. “I was so incredibly giddy, I forgot to eat or sleep for like twenty-four hours,” she’d said. I thought how nice it would be to forget about eating, for forever preferably.

“So you really don’t party, huh?” the man asked again.

“Nope,” I said.

“Well, whatever makes you happy, Red.” He leaned towards me. “Are you happy?”

Happy? I wasn’t happy. But I wasn’t sad, either. I was empty.

* * *

As the sun sank, the sky turned a deep shade of blue, and the trees looked black against it. We were out of the mountains and rolling through Tennessee. By the time we were half an hour outside of Knoxville, the moon was out, white and perfectly round in the violet sky.

The man was stretching. He twisted his torso, and I heard a crack along his spine. “That felt good,” he said, making a low, groaning noise. “I been sitting on this bus for too long.”

“I know,” I agreed. I rotated my ankles and heard the little pops from inside my joints.

“How old are you, anyway?”

“I’ll be sixteen in September.”

“Sixteen.” The man shook his head and blew a stream of air from his lips. “If only I was sixteen again. I tell ya.” He looked at me, and the whites of his eyes glowed in the dark. “You probably have all kinds of boyfriends, huh?”

“Not really.” In fact, I had never had a boyfriend. Boys were so fidgety and unpredictable, like dogs, always running, jumping, slobbering. I never knew where to look when boys were around. If I looked into their eyes, it felt like I was falling.

“Oh well,” the man said. “You’re young. You’re a beauty, though, you know it? I bet when you fill out a little bit, the boys are going to be lining up and down the block just to talk to you.”

Fill out. I hated when people said that. I imagined someone filling me up, packing me full of wet, brown clay that would harden in the sun and make me heavy and immovable: a rounded statue of a girl, imprisoned inside my own body.

I had been in the air-conditioning for so long that when I stepped off the bus in Knoxville, the humid summer air choked me, and I pushed up the sleeves of my sweatshirt. I walked across the parking lot towards the station, and even though it was nighttime, I could still feel the day's heat radiating off the black pavement. My stomach was no longer growling, but I felt woozy from hunger. The bright lights inside the station made my vision go blurry for a moment, and I stood in the lobby, momentarily blinded. When the hazy lines began to straighten out, I realized that the hairy man was standing next to me, grinning. "Earth to Red," he said, snapping his fingers in front of my face.

"It's so bright in here," I murmured.

"You have to wait for number 53, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Me, too. It doesn't come for another three hours, you know."

I nodded. "I know."

"So what are you going to do with yourself?"

Suddenly, three hours seemed like a very long time – an empty stretch of endless minutes, frightening in its vastness. "I have no idea," I said.

"Don't worry, Red. I know just the thing." He nodded his head towards the door and indicated that I should follow him outside.

"No thanks," I said.

"Oh come on. I'm not gonna bite you." He walked through the door, and without really knowing why, I followed him.

We went around the corner to the side of the building and sat down together on the still-hot pavement. Heat lightning pierced the sky, and there was a far-off rumbling in the clouds.

The man reached into the pocket of his pants and pulled something out. He opened his palm to reveal two gleaming white pills. “Ecstasy,” he said.

I stared at the pills, afraid to look up into his dark face. Was it a coincidence, or had he known somehow?

“Whaddya think?” he asked.

I looked into his eyes and saw myself reflected in the black pupils.

“Makes you feel like you’re flying.”

I imagined feeling weightless. Not hungry, not anxious, not anything. “Okay,” I said. I plucked a pill from his hand and quickly placed it on my tongue before I had a chance to change my mind.

By the time our bus arrived, Garrett was my new best friend. “Garrett,” I said, as we sat down next to each other at the back of the bus. “Sounds like Gar-red. Red! Like me.” I brushed his face with a strand of my hair. “Gar-RETT. Like Rhett Butler. Who was in love with Scarlet O’Hara, and Scarlet is another word for Red. Get it?”

“I do, Red, I do,” he said slowly, shaking his head back and forth. His voice was deeper and more drawn out now, sticky-sweet like dark molasses. “It’s like this whole night was meant to be.” He smiled at me, and I reached out and ran my fingers under the sharp edges of his teeth. He put his hand on my knee and squeezed. “You need to put some more meat on these bones,” he said.

Someone in front of us shushed loudly. “There are people tryin to sleep!” a woman’s angry voice hissed. “Can ya’ll shut up?”

It was past midnight. The sky was black, pricked with stars, and the moon rode above us, following our bus through the countryside. Inside, the bus was dark, and Garrett was just a shape beside me. I put my hand out tentatively and found his arm. I felt his coarse hair and warm, tender muscles flexing underneath the skin.

“Do you like this, Red?” he whispered, his face next to mine. His breath was hot, and I felt a flick of spit land on my cheek. The blood tingled in my veins.

“I like it,” I said. I hadn’t realized how much I would like it. I loved it. I loved this wild night and this cold, dark bus.

“This is perfect. You’re perfect.” Garrett leaned across me, and I splashed my fingers into his hair and held on tight. The next thing I knew, I was pulling his face towards mine, tasting wet lips, feeling his sharp teeth with my tongue.

His hair was in my mouth, against my face, rubbing my chin raw. He nibbled the tendon of my neck, and his beard felt like tiny thorns against my skin. “I want to eat you,” he growled into my mouth.

“Don’t eat me!” I giggled.

“You’re right.” His arm circled my waist. “You’re nothing but skin and bones.”

I ran my hands under his shirt and threaded my fingers through the hair on his chest, searching out the nubs of his nipples. He groaned, his head falling forward against my shoulder. “My god, Red,” he murmured. “What are you doing to me?”

I had never done any of this before, but I wanted to try it. I couldn’t see anything. The bus was dark, and the sky was black except for the moon. I tip-toed my fingers down his lean stomach; the hair grew even thicker below his navel. The button of his jeans was like a magic

coin and the teeth of his zipper parted open like a grin. I lowered my head. Hair tickled my throat, but I swallowed him.

I swallowed him whole.

I sucked him down into my empty stomach, filling myself up. He writhed and whimpered. He told me he loved me. I was in control. I felt power surging through me, but then, just as quickly, it was gone. When it was over, I sat back up, wiping my mouth on the back of my sweatshirt sleeve. He tried to wrap his hairy fingers around my neck, but I pushed him away, feeling slightly sick. I turned towards the window, the smell of wolf on my breath. Outside the sky was still black, but there was a strip of light on the horizon, the first stroke of a new day. I leaned my face against the glass and waited for sunrise.

Dreamsicle

One day my mother woke up and realized she had forgotten to have a child. She'd been so busy climbing mountains and painting murals and attending parties that it had completely slipped her mind. All of the people she had climbed mountains and painted murals and attended parties with had settled into cozy families and no longer had time for her. She was all alone, and she wept for three days in a row and filled a wastebasket full of soggy tissues. At the end of the third day, her nose was empty, her eyes were dry, and she was exhausted. She sat on her living room floor with a lit candle, and she sent up a prayer to the universe. She asked the universe to send her a child, a little person she could love and care for, who would love her back and keep her company.

The next day, she opened a Dreamsicle package, and instead of finding an orange and vanilla popsicle inside the waxy white paper, there was a tiny girl, curled up around the wooden stick. And that girl was me.

Of course, I was frozen solid, so at first my mother thought I was a toy. She put me down on the table and pulled another Dreamsicle out of the box. But as she twirled the orange popsicle around inside her mouth, I began to thaw out on the kitchen table, my limbs all a-tingle and my hair sopping wet. When I could feel the blood pumping warm and liquid through my veins, I stood up in a cold puddle of melted frost and looked around me.

This is where my memory of the human world begins. My mother and I think that before the dark Dreamsicle box, I must have lived somewhere else, although that world seems muddled and distant to me, like a story I heard long, long ago. I must have been somewhere else before the Dreamsicle box because I came to my mother fully grown, despite my tiny size. And I knew

how to speak and how to dance and how to kiss, though I couldn't remember where I'd learned to do these things. My first real, solid memory – a memory that comes into focus in my mind instead of staying always blurred – is the day I thawed out. I remember standing on the kitchen table, naked, wet, and shivering, and wondering if I should introduce myself to the salt and pepper shakers, which were shaped like a man and a woman in country clothing.

I wasn't sure where I was or why everything seemed so large and strange. Then a peeling noise tore through my head, like the sound the sky would make if it was ripped in two. It was my mother screaming. How funny, *she* was afraid of *me*.

It's hard to explain what I thought when I first saw her. She was just so big. Her messy pile of hair seemed like the nest of a wild bird. Her mouth was a vast cave, jagged with white boulders at its entrance. Her body was a landscape of sloping hills, hair like dark grass, sunspots like pebbles. And her eyes... they were huge and glowing like massive coals burning in the temple of the gods.

“What are you?” she asked. Her voice was so loud I had to put my fingers into my ears to muffle the sound. I worried she would think this was rude, but she didn't seem to notice. She had dropped her Dreamsicle, and now she moved towards me cautiously with both her palms raised like a shield against her heart.

“What are you?” she asked again.

“I don't know,” I said. “What are you?”

“Are you real?”

You see, my mother thought I was a figment of her imagination. She thought she was going crazy, or that maybe the pizza she'd eaten for lunch had somehow been spiked with magic mushrooms. I was offended. I didn't know much, but I knew I was real.

“You can touch me,” I said. “To make sure.”

She stood looking at me for awhile before finally reaching out a trembling hand, her finger extended. She just barely tapped my head before pulling her arm back towards her chest. “I don’t understand,” she whispered.

She seemed distressed, and I wanted to help her, even though I didn’t understand either. “Just because I’m small doesn’t mean I don’t exist,” I told her, trying to be reasonable.

“You don’t exist,” she said. “You’re just in my mind.”

I took my fingers out of my ears and crossed my arms over my bare chest. “If I’m just in your mind,” I said, “then what am I going to say next?”

“I don’t know.” The creases across her forehead deepened.

“I must not be in your mind then, or else you’d know.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” my mother argued. “Sometimes I have dreams, and I don’t know what’s going to happen next in the dream. Maybe I’m dreaming right now.” She began to slap herself in the face, whispering, “Wake up!”

I didn’t know how to make her stop, and then I started to worry that maybe I *was* a part of her dream, or maybe this was my dream, and both possibilities made me nervous. If she woke up, I’d be gone in a puff, and if I woke up, I might be back inside the Dreamsicle box.

“Do you want to pick me up?” I asked. I thought it might help if she could feel my weight in her palm, but she just shook her head.

“What are you?” This time she asked it more to herself. She stood looking at me for a long time, her cheeks flushed from all the slapping. She shook her head and whispered, “I don’t understand” over and over. This might have gone on all night if it wasn’t for Mr. Chunks.

Mr. Chunks was my mother's cat at the time, orange and white, and slightly overweight. He came sauntering into the room, looking, to me, like a Bengal tiger. When he saw me, he stopped dead in his tracks. His fur prickled, and his ears flattened against his head. He stared at me with yellow eyes, and I saw his tail flick back and forth, like a snake tasting the air with its tongue.

My mother turned to Mr. Chunks. "Do you see her?" she whispered. "Do you see her, Chunky?"

Suddenly, Mr. Chunks bounded forward, leaped onto the table, and the next thing I knew, I felt wetness around my middle and teeth grazing my sides. Mr. Chunks had happily scooped me up in his mouth like he would a field mouse.

"No!" I heard my mother scream, and it sounded like a crack of thunder from the heavens. She grabbed me out of Mr. Chunks mouth and used two fingers to tap him on his little, pink nose. "Bad kitty," she said. "Don't mess with her."

She turned me over, looking for damage, and when she was satisfied that I was okay, she put me down gently on the table. Seeing me almost die in the jaws of Mr. Chunks seemed to convince her that I was real. After all, she told me later, a person can go crazy, and maybe even a cat can go crazy, but the chances of a person and a cat going crazy at the exact same time and in the exact same way, well, that seemed even more unlikely than finding a tiny person inside of a Dreamsicle box.

After my mother accepted me as a real, live person, we got along beautifully, and she enjoyed having someone to talk to and care for. She compared me side-by-side with a Barbie doll and found I was a little shorter and a little plumper. I could fit into clothes made for generic dolls that weren't as skinny or fashionable as Barbie. Over time, my mother bought me dozens

of doll dresses, as well as furniture and accessories and even the Barbie kitchen set, complete with miniature dishes and silverware. That first night, however, she had to improvise. She cut a hole in a small handkerchief and slipped it over my head like a poncho. She fed me a tiny dollop of peanut butter and poured a drop of orange juice into a toothpaste cap for me to drink. It made the juice taste slightly minty, but I needed something to wash down the peanut butter. After dinner, she made me a bed of maxi-pads and put me on the nightstand next to her so she would be close by in case I needed anything.

The next morning, we made a plan. My mother decided that she couldn't tell anyone about me. "Either they'll think I'm crazy," she said, "or the media will get you. They'll want to do scientific tests, or make you into a freak-show celebrity." She sighed. "I have to keep you a secret." And even though she sounded sad saying it, I saw a sneaky little smile playing in the corners of her mouth, and I knew that really she rather liked the idea of keeping me all to herself.

Life with my mother was full of many joys. She was an artist, and so she stayed home most days to work in what she called her "mess room." She gave me a paper plate on which she squirted different colors of paint, and she gave me my own brush, which, to me, was the size of a paint roller. Often I just painted with my fingers, or stepped in the paint and walked around on sheets of paper. My mother was always delighted with my tiny footprints, and a few times she had me walk across a painting she was working on, although she said afterwards it felt a bit like cheating.

Just as I had come to my mother already knowing how to speak, when she decided to teach me to read, we found that I already knew how. I spent a lot of time inside the books she checked out from the library. I liked sitting on the bottom margin of each page, reading

sentences the size of street signs while breathing in the heady scent of trapped stories, a delicious combination of vanilla and dust and aging paper.

For exercise, I swam laps in the bathtub or took long walks around the apartment. In time, I became somewhat friendly with Mr. Chunks, although we were never completely at ease with each other. In fact, my mother didn't like to leave the two of us alone together, just because she said you can never fully trust a cat, and so when she went out grocery shopping or walking or visiting with old friends, I came along, hidden inside her coat pocket or the open pouch of her purse. I couldn't look out very much for fear of people seeing me, but I could hear their booming voices all around me, and it was like eavesdropping on Mount Olympus.

Time went on, and life was good. Of course I got bored sometimes, having only one person and one cat as company. Only sometimes did I get a buzzing feeling on my lips, or between my legs, and I had a vague memory of a man who had kissed me in those places and made me feel a happiness that was different from the happiness I felt when I was with my mother. I talked to my mother about it, and she confided that she had the same longings from time to time. "I had many lovers when I was young," she told me. "But none were as good of company as you."

I wondered if, in my life before the popsicle box, I had had many lovers, or just one. I couldn't see the face of any man in particular; I only remembered a mouth on top of mine, sweet like ripe fruit, and the warmth of a body beneath me. I remembered the movement, the wetness, like riding across the sea on the back of a dolphin. But these memories came and went, and although I thought it might be nice to have a lover, I knew that all of the lovers in this world were far too big for me. If they tried to kiss me, they would end up eating me instead. I told this

to my mother, and she nodded slowly, pointing at me as if I'd said something profound. "It's just the same for me," she said. "It's just the same for me."

And so we went on with our lives. On his thirteenth birthday, Mr. Chunks slunk off into the bushes behind the house and died with quiet dignity. My mother buried him in the backyard under his favorite tree, and then it was just the two of us, and the years continued to pass.

One day, my mother woke up and realized she was old. In the same way that her child-bearing years had dwindled without her noticing, so had her later-years. She couldn't understand where all the time had gone. "It seems like just yesterday I was forty-five, and I found you in a Dreamsicle box," she told me. "And now I'm old, and you're just the same as you've always been."

I didn't spend much time looking in mirrors, but I had noticed that my skin was still smooth and my hair still healthy, while my mother, in the passing years, had begun to shrink and shrivel. Her brown hair had turned gray, her eyes had wrinkled up, and her neck had grown loose under her chin. I didn't care what she looked like, of course, and neither did she. What concerned us was what would happen to me after she was gone.

"We have to find someone to take care of you," my mother said. She had kept me a secret for thirty-five years. The time had come to tell someone.

My mother composed an internet ad that said the following: *Full-time caretaker needed for a lovely woman of small stature with many special needs. Must be compassionate, open-minded, and extremely trustworthy.*

She met the applicants at a coffee shop down the street, and I came along in her pocket. She didn't tell anyone the specifics of my special needs, but instead asked each person lots of questions, trying to gauge their integrity and their ability to keep a secret. She worried that the

first thing a prospective caretaker might do was sell me for top-dollar to a scientist or television producer.

And that was a large reason why she settled on Frank. Frank had no need for money. He already had too much of it.

“Why are you interested in this job?” my mother asked him. “You don’t seem to need it financially.”

“I like to help people,” Frank said. “Money isn’t everything. I want to feel like my life has purpose.” I couldn’t see him because I was in the darkness of my mother’s coat pocket, but his low, cracking voice made me imagine his face was made out of paper that had gotten wet and then dried again into brittle, crunchy folds.

When I met him a few days later, I saw that I wasn’t too far off. He was a middle-aged man, with a wrinkle between his eyes and dry, flaking skin.

I sat in my mother’s palm and felt her body shaking. This was the first time she had ever showed me to anyone. I wore a sundress made for a doll, and I had braided my hair very carefully. I looked up at Frank’s peeling face and waited for his reaction.

His thin lips opened into a smile. “She’s beautiful,” he said. “I had no idea this was what you meant by small stature.”

My mother put me down on the kitchen table and smiled awkwardly. “She is very small.”

“Very small,” Frank murmured. He stared at me.

“Are you still interested?”

“Of course,” Frank said. “Of course I am.”

* * *

They made the arrangements, and when my mother died less than a year later, I went to live with Frank in his large and drafty house by the lake. My first day, he left me alone all day in my new room with nothing to eat and nothing to do. He had put me on the bed, so I couldn't even explore the room unless I jumped down onto the hardwood floor, and it was a bit too much of a drop for me to risk it. By nighttime, when he finally came back, I was bored and anxious and on the verge of tears.

Frank sat down on the bed and looked at me, the wrinkle prominent between his eyes.

"So," he said, "is it true you've lived with your mother all your life and never seen another person besides her?"

One side of his mouth curled in a mean way, but I was happy for the conversation. I explained that I had had another life before my mother, but I didn't really remember it. And although I hadn't become acquainted with other people, I had listened to them and sometimes peeked out at them from the safety of my mother's pocket.

"But you've never been with a man?" Frank asked.

I knew that he didn't mean talked to a man or stood close to a man. I knew he was referring to being with a man in the riding-a-dolphin-through-the-waves type of way.

"I don't really remember," I told him. "In my life before the popsicle box, I may have had a lover, but maybe I have only dreamed of him."

This seemed to surprise Frank a bit, and he suddenly straightened up and pulled a pair of glasses out of his shirt pocket. "Well," he said, "let's have a look at you and see."

Frank asked me to undress. I found it strange, although I couldn't put my finger on why. I had always undressed in front of my mother when she was giving me a bath, or even when it was the middle of the summer and I felt too hot to wear my clothing. So I unbuttoned my blouse and pulled off my skirt and stood naked before Frank with my feet sinking into the comforter below me.

Frank stared at my body. "It's all there," he whispered. "You're the most anatomically correct doll I've ever seen." Then he reached out and picked me up. He laid me back on his callused palm, and with the tip of his fingers, he touched my breasts, and he moved my legs apart, peering at the tiny mysteries between them. "Put your hand between your legs!" he demanded suddenly. His face was fierce, and his voice so loud that I trembled and did what he said, though I didn't enjoy it the way I did when I was alone.

He placed me back down on the bed and unzipped his pants. He pulled out his snake and began to stroke it. I had never been more frightened in my life. The snake was huge, about as big as me, and as he rubbed it, it grew bigger around the middle, like it had just swallowed a rabbit whole. He stared down at me all the while, his thin lips hanging open. I cried quietly, terrified that I was about to get consumed, either by the snake, or by his dank-smelling mouth.

He grunted suddenly, and his eyes rolled back. A stream of milk gushed from the snake and soared in an arc over my head, landing on a pillow behind me. Without saying a word, he zipped up his pants and walked out of the room.

Every day after that was pretty much the same except for small, yet disturbing differences. Every morning, he brought me a plate with his leftover breakfast and set it down on the bed. I spent the day alone, walking along the rim of the plate and nibbling on toast crumbs or lifting up a plank of bacon to take a bite.

In the evenings, Frank came to my room. Sometimes he brought his other dolls with him. He had dolls my size and some that were much bigger, but they were all naked. I was naked now, too. Frank had taken away my clothes. Some of Frank's dolls seemed new, but others were old and beat-up. There was a blonde doll he called Kiki with jaggedly cut hair, and several dolls that had been scrawled on with a permanent marker, things like "bitch" and "slut" tattooed across their plastic chests. Every day he told me to lie next to the other dolls, and so I did. He rubbed his thumb between the dolls' legs before unzipping his pants. They stared back at him with their eyes made of paint and glass.

Sometimes he picked me up and prodded at me. One day he took a toothpick and inserted it into the hole between my legs. It was sharp, like a bee sting, but worse, and I couldn't help but cry out. "Do you like that?" he whispered. I cried even harder.

These were very dark days for me. I grew depressed. I tried to remember the happy times with my mother: painting and reading and traveling around in her coat pocket. The conversations we had. The times she gave me a few drops of wine and we both got giggly. But no matter what, I couldn't feel happy. All those years of being nurtured by my mother were quickly being erased by a man with a mean heart.

I began to think of ways that I could escape from Frank. He always shut the door tightly behind him when he left, but there was a window he left open. If I could get off the bed without hurting myself, and somehow climb up to the window... but the room was on the second story. The fall would surely kill me. Besides, even if I managed to get out of his house, I would never survive in the outside world. I would get eaten by a cat or run over by a car, and where would I go when the world turned to ice and snow? Already I could see out my bedroom window that the leaves were turning the color of blood and oranges.

I thought more and more about my life before the Dreamsicle box. Had I lived with people my own size, in a world that was suited for me? Had I ever had a lover who considered me an equal? I still couldn't remember. I wondered where my world could be, where my lover could be. I imagined him flying into the bedroom on the back of a swallow and reaching out his hand. The swallow feathers would be soft and brown, just like his long hair, and I'd wrap my arms around his slim waist as we flew out the window together and back to the place where we both belonged.

Things with Frank got worse. I watched him abusing the other dolls, yanking out their hair, smacking their plastic faces, scratching white lines into their limbs with the sharp end of a needle. I knew I was next. To him, I was just his very best doll.

The night he destroyed Kiki, I knew I had to go. Frank sat on the bed, and, very slowly, with a sort of relish, he pulled off her arms and legs, smiling at the pop they made when they came out of the sockets. When she was nothing but a head and an orange plastic torso, he smushed his thumb into her face, denting her perfect nose. Then he grabbed her by her short, jagged hair and ripped her head away from her body. He threw the head across the room and placed the hollow cylinder of plastic with the five gaping holes next to me on the bed.

As soon as Frank left the room, I dragged poor Kiki's torso to the edge of the mattress and pushed it over so it dropped onto the floor. Then I sat down and scooted myself towards the edge of the bed. I took a deep breath and let myself fall. I landed on Kiki's plastic body, the wind knocked out of me.

After a moment, I slid off of her and walked across the room. It was a large room, like walking across a football field. I saw Kiki's head in the corner. Her eyes were the kind that closed, and I felt glad that they were closed now, the silky eyelashes splayed against her cheeks.

I reached the window. The curtains hung down to the floor, and I began to climb up them. It took a long time, because I wasn't very strong, but finally, breathing heavily, I made it to the window sill and scrambled onto it. The window was open a crack, and I lay down on my stomach and wriggled through the gap.

Outside, the air was cool, and the sky was black. I heard the lake lapping against the shore in the distance. I looked up, and the stars winked at me in the darkness. Stars are huge, I thought. Massive balls of heat and energy, each one bigger than the earth. They only look small because they are so far away.

I had lived in this world – the world where I was too small – for thirty-seven years. Thirty-six years with my mother, and one year with Frank. It was amazing how one miserable year could push me to the edge of a window sill, like those other thirty-six didn't matter.

I looked down and, to my surprise, I saw stars below me, too. It was a swimming pool, I realized, reflecting the night sky. And then I knew it wasn't hopeless.

I took a deep breath and leapt out into the air. I hugged my arms around my chest and cannon-balled into the pool. The icy water swallowed me up, and as I kicked my way to the surface, goose bumps broke out across my arms and legs. I swam towards the edge, avoiding the soggy leaves and algae scum that floated on top of the water. My teeth chattered loudly as I pulled myself up onto the lip of the pool. I worried that Frank might have heard my splash, but when I looked up at the house, the windows were dark.

I walked along the concrete, past giant lounge chairs and a shiny outdoor grill, towards the rest of the back yard, and, beyond that, the rest of the world. My bones ached from the cold, and my fingertips felt numb. I wished I had some clothes, but I would have to make do with

nothing. I started off into the waist-high grass with no plan other than leaving one place and getting to another.

As I went on, my eyelids grew heavy and my limbs weary. I kept my head down against the wind and rubbed my arms for warmth, but the air blew against my wet body, and my shivers turned into violent shaking. I couldn't go on. I needed to rest. I found a pile of leaves underneath an old tree, and I snuggled into it, trying not to think about the slugs and bugs that might be sharing it with me. I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

When I woke, I tried to open my eyes, but they were glued shut. I couldn't feel the wind, or the cold, or the dry, scratchy leaves. In fact, I couldn't feel anything at all. I tried to wiggle my toes, but they didn't move. I tried to lift a finger, speak a word, but nothing happened. I was frozen solid.

And so, here I am, paralyzed in this cold, dark place, waiting for whoever might find me next. Sometimes I think of Frank's dolls; they are numb and motionless, too. But I am different from them. I'm real. Who knows where I'll be when I thaw out this time, but I have a feeling it will be some place better. I don't care how long it takes. I know I'm small, but I think I might live forever.

Black Magic Women

We witches are misunderstood creatures. We are lonely, jilted women who live in secluded candy cottages or drafty haunted castles, all alone except for our black cats and our warty toads.

We are wise with experience. Wise as owls with eyes just as keen, and we can catch you with our talons in the middle of the darkest night. We are smarter than most men. We have spent years studying botany and astrology. We know how to interpret dreams and palms and the entrails of a butchered hog. We can look a man in the eye and see inside to his soul. But men are not impressed with our knowledge. We are too strong, and they fear such power in a woman. They prefer their women with flaxen-hair and straw for brains. And so they call us evil, and they throw us out into the barren wilderness.

We are empty and we are angry. We spend year after year alone, and our eccentricities flourish like the horehound and wormwood in our backyard gardens. Like homegrown herbs, we are bitter and strong, and we grow impervious to the elements, able to withstand blizzards and droughts.

We grow old and ugly, with shriveled ovaries and sagging breasts. Our wrinkled skin is dry and rough as tree bark. But we have the power to appear otherwise, for a time. We cast spells to smooth away our wrinkles, to bring the color back to our fading hair and faces. But it never lasts. We know that beauty is power. We hate the fact, but it remains true. And even though we possess so much power, the beautiful always have more. The slim-waisted princesses, the creamy-skinned maidens.

Though we hate ourselves for it, we are jealous of those stupid young things. They come to us asking for help, and we look at them with disgust. They have everything we always

secretly wanted, and yet they dare to ask for more. Is it any wonder we make unfair deals? Life has been unfair to us. Because we are smart, because we are strong, we have been shunned. By men and by all of the world. The young, bubble-brained girls with blinking doe eyes come to us, twittering about love, and we say we will help them... for a price. We reach out our boney, greedy hands and we ask for their babies. The children we never had. We ask for plump, rosy babies so that we have something warm and fat to cradle against our cold, shrinking hearts.

What we ask for is a new life. We crave the innocence we long ago threw away. We are too smart to be innocent. Too wise to believe in love. We are not evil. We are lonely. And beneath our ashen skin, our old bones are as fragile as glass.

Hunting Season

Once upon a time, deep in the Appalachian Mountains, where wild blackberries grew thick and thorny, and kudzu sucked the life from unsuspecting trees, there lived a little girl named Anna. When Anna was just a baby her mother pricked herself with a heroin needle and died. Anna went to live with her grandmother in a log cabin outside of a small, sleepy town. The townspeople whispered that Anna's grandmother was a hippie-freak. She wore homemade skirts, ate organic food, and believed in the healing power of herbs. Because she was a hippie-freak, and because she wanted to protect Anna from the evils that had claimed the girl's mother, she decided to home-school the child.

One night, shortly after Anna's eighth birthday, the older woman and the young girl sat in the living room, reviewing Greek goddesses. Grandma Ginny sat in the lotus position on a little mat in the middle of floor. Anna sat next to her and tugged at her own feet, trying to tuck them neatly into her lap like her grandmother's.

With her legs still woven together, Grandma Ginny reached across the floor and lit a stick of jasmine incense. "Artemis," she said softly.

"Goddess of the Hunt," Anna said. "And she's the twin sister of Apollo."

"Very good. Roman name?"

"Diana." Anna watched a trail of smoke curl up from the ashy gray tip of the incense stick and wind slowly towards the ceiling.

Grandma Ginny stretched out her legs. "Now, what were the good things that Artemis did that some of the men in town don't do?"

“She said you should only hunt when you need it, and she said you shouldn’t kill young animals.”

Grandma Ginny placed her palms and toes on the floor and arched her back like a cat. “Exactly.” Her long, graying hair fell into her face, muffling her words. “She was ‘the protectoress of the dewy youth.’”

“I wish she would come to our mountain and protect the deer.”

Anna and her grandmother lived on private property. Black and red “No Trespassing” signs hung on the trees by the road, but even still, from time to time, they heard the crack of a rifle and the squeal of tires as men drove their pick-up trucks back to town, the beds heavy with the soft, dead bodies of does and bucks.

“I don’t like them hunting on my property, that’s for sure,” Grandma Ginny said. “Not with you running around outside.”

Grandma Ginny’s solution to the problem was Anna’s deer season outfit. Every day during the hunting season, her grandmother insisted that she wear a bright orange safety vest purchased at Wal-Mart and a little satchel of elderberries, rosemary, and tarragon tied around her neck. Grandma Ginny said the herbs contained positive vibrations and would repel the negative energy of a poacher.

One afternoon in early autumn, wearing her orange vest and red satchel, Anna went walking along her favorite hiking trail. There was a spot, past the water tower and before the path began its steep zigzag up the mountain, where fairies lived. At least, that’s what Anna liked to pretend. She had never actually seen the fairies, but her grandmother told stories about them. They ate berries and drank honeysuckle wine out of snail shells. At night they made their beds with the soft moss carpeting the rocks and slept in the crooks of tree roots, shaded from dappled

moonlight by tiny purple wildflowers. They were fun-loving and mischievous, Grandma Ginny said, and protectors of the innocent.

Anna sat quietly on a rock by the side of the path, her eyes scanning the underbrush. Suddenly, she saw wings fluttering behind a tree. She held her breath, waiting, but just then something loud crashed through the woods, disturbing her vigil. “Hey! Anna!”

It was Tommy, the little boy who lived nearby in an old, crumbling house with his mother, stepfather, and three older sisters. He ran to Anna, and twigs snapped under his feet like gunshots. Whatever had been moving behind the tree was gone.

“You scared away the fairies,” Anna told him, frowning. “There was one flying right behind that tree.”

“It was probably just a moth.” Tommy picked up a rock and threw it at the tree. His fingers were grimy, and he had a smudge of dirt on his small, pale face.

Anna stood up and watched Tommy throw rocks. His long arms were covered with purple bruises.

“What are you doing that for?” Anna asked as one of Tommy’s rocks ricocheted off a tree trunk and came flying back in their direction.

“I don’t know. Wanna go play at my house?”

Anna wasn’t crazy about Tommy, but he and his older sisters were her only source of companionship besides her grandmother, so she said yes. She followed him through the woods, taking the shortcut through the land that belonged to his step-father. There were strange things in this part of the woods, including an ancient, rusting pick-up truck that was home to a family of possums, and a system of large metal barrels connected by old pipes. When they walked past the

barrels, Tommy pointed to them. “You can’t tell anybody about this,” he said. Anna agreed, but she had no idea why they were to be kept secret.

A few weeks later, when the leaves began turning orange and floating from the trees, Tommy’s step-father was arrested for making moonshine in the woods behind his house. Soon, Tommy, his mother, and his three sisters moved away to live with relatives, and Anna was left once more with only her grandmother for company.

Every afternoon in the dwindling fall, when Grandma Ginny took her nap, Anna went to the blackberry patch by herself to collect berries for the next morning’s breakfast.

“Why do blackberries have to have thorns?” she asked her grandmother one evening as they sat down to dinner. Her fingers and mouth were stained purple, and her arms were covered in thin, red scratches from her afternoon of berry-picking.

“For protection. So they don’t get all eaten up by birds and squirrels. And humans.”

“I guess that makes sense.” Anna rubbed her finger across a hardened pink scratch on the back of her hand before picking up her fork.

On that very same day, in a land far to the north called Connecticut, a boy named Kyle was getting ready to leave home and seek his fortune, having graduated from college that spring and just landed a job at a consulting firm in Washington, D.C. He sat in his half-empty childhood room and picked up an old high school yearbook. He winced at his picture: the braces, the glasses, the awkward smile. Even in black and white, his face was mottled with acne. Girls had been afraid to look at him back then, much less touch him, fearing that his swollen red bumps were contagious.

He ran his finger over a picture of Becca Stevens. From the little square in the middle of the yearbook page, she still taunted him with her beauty: the dark hair and startlingly bright eyes. He had obsessed over her for pretty much his entire adolescence.

Back then, he had been quite religious. His mother was Catholic out of habit, and his father thought church was a waste of time, but to Kyle, it had truly meant something. He liked the way everyone knew the proper times to kneel, and the proper times to make the sign of the cross against their foreheads, lips, and hearts. It made him feel like he was a part of something bigger than himself. And there was a magical quality to Catholicism: water turned into wine, wine turned into the blood of Christ. He liked to read about sightings of the Virgin Mary and the miracles attributed to various saints. God, he thought, can work miracles. Ask and ye shall receive. And so he prayed to God, sandwiching his petty requests between Our Fathers and Glory Be's. He knelt at Mass, his elbows rested on the hard pew in front of him, and asked God to make him attractive and popular, to make girls like him. Especially Becca Stevens.

Sophomore year, Kyle sat behind Becca in Trigonometry class, leaning forward to breathe in the scent of roses that clung to her long hair, noting when she shifted positions or re-crossed her legs. Every day he watched Becca pass notes back and forth to her friends, and one day in the spring, she slipped a piece of folded paper onto her friend's desk, but the friend didn't notice, and it fluttered to the ground. The bell rang, and Becca flitted away. Kyle reached down and picked up the folded sheet of paper.

He opened it, and for a moment, his heart surged at the sight of his name – first and last – written on the paper. But, as he continued to look, the blood that pounded through his veins turned cold. The note was a ranking survey, and this one had been filled out by Becca herself. There were categories like “Hottest Boys,” and “Bitchiest Girls.” Kyle's name was written

under the heading “Ugliest Boys,” and she had ranked him number one. After that, Kyle’s faith in prayer began to lessen. God wasn’t listening. By junior year, he began to wonder if there was a God at all, and more and more he opted to stay home on Sunday mornings with his father and watch football games.

This was when Kyle’s father began giving him advice about girls. “When I was your age,” his father said one day, “I got laid every weekend.” He gulped from a beer bottle and laughed. “Be young. Have fun. Use a condom. I know they’re a pain in the ass, but you don’t want to be getting anybody pregnant.”

Usually his advice turned into stories from his glory days as a high school basketball star, but when he drank too much, he grew angry at the thought of his lost youth, and he lashed out at Kyle. “You play too many damn video games,” he’d said. “Go to the gym. Wash your goddamn face. No wonder you don’t have any girlfriends.” As if Kyle didn’t already feel bad enough, his father always seemed to make it worse.

Kyle was glad to go off to college, where he excelled academically, but he was shy and people, especially girls, ignored him. By senior year, his acne cleared up. He worked out and dressed better, but still he had no luck with girls. He lived in on campus with a guy named Richie who got laid all the time, and Kyle didn’t understand it. Richie was only five-nine, and his flat nose and squinty eyes made his face look weirdly squashed. He wasn’t even rich. How, Kyle wondered, did he get so many girls?

Richie revealed his secrets one day over Belgian waffles in the caf.

“They don’t want people to think they’re sluts,” he explained. “So you have to find the right way to talk them into it. They *want* to be talked into it.”

Kyle poured syrup into the craters of his waffle. “What do you say?”

“I got different material for different girls. I mean, a lot of times the whole ‘I like you so much, you’re so beautiful, I can’t take my mind off you’ stuff wears them down pretty quick.”

Richie chewed a bite of waffle and then gulped from his glass of milk. “But for the really pretty girls, they hear that shit all the time, so you have to be creative. Like that girl from my Bio lab? I told her I thought she was a lesbian. She was all offended, and I was like ‘well, you have short hair, and you played softball in high school, and you just don’t give off a vibe like you’re interested in men.’ Five minutes later, she’s going down on me to prove me wrong. Swear to god.”

Kyle looked around the crowded caf, worried that a girl might overhear their conversation. Girls jostled past their table, carrying trays of breakfast food, but they didn’t seem to be listening.

“Oh.” Richie snapped his fingers to get Kyle’s attention. “You know what really works? Make them feel guilty. Tell them they’re wearing that short skirt on purpose to get you horny, and how could they be so mean to torture you like that. Girls hate being called cockteases just as much as they hate being called sluts. I mean, they’re worried about their image, you know? They want to have sex, but they want to make it seem like it wasn’t their idea.”

Kyle nodded and looked around again at all the girls swarming through the dining hall, tossing their hair, showing off their bare legs. Some of them still wore their pajamas: tank tops and little shorts with writing across the butts. They all *wanted* to have sex.

Of course, Richie’s method was easier said than done. When Kyle had gotten up the nerve to talk to girls at parties, he’d gotten tongue-tied and quiet. They’d given him pitying smiles and gone off with Richie or some other pushy asshole to one of the vacant bedrooms. And thus, he graduated from college still, embarrassingly, a virgin.

In his room, Kyle sighed and dropped his old yearbook into a storage box. Things were going to be different now that he was moving to the city. He had a good job and a nice apartment. It was time for him to be a man. He couldn't keep letting girls have all the power over him.

Just then there was a bellowing from downstairs: Kyle's father was calling to him from his study. Kyle went down the stairs and cautiously opened the door, wondering what kind of mood his father would be in. He sat behind his desk in the semi-darkness, drinking expensive beer from the bottle. "So, you're off to D.C. tomorrow," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"Now don't do anything stupid like get engaged right away like I did." Kyle's parents had married right out of college, when his father had first taken a job at the accounting firm where he had worked for twenty-five years now. They were still together, but they slept in different rooms and barely spoke to each other. "Play the field, son. See what's out there."

"Yes, sir."

His father leaned forward, his stomach pushing against the desk. "You got Georgetown and George Mason and American all right there. You'll have plenty of opportunities to put some more notches in your belt."

Kyle wondered what his father would say if he knew Kyle had yet to put a notch in his belt.

Kyle's father shook his head, his eyes shiny in the dim light. "I gotta live vicariously through you, son, because you know what your mother's like. Frigid bitch." He picked up the beer bottle and tipped it to his lips. Kyle went back to his room to finish packing.

* * *

As the years went by, Anna's grandmother taught her lots of things: the cycle of the moon, Shakespeare's plays, how to make tabouli. But as Anna grew older, she became restless for the outside world, and in the afternoons, instead of going to the blackberry patch, or the creek, or the trail by the water tower, she began riding her bike into town. She perused the candy aisle at the 7-11, studied the posters outside the movie theater, and flipped eagerly through magazines at the pharmacy. And she always stopped by the high school. She sat on a bench outside the public library, across from the school parking lot, and watched the boys and girls dance around each other on the blacktop during lunchtime. She didn't realize that she was in danger, but she was, more and more as the days went by. Her grandmother had told her what to do if she came upon a mountain lion or a water moccasin, but she had not taught her about the other types of dangers there were for young, beautiful girls.

And now that Anna was a teenager, she was beautiful, only she didn't know it. Her eyes were blue like the rolling mountains in the distance. Her hair was the warm, shiny brown of an acorn. But she had grown so quickly into her beauty from a bony, awkward child, that it frightened her. Her thighs seemed heavy. One breast was larger than the other. In the shower each morning she sucked in her breath and smoothed her hand across her stomach. It was no longer flat on its own.

She had no friends her own age, no television, nothing to help her understand what was happening to her. She poured through the teen magazines at the pharmacy for information until the sales clerk yelled at her to, "Buy it or get out." She wished for friends her own age, but she was afraid to talk to the loud, colorful girls who stood around by the pay phone in the 7-11 parking lot. She also found herself hungry for male attention. In bed at night she practiced

kissing her pillow, and sometimes she cried herself to sleep, without really knowing why she felt sad.

Anna became more and more fascinated with going into town. Her grandmother couldn't understand it. Grandma Ginny only went to town when she absolutely had to, to get groceries, or fabric for clothes, and, most recently, to buy some new bras for Anna.

“Can't we go back and buy me some jeans?” Anna begged after their bra-shopping trip.

“Why do you want jeans? Don't you like the clothes I make for you?”

“All the other kids in town wear jeans.” Anna looked down at her long cotton skirt. She had found a razor in a box in the back of the bathroom closet, and she had been secretly shaving her legs for the past few days.

“Why do you want to be like everybody else? You're better than those kids.”

“Grandma...”

“No. Those jeans are made by child labor in India, and I refuse to support that.”

Anna waited desperately for her sixteenth birthday so she could get a job and have her own money to buy all the things her grandmother snubbed: jeans, movie tickets, Seventeen magazines, Daisy razors, mascara. Anna was sure if she had these things, she would transform into a normal girl, someone who other girls wanted to be friends with, someone who boys wanted to kiss.

And so the end of summer came, and Anna turned sixteen. It was hunting season once more, but of course she no longer wore her orange safety vest or satchel of herbs. She rode her bike into town to fill out job applications, and was hired almost immediately as a waitress in a little café across from the farmer's market.

At first waiting tables was difficult. Everything moved quickly, and people got very angry sometimes. Anna wasn't used to the way the kitchen boys teased her, calling her "home-school hippie" over their loud rock music, or the way her manager yelled at her when she asked him to void a transaction on the cash register. She also had trouble figuring out the other waitresses.

"Anna, come take a smoke break with me," Traci said one slow, humid day in September.

"I don't smoke."

"I know that. I just want some company." Traci smacked her pack of Kools against her palm.

"I have a table." Anna gestured to a couple sharing a piece of pie near the window.

"They'll be fine for five minutes, good Lord."

Anna followed Traci outside to the back of the building. They sat on the hot concrete next to the dumpster. It smelled like rotting cheese, and Anna was thankful for the minty scent of Traci's menthol cigarette.

"You been working here for a month, and we don't hardly know anything about you." Traci blew smoke into the thick air.

"What do you want to know?" Anna felt uncomfortable with Traci and the other girls. They were loud and bossy; they talked about drugs and tattoos and other things and other things Anna didn't know much about. She hated feeling like such a baby around them.

"So you really never went to school?"

"No. My grandma teaches me."

“That’s weird. You got a boyfriend?” Traci flicked her cigarette, and ashes fluttered to the ground.

“No, but I’d like to have a boyfriend.”

“Oh my god, okay!” Traci wiggled a little bit closer to Anna. “Let me think who you could go with. Does it matter if he has a car?”

“No,” Anna said. “That doesn’t matter.”

In the north, in a place called Washington, D.C., Kyle was now thirty, and he had done quite well for himself in the business world. Something about putting on a suit everyday and taking the Metro to work had given him confidence. No one here saw him as the awkward, pimply boy he’d been in high school, or the shy nerd he’d been in college. Here, he was tall, good-looking, and successful, and his quiet demeanor made him mysterious. In the office, women smiled at him, and men nodded their heads, and Kyle drank in their approval until it made him feel light-headed.

Right away he’d started going out with the other young guys from the firm. He found that after a few drinks, it was easy to talk to women at the loud happy-hours or dark nightclubs. By the time he got them home, they were so drunk, he usually didn’t have to do much convincing to get them into bed.

He was just as lonely as Anna, except he didn’t want to admit it. He ought to love being single: a different girl every night, or at least the possibility, what more could a man want? Secretly, he worried about the fact that he’d never had a real girlfriend. His colleagues were

starting to get married, whereas he had never dated a girl for more than a week. But his father and Richie seemed jealous of his life, and they were probably right. He was living the dream.

One morning, he woke up to find Jessica, a sophomore at George Mason, asleep beside him. He thought back to the night before. He had approached her outside of the bathroom at a bar in Adam's Morgan. All night he'd bought her drinks that glowed in the black light, and they'd danced close in the dark haze of the club. At last call, when the lights came on, he told her they could share a cab because he lived near her dorm. Of course, he gave the cab driver his own address, and she followed him inside his apartment without question.

In his living room, he played the charming prince. He offered her a drink and told her she had beautiful eyes, even though her eyelids were drooping.

When he led her to the bedroom, dotting her neck with kisses, she nearly tripped over his feet. "I don't know," she mumbled as he laid her on the bed. "I'm trying to be good."

"This is good," he had insisted.

"I don't know. I don't even know your last name." But she'd let him undress her.

Richie had been right.

Now Kyle looked at Jessica. Her makeup was smudged in the corners of her eyes, and her mouth hung open slightly to reveal small, pearly teeth. He thought about waking her up and taking her to breakfast, but what would they talk about? Without alcohol or loud music, conversations made him nervous. He always worried that in the light of day the girl would look at him and be disappointed.

Instead of waking Jessica, Kyle put on his sneakers and went for a run. When he got home, she was gone, but there was a slip of paper on his bed with her name and phone number

on it. He considered the note for a moment before letting it fall from his fingers into the trashcan.

Kyle went to his desk and picked up a map of Virginia. He ran his finger across the state's southwestern tip until he found what he was looking for. His great-aunt had died a few months ago and left him a piece of land just outside of a small, Appalachian town. He decided that this weekend he would drive down and check out his inheritance.

Anna noticed the man immediately because his polo shirt and pressed gray slacks were a strange sight in the café where she was used to seeing men in t-shirts and trucker caps. She approached his table with a pitcher of water.

“What can I get you?” she asked, filling his glass. He was handsome, she thought, but in an unsettling way. His large, dark eyes were wide-set, and his features were sharp and angular. He looked up at her with one thumb resting casually on his square chin.

“What I really want isn't on the menu.” He winked, and she laughed, although she wasn't sure what he meant.

“What do you recommend?” he asked.

“I'm a vegetarian, so I only eat the salad, but it's good.”

“Okay. Is there anything I should avoid? In your opinion?”

Anna leaned towards him. He smelled earthy and damp, like the woods after a nighttime rain. “I'm not supposed to say this, but the soup of the day is a week old.”

He smiled. “Thanks for the warning.”

In the kitchen, by the coffee machine, Traci eyed Anna. “You were flirting with that guy, weren’t you?”

Anna pulled a heavy white mug and saucer onto a tray. “I don’t think so.”

“Yeah you were! You were all giggly, and you were standing really close to him.”

“Was I?” Anna could feel her cheeks growing warm.

“He’s pretty cute. You should go for it.”

“I don’t know. Don’t you think he’s kind of old?” Anna peeked out at him and felt a tightening in her chest.

“Age ain’t nothing but a number, baby,” Traci said, wandering off towards the condiments counter to steal a pickle.

At his table, Kyle pretended to read the Washington Post, but really he watched as the cute, young waitress hustled around the café, dropping off plates of food, refilling mugs of coffee, wiping down the counter with a wet rag. He admired her long legs, scissoring out from her short skirt, and the way her pretty little ponytail swung back and forth when she walked.

When she brought him his club sandwich, she asked where he was visiting from, and he told her D.C. “Wow. That’s cool,” she said, biting on her plump bottom lip. When she leaned over to refill his water glass, her skin smelled like honeysuckle. There was something familiar about her, and suddenly Kyle realized what it was. She looked like Becca Stevens, his high school crush: the shiny brown hair, the bright eyes. His ideal girl.

When she brought Kyle the check, he asked her when she got off from work.

“I’m new, so I only work the lunch shift.” She shrugged. “Around three or three-thirty.”

Kyle told her he was in town for the weekend and didn't know his way around. Would she suggest a restaurant and be his date for dinner? She hesitated for a moment before saying yes.

Anna didn't even consider what her grandmother might say. After work, she raced home on her bike, flew into the house, and announced to Grandma Ginny that she was going back into town that evening to meet a guy named Kyle for dinner.

Her grandmother immediately forbade it. "Absolutely not! You hardly know this man, and you are much too young to go on a date!"

"I'm sixteen!" Anna protested. "My mom was sixteen when she got *pregnant* with me."

"Exactly my point." Grandma Ginny turned away from Anna and opened the refrigerator, calmly pulling out a block of tofu.

"It's not fair. You act like I don't know how to take care of myself."

"You don't."

"Well whose fault is that? Who's the one who's supposed to be teaching me?" Anna felt hot anger flushing her face.

A strange look came into Grandma Ginny's eyes. "You're just too young to date."

"You can't keep me locked up in this house forever, you know!" Anna ran to her room and slammed the door.

Anna had never disobeyed her grandmother before. But she couldn't pass up the chance for a date, the chance to be a normal girl. She didn't know what might happen with Kyle, and she liked not knowing. She changed from her waitress clothes into an outfit she'd bought with her tips from the café – a white skirt and pink top. She brushed her long hair, and rubbed sparkling gloss on her lips. She waited until she heard her grandmother turn on the radio in the

living room. Like every evening, she would sit in her armchair, crocheting, listening to NPR, and letting her eyes flutter closed. She wouldn't even realize Anna was gone.

Anna quietly opened her window and slipped out into the Indian summer evening. She rode her bike to the café where she waited for Kyle. He arrived a few minutes later, and they drove to the only nice restaurant in town.

At dinner, everything seemed perfect. Anna carefully lifted her glass of white wine to her lips. It was her second glass, and she was already beginning to see the world through a softened lens. Her body felt lighter, and Kyle's deep voice drummed inside her. She couldn't believe the people at the restaurant thought she was twenty-one. No one had asked to see her ID. She felt a giggle bubbling in her stomach, but she blew it out with a deep breath and re-crossed her legs. She didn't want Kyle to think she was immature.

She didn't know much about Kyle except that he was a consultant in DC, and he had come down for the weekend to see a piece of property. She watched his face as he took a sip of wine. He had a pockmark scar on his cheek that served as a perpetual dimple; it gave the impression that he was smiling even when he wasn't.

"I heard somewhere that this area is known for moonshine," Kyle said. He picked up a piece of bread from the basket between them.

"Yeah. I had a friend when I was younger whose stepfather went to jail for making it."

Kyle laughed. Anna was easy to talk to. She didn't play games or flirt in double entendres like the women he met in D.C. She was genuine. "Moonshine, huh?" Kyle said. "I didn't even realize people still made that stuff. Or drank it."

"People around here do." Anna twirled the thin stem of her wine glass between her fingers. "My friend Tommy used to tell me his step-dad drank moonshine, and I had no idea

what he was talking about. I thought it was juice that soaked up light from the moon. Like sun tea.” Anna laughed self-consciously. “I guess that’s what happens when you’re home-schooled.”

“So where do you go to school now?” Kyle asked. He had figured that Anna was a college student, home for fall break.

“I don’t go to school,” she said shortly.

Kyle wasn’t sure what to say, but he decided that even if Anna was younger than he’d originally thought, he didn’t care. He liked her, and he was pretty sure she liked him, too. Her flirty giggles. The way she gazed at him over the rim of her wine glass. “You look really lovely tonight,” he told her.

She blushed. “Thank you.”

After dinner, they walked across the parking lot under a purple night sky. The breeze rustled tree leaves in the distance. “I have goosebumps!” Anna announced. Her voice had gotten higher after her third glass of wine, and her eyes were shiny and wild. Kyle moved towards her and rubbed his palms up and down her bare arms.

“Better?” he asked, and she nodded.

In the car, he asked her if she wanted to drive by his newly acquired land.

“Will we be able to see anything?”

“The stars. You can see them so much better out there.” He told her he had a blanket in the backseat she could use if she got cold.

In truth, he wasn’t sure how to get to the land. He’d left the directions in his hotel room. But it didn’t matter. He just wanted to find a private place where he could park the car and they could be alone.

He drove out of the town limits and onto the parkway. The road curved through the mountains, and dense woods rose on either side.

The wine made Anna feel sleepy and stupid. She rested her cheek against the cool glass of the passenger side window. She tried to figure out where they were, but it was dark, and the world was rushing by so quickly.

“Oh!” she said suddenly, seeing a familiar sign. “Up ahead is the start of this pretty trail that goes to the top of the mountain. I used to hike it all the time because I thought fairies lived there.” She was immediately sorry she had mentioned fairies because it made her sound childish, but Kyle seemed amused. He laughed and placed his hand on her knee.

“Let’s go check it out,” he said.

“The trail?”

“Yeah.”

“Right now?”

“Sure. Why not?” He pulled his car into the overlook parking lot and cut the engine.

The trail was dark, and trees draped with kudzu blocked out the stars. Anna held Kyle’s hand, loosening her grip a little as her eyes adjusted to the night. They stumbled up the slope, tripping over rocks and bumping into each other. As they passed the water tower, looming like a mosque beside them, Kyle wrapped his arm around her small waist. He pulled her against him and kissed her. She began to feel frightened, but she was also excited, and she didn’t want it to stop. Not just yet.

Kyle had brought the blanket with him. He spread it out on the path and they sat down together. For awhile they just kissed, but then his kisses became deeper, more insistent. He reached his hand up her shirt and underneath her new bra. Anna wasn’t sure she liked his hand

there, but she didn't want him to think she was young and inexperienced. This was what Traci and all the girls at work did when they went out with boys.

Kyle laid her down and straddled her. He suddenly seemed very large and strange, and she could feel rocks and twigs poking into her back. He reached up her skirt, and she tried as best she could to close her legs and push him away. "No," she murmured. "Let's just kiss."

"We can do a little more than kiss," he said, pulling at her cotton underwear.

"I hardly know you." She tried to sit up, but he was on top of her, heavy and hard.

"I hardly know you, too, but I know I like you." He looked down at her. "I like you so much." He held her down and sucked hungrily on her neck. "You're sweet," he told her. "Don't worry. I'm going to make you feel good."

"But, I don't..." She squirmed underneath him.

He wondered if she was a virgin. What about her short skirt, and the way she snuggled into him when he'd rubbed her arms in the parking lot? Besides, how many times before had girls said no when they meant yes? "Don't worry," he told her, "it's fine."

She started to say something, but he covered her lips with his, and her words were lost inside his mouth.

Anna didn't know what to do. How had she suddenly found herself here, with Kyle's heavy hands on her shoulders, his large mouth devouring her? The more she resisted, the more he bore down on her. When he reached down to unzip his pants, she wanted to scream, or cry, but she felt frozen. What good would it do? There was no one here to help her. Just then she saw a flicker of light in the woods beside her. The flash of a fairy wing, she thought deliriously. Or the glint of Artemis's silver arrow?

Kyle looked down at Anna. He had never wanted anything so much. He pulled down his pants. Then suddenly he felt something. A hand on his shoulder. It was cold but scorching, gentle but firm. His entire body prickled, and all the blood left his arms and legs. Everything was sucked up into his head until there was a separation, and he was plucked by the invisible hand and held, dangling, over his own body. He saw himself crouching over a young, terrified girl, like an animal over its wounded prey. And then, just as quickly, the hand was gone, and he was back inside his body, limp and exhausted.

Meanwhile, Anna watched as Kyle's eyes grew vacant and misty. Something strange was happening to him, but she didn't know what. His body went rigid, and then he rolled off of her, breathing heavily. She lay motionless, her heart thumping inside her chest. She closed her eyes and imagined that she could hear fairies in the woods, their tinkling laughter mixing with the singing of crickets and night birds.

After a moment, Kyle stood up and zipped his pants. She followed him numbly back down the trail. In the car, she wondered what had happened to him to make him stop so suddenly. Had he fallen under a fairy spell or been pierced by a goddess's arrow? All she knew was that there was magic in the woods, and it had saved her.

On the drive home, Kyle wanted to tell Anna that he was sorry, but he was too ashamed to speak. Memories of other girls, their whimpers of protest, flooded his brain, and made his stomach feel queasy. He couldn't wait to get Anna out of the car so he could drive back to the hotel and take a hot shower.

He dropped her off at the mailbox where the path to her grandmother's cabin began, and then he sped away, down the curving road and out of sight.

Anna started towards the cabin, her legs feeling heavy. She heard the slam of the front door, and her grandmother came running down the path to meet her. “Oh thank god!” Grandma Ginny said, throwing her arms around Anna. “I thought...” Her voice drifted away. Anna didn’t say anything, but she started to cry.

When Kyle returned to D.C., he stayed in his apartment for days, sitting motionless on his couch and eating ravioli from a can. After three days, he went back to work, back to the gym, back to his normal life, but he no longer went out to clubs and bars. He sold his great-aunt’s land and never again returned to that small, sleepy town in southern Virginia. He began seeing a therapist and attending a non-denominational church. When he gave his testimony in front of the congregation, he talked about how he had gone to a mountain trail and truly felt the hand of God.

In Bible study one evening, he met a woman named Robin, a recovering alcoholic from Chicago, and eventually they married and moved into a house in Fairfax. They never had children, but they owned two Labrador Retrievers who they called their babies.

As for Anna, when she went into her room that night, she felt different, as if, for a brief moment, she had slipped into the life of someone else: Traci, or one of Tommy’s sisters, or maybe even her own mother. She hated Kyle for what he’d almost done to her, and she wished she was covered in sharp, black-tipped thorns that would have scratched out his eyes out, made him bleed. She was scared of her own softness, and she knew she had a lot to learn about the world.

The next morning, she asked her grandmother for the hundredth time if she could go to public school. This time, perhaps worried of what would happen if she said no, Grandma Ginny

agreed. Anna began her junior year at the local high school, and started the process of trying to fit in.

Years later, when Anna was married with three daughters of her own, she thought about the incident with Kyle and found she wasn't angry with him anymore. She still didn't know for sure what had happened that night in the woods, but she thought she could remember the glow of fairy wings, the way they had flickered with rainbows, like rippling water on a hot day.

The Three Gateways

There once was a girl named Nadine who had eyes as blue as gumballs and hair as black as pavement. She lived with her mother and wicked stepfather in a small, yellow house by the river. The river was wide and brown, and on hot days it smelled like sewage. The smell wafted through Nadine's neighborhood of old, crumbling houses and made everyone wish they had enough money to live somewhere else.

Nadine's stepfather, Roy, was a plumber, so the sewage smell in the neighborhood didn't bother him much. He did want more money, though, so he could buy nice things like a motorcycle and a big-screen television. He made extra money by selling marijuana, which he grew in the garage beside the house. He was very proud of his plants, and his customers said his pot was smoother and more potent than anything they'd ever smoked. They begged to know his secret, but Nadine and her mother were the only ones who knew: it was Roy's special fertilizer, made of his own feces, that made his plants so healthy.

Roy kept a small zip-lock baggie of dried pot in the freezer for an occasional smoke, but he preferred liquor, which he drank on a regular basis. One night, shortly after Nadine began the tenth grade, her stepfather stormed into her bedroom, his face flushed and his breath smelling of whiskey. "You stole some of my weed, didn't you?"

Nadine sat cross-legged on her bed, doing her math homework. She looked up at him with wide eyes and shook her head. "No."

He lurched towards her. His chin was patchy with dark stubble. "Well, half my weed is gone, so where'd it go?"

Nadine stared down at the faint blue lines on her notebook paper. “I didn’t take it.” She was lying. She had, in fact, stolen it. She didn’t realize that Roy would be so observant.

Suddenly he was upon her, grabbing at her face with his hand. He squeezed her cheeks together between his thumb and fingers. “You’re lying to me. I know when you’re lying.”

“I don’t have it,” Nadine mumbled out of her pinched mouth. That much was true. The pot was gone. She and her friends had smoked it all the day before.

He released his grip, only to use his open palm to smack her across the face. Nadine’s cheek burned. She looked down at the faded pink flowers on her bedspread.

He reached for her arm and yanked on it, glaring at her with wild black eyes. “That’s my shit. Don’t steal my shit.”

“Stop it! You’re hurting me.” She tried to twist out of his grip.

“Yeah?” His fingers tightened. “I’ll hurt you worse if you steal from me again.”

“Let me go!”

“Fucking drug addict,” Roy said, dropping her arm. He left her room, but the smell of his musky sweat remained.

Nadine wasn’t a drug addict, not yet at least, but she and her best friend Elizabeth had been doing drugs recreationally since middle school, around the time when Nadine and her mother had moved in with Roy. In the sixth grade, they’d stolen a pack of Elizabeth’s mother’s cigarettes and ran with them to the graveyard. They sat next to a small angel perched at a baby’s headstone and smoked skinny Virginia Slims until their heads were spinning and they felt like puking. In the seventh grade, they raided Roy’s liquor cabinet and poured whiskey into a half-

full Sunny Delight bottle. The next day, Nadine brought the bottle to school in her book bag, and they drank the potion in the third floor bathroom before choir practice. When they sang, their young voices were husky and carried the scent of fire and citrus. In the eighth grade, they started meeting high school boys in the park every afternoon after school and riding with them to the Chuck E. Cheese where they smoked joints in the back parking lot next to the dumpsters.

Since then, they had moved on to other things. Pink and white pills stolen from friends' medicine cabinets. Thick red cough syrup that made them see swirling colors when they looked at the street lights. And once, at an older kid's party, they had tried a beautiful white powder, like fairy dust, which they had snorted through cut plastic straws. There was still weed, too, of course. Usually it made Nadine feel relaxed. But lately, the drugs weren't helping as much. She was tired of always being afraid, of always holing up in her room in the evenings, trying to avoid her stepfather's wrath.

Nadine knew better than to tell people about her problems. In her experience, that only made things worse. But sometimes she forgot this, and the morning after her stepfather yelled at her for the stolen weed, she decided to talk to her mother after Roy left for work. Nadine's mother only worked part-time because of her back problems. She'd been in a terrible car accident as a teenager, and she couldn't stand or sit in the same position for too long, even though she took a lot of pills that were supposed to ease her pain.

As soon as Nadine's alarm went off Tuesday morning, she got out of bed, pulled on a sweatshirt, and walked down the hall to her mother and Roy's bedroom. The king-sized bed spanned most of the room so that the rest of the furniture had to be squeezed into the leftover spaces. A large dresser stood next to the bed, an old television on top of it. The door to the

closet was open, and inside it the horizontal metal bar sagged under the weight of too many clothes.

Nadine shimmied sideways past the dresser and perched on the edge of the bed by the nightstand. Her mother was buried under a thick mountain of blankets with a pillow on top of her head. Nadine pushed at the lump underneath the covers. “He was drunk again last night, Mom. Look what he did to me.”

Her mother didn’t move.

“Mom.” Nadine pulled the pillow off her mother’s head, revealing a pile of brown, matted curls. “Mom. Wake up.”

Her mother groaned and rolled over, her face emerging slowly.

“Look what he did to me.” Nadine held out her arm to display thin purple bruises where Roy’s fingers had clutched her.

“He said you stole from him.” Her mother squinted at the light coming through the blinds behind the bed and pushed the tangles out of her face.

“Well...”

“You see, now, Nadine, I can’t stick up for you if you’re the one who started it in the first place.”

“You never stick up for me anyway!” Nadine heard her voice climbing into a whine, but she couldn’t seem to control it.

“That’s not true.”

“It is. He *hurt* me.”

Her mother struggled to pull herself up. She sighed and leaned back against the wooden headboard. "I'm sure he didn't mean to hurt you, baby. He doesn't know his own strength sometimes, you know that. Maybe if you hadn't stolen from him..."

"He meant to hurt me."

"Relationships are a compromise, Nadine. He provides for us. We'd be living at Nana's house eating Ramen noodles every night if it wasn't for him. Is that what you want?"

"No," Nadine whispered. Her grandmother's house smelled like cat pee and boiled cabbage. When they stayed there, Nadine had to sleep on the couch, and cat fur tickled her nose in the night and made her eyes red and swollen.

"Sometimes he gets too drunk," her mother said, sinking back down into the covers. "We just have to deal with it." She closed her eyes. "Can you do that for me?"

"I guess."

"That's my girl."

Nadine knew the only way to get rid of her stepfather was to take matters into her own hands. She decided that very day to go to Luci for advice.

Luci, short for Lucifer Marie, was a senior girl who openly admitted to practicing dark magic. Her real name was April, but it was said that she would put a curse on anyone who called her that. Even the teachers had consented to calling her Luci.

Rumor had it that Luci could actually perform magic, and there were several incidents to prove it. The first was her nomination and election into Homecoming Court her sophomore year. "It had to be magic," Elizabeth always said. "She must have bewitched people into voting for

her.” Luci had been a sophomore before Nadine and Elizabeth were even in high school, but one day they had looked through the old yearbooks at the library, and sure enough, there on the Homecoming Court page, was Luci’s picture with the words “Sophomore Princess” underneath it. She wore a long-sleeved black dress with a high, lacy collar, and her eyes were dark with make-up. She stood sullenly next to her date, an enormous curly-haired boy nicknamed Ogre, who wore a black trench coat over army fatigues.

The second incident involved Ogre. Legend had it that after six months of dating Luci, he attempted to break up with her. The very next day, he woke up with huge pimples covering his cheeks and a bulbous cold sore developing in the corner of his mouth. Then he got lice and ended up having to shave his head. A week later, he fell down a flight of stairs and broke his leg. He was out of school for a few days, and Luci told his teachers she could bring him his assignments. The next thing everyone knew, they were back together, his acne was gone, and people said that his leg healed much faster than normal.

The most astonishing proof of Luci’s powers happened shortly after she and Ogre got back together. She was enjoying a black clove cigarette in the second floor bathroom. This was the bathroom where everyone smoked, even some of the teachers. But on this certain day, Mrs. Robins-Pratt, the assistant principal, walked in and wrote Luci a three-day suspension. The injustice of it infuriated her, and she swore to get even with the old hag. A few days later, Mrs. Robins-Pratt came down with a terrible illness. She was out for nearly two months with what other teachers said was mono, but then she’d resigned her position at the end of the year and moved to Florida. Students whispered that her illness was actually insanity brought on by the nightmares that Luci was charming into her brain. The truth of this incident was what Nadine

was counting on. She needed Luci to teach her how to bewitch her stepfather into leaving the state.

And so, that day at lunch, Nadine and Elizabeth went looking for Luci. “I’m kind of afraid of her,” Elizabeth said as they walked through the quad, scanning the crowd for people wearing black.

Nadine tucked her hair behind her ears. “Well, you don’t have to say anything to her. I’ll do all the talking.”

Luci was nowhere to be found in the quad or the cafeteria, so the girls headed to the theater because Ogre was the head of the tech department, and they’d heard that Luci hung out there sometimes. The theater was a large, windowless building at the very edge of campus. They entered through the side door, which led down a dark hall towards the Black Box. They searched the costume closet and the green room but there was no sign of Luci. They walked backstage, past hulking wooden flats and through swirling black curtains until they came, suddenly, upon Ogre. He was hunched over on the stage in his army fatigues, marking x’s on the floor with white tape that glowed faintly in the dimness.

“Do you know where Luci is?” Nadine asked.

Ogre turned his large head towards them. “Lighting booth.” He pointed out past the rows of seats in the auditorium to the little room, high in the back of the theater, that looked out over everything. Nadine saw a flash of movement in the small window and shivered. Luci was up there, watching them.

The girls jumped off the stage and walked the sloping path to the back of the house. They opened the door and climbed a set of the narrow steps to find Luci sitting in front of the switchboard, eating raisins and reading the Cliff’s Notes for *The Crucible*.

“Luci?” Nadine asked, hovering by the door. Luci looked up. She was wearing a long, bright blue wig, a black dress, and combat boots. Her face had been powdered to a chalky white, and her eyes and lips were lined in dark purple. She raised a penciled eyebrow at the two girls.

“Hi.” Nadine took a few steps closer, but Elizabeth stayed on the last step. “Um, I’m Nadine. Can I talk to you for a minute?”

Luci picked a raisin out of the red cardboard box and held it between her long, black fingernails. From a distance it looked like a bug. She popped it into her mouth and nodded, just slightly.

“I was wondering if I could get your help. I’m sort of trying to get rid of someone.”

“I’m not a hit man, you know.” Luci’s voice was deep and tremulous, like the vibrating of a cello.

“Yeah, I know.” Nadine tugged at a piece of hair brushing her shoulder. “I just heard that you were able to do something to Mrs. Robins-Pratt last year to make her leave school, and I’m trying get my stepdad to leave town, so...”

Nadine could feel Luci’s eyes upon her, noticing that puffy white scar on the back of her hand from where Roy had burned her with a cigarette and the fresh, angry bruises on her arm. Nadine felt her face flushing under the heat of Luci’s gaze.

“I can help you,” the older girl said finally. “But it won’t be easy.” Luci motioned for Nadine to come closer. “What you need to do is tap into your stepfather’s subconscious.” She plucked out another raisin and ate it before continuing. “Once you have access to a person’s subconscious, you can pretty much control them. You can torture them. You can plant ideas in their brain. You can find out what they’re really thinking and feeling deep down.”

Nadine nodded and took a step closer. She sat down in the chair beside Luci. Elizabeth came forward slowly and stood behind Nadine.

“There are three gateways into the subconscious,” Luci explained. “They aren’t guaranteed access, but they are the things that can break down the barrier and create a way in. The first is drugs.” She stared at Nadine for a moment, her eyes hard and judgmental. “I think you might have some experience with that.”

Nadine felt herself blushing again. “So what do I do?”

“Are you sure you want to get rid of him?” Luci asked.

Nadine nodded quickly. “Yes.”

The older girl paused, and her purple lips clamped closed, like two caterpillars against her pebble-white skin. Her dark eyes stared into Nadine’s. “Okay,” she said finally. “Drugs are the easiest gateway. We’ll try that first.”

The pill was small and white, as unassuming as aspirin. It would dissolve quickly in an alcoholic beverage, Luci said. Once in effect, the victim was highly susceptible to suggestion, like being hypnotized.

That night, Nadine’s mother brought home a bucket of fried chicken, a container of coleslaw, and a flimsy cardboard box with four buttery biscuits. She set everything down in the middle of the kitchen table and pulled three mismatched plates from the cabinet. Unlike the other rooms, which were crowded with furniture and knick knacks, the kitchen was bare, and when Nadine’s mother opened the refrigerator to pull out a pitcher of iced tea, the inside gleamed white and nearly empty.

“When are you going to learn to cook?” Roy asked, dropping two ice cubes into a glass and filling it with whiskey. “It’d save us some money if you weren’t always getting take-out.”

Nadine’s mother sank into a chair and scooped coleslaw onto her plate from the Styrofoam container. “I’m doing my best,” she said. Nadine peeled the brown skin off her chicken and glanced at her stepfather. The pill was in her pocket.

“What was that?” Nadine asked. She jumped out of her chair and ran to the window above the sink.

“What?” Nadine’s mother stood.

“I thought I saw somebody outside by the garage.”

Roy slammed his glass of whiskey onto the counter. “What?”

“I don’t know. I thought I did.”

He threw open the side door and marched towards the garage. Nadine’s mother followed him halfway.

“Hello?” Nadine heard him yell. “Better not be anybody on my property!” Quickly, she pulled the pill from her pocket and dropped it into the glass of liquor. It fizzed for a moment then disappeared.

The adults came back inside. “Don’t make shit up, Nadine, it’s not funny,” Roy said.

“I really thought I saw something.” Nadine shrank back towards her seat.

“Maybe it was a cat.” Her mother sat down at the table. “I’m sure it’s fine.”

Nadine resumed picking at her chicken. She pulled a string of greasy meat off the bone and put it slowly into her mouth. She watched Roy as he picked up his glass and took a long swallow. His hard, pinched face softened a little. The deep lines in his forehead smoothed. Nadine waited.

Nothing happened until he was on his second glass of whiskey. His pupils grew large, and his head began to sway back and forth slightly on his neck. Suddenly he slumped forward onto the table, smashing his cheek down next to his half-empty plate. "I feel fucked up," he said, his voice coming out through squashed lips.

Nadine's mother looked at him with concern. She moved a hand towards his glass of whiskey, but then stopped, her arm hovering in the air. "You feel sick?"

"No," came his garbled voice. "I feel like I just took a shit load of acid." He struggled to lift his head up and waved a palm in front of his face. "My hand looks like a fucking piece of chicken."

"Why don't you eat it?" Nadine muttered. To her surprise, almost immediately, he crammed two thick fingers into his mouth.

"Roy!" Her mother jumped out of her chair and ran behind him, yanking his hand from his mouth. Nadine saw red teeth marks on his wet fingers. "Why don't you lay down on the couch?"

Roy pushed himself up from his chair and staggered, zombie-like, towards the living room.

"Nadine, go bring him a glass of water," her mother said. "And a trash can in case he has to throw up. I'll make some coffee."

Nadine filled a glass with water from the tap and grabbed the trash can before heading into the living room. At first she thought he was asleep, but he wasn't. His eyes were open; the large pupils stared at the blank television screen.

She set down the trash can and water at the end of the couch near his head and then backed away slowly. "Roy?" she said softly. She felt like she was locked in a cage with a

sedated tiger that might, at any moment, shake off the effects of the drug and lunge for her throat.

“Yeah?” he mumbled. He didn’t turn to look at her. His eyes stayed focused on the black screen.

Nadine had planned out her suggestions carefully. “You don’t want to be trapped in a house with a nagging woman and her stupid teenage daughter fixing toilets all your life, do you?” she asked, her voice trembling. “Wouldn’t you rather be free? Riding a motorcycle across the country to California? Doing whatever you want, and sleeping with whoever you want? You could go anywhere.”

“I can do whatever I want,” he said. His voice was heavy.

Nadine heard dishes clattering and glanced towards the kitchen. She had to hurry up. “You should just leave. Just pack up and go,” she said. “Tomorrow you will take your savings and buy a motorcycle, just like you’ve always wanted. And then you will leave all this crap behind and ride off across the country to sunny California.”

“California,” he said. His eyelids were drooping. Nadine’s mother appeared in the doorway with a mug of coffee.

“I think he’s asleep,” Nadine said before trotting up the stairs to her room.

“It didn’t work,” Nadine reported to Elizabeth the next day at lunch.

“It didn’t fuck him up?” Elizabeth pulled her long hair into a messy ponytail before picking up her sandwich.

“Oh, he was fucked up,” Nadine said. “And I made suggestions and everything. This morning, I was expecting him to come downstairs with his bags packed, but he just said that he’s going to buy a motorcycle when he gets his tax rebate, and that he wants to go on a vacation to California some day.”

“So it only halfway worked?”

“We need to see Luci.”

The girls set off for the theater and again found Luci in the lighting booth. This time she was wearing a red wig, cut in a short, swinging bob. Her eyes were rimmed with red, and her lips were crimson. She sat in Ogre’s lap, and when Nadine and Elizabeth arrived, she regarded them both with annoyance. “Yes?”

“It didn’t exactly work,” Nadine said.

“You mean you didn’t give him the right suggestions.” Luci narrowed her eyes at the girls.

“Should we try it again?”

“No. We’ll try something else.” Luci ran her sharp fingernails through Ogre’s curly hair. She bent her head close and kissed him on the lips, staining them a bloody red.

“Um, should we come back later?” Nadine started to back away towards the stairs.

“No. Stay.” Luci’s deep voice echoed through the little room. She stood up, and Ogre excused himself with a nod of his big head. He ducked out the door and thundered down the stairs.

Nadine approached Luci slowly. “What do we do now?” she asked.

“The second gateway.” Luci curled herself into the chair where Ogre had been sitting.

“The second gateway is dreams. Dreams are the playground of the subconscious, you know, but the gateway can be hard to find.”

Nadine nodded.

“I can help you create dreams and send them into your stepfather’s subconscious, but it’s hard work, and I won’t do it for free.”

“How much?”

“A hundred.”

Nadine had ninety-seven dollars in her savings account, and a few dollars hidden between the pages of her old *Charlotte’s Web* book at home in her room. “Okay,” she said.

“Tomorrow.” Luci pointed a long, skinny finger towards the girls. “I’ll need the money, plus a pillowcase, three of his hairs, and a written script for the dreams you want him to have. Leave the items at the foot of the lighting booth stairs before first period. At the end of the day, come back. You will find the pillowcase. Try not to touch it too much because it will be saturated with nightmares. If he sleeps on it, he will have terrible dreams for three nights. Dreams so invasive he will begin to think they are real.”

That afternoon, Nadine and Elizabeth stopped by the bank and withdrew all the money from Nadine’s savings account. Then they walked to Elizabeth’s apartment. The girls wound through the small living room where Elizabeth’s mother sat in the dark, smoking a cigarette and watching daytime television.

Elizabeth closed and locked the door to her room, and Nadine sat down cross-legged on the bed with a pad of paper in her lap. “Okay, what sort of dream is going to make him want to leave?” she asked.

Elizabeth opened the bottom drawer of her dresser and pulled out a small pink jewelry box with a ballerina painted on the lid. She tossed it onto the bed where it made an indentation in the fluffy comforter. Nadine opened the box to find a small glass bowl and a little baggie of green weed. “Inspiration,” Elizabeth said.

Nadine sprinkled the dried green crumbles into the bowl. “All I want to do is get fucked up and never go home again,” she said quietly.

“That’s why you gotta think. What would make Roy want to leave?” Elizabeth sat down next to Nadine and handed her the lighter.

Nadine inhaled deeply, feeling the smoke burn inside her lungs. She blew it out and watched it stream across the room and disappear. “He always says that if he found out my mom was cheating on him, it’d be over.”

Elizabeth took the bowl from Nadine’s hand. “Perfect.”

When Nadine got home, her mother was washing dishes and Roy was watching television, so she went upstairs and tiptoed into their bedroom. She pulled back the covers and examined the pillows, looking for hair. Her brain still felt fuzzy from the pot, and she imagined that her eyes were focusing in together like a high-powered microscope. Her vision zoomed towards something dark and thin, like the stroke of a fine-tipped pen. She picked it up, but it was too long and curly to be Roy’s. She found another piece on the edge of his pillow. Short and straight. She put it in the zip-lock baggie she’d taken from the kitchen. She heard Roy yelling downstairs, and her heart pounded. What if he found her? What if he knew what she was doing? But of course, he couldn’t know. She found another short hair on the sheet below the pillow, and

then another one, even further down. Coarse and dark. She shuddered to think where it might have come from. She put the hairs in the baggie and went to the hallway closet to find a pillowcase.

The next day, Nadine left everything in a plastic grocery bag at the foot of the stairs leading to the lighting booth. At the end of seventh period, she went back to the theater and found the bag waiting for her, empty now except for the pillowcase. Nadine went straight home so she could be there before either her mother or Roy got home. She went into their room and pulled the pillowcase off the pillow on Roy's side of the bed. She took the nightmare pillowcase out of the plastic bag with the tips of her fingers. Very carefully, she eased the pillow into the case and left it, plump and inviting, on top of the covers. Then she went to the bathroom and washed her hands with hot, soapy water.

For the next three mornings, Nadine woke hoping to hear the scuffle of boxes or the rev of an engine, but the first two mornings there was nothing. Well, not nothing, exactly. Her stepfather looked terrible. He had purple circles under his eyes, and he staggered around the kitchen, drinking cup after cup of black coffee and complaining of a headache.

Sunday morning, after the last night of Luci-induced nightmares, they finally seemed to be taking effect. Nadine sat in the living room, pretending to read a magazine, but really listening to the conversation in the kitchen.

"I've been having the same fucked up dream," Roy said. "I'm watching you have sex with another man, and you're laughing in my face and telling me I'm stupid. It was so real. I woke up this morning, and I could've sworn it actually happened."

"Oh, baby!" Nadine's mother crooned. "It was just a dream. That would never happen."

"Well why am I dreaming it?"

“I don’t know.”

“If you’re cheating on me....”

“I’m not cheating on you!”

“I swear... Maybe I should just buy a motorcycle and fucking take off to California or something. I don’t need this shit.”

“Roy, I swear. I’m not cheating. Why don’t you go back to bed, baby? You look tired.”

“I’m going out to the garage.”

All day, Nadine waited for something to trigger Roy’s departure. But he didn’t leave. He just spent the day in the garage, tending to his plants. Monday came, and the nightmares had stopped. Roy was better rested, and he was already forgetting about his suspicions. He didn’t even complain, like he usually did, that there was nothing good to eat for breakfast. If only the nightmares had kept up for a few more days, Nadine thought on the bus ride to school, it would have been enough to really push him over the edge.

At lunch, Nadine ran to the theater by herself to find Luci. The older girl was on her back on the floor of the lighting booth, her arms folded across her chest like she was lying in a coffin.

“Luci?” Nadine asked.

“What do want?” Luci didn’t open her eyes, and her black lips barely moved.

“I’m sorry. Is this a bad time?”

Slowly, Luci raised herself up. She glared at Nadine. “Just make it fast.” She was wearing a long, black wig. A pillbox hat perched on top of her head, and from it sprouted black mesh, which covered the top half of her pale face like a spider’s web.

“I was wondering, the nightmares were doing really well, but I think I need a few more to do the trick. Just a few more.” Nadine looked down at her feet to avoid Luci’s dark, angry eyes.

“You know my price.”

“Well, I don’t actually have any money right now, but I could get some. By next week maybe, if I baby-sit a lot over the weekend.”

“Then next week I’ll send the dreams.”

“But I think it’s got to be now! We’re so close.”

Luci shrugged. “I don’t accept credit.”

“What else can I do?”

Luci’s black lips parted in a smile, and her teeth looked unnaturally white against them.

“You can try the third gateway,” she said. “Love.”

“Love?”

“If someone or something a person loves is being threatened, the path to the subconscious can emerge.”

“My stepfather doesn’t even know what love is.” Nadine felt her eyes prick with tears.

“Don’t you get it? That’s why I’m trying to make him leave!”

“I’m sorry. I’m afraid I can’t help you.” Luci’s voice was cold and metallic. “Please leave now.” She sank back to the floor and closed her eyes.

Sniffing back tears, Nadine ran down the steps, through the empty theater, and out into an afternoon growing dark with heavy clouds.

* * *

Normally after school, Nadine and Elizabeth hung out behind the library with the potheads and skaters, or they walked to Elizabeth's house to listen to music and talk about boys. But by the end of the day, it was pouring rain, so they rode the school bus to Nadine's house.

Nadine unlocked the door and led Elizabeth up the stairs to her bedroom. The rain smeared down her windows and rapped against the thin roof. The girls kicked off their shoes and sprawled out on the bed, looking up at the ceiling, which was mottled with little bumps, like tiny pimples.

"Luci's such a bitch," Elizabeth said. She mocked Luci's deep voice. "Love is the third gateway." She dangled her arms behind her and they trailed off the bed. "What a bunch of shit."

"I know." Nadine sighed. "What does she want me to do? Get him to fall in love with someone else?" Nadine stared at the naked bulb in the middle of her ceiling. She closed her eyes and saw it still, pulsing red then yellow. "He doesn't even love my mom." She opened her eyes and rolled onto her side, facing Elizabeth. "I'm serious. I don't think they love each other."

"So what does he love?"

"He loves whiskey. And his precious pot plants."

"That's sad."

"Maybe we should try the drug thing again," Nadine said. "Maybe if I give him different suggestions this time, it'll work."

"But Luci has the drug."

Nadine sat up suddenly. She pulled her pillow into her lap and hugged it hard. "Yeah, but we don't know what she gave us. It could have been anything. Roy said it felt like he was on acid, so maybe it was just a DXM pill or something."

"Which we don't have."

“No,” Nadine said. “But,” she squeezed the pillow with growing excitement, “that boy Jerry once told me how to make it with Robitussin and cornstarch.”

Elizabeth sat up. “For real?”

Nadine nodded. “We have some. My mom’s always sick.” She bounced off the bed. “Let’s do it right now.”

Nadine’s mother would be home from work soon, so they couldn’t make the pills in the kitchen. But Nadine knew from her snooping that there was an old Bunsen burner in the garage, and, contrary to Roy’s knowledge, she knew where he kept the garage key. They took a bottle of cough syrup from the upstairs bathroom cabinet before heading to the kitchen for a deep-frying pan, a box of corn starch, and a big metal spoon.

“Basically, DXM is the same as the main ingredient in Robitussin,” Nadine explained as she and Elizabeth pushed open the garage door. It wasn’t raining as hard now, but still the bottoms of their jeans were wet, and rain drops rolled down their foreheads and into their eyes. They went into the garage, which smelled faintly of shit, and pulled the door shut behind them. Inside, their faces glowed blue in the grow lights, and they stared in awe at the neat rows of clay pots, each holding a long leafy stalk of the forbidden plant.

Nadine found the Bunsen burner in a corner and plugged it in. She set it on top of a flimsy card table in the middle of the garage. “Jerry said that all you have to do is heat up the Robitussin and burn off all the sugar, and what’s left is pure liquid DXM.”

“So what’s the cornstarch do?” Elizabeth asked.

“I don’t know. I guess it helps it thicken or something.” Nadine poured the cough syrup into the pan. “We’ll figure it out.” She turned the knob on the burner, and a high blue flame

leapt out, carrying the scent of heated metal. “I guess I’ll just have to hold the pan over it,” Nadine said. “I don’t know how long it’ll take.”

“We can take turns,” Elizabeth suggested. “And whoever’s not holding it can be the lookout.” She pushed an old folding chair against the garage door and stood on it. The small windows were covered with black electrical tape, but the window on the end had some tape missing, so Elizabeth put her face there and peered through the dusty opening. “All clear,” she reported.

Nadine held the heavy pan over the steady blue flame. She looked around the garage. She hadn’t been in here in a long time. There were more plants than there had been before. The garage was crowded with regular things, too: cardboard boxes, tools, the lawnmower, a jug of gasoline. And under the card table were buckets of paint and paint thinner from two years ago when Roy said he was going to repaint the house but never did.

“Do you think things will be better once Roy’s gone?” Elizabeth asked from the window.

“Are you kidding? Of course.” Nadine picked up the spoon from the table and stirred the red liquid. In the eerie blue light her hand looked translucent.

“What if she just finds another guy? That’s what my mom does.”

“No,” Nadine said. “When Roy’s gone, my mom will realize that she never really needed him. Plus, I’ll be sixteen soon, so I’ll get a job and help her out.”

Elizabeth was quiet, and Nadine watched the syrup begin to move inside the pan. Thick bubbles grew slowly on the surface and popped. It began bubbling quicker. “Your mom’s here,” Elizabeth reported. “She’s driving into the driveway.”

“That’s okay,” Nadine said. “We just have to be out of here before Roy gets home.” The liquid churned.

“Oh my God, Nadine,” Elizabeth said. “Roy’s getting out of the passenger side of the car.”

“What?” Nadine’s hand shook, and the syrup sloshed against the sides of the pan. “Are you sure? Why would he be with her?”

“I don’t know. But he is. He’s standing right there in the driveway.”

“What should we do?”

“Oh my God!” Elizabeth jumped off the chair. “He just looked right at me.”

“Shut up,” Nadine whispered. “Just be quiet.”

Suddenly the garage door began to rattle open. The folding chair fell, and Elizabeth shrieked. Roy stood in front of them, wet from the rain outside.

“Nadine!” He came towards her.

“Stay away from me!” Without thinking, Nadine flung the pan at him. Hot red cough syrup flew through the air. The pan landed on the ground behind him, but the red liquid hit his face and rolled down his cheeks. He bellowed like a wounded animal and, even though he was half-blinded from the burning syrup, he lunged for Nadine, his arms groping wildly.

Nadine ran towards the door as Roy knocked into the card table. The table collapsed, and the burner fell. Roy didn’t even notice. He turned around, swatting at his face to wipe off the syrup. It oozed down his neck like blood.

The girls ran outside into the rain. Nadine’s mother stood motionless in the driveway, holding an umbrella and staring at them. “What’s going on?”

Roy emerged from the open garage door. “I’m gonna kill you both,” he yelled. He moved towards them, but he could barely see. His eyes were red and puffy.

“Roy, calm down,” Nadine’s mother said.

Just then, a familiar smell came through the damp air: the woodsy smell of burning marijuana. Roy sniffed, his nostrils flaring. “What the fuck?” He turned back towards the garage. Flames licked the floor where the Bunsen burner had fallen, and the plant closest to it was on fire. The leaves crumbled into glowing white ash, accompanied by thick gray smoke.

“Fucking shit.” Roy ran back into the garage.

“Oh my God,” Nadine’s mother said. “I’m calling the fire department.”

“No!” Roy emerged from the garage with two of the plants. He set them down in the driveway. “Go get the hose. We can’t – they’ll arrest me.” He ran back into the garage, which filled quickly with the pungent smoke. Nadine’s mother dropped her umbrella and ran towards the side of the house to get the hose. Nadine and Elizabeth stood in the driveway in the misting rain, not sure what to do. Roy emerged again with two more plants. He looked insane. His eyes were bloodshot, and wet hair clung to his red, sticky face. “Help me, for god’s sake,” he shouted at them.

Nadine looked at him carefully. “You want us to help you?” she asked.

Roy set the plants down on the driveway. “Yes, dammit!” He pressed his lips together and his chest rose and fell. “Come on, please, Nadine,” he said. There was hint of sad desperation in his voice. For a moment, Nadine thought he looked almost human.

She pursed her lips and looked him in the eye. “No. I think we’ll go call 911.”

The girls ran into the house, ignoring Roy’s angry screams.

In the kitchen, Nadine peered out the window. Her mother was on the side of the house, struggling to untangle the old garden hose. Roy ran from the garage with an armload of plants. Behind him, the fire grew. “Are you really calling 911?” Elizabeth asked.

“No. I don’t want my mom to get in trouble or anything. I just said that to scare him.”

“He’s going to be so mad at you.”

“I know. But it was worth it just to stand up to him.” Nadine watched Roy deposit another load of plants and head back into the garage. It was sad in a way. He loved the plants more than anyone, more than himself.

Suddenly, there was an explosion of noise and light. The garage seemed to shudder for a split second before it burst into flames. It was both startling and beautiful, like fireworks on the fourth of July.

The funeral was small. There was no casket, no remains. Two months later, Nadine and her mother moved back in with Nana because, without Roy, they couldn’t afford the mortgage on the house. Nadine slept on the living room couch, waking up when her mother staggered in at three a.m. from various bars. Every night cat hair tickled Nadine’s nose and got caught in her throat. She went to school with itchy red eyes, and her teachers recommended her for drug counseling, even though she tried to tell them it was just allergies.

One night, she dreamt of a wolverine chasing her in the school theater. She ran through the labyrinth of black curtains, twisting, and turning, until she came to a dead end. Luci, in a long, gray wig, watched from the lighting booth above as the wolverine advanced. It jumped at Nadine, its nostrils spewing pot smoke, and when it slashed at her heart with its sharp claws, cherry red cough syrup poured out. Her eyes flew open, and she was back on the couch in the dark living room, with one of Nana’s cats asleep on her chest. Nadine pushed the animal onto the floor and fell back asleep.

And so the girl with the gumdrop eyes had rid herself of the evil stepfather and moved away from the yellow house by the brown, smelly river. But she did not feel contented, and she was haunted by a ghost that lurked in the gateways of her subconscious. She knew that something had to change. She stopped doing drugs and began to apply herself in school so that she could get a college scholarship and leave her pathetic, little town. After graduation, she moved to New York City and studied psychology, focusing on dream analysis and Freudian theory. She obtained her PhD and married a wealthy, eccentric man she met in graduate school. Together they opened a hypnotherapy clinic in Manhattan, and that is where they are still living to this very day.

High School Princess

I have a lot of issues with Rapunzel. I just don't think she was very pretty. For one thing, she never cut her hair, so she probably had a ton of split ends. And, okay, so the wicked witch locked her up in a tower for years, right? I mean, I don't know, maybe Rapunzel was doing lunges and squats up there, but I seriously doubt that. She was probably just sitting around, letting the cellulite build up on the backs of her thighs. And she definitely didn't bathe very often, if at all. So by the time the handsome prince found her she was probably fat and greasy. I don't get why he was all obsessed with her unless maybe he was just really desperate for some play.

Really, I don't think any of the fairy tale princesses were very cute. They're all supposed to be "fair and creamy" or "rosy and dimpled" or "ripe and milky." You know what that means? It means they were all pale and chubby. Sure, they had the corsets holding them in, but as soon as they unlaced those strings, their guts probably pooched out in the front and their white butts sagged down in the back. Plus, you know they didn't shave or wax, so their legs and armpits were all hairy, and I don't even want to think about their bikini areas. Gross.

And that's just their bodies. Now think about their faces. There were no dermatologists or orthodontists back then. They didn't even have make-up. So all the princesses were probably covered in pimples and had crooked, yellow teeth and under-eye circles. I'm telling you, if Rapunzel came out of the past and showed up at my high school, she would be totally shunned. Of course, I'd be nice and take her under my wing. I'd make her cut her hair and get some highlights. I'd teach her how to pluck her eyebrows and wear lip gloss. We'd go tanning

together, and I'd get her a consultation at the Clinique counter at the mall. Plus I'd tell her to buy Pro-Active, and Crest White Strips, and probably Invisalign, too, if her teeth were crooked. Oh yeah, and a gym membership. For sure.

I'd have to teach her about boys, too. That around here, she's not going to get any marriage proposals at fifteen. This is the modern age. You can't just get guys to fall in love with you because you have long hair and a pretty singing voice. You have to make sure every part of you is perfect because that's the way things are now. I mean, we're lucky to have so many products. And, the thing is, boys see the models in magazines and the actresses in the movies, and they think that's what girls are supposed to look like. And it *is* what we're supposed to look like now. I mean, now that we have Pro-Active and Invisalign and mineral make-up and all that. Thank God we do, right?

So, yeah, I'll tell Rapunzel that she has no excuse not to be pretty and perfect. After all, she's a princess. She has to be.

Meat Man

Once a week, Amy cut her own hair in the bathroom with a pair of rusty scissors. She could have borrowed her roommate Sasha's scissors, or bought new ones, but she liked having to hack through her thick, red hair, tugging it so tight her scalp hurt. She didn't care about the end result, as long as it was short. She even carried her scissors with her in a bag slung across her chest, just in case she found an accidental long hair that needed to be cut immediately. "Hair is just dead cells," she always told Sasha. "Why would you want a bunch of dead things hanging all over you?" The idea of a guy running his hands through a girl's long hair made her feel like vomiting.

Lots of things made Amy feel like vomiting. Home football games. Sorority formals. Business majors. Cheese fries.

And yet she wasn't nauseated in the least by her three-legged pet mouse Stumpy. She routinely picked him up out of his cage and kissed his tiny, wet nose. She let him nibble on her bottom lip before putting him down on her bed and watching him hobble over the lumps in her covers. When she put him back in his cage, she scanned the bed for little, black, mouse turds, picking them up with her fingernails and tossing them towards the trash can.

Amy had rescued Stumpy from the Biology lab where he had been born mutated and was going to be killed because he couldn't be used in experiments. For three days after she'd brought him home, he had made tiny chirping sounds that Amy imagined were mouse sobs. He didn't make the sounds anymore except around strangers, and, lately, around Sasha, which Amy took to be a sign.

“Amy, your mouse stinks,” Sasha told her one day.

“Not as much as the stench of hypocrisy.”

“Can you clean his cage, please?”

Sasha also made her feel like vomiting.

At first Sasha had seemed okay. She played bass in an all-girl punk band. She was a sociology major. She had a nose ring and a tattoo on her left shoulder of a wilting flower. But it was all a façade. She took regular showers and shopped at Victoria’s Secret and smiled at people she didn’t really like. And she was dating a boy named Daniel who was pre-med and played club soccer. Amy felt sick imagining Daniel’s sharp, perfect nose nuzzling Sasha’s nose ring and his long, surgeon fingers running across her tattoo. He probably just wanted to be able to tell his friends that he nailed the hot alternative chick. And Sasha thought he was *such a great guy*. Puke.

Amy decided that as much as she hated to accommodate Sasha, Stumpy’s cage did need cleaning. She picked it up and marched outside into the chilly, fall afternoon. The sun burned weakly at the edge of the horizon, and a ghost moon wavered in the pale sky. Amy held Stumpy in one hand while she turned the cage upside down and dumped poop-covered cedar shavings onto the sidewalk. “I hope Sasha steps in it,” she whispered into Stumpy’s twitching face.

Amy looked around at the stately buildings of East Campus. Brick sidewalks cut through neatly trimmed green lawns. The walkways were canopied on either side by old oak trees that fluttered leaves onto the heads of students as they hurried to psychology class or chem lab or the Commons to check their mail. It was hard for Amy to remember why, three years ago, she had picked this place. It all seemed so fake now.

Instead of going back inside the room, Amy put Stumpy in his emptied cage and walked with him towards the dining hall. She made a point to glare at everyone she saw walking past. She growled at a group of sorority girls and was disappointed that they didn't hear her over the sound of their own giggles.

Amy had never really been much of a people-person. Her father called her shy and introverted; her mother called her anti-social and rude. Lately, though, instead of just being annoyed with people, she felt genuine surges of hatred towards everyone around her. She knew it probably had something to do with the fact that she'd been raped at the end of last year by a boy named Patrick, and she knew that if she didn't go to therapy soon she'd probably end up going crazy like her mother and getting put on an assortment of anti-depressants, but the thought of therapy, the thought of even saying what happened *out loud*, made her feel sick.

Amy marched down the brick path. I hate you, she thought. She wasn't sure who she was talking to. Maybe Sasha. Or Patrick. Her mother. Herself. I hate people, she thought. Hate, hate, hate, hate. The word repeated itself over and over in her head like a skipping cd. Her heart beat in time with her stomping feet, and she suddenly felt like screaming and throwing Stumpy's cage into a nearby bush. Instead she ran up the steps to the University Center and flung open the door.

The cafeteria was warm and smelled like sour milk. The windows were fogged up, and the echoing voices of students as they shouted over the clanking of plates and silverware made Amy feel like she was in a medieval banquet hall. She half expected to see kids gnawing on turkey legs and throwing the bones onto the floor for the dogs.

Amy decided to match her mood by getting the most unappealing food she could find. She filled her tray with a plate of Salisbury steak in lumpy gravy, a bowl of slimy baked apples,

and a piece of dried-out cake. She sat down in the corner next to a steamy window. There was a brown-haired boy sitting at the other end of the long table, but he was far enough away that Amy could pretend like he wasn't there. She put Stumpy's cage on the table as a barrier between them and dropped cake crumbs in between the slim, metal bars.

Amy then set to work mashing her Salisbury steak into a gray mush with her fork. She heard a noise from the boy at the far end of the table and peeked through Stumpy's cage to observe him. And that's when she noticed, although how she hadn't noticed before she wasn't sure, that he had slices of lunch meat all over his face. A round piece of bologna was stuck to his forehead, and there were two square speckled pieces that looked like olive loaf on either cheek. A thin slice of pink ham was dangling from his chin. He was solemnly piling additional pieces of lunch meat onto a slice of white bread that lay dejectedly on his otherwise empty plate. Stumpy's whiskers twitched with interest. Amy stared down at the brown mush on her plate and said as loudly as she dared, "Hey, I like your meat."

She wasn't sure if he had heard her because he didn't say anything, and she continued to stare at her plate, afraid to look at him. She swirled the mush with her fork.

"Yeah, I think I'm going to wear this meat to a party," he said after a while in a monotone voice.

She raised her head in his direction. He was looking at her with flame blue eyes so bright she felt like she was staring directly into the sun. "What party?" she asked.

"Just some party. I'm going to go as Meat Man."

"Is it a costume party?"

"No."

Amy's mouth was dry, and she wished she had thought to get a glass of juice before sitting down. "Do you wear your food a lot?" she asked.

"Sometimes." The boy folded his meat and bread in half and took a bite from the folded edge. She watched him put the sandwich back down on his plate. She could see his teeth marks in the bread. The pink meat peeked through the half-circle hole, and Amy felt slightly embarrassed. She looked back at her own plate.

She decided she better do something really weird to scare him away. "Sometimes I wash myself with food," she said loudly. She stuck her hand into the bowl of sticky apple slices and smeared the warm apples up to her elbows. The thick syrup made the little, blond hairs bend backwards, and the apples began to slide off her arms and drop with wet plops onto the table.

The boy stood up and walked the length of the table to sit across from her. His lips were very red and his eyes very blue. He blinked several times and then said, "I'm Nathan."

"Amy." She picked up a stray apple slice and rubbed it into the back of her hand. "And that's my mouse, Stumpy."

"Are you eating that?" He gestured towards her steak mush.

"Be my guest." Amy's heart beat quickly, and the cacophony of the cafeteria seemed to have faded away. It was just her and Nathan, separated only by a tray of food and a mouse cage.

Nathan's arm reached across the table. He dipped his finger into the gravy and then, with a flourish, he swiped it onto the tip of his nose. The slices of meat trembled slightly on his face. He paused with his finger still hovering in the air. "Do you...?" He looked at her intently as he dipped his finger back into the mush.

"Okay," Amy whispered.

Nathan's finger came towards her, dripping gravy, and she felt the world swirling around her. He touched her nose, and she was momentarily overwhelmed by the smell of meat. Her entire face prickled at his touch. She smiled, and he smiled back. The piece of ham fell off his chin, and he picked it up from the table and popped it into his mouth. "Hey, do you maybe wanna come to the party with me?" he asked as he chewed.

Amy opened and closed her hands. The apple syrup was beginning to harden on her fingers. She hated parties. And boys. But this Meat Man boy was different.

"Do you?" he asked again.

"I guess so," she heard herself say.

Back in her dorm, Amy locked herself in the bathroom she shared with Sasha and two other girls. She washed the apple goo off her hands before searching through Sasha's Tupperware container of make-up. Amy hated make-up as a general rule, but she was sometimes self-conscious about her pale eyelashes. From a distance it looked like she had no eyelashes at all. She found a tube of mascara and put some on. It made her green eyes a little bit brighter. Her nose was still slightly brown from the gravy, but she decided not to wash it off.

At ten-thirty, Nathan stopped by her room so they could go to the party together. He wore a black beret and a white t-shirt on which he'd written in permanent marker, "Meat Man." There were slices of lunch meat hanging off the shirt at random intervals, held on with safety pins. He did not, however, still have meat on his face. "They kept falling off," he explained. His cheeks and forehead looked shiny.

Nathan had brought a bottle of tequila that was mostly empty. “There are still a few shots left in here,” he said, swinging the bottle in front of his face and watching the pee-colored liquid slosh back and forth. “I don’t have any salt or limes, though.”

“That’s okay.” Amy paced back and forth in front of her bed. “Maybe there’s something else salty we can lick.” Her eyes surveyed the room.

“It’s too bad neither of us are sweaty.” He sat down on Amy’s bed. “Then we could just lick each other.”

Amy felt a jolt go through her whole body at the thought of his tongue touching her skin. Blood rushed up her neck, and when she turned to face him, she knew that her cheeks were blazing red. “I think my roommate has some crackers,” she said.

They sat together on the bed and took turns licking salt off Wheat Thins and chugging from the tequila bottle. When the bottle was empty, they stood up and left the pile of soggy crackers on Sasha’s pillow.

“It can be her bedtime snack,” Amy said.

“You’re funny.” Nathan squeezed her shoulder.

“Did you see my mouse Stumpy?” She shrugged away from his hand.

“Yeah. I remember him from the cafeteria.” Nathan walked towards the cage, which sat on top of Amy’s desk. “Can I hold him?”

“He doesn’t like strangers,” she said, but she slid the cage door open and reached down to pick up Stumpy. She placed his warm, little body in Nathan’s palm. Stumpy’s whiskers twitched, and he gave Nathan’s thumb a friendly nibble. Maybe it was just the soothing smell of meat, but Stumpy didn’t make his mouse-sob noise like he usually did with strangers. Amy

watched Nathan rub Stumpy's little head with the knuckle of his forefinger and then gently place him back inside the cage.

Outside the dorm, the air was cool and smelled faintly of sulfur. They walked down the little brick paths until they reached the edge of campus where the real world began. "So where's this party?" Amy asked.

"The Inferno," Nathan said. "You know that place?"

Amy knew it. It was a big, dilapidated house a few blocks from campus. Sasha's band played there sometimes in the living room, and although different people lived in the house each year, there was always someone living there who sold weed. Amy had gone to parties at the Inferno in years past, back when she had more friends and she sort of liked people. The thing with Patrick had happened there in his upstairs bedroom, underneath the red tapestry that hung loosely from the ceiling, impregnated with air. She had gone with him willingly. They had lain down together on his bed that smelled like pot and dryer sheets. She hadn't been back to the Inferno since then.

"Amy?"

Amy had stopped walking. She looked at Nathan. His head was cocked to the side, and the little nub in the middle of his beret stood up like a tiny cowlick.

"I think I'm going to go home," she said.

"Why?"

"I really don't like the Inferno."

"It's not actually hell, you know," Nathan said. "It's just this shitty party house."

"I know." Amy stared down at the sidewalk, at the long crack between two bricks.

"But it's still pretty hellish."

“Well, this entire town is pretty hellish if you’re going to get technical,” Nathan said.

“But at least we can get free beer at the Inferno.”

“Some of the people who hang out there make me want to vomit.”

“Well, if that happens, you should try to vomit in their faces,” he suggested. “Or, if they’re taller than you, on their shoes. That’s what I do. Or sometimes, I just pee in their closets.”

The shots of tequila were beginning to kick in, and Amy’s brain felt loose and jiggly inside her skull. A car drove by slowly, illuminating Nathan’s face and catching light on something metallic glinting near the collar of his shirt.

“Meat Man,” she said, “What’s that silver thing around your neck?”

Nathan put his hand to his collarbone and pulled out a wide necklace made of silver mesh. “Chainmail,” he said. “I made it myself.”

“Chainmail?”

“Yeah.” Nathan shrugged. “I’ve always been into medieval stuff. I’m kind of a dork.”

“It’s okay.” Amy smiled. She had gone to the Renaissance Festival every year in high school, something she didn’t readily admit. “Hey, can I feel it?” Nathan bent his neck towards her, and she reached out a hand so she could rub the tiny interlocking silver loops between her thumb and middle finger. “That’s neat.”

“Thanks.” Nathan put his hand to his throat and found Amy’s fingers there. He pressed her hand against the cold metal. “When I have time, I’m going to make a whole suit of armor out of chainmail.”

“And do what with it?” She pulled her hand away.

“I don’t know. Just wear it under my clothes. You know, for protection.”

“Who knows when you might need it.”

“Exactly.” He looked across the empty street. “So, do you want to go to this party? We could just put in an appearance.”

Her stomach did a flip at the thought of the Inferno, but something about Nathan’s long, somber face calmed her. “Okay,” she said finally. “We wouldn’t want your Meat Man costume to go to waste.”

They crossed the street and walked down the block, heading towards the Inferno.

As they approached the house, Amy could see people standing outside on the porch smoking. Their red cigarette butts glowed in the dark. Slowly, Amy and Nathan walked up the steps, through the clouds of smoke, and into the front hall.

The foyer was packed with kids, and their drunken shouts throbbed against Amy’s eardrums. She kept her eyes down so she wouldn’t have to say hi to anyone she knew. She followed Nathan through the living room and into the kitchen, where he went directly to the refrigerator and pulled out two bottles of beer. He pressed one into her palm. “Living room?” he yelled to her.

“Sure.”

In the living room, kids sprawled over the beat-up sectional couch, and a couple was making out in an orange recliner by the fireplace. Otherwise, the living room was merely a thoroughfare from the kitchen to the foyer. A constant flow of people moved in both directions, bumping into each other and then drifting on. Amy and Nathan stood in the corner near the window, drinking their beers and making mean comments about people walking past.

“That boy is going to grow up to be a fat-assed child molester.”

“If that girl doesn’t already have herpes, she’s going to get it tonight.”

“That boy smells like someone peed in his closet *and* vomited on his shoes.”

Amy waited with dreaded anticipation to see Patrick. He lived at the Inferno, after all, in the front bedroom overlooking the street. His “den,” as he called it. Amy tipped the beer bottle back against her lips. “Empty,” she said, setting it down on the window sill.

“Let’s go find the keg.”

They squeezed their way into the kitchen where a group of kids sat around a table in the middle of the room. A chubby, blond girl dealt out piles of cards while another girl tried to clear the table of beer bottles and empty potato chip bags.

“Hey, what’s on your shirt?” the blonde girl asked, looking up from the cards as Nathan walked by.

“Meat,” he said. “You want some?”

“No. That’s gross.”

The girl cleaning off the table dropped a plastic cup, and Amy watched it bounce three times before rolling across the sloping linoleum and into the corner.

“Come on,” Nathan said. “Someone has to eat it. I don’t want all this good meat to go to waste.”

“That is so sick,” the girl said. “It looks like it’s rotting.”

“It’s perfectly good.” Amy looked up from the floor. “You’re just a priss.” She pulled a piece of turkey from Nathan’s chest and stuffed it into her mouth. It was warm, but it still tasted okay.

Nathan put his arm around Amy’s shoulders. “That’s why Amy is the best.”

“You guys are fucking weird,” the girl said.

“Thanks.” Nathan said.

They let themselves out the back door and into a small, overgrown yard. The keg was set up in the corner next to the high wooden fence, and they walked towards it across the damp grass.

Amy looked around the back yard. Kids were staggered in groups, sipping from cups or huddled around joints. Their faces were gray and indeterminate in the dark. Amy hugged her arms around herself in the cold air and shifted her weight from one foot to the other as Nathan filled two red plastic cups with beer.

The back door opened, and a figure stood illuminated in the bright rectangle of light. He was short with thick arms and shaggy hair. Patrick, Amy thought. Probably wearing the same old threadbare Phish t-shirt and hemp necklace. She usually hated upper-class kids who thought they were hippies, but Patrick had interested her with his stories of hiking the Appalachian Trail and hang-gliding in Florida. They'd sat together on the sectional couch, flirting and passing a bottle of Southern Comfort back and forth between them. She had told him she hated the Grateful Dead, mostly just to get a rise out of him, and he'd insisted they go upstairs so she could smoke a bowl, listen to the Dead, and change her mind.

The figure in the doorway descended the three concrete steps and began to walk across the grass towards the keg. Amy wondered what she should do. Throw beer in his face? Kick him in the crotch? Her stomach churned, and she felt the back of her throat stinging with bile. The figure strode towards them, his short arms pumping, and as he approached, Amy realized it wasn't Patrick after all. Just some shaggy-haired boy who looked like Patrick in the dark.

“You guys guarding the keg or something?” he asked.

“No, man, go ahead,” Nathan said.

Amy let out the breath she had been holding. She felt like she'd been holding her breath for months. "Meat Man," she said, "can I borrow your chainmail?"

"Sure." He reached behind his head and unclasped the necklace. He poured the links into Amy's hand, and she fastened it around her own neck.

With the armor cold and heavy at her throat, she took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "I'll be right back," she said.

"Where are you going?"

"On a quest."

Nathan smiled at her. "Okay, Sir Amy. Come back to me when you're done."

"Sure." Amy swallowed the rest of her beer and threw the cup on the ground. Then she marched towards the back door. She had been damming up the memories in the back of her mind for months, but now they came flooding back. She remembered sitting down on his bed while he found the Grateful Dead cd. The first song wasn't even over before he started kissing her. Things happened quickly. She told him no, that she didn't think it was such a good idea, but he kept on going. "Don't worry about it," he said. "It's just sex. It's fine." She told him no again, but he was strong and pushy, and she was too drunk to know what to do. Then he was inside her. She told him to stop, that it hurt, but he didn't stop. He just kept jabbing himself into her, making her feel like she was nothing but an empty hole. A place for people to hide things.

Now Amy walked through the kitchen of the Inferno and into the living room. She scanned faces, but she didn't see him. She shoved her way to the foyer and headed up the tight, narrow staircase. The second floor was much quieter. Amy walked down the short hallway, hearing the slight slapping of her shoes against the hardwood. Her eyes were focused on the closed door.

She imagined him in there. His dry, scaly skin and shaggy hair. Forcing himself on another girl. It had hurt to pee for three days afterwards. She put her hand on the knob and turned. The door swung open, revealing the room, dark, and empty, and reeking of pot smoke. She flipped the light switch, and above her head the red tapestry glowed. The bed was disheveled, and there were piles of clothes and books on the floor. Pale curtains swayed in front of the open windows, like ghosts in the breeze.

Amy walked towards the desk. She moved her finger across the mouse pad of his laptop, and the screen sprang to life. “Biological and Sociocultural Views of Gender Roles in the New Millennium by Patrick Jennings.” The stench of hypocrisy, Amy thought. She picked up a lighter sitting on the edge of the desk and flicked it with her thumb. The flame leapt out, its outside a wavering orange, its inside as blue as Nathan’s eyes.

She dropped the lighter back on the desk and continued to move slowly around the room, her eyes roving. She was looking for something, but she wasn’t sure what. Weapons, or child pornography, or bottles of roofies, maybe? Some kind of proof. But everything was so normal. How could she have known he was dangerous? She thought of crazy Nathan, his shirt dripping with lunch meat. How could she ever know anything about anyone?

The dragon lies sleeping just over there, Amy thought to herself, looking at the unmade bed. He’s missing but one scale - the scale that should cover his heart. I must take my trusty sword and plunge it into that unprotected place. She fumbled in her bag and pulled out the pair of rusty scissors. She opened them and held one of the blades in her hand. She walked towards the bed. The evil dragon. The smoking, sweating, no-condom-wearing dragon. The dark green blankets were pulled back, revealing a spot of white sheet. She raised her hand above her head

and plunged the sword into the dragon's white belly. There was a ripping sound as the scissor blade cut through the sheets and stabbed the hard fluff inside the mattress.

Suddenly, there was a pealing cry. The dragon in its death throes? Blue and red lights flashed, coloring the room. Amy moved to the window and looked out. A black and white police car had pulled up in front of the house; its sirens were on. Amy ran out of the room and flew down the stairs, nearly knocking over a girl standing on the landing. Kids ran in all directions, crashing into each other and spewing from the house in a panic. Amy pushed her way through the kitchen and ran out into the backyard. Nathan stood in the middle of the yard, and she ran to him. "Let's get out of here," she said. "Cops."

They hurried around the side of the house to the front where more police cars had pulled up, their lights flashing. Nathan grabbed Amy's hand, and together they sprinted down the sidewalk towards campus. Once they were far enough away, they slowed to a walk. Amy tried to catch her breath and realized that she was still holding Nathan's hand.

"You rescued me from the cops," he said playfully.

"I do what I can." Amy shrugged.

They walked in silence for a moment. Nathan's hand was warm, and she could feel a pulse beating in his thumb. She tipped her head back and looked at the moon, which was now large and solid in the sky.

"I have a single," Nathan said as they entered campus. "Do you want to come over?"

She released her fingers from his. "I'm not going to have sex with you for a really, really long time. If ever."

"We could just talk."

She didn't say anything, only turned to look at him, and as her eyes adjusted to the dark, his features came into focus, developing like a black and white photograph. She *did* want to go back to his single and sleep in his arms with their limbs entwined and their dreams mingling. But she worried that he would want to have sex, and she would have to explain why she wasn't ready. "Are you a virgin?" he might ask. "Not exactly," she'd have to tell him.

"All your meat fell off," she said, patting his chest lightly.

"You know, you don't have to come back to my room if you don't want," he said. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to do." He stopped walking and put his arms around her waist, pulling her close. She didn't know whether she should take off running towards her dorm or maybe just puke on his shoes. The alcohol rushed through her body, and blood pounded in her fingertips. He bent down towards her, and she rose up on her toes. His mouth found hers.

They walked down the brick pathway under the spell of new kisses, stopping to lean together against tree trunks and lamp posts. "Am I walking you back to your room?" Nathan asked as their lips broke apart for the third time. Amy nodded. They walked through the old campus gardens, and he put his arm around her. "So what was your quest anyway?"

"Slaying a dragon."

"Hey, I'm supposed to be the knight in shining armor," Nathan teased.

Amy touched the chain mail that still circled her neck. "You are."

When they reached Amy's building, they kissed goodnight, and Amy ran up the steps of her dorm and swiped her ID card. The door clicked open, and she climbed the stairs to the second floor. She unlocked her door and walked inside the room. The light was off, and Sasha lay in bed under the covers.

"Hey," Amy whispered. "Are you awake?"

“Yeah.” She reached over and turned on the lamp next to her bed. “I just got home.”

“How was your date with Daniel?” Amy closed the door and kicked off her shoes.

Sasha raised her eyebrows. “You really want to know?”

“Sure.”

“It was fun. We filled up water bottles with vodka and Sprite and played putt-putt golf.”

Amy opened Stumpy’s cage and pulled him out, wrapping her fingers around his soft little body. “That sounds fun.”

“Rachel called me a minute ago and said you were hanging out with some tall boy at the Inferno tonight.”

“Yeah.” Amy nuzzled Stumpy’s patchy fur. She could feel his heart beating fast.

“Apparently he was wearing a shirt with a bunch of meat all over it.”

“Yeah.”

Sasha sat up in bed and looked at Amy. “So who was this guy?”

“Nathan the Meat Man.” A tiny giggle escaped from Amy’s lips.

Sasha’s mouth opened wide. “Amy! Did you just giggle about a boy?”

“No. I hate boys. You know that.”

Sasha shrugged and lay back down. “I know.”

Amy put Stumpy back inside his cage and swallowed the laughter that was bubbling up from deep inside her stomach. It was only then that she remembered she’d left her scissors speared in Patrick’s mattress.

Smiling faintly, she put on her favorite pair of pajamas and crawled into bed. She slept soundly, and in the morning, feeling wide-awake and rejuvenated, she walked to the campus store and bought herself a new pair of scissors. Later, in her room, she ripped apart the package

and took them out, opening and closing them a few times. There was something satisfying about the sound of the sharp new blades, slicing through the air before they closed up tight together.

Bear Boy

There was once a beautiful girl named Rena who was a very bad driver. She drove much too fast, and she often kept the steering wheel steady with her knees while she text messaged her friends or put on make-up in the rearview mirror. At night, on her way to parties or bars, she drank vodka and soda out of a plastic cup and sang along loudly with the radio while rolling through stop signs and running red lights.

“You know, you’re supposed to brake *before* the white line,” her roommate Kat said to her one night as they were stopped at a traffic light in Rena’s little, teal Honda.

“What?”

“The white line. See? See how you’re way past it?”

“Oh.” Rena shrugged. “Whatever.” She picked up her vodka and diet orange soda from the cup holder between the seats and took a sip through the neon bendy straw. “Where should we go?”

Kat sighed. “I’m bored of everywhere. Maybe we should just go home.”

“No!” Rena swirled her drink, listening to the gentle thud of ice cubes against the sides of the plastic cup. “We’re not going home!” The light turned green, and Rena stepped on the gas in her white heels.

They decided on a club downtown they’d gone to often as undergrads. There were beanbag chairs and colored Christmas lights upstairs, and a tiny, sweaty dance floor downstairs. All the beanbag chairs were occupied by kissing couples and nodding-off drunks, so Rena and Kat slouched against the bar in their pleated mini-skirts and fake tans, drinking cherry vodka sours.

Rena smiled at a balding man sitting on a nearby stool. She ran her hand through her short, dark hair and felt beautiful in the reflection of the man's eyes. The next thing she knew, he was buying tequila shots for her and Kat. Rena licked salt off the inside of her wrist, winked at the older man, and swallowed her tequila. With limejuice stinging their lips, the girls headed downstairs to dance.

The dance floor was very dark, and the black-light over the bar made the bartenders glow white and hollow like plastic Halloween skeletons.

Rena ordered a beer for herself – Kat said she'd had enough – and the two girls squeezed their way onto the dance floor. Rena held her beer bottle at its thin, brown neck, and brought it to her lips, tipping back her head a little. She looked out over the dance floor. It was a carnival. Brightly dressed clowns and screaming wild animals. Girls with fishnet stockings and sparkling faces slinked themselves over magicians and muscle men. The whole place began to spin like a carousel, and everyone seemed to be riding snow-white unicorns or dancing with bears wearing fedoras. Rena swayed her hips and tossed her head, letting her hair whip across her face.

When the song ended, Kat clutched Rena's arm and leaned towards her. "I'm going to the bathroom!" Her voice left a shrill ringing in Rena's left ear.

Rena danced by herself while she scanned the crowd, pursing her lips and winking at everyone who looked in her direction: the clowns, the chorus girls, the ringmaster deejay in his candy red t-shirt. And then, suddenly, the bear in the fedora was heading towards her with big, lumbering steps.

"Hi." He looked down at Rena. His eyes were small and flat, like buttons, and his face was covered with dark, scratchy hair. "You wanna dance?"

Rena usually danced with blond surfers or shaggy-haired rock stars or tattooed starving artists. She didn't really like chubby, scruffy, bear-faced boys. But there was nothing else to do, and no one else to dance with, so she twitched up her lips in a flirty halfway smile and said, "I already am dancing." She shook her hips a little so her short skirt fluttered around her thighs.

The bear boy looked at the floor. "Did you maybe wanna dance with me?"

"Why not?" Rena shouted, shrugging. She swallowed the last of her beer. "Hold on a sec." She turned sideways and maneuvered through the crowd. She put her empty beer bottle on a sticky table along the edge of the dance floor and looked back at the bear boy. He stood motionless, watching her intently, while people swirled around him. She danced her way back. In front of him, she moved her hips wildly, flung her arms in the air, twirled herself around. The bear boy bobbed his head and shuffled his big feet, trying to keep up. He moved towards her and put his paws awkwardly on her waist. Rena shrugged and reached her arms up around his hairy neck.

Bear Boy leaned towards Rena, his breath hot in her ear. "You know you're the best looking girl here?"

She smiled and swayed her hips a little closer to him.

When Kat finally appeared, Rena was dancing with her back against the bear boy, and his arms tight around her waist.

"Let's go!" Kat yelled. "This place sucks."

"Okay." Rena broke away from the bear.

"Wait!" He grabbed her arm. "What's your name?"

"Rena."

"I'm Mike."

“Nice to meet you.”

He moved his rough paw down her arm and found her hand. He squeezed it tightly.

“Could I get your number?”

Kat raised an eyebrow. “Come on Re, we gotta go.”

Rena looked at Mike’s hairy, hopeful face. “Give me your phone,” she said. He pulled a cell phone out of his back pocket and handed it to her. Rena punched her number into the glowing blue digits and handed it back.

He tipped his hat at her. Rena waved as Kat grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her through the thinning crowd to the stairs.

Outside in the chilly night, Kat walked quickly towards the car, and Rena trotted to catch up, her heels clicking on the grainy sidewalk.

“What were you doing to that poor boy?” Kat asked.

“What?”

“You were leading him on.”

“No I wasn’t!”

“If you don’t like someone, it’s mean to give him your number and make him think that you do.”

“Who says I don’t like him?” Rena fished her keys out of her fake leather purse. “I don’t even know him.”

“Whatever.” Kat shrugged and slid into the car.

* * *

A few days later, Rena stood in the bathroom, putting on eyeliner while Kat lounged in her bedroom and listened to loud, European techno.

“The bear boy suggested we go out for seafood, naturally,” Rena shouted over the music. “I’m just hoping we’re not going to a stream where I have to wait for him to catch us some salmon.”

Kat walked to the bathroom doorway and leaned against the doorframe. “No one’s forcing you to go out with him.”

“I know. But he was just so nice.”

“And you’re mean. It’ll never work.” Kat wandered back towards her bedroom.

“I’m not mean,” Rena protested. She leaned across the sink towards the mirror and used her finger to smudge the makeup around her dark eyes. She wanted to make poor bear boy cum in his pants just by looking at her.

She dabbed spicy perfume on her neck and clasped a dangling silver charm bracelet around her wrist. She turned sideways towards the mirror, took a deep breath in, and smoothed the fabric of her top flat against her stomach. Then she went to the kitchen to make herself a vodka tonic.

Mike picked her up ten minutes later in his truck. In the dark, sweaty cab, Rena did most of the talking. Mike drove nervously and had to attempt parallel parking twice before he got it right. Rena let herself out of the truck before Mike had the chance to open the door for her, and they both went into the restaurant.

At dinner, Rena took sips of hot sake out of a tiny ceramic cup and purposefully let her hair fall over one eye. Mike picked up a piece of sushi with his big fingers and dunked it in a pool of soy sauce flecked with green wasabi. He popped it in his mouth like it was a piece of

popcorn. Rena tried to cut a sushi piece in half with a chopstick, but the seaweed unraveled, and the yellowfin tuna and avocado spilled out. She dabbed a few pieces of rice onto her finger and licked them off. Mike watched her, fascinated.

“You know, you’re supposed to eat it all in one bite.” He popped another piece into his mouth.

“I know. But all these rolls you ordered are so big!” She pointed her chopsticks at him playfully and picked up a piece of sushi topped with tiny, golden fish eggs. “Here, watch. I’ll do this one the right way.” She dipped the sushi in the bowl of soy sauce and put it into her mouth slowly. While she chewed, her cheeks bulging, she smiled at Mike and winked. Sake always made her feel like flirting.

“So. Rena.” Mike leaned towards her, his elbows heavy on the table.

“So.” Rena tipped her delicate sake cup against her lips and sipped. It burned down her throat.

“I want to know everything about you.”

Rena laughed.

“What do you do? Where do you work?” Mike held his tiny sake cup between two fat fingers.

“I’m getting my Master’s in Communications and I work as a personal trainer.”

“Wow. That must be why you’re in such good shape. What else?”

“What else do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

Rena played with the spaghetti strap of her dress, zipping her fingers up and down against it. She was delighted to see his attention immediately drawn to her shoulder. It was enormously flattering to impress someone so thoroughly without really trying.

Mike talked about his job as an electrician's apprentice, and Rena tried to stay focused. His words were flowing by a little too quickly, and her vision was already blurry. She looked at him carefully as he spoke. His eyes and nose were small, but the rest of him was big: wide shoulders, thick torso, meaty arms. His hair was dark and messy and his beard scraggly. It crept down his neck and nearly met the chest hair that was peeking out from the top of his button-down shirt.

"So, do you always have a beard?" she interrupted. "I mean, do you ever shave it off, like in the summertime?"

Mike cupped his hand around his scruffy chin. "Why? You don't like it?"

"Umm..." Rena lifted her eyebrows. "I'm just not a big fan of facial hair in general."

"I'll shave," he said immediately.

"What? Oh, no! Don't do that. If you like it, keep it."

"No. I'll get rid of it. The next time you see me, I'll be clean shaven." Mike paused for a moment and looked at Rena intently. "When is the next time I'm going to see you?"

On Saturday evening, Rena and Kat sat at their kitchen table drinking rum and diet Cokes. Rena wore a low-cut top and kitten heels. Kat was still in her silky red robe.

“I really don’t want to go to this party without you.” Kat swirled her straw around inside her sweating glass. “I can’t believe you’re going out with him again. I thought you said he was lame and hairy.”

“He is. But he’s just so *nice*. He told me I took his breath away.”

“So you’re going on a second date with a guy because he told you some cheesy line?”

“Plus, he said he was going to shave his beard for me! Isn’t that crazy? I just want to see if he did it or not.”

The doorbell echoed through the apartment. Kat jumped out of her chair. “I need to get dressed. Have fun with Bear Boy.”

Rena opened the front door, and there stood Mike, wearing a suit and tie. His face was pale and doughy. Without the beard, Rena noticed his slight double chin, and the mole below his bottom lip.

“Shall we go?” he asked.

In his truck, Mike awkwardly moved his hand from the stick shift onto Rena’s knee. She was surprised and almost amused. On their first date, he had been so nervous that when he tried to kiss her goodnight, he had accidentally caught the tip of her nose with his lips. His ears had turned red, and he’d muttered goodnight before stumbling down the steps to his truck. Now Rena looked at his hand, lying motionless on her leg with the fingers spread. It was sort of cute in a pathetic way. She wondered how far he would try to go with her.

Mike took Rena to a very nice restaurant. They sat at a small table next to the window, and the flickering candlelight made starbursts on the rows of silverware in front of them. Rena scanned the menu. “This is expensive,” she whispered.

“Do you want an appetizer?” he asked. “Let’s get an appetizer.”

Mike ordered the pâté sampler, and a hundred dollar bottle of wine. Rena was speechless. When Mike left to go to the bathroom, she quickly texted Kat that Bear Boy was totally crazy.

When Mike returned, she told him she just wanted a salad as her entree. She was beginning to feel guilty. Electrician's apprentices didn't make a lot of money. But Mike insisted that Rena get a "real meal," so she ordered the duck, and Mike got the sashimi tuna. When the food came, he watched Rena eat, his eyes following the fork to her mouth. "Is it good?" he asked. "Do you like it?"

"It's amazing," Rena assured him.

Mike insisted on ordering desert and another bottle of wine. He tapped his finger anxiously on the stem of his wine glass until the waiter arrived with the second bottle and opened it at their table.

After desert and several glasses of wine, Mike was much calmer. His shoulders dropped, and he leaned in towards Rena, his dark eyes reflecting the jumping flame of the candle. "It's been a long time since I've dated someone," he said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. This is like a dream to me. Going to a nice dinner with a nice, beautiful girl."

"You're sweet." Rena looked up at him from underneath her eyelashes. Her stomach was happily full, and the candle-lit restaurant was swirling gently, like a merry-go-round at dusk.

"I hope this doesn't come out the wrong way," Mike said, "but you're really, really hot, and hot girls don't usually like me."

"Well." Rena shook her head drunkenly, trying to think of what to say. "Well, I don't see why not," she lied.

“God, you’re so beautiful,” he murmured. “I wish I could just eat you.”

“You’re sweet,” Rena said again, smiling.

After dinner, Mike drove Rena home and parked in front of her apartment building. In the dark his features were blurred. He cut off the engine and leaned towards her. “Can I kiss you?”

She didn’t really want to kiss him, but she liked how much he wanted to kiss her. “Sure,” she whispered.

The kiss was sloppy; his tongue large and cold. Rena let it go on for a moment before breaking away. “I better go to bed,” she said. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Beautiful.”

“Okay, he’s insane,” Rena told Kat the next morning. “He must have spent, like, four hundred dollars on dinner. And then,” she paused to giggle, “he told me I was so beautiful he wanted to eat me, or something weird like that.”

Kat pulled her bagel out of the toaster and dropped the two halves onto a plate. “He sounds crazy. I told you not to go out with him.”

“Yeah, but, at least I got a really good dinner out of it. And he *is* a nice guy.”

“You just think he’s nice because he said you were beautiful.”

“That’s not true.”

“Do you actually want to date him?” Kat looked up from the cream cheese.

“No. He’s way lame.”

“Then you better stop going out on dates with him.”

“Yeah, I know.” Rena decided not to tell Kat about the kiss.

Over the next four days, Mike called Rena ten times. She didn’t answer any of his calls. He left a message every time.

On Wednesday evening, Rena and Kat walked through the mall, looking for new outfits to wear for the weekend. As they strolled past the fountain, Rena’s cell phone buzzed inside her purse. She pulled it out. “Oh my God, he’s calling again!” She held up the phone so Kat could see the display. “He’s totally obsessed with me.”

“You made the poor boy shave his beard, and now you won’t even talk to him,” Kat said. “Did you want to look at shoes?”

“Yeah.” Rena dropped her phone back into her bag and listened for the satisfying beep that told her she had a voice message.

Later, at home, she checked her voicemail. “Rena,” Mike said. “I’d love to see you, but maybe you don’t feel the same way about me, so I guess I’m going to stop calling you.” Rena listened to the message twice before deleting it.

True to his word, Mike didn’t call anymore. The days went by, and there were no more calls, no texts, no voicemails from the bear boy.

“So I think Mike *finally* got the hint that I’m not interested,” she told Kat, trying to sound relieved. But she wasn’t relieved. She was disappointed. She felt ugly and unwanted.

On Saturday, Rena and Kat went barhopping. The night was unsuccessful. They dressed up in heels and short skirts and sat in various bars, sipping cocktails, but nothing interesting happened. No one came to talk to them. “What am I?” Rena asked. “A leper?”

Finally, they went to a college bar and sat on stools looking out at the crowd. Rena sipped her drink and studied the fresh-faced girls in their tank tops and jeans. She felt old and

over-dressed. “I can’t believe no one’s hitting on us,” Kat complained. “I’m running out of money from buying my own drinks.”

“I know. There are no decent guys in this entire city,” Rena slurred, narrowing her eyes at some frat boy types who had just walked through the door. She brought her glass towards her face and, distracted, poked herself in the chin with the straw. “Should we go talk to those guys who just came in?” She pulled a mint leaf out of her drink and chewed on it.

“They look like meatheads.”

“They might buy us drinks.”

Rena and Kat stood up and sauntered over to the group. “What are you boys up to tonight?” Rena asked, her hand on her hip.

They hardly looked at her. “Dominating the pool table,” one of them said.

“Dude, I’m so going to kick your ass,” another said.

They walked off towards the pool tables without a backwards glance.

“That was depressing,” Kat muttered.

“What was wrong with them?” Rena slurped the last of her drink and slammed the glass down on a table. “We’re fucking hot!”

“Maybe we should just go home.”

“Shut up.” Rena grabbed Kat’s arm and pulled her towards the bar. “Let’s get another drink.”

They arrived home two hours later, both staggering drunk. Kat fell onto her bed in all of her clothes, and Rena turned off the lights before stumbling into her own room and sitting on the bed in a daze. She didn’t feel like going to sleep. Her skin tingled. She wished she had

someone who would put his arms around her and tell her she was beautiful. She dug her cell phone out of her purse and stared at it for a moment. She searched for his name in her contacts.

He answered on the second ring. “Did I wake you up?” she asked. Her voice was a sticky staccato from too many mojitos.

“Yeah. But it’s okay.” His voice was gruff.

“I’m bored.”

“It’s two a.m.”

“I know. I can’t sleep. Do you wanna hang out?”

“Um, okay, sure.”

“Good.”

“Do you want me to come over to your apartment?”

Kat was totally passed out, but Rena couldn’t risk her finding out. Kat would never understand. “No. I’ll come over to your place,” she said. “Where do you live?”

He gave her directions, and Rena wrote them down on the back of a bar receipt. She looked at herself in the mirror and reapplied lipstick before leaving the apartment and locking the door.

The hair was growing back in prickles all over his face, and it scratched her delicate chin when he kissed her. Naked, he was enormous and hairy. He panted as he heaved himself into her. Then he collapsed onto the bed, wrapped his heavy, hairy arms around her, and fell into a hibernating sleep. Disgusted and dizzy, she pried herself loose from his grip and gathered her clothes from the floor. In the semi-darkness of dawn she put on her lacy bra, fuzzy green

sweater, black mini skirt. She couldn't find her underwear. "Fuck it," she muttered as she hurried out of the apartment.

It was nearly six a.m., and the roads were empty. Rena sped down the interstate, punching at the buttons on her radio. She swung wildly into the exit lane, swerving around the sharp curve. She could still smell him on her: the woodsy sweat and sour, stale breath. She turned up the volume on the radio and blinked hard to keep her eyes open. For once, she just wanted to go home.

She sailed through a green light, and then another. The light was red at Oak Street, but she wasn't paying attention. Suddenly, the color registered in her sleepy brain, and she stomped on her brakes. There was a blinding light on her left, and the sound of squealing tires. Rena's car skidded to a stop, just barely missing the oncoming car. The car zoomed past, the man inside it honking his horn.

"Asshole," Rena muttered. "God."

The seat belt had locked tight against her chest, and she realized her heart was beating fast. With a trembling hand she put the car in reverse and backed up to behind the white line.

When she got home, she was surprised to see Kat standing in the kitchen with a glass of water. "I was so thirsty," she said, her eyes half closed. "Where have you been?"

Rena shrugged. "You pooped out on me early. I decided to go back out."

"You didn't go hang out with Bear Boy did you?"

"Are you kidding? That freak? No. I just went to Sky Bar and had a drink. And then I met this really hot guy, and he bought me a few more drinks. He wanted to take me out on a real date, but he's flying back to New York today. He was just here visiting."

Kat raised her eyebrows and drained the last of her water. "You kind of look like shit."

“Oh my god,” Rena said, trying to change the subject, “I almost got in an accident on the way home. I was just waiting at a red light, and this car was swerving all over the place and almost hit me.”

“Whoa,” Kat mumbled. “People need to be more careful.”

“Yeah, I know.” With that, Rena headed to her room and fell asleep at once. She woke up at noon with a terrible hangover and vowed to never drink again, a promise she broke just a few hours later. She never saw the bear boy again, but she thought about him sometimes, and she kept his number in her phone until she was an old maid, and he had forgotten about her completely.

Happily Ever After

Dude, you totally should have come to the reunion. I learned so much fucked up shit about people. Well, did you hear the shit that happened with Rapunzel? It was so crazy. So you know she was fucking the prince, right? Well of course she got pregnant, and then her foster mom freaked the fuck out about it and started beating her up. She cut off all Rapunzel's hair and then was trying to kill the prince or some shit. They're actually still together, Rapunzel and the prince, but they live out in that trailer park by the dump, and now she's got some ugly-ass extensions.

Snow White? No, she wasn't there. Yeah, I was messing around with her for awhile a few years ago. I told you she got skin cancer, right? Which, I'm sorry, but, hey, pale-ass girl, put on some fucking sunscreen and stop going to the tanning bed every day, you know? How fucking hard is that? I mean, she was okay. They just cut it off or whatever. But, yeah, I was talking to somebody who said they heard she got addicted to meth because the dwarves had a meth lab in their basement. And I've heard all kinds of crazy shit about her and those dwarves, man. Like gang-bang, drugged-up, sex-with-midgets type of freaky shit. So the prince divorced her, and I don't know if it was because of the meth or because she was fucking around on him or what, but I heard she's in jail now anyways.

Let's see. Who else you wanna hear about? Cinderella? Well, apparently her stepsisters got real drunk at her wedding and ended up beating the shit out of each other on the dance floor, and the fat one stabbed the other one in the eye with a fork, so now she's on welfare because she's partially blind. Oh, and the fat one works at Wal-Mart. It actually sounds pretty fucking

funny. I wish I had been there. I always hated those bitches. Yeah, Cinderella and the prince are still married and they have a couple kids and shit, but I heard he cheats on her all the time.

Who else? Well, Sleeping Beauty got fat. Like fucking huge. Hansel's in jail right now for statutory rape, and Gretel's a stripper. Neither of them were there. Oh, Red Riding Hood was there, and she was just straight-up crazy. Somebody told me she's schizophrenic and hears voices of the wolf telling her to do things. I don't know. I guess she's on meds now, but she still wears that ugly-ass red cape. And Goldilocks got all up on me telling me I felt "just right." She was sloppy drunk and trying to dance with everyone. Yeah, Jack was there, too. He's just as much of an asshole as always, like telling me how much fucking money he makes from that chicken that shits gold, but you know what, he's fucking bald and his wife left him for her yoga instructor, so he can suck my dick.

It was crazy, man. Seriously. Some people. You would have never guessed then what they'd be like now.

The Season of the Ice King

I happened to see Stephanie Yearling once at the beginning of the summer. School had only been out for a week, but already the heavy heat made the days seem long and insufferable. My house didn't have air-conditioning, so one afternoon I walked to the library and spent the hot part of the day flipping through giant art books and reading about Greek mythology under the icy blasts of the AC vents. Around five o'clock, I emerged, holding a stack of waxy-covered books, and that's when I saw her, Stephanie Yearling, in the flower garden on the opposite side of the parking lot.

The flower garden was a community project I'd seen flyers about on the cork board inside the library. The pale green notices asked for volunteers to pull weeds or water the small patch of flowers and shrubs. It didn't look like Stephanie was doing either of those things, however. She was simply floating down the narrow mulch path in a long, white peasant skirt, stopping every few moments to crouch down and sniff a flower with her delicately pointed nose.

I stood motionless on the steps watching her. I had never actually spoken to her, but I had what some people might call a girl crush on Stephanie. She was one year older than me and so beautiful, so perfect in every way, that I had fantasies about her. Usually I just imagined that we were friends – best friends who held hands and lay side-by-side in fields of plush grass, telling each other secrets. But once I had a very vivid dream of kissing Stephanie. In my dream, I kissed her so deeply, I somehow became her.

Stephanie bent over to examine the small, wooden label spiked into the ground beside a bunch of pale purple flowers. Her skirt trailed in the dirt, and her loose, blond ponytail slipped

over one shoulder, revealing a slope of neck. She wore a light pink tank top that seemed to glow against her golden skin.

Suddenly, a black Honda with tinted windows and spinning silver hub caps roared into the parking lot. It stopped, diagonal across two spaces, and Hayden Wright, the Ice King himself, got out.

Stephanie stood up. I saw that she had picked one of the purple flowers, and she looked at Hayden while twirling the flower stem between her thumb and middle finger. Despite the heat, he wore a black t-shirt and black slacks. Dark sunglasses divided his pale face into two angular shapes: a triangle below and a rectangle above.

He approached her, and I squinted into the sun, thinking if I concentrated hard enough, I could hear what they were saying. Stephanie's mouth opened wide with laughter. She threw the purple flower towards Hayden's chest, but it stopped short just past her fingers and fluttered to the ground. He took her slender arm and bore her off towards the car. I wondered if they had planned to meet here, or if impromptu love affairs like this happened all the time to people who were beautiful like Stephanie and powerful like Hayden.

It was a love affair, no doubt, I thought, as I watched the little black car dip down into the street and speed away. I couldn't really imagine Stephanie dating the Ice King, but then again, it was hard to imagine her dating anyone. Because of her divine perfection, none of the boys at school seemed worthy of her. She was above the labels of high school; despite her honors classes, she wasn't a nerd; despite her athletic abilities, she wasn't a jock. She drifted among the groups, pollinating them with smiles and sticks of gum, but she didn't belong to any of them.

I didn't see Stephanie again until summer was coming to an end. I rode my bike to Carl's house because he had borrowed a bunch of my paints a long time ago and never given them

back. Carl and I weren't exactly friends anymore, but I was one of the few people who knew his secret passion for art, which made me believe that one day he would remember I was his true friend, unlike all the "cool" people he'd been trying so desperately to hang out with.

Carl lived in a very nice neighborhood – a colony of large brick houses on a hill overlooking a man-made lake – but lately he'd been dressing like he came from the projects. He answered the door in a white wife-beater and sagging jeans. A gold chain glinted around his neck. I followed him up the carpeted stairs to his room, and he didn't speak until he had shut the door behind us. He turned to me, running his hand over his shaved head. "Can you do me a favor?"

"I'm just here to pick up my paints."

"Can you take something by Hayden's house?" Carl gestured towards a navy blue duffel bag that sat on the floor by the bed.

"Why can't you?" I crossed my arms over my chest and felt my rib cage through my t-shirt.

"I'm under house arrest." Carl picked up the bag with one hand and let it fall onto his unmade bed.

"For real?" I stared at him. Carl had obviously been working out all summer – his arms were bulging – but his cheeks were still round with baby fat. "What'd you do?"

"I don't wanna talk about it." He shrugged. "Look, I'll give you back your paints if you just run this over there. He'll fucking kill me if he doesn't get it."

"What a great friend," I muttered, but Carl didn't hear me because at the same time the phone began to ring.

"Fuck," he said. "I'll be right back."

Carl left and closed the door behind him. I walked towards the bed, looking at the duffel bag. I unzipped it slowly, and it fell open, revealing hundreds of little cardboard boxes of Sudafed, Claritin, and other over-the-counter medicines. I knew Hayden was a drug dealer, but he hadn't risen to the top of the high school food chain by selling cold medicine, had he? I stuck my hand into the bag and rifled through the flimsy boxes, expecting to find a dime bag (whatever that looked like) or heroin needles, but there was nothing else.

Carl walked back in the room, and I pulled my arm quickly out of the bag. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Hayden must be really sick," I said, smiling.

"Shut up."

"No, seriously, why so much cold medicine?" I didn't really care what Hayden was going to do with a duffel bag full of Sudafed. What I wanted to know was why Carl cared so much about being Hayden's friend.

Carl looked at me like I was an idiot. "Ephedrine," he said, tilting his head slightly. "You use it to make meth."

"Oh." I pulled the zipper closed and backed away from the bag. "Is that what he sells?"

"Sometimes. Why do you think people call him the Ice King?"

I didn't say that I had always thought it was because Hayden was cool. "How do you guys know how to make meth?" I asked.

"You just look it up on the internet," he said impatiently. "Grant's the one who's gonna try to make it anyway. I just got all the supplies."

"What else do you need?"

"So can you take it over there?"

At the corner of the bed, I noticed a canvas that had been shoved between the wall and the mattress. Only a tiny edge was sticking out, but I recognized the colors. It was the portrait Carl had done of me, two years ago, when he'd made me take my hair out of its ponytail and pose on the old swing set in his backyard. I'd sat for hours in the swing, gripping the rusted chains in both hands and staring at my bare feet in the dirt while Carl "got the shadows right."

Now Carl was standing in front of me, pulling at the cotton strap of his wife beater like it was choking him. "Will you?"

I sighed. "Where does he live?"

I left a few minutes later with the duffel bag slung over my shoulder. I rode across town to a very normal, middle-class neighborhood of boring, brick houses where Hayden's shiny black car stood out on a street full of station wagons and scuffed-up Toyotas. I locked my bike around a telephone pole on the corner and walked towards his house.

The front door was slightly ajar, and through the crack, the house looked dark and empty. I rang the doorbell and heard it echoing inside. I waited, but no one came. I glanced out at the street, towards the Ice King's car. I wondered if I could just leave the bag on the porch, but Carl had been very specific that I needed to give it directly to Hayden. I opened the screen door, wincing at its squeak, and knocked. My touch made the door swing open. "Hello?" I called. I took a step into the house. "Hello?"

The front hall branched off towards a living room on the left and a staircase on the right. Next to the staircase was an open door descending into what must have been the basement, and from there I heard the faint sound of voices and thumping music.

I gently pulled the screen door closed behind me and headed towards the basement steps. They were concrete, and as I walked down them, I felt the air growing cooler. I breathed in the dank, mineral smell, but it was laced with something else, too, something hot and chemical.

The steps turned sharply towards the bottom, so that that I didn't even see the boy standing at the foot of the stairs until I was practically face-to-face with him. It was Mouth, a large, hulking boy with fat, pimpled cheeks, and he held in his arms a strange, slinky animal.

"Hi," I said. My voice came out choked with phlegm, and I cleared my throat and tried again. "Hi, is Hayden here?"

The animal in the Mouth's arms squirmed. It seemed to be snake-like, yet furry, and in the dimness I could see more than one set of black eyes looking at me from within the writhing fur.

"Who wants to know?"

I coughed again, even though I didn't need to. "I have something from Carl."

He poked his tongue into the inside of his cheek; I could see it bulging out next to the chapped corners of his lips. "Okay," he said finally. "But you have to give me a dollar."

"Why?" I hiked the duffel bag higher onto my shoulders and held onto the straps with both hands. The brownish animal moved endlessly in his fat arms, and I counted one little head, and then another.

"It's policy." Suddenly one of the heads moved towards the boy's finger, opened its little mouth, and bit. "Ow! Fuck!" The boy dropped the mass of fur, and they separated into three ferrets on the gray floor.

He hunched over, grabbing at the wiggling lengths of fur, and I squeezed past him. The basement was cold and overhung with pipes and pink insulation. There were open doorways

leading to other rooms, but I seemed to be in the main room; there was a water heater at one end, and a make-shift living room set up at the other. A stained oriental rug was spread across the concrete, and upon it squatted a ratty brown couch and a few folding chairs. A cheap stereo on the floor played growling industrial rock, and beside it was an elaborate plastic ferret home made of several levels, each one softened with a layer of sawdust and connected to the other stories by winding tunnels. On the couch next to the ferret palace sat Hayden, with a cigarette between his fingers. And there, sitting next to him, was Stephanie Yearling.

I hardly recognized her. It had only been two months, but the change was dramatic. At first I thought she had cut off all her long blond hair, but no, it was just pulled back and stuffed up into a black fedora, the rim of which hung low and shadowed her face. Her eyes were rimmed in heavy black make-up, and her normally tanned skin was white against the black straps of her tank top. She sucked on a red popsicle, sliding it in and out of her dark little mouth.

“What do you want?” Hayden stared at me. He had bleached his hair white blond, but his eyebrows were still dark, arching over cold gray eyes.

I dumped the duffel bag onto a folding chair. “This is from Carl,” I said.

Hayden’s shoulders loosened a little bit. “Okay, cool.” He brought the cigarette to his mouth and sucked on it gently. “Did you wanna buy anything?” His words were seeped in smoke.

“Oh no,” I said, backing away. “I’m good.”

Hayden laughed loudly, but Stephanie put her hand on his arm, and he stopped. “What’s your name?” she asked.

“Lilly.”

“That’s pretty,” she murmured. She bit into the popsicle and smiled at Hayden, her teeth stained red.

I waited to see if she would say anything else, but she only leaned over and pressed her bright lips to the side of Hayden’s neck, so I turned away and climbed slowly up the stairs.

Outside on the porch, I blinked in the sunshine and noticed a woman standing on the sidewalk in front of the house. She wore a large straw hat and a loose, flowery dress. She looked at me eagerly. “Hello!” she called from the sidewalk. I descended the porch steps towards her. “Hello!” she said again. “Do you live here?”

“No.”

“Oh.” The woman pressed her fingers against her chest in a nervous way. “Do you know who does? Is it a boy named Hayden?”

“I don’t know,” I said slowly. “I was just delivering something.” The woman raised an eyebrow. “Girl Scout cookies,” I added.

“Never mind then.” She flung one of her hands away from her chest in a dismissing gesture. “It’s just...” She stopped and looked at the black car. She seemed so confused I felt sorry for her. “I was taking a walk and... This car looks like his.”

I had a wild thought that perhaps she was Hayden’s previous lover; she wasn’t so bad-looking for being middle-aged.

“My daughter’s boyfriend,” the woman continued. “She’s gone all day, and she comes home so late. Last night he didn’t bring her home until four a.m.” She took a step towards the car and reached out a hand towards the black hood. “I’ve always trusted her, it’s just...” She stared at the car like it was a coffin.

This was Stephanie's mother, I realized with awe. She had been wandering the neighborhood, mourning the loss of her beautiful, golden daughter.

I didn't know what to say. I watched as she put her hand down on the hot hood of the car and then snatched it away quickly, as if it had burned her fingers.

"Don't worry," I said finally. "I'm sure she's fine." I turned and walked down the sidewalk towards my bike.

School started a few days later, and summer ended abruptly. Instead of a gradual cooling off, the weather plunged from scorching heat directly into a cold spell. I wore a jacket on the first day of school, and even by lunch time a chill still hung in the air. I walked towards the cafeteria to meet my best friend Audrey, a quiet, bookish girl like myself who often annoyed me but could be counted on for consistent companionship. I was about to take the shortcut across the quad when I noticed the Ice King and his crew standing under the large oak tree in front of the auditorium. Besides Carl and Stephanie there was Grant, a black boy whose father was a vet, Ben, who had gotten kicked out of Catholic school, and Mouth, the large boy who I'd encountered in the basement the other day.

I decided to take the long way around so I could pass right by them. I tried to catch Carl's eye, but he didn't look in my direction. Hayden was talking to Grant, but his fingers lightly grazed Stephanie's waist as she stood beside him in a miniskirt and black combat boots. They were all so cool, the way they stood there not eating lunch. Hayden's white hair and black shades. The silver barbell flashing below Grant's dark lips. I wanted to be standing there with

them. In fact, I wanted to *be* Stephanie Yearling, to stand like a gothic goddess among the most powerful boys at school and feel the Ice King's cool fingers running up and down my side.

A few weeks later, I was coming out of the library when I noticed Stephanie's mother standing at the edge of the community garden. I don't know if she heard the banging door of the library or if she just sensed that she was no longer alone, but she turned around and saw me from across the parking lot.

"Hello!" She waved. I glanced behind me, but there was no one else there, so I turned back to face her. She waved again, more insistently, and I walked towards her.

Her hair was pale and coarse as straw. She had braided it into a thick rope and then wound it into a coil at the nape of her neck. Her face was youthful except for the deep lines that ran from the edges of her nose to the corners of her mouth. She wore another loose dress that swirled around her ankles, and her jean jacket had embroidered daisies on the breast pocket. "Do you go to Maymont?" she asked when I got closer.

"Yeah." A breeze blew through the parking lot, and the dried up plants in the garden shivered.

"My daughter goes there, too. Do you know Stephanie Yearling?" She touched her earlobe self-consciously and pinched at the small golden earring that hung from it.

"Yeah," I said again. "I know who she is."

Stephanie's mother sighed. "We used to come here every Wednesday afternoon to do weeding." She looked out at the community garden. Almost all the flowers that had bloomed

there over the summer were gone, and even the bushes seemed faded. “She used to love gardening.”

Maybe it was because I felt sorry for her, or maybe it was because I wanted to see what it felt like to be Stephanie Yearling, but a few minutes later I found myself on my hands and knees in the mulch path, reaching into a patch of green stalks and pulling out thin, spidery weeds.

“I don’t trust him,” Stephanie’s mother was saying. “And she’s never home anymore.” She paused and ripped out an intricate system of tangled white roots. “He gave her a bracelet with real diamonds. What kind of boy does that?”

The Ice King, I thought. She turned to me, her eyes wide. “Do you think they’re doing drugs?”

I knew that Carl smoked pot. He said it helped with his painting. Grant was said to snort cut-up cat tranquilizers in the bathroom before class. And everyone said that Mouth was Hayden’s official tester; he tried every drug that came through the Ice King’s hands, just to make sure it was decent. Surely Hayden and Stephanie did drugs, too, but I didn’t know what or how much. I often imagined them lying around on tassled pillows, the basement like an opium den in my mind. Stephanie wore silk scarves and a belly chain, and I was there, too, breathing in the perfumed smoke from her burning poppy seeds.

Stephanie’s mother and I worked in silence as the sun sank lower in the sky, and after awhile my hands grew cold and stiff. She stood up and brushed the mulch from the back of her skirt. “It’s getting dark.”

I stood up, too.

“Winter’s coming early this year. It’s so depressing.” She looked around at the wimpy patches of dried-up flowers and the bushes with their leaves turning brown. “It’s sad to watch them all die.”

“But they’ll come back in the spring,” I said, trying to sound cheerful.

Her lips pressed together in a weak smile.

I walked across the parking lot and began heading towards home, but after I’d gone a few blocks, I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and turned in the opposite direction. The wind blew against me, and I crossed my arms and stuck my fingers into my armpits for warmth. I walked quickly, and the cool air made the insides of my ears ache.

I reached Hayden’s house by dusk, and to my surprise, I found Carl sitting on the front porch. “Hey,” he said. “What are you doing here?”

I had thought about my plan the whole walk over. “Stephanie,” I would say, “I ran into your mom, and she really needs to talk to you.”

“About what?” she would ask, little crinkles of concern in her forehead.

“I don’t know. But she was pretty upset. She asked me to come find you.”

“Let’s go.” Stephanie would take my hand, and we’d rush up the stairs and out of the basement.

“Stephanie, wait!” Hayden would chase us as we run down the street towards her house. We’d fly down the sidewalk, finally losing him.

“Lilly,” she would say, winding her arm around my waist, “I knew you’d come and rescue me.”

“Hello?” Carl’s voice came at me like a slap. “I asked you what you were doing here.”

I shrugged and walked up the steps towards him. “What do think? Why do people usually come to Hayden’s house?”

“You don’t do drugs.”

“How do you know?”

“You always said you wouldn’t. You called me a loser for smoking pot.”

“Well, people change.” I stood in front of Carl with my hands on my hips.

He stared at me for a moment. “For real?”

“For real.” I wasn’t sure what exactly I was doing or where this was going, but I didn’t want to turn back.

He smiled and shook his head. “Lilly, Lilly. Welcome to the dark side.”

Carl led me down the stairs, past Mouth, who sat in an old armchair playing with the ferrets, to where Stephanie and the Ice King sat on their throne. Carl brought out a glass bong – tall and green – and taught me how to hold my finger over the hole, to watch the chamber thicken with smoke. He told me to hold in the smoke until my lungs burned, resisting the urge to cough. After my turn, I watched as Stephanie swallowed her smoke and blew it out slowly, her lips pursed like she was whistling.

“Hydro,” she said, her voice strange and willowy. “Once you smoke this, you’ll never go back to shit weed.”

She reached over and laced her fingers through mine. My thumb was smarting from where I’d burned it with the lighter. She didn’t say anything, but I imagined what she was thinking, maybe that she’d seen me at school and always wanted to be friends with me. In my mind I heard her whisper, “I’m glad you came over, Lilly. I like you.”

I smiled across the circle at Carl, and he smiled back at me.

* * *

As the days grew colder, the leaves turned brown and littered the gutters, and I spent more and more time in the Ice King's basement. Audrey thought I was crazy, but I told her weed wasn't that big of a deal and she was just a worry-wart. I was being careful, and besides, whenever they brought out the pills and the powders, I pretended like I had to go home. But as the months went by, I started to feel comfortable there in the dark basement, and the drugs made of alphabet letters no longer seemed scary: LSD, K, PMA, DXM, E. We swallowed the tabs and washed them down with beer, waiting for the chemicals to hit us. When the world began to waver, we passed around the ferrets, smoothing back their fur, staring into their beady, black eyes. Warm under a blanket of drugs, I watched Hayden and Stephanie kiss, devouring each other in a bath of poisoned saliva. I was so close to them, I felt like I was inside their mouths, being brushed at by both of their tongues. Sometimes I thought I was the one kissing Stephanie, but I was only kissing Carl, rubbing my hand up the back of his shirt, pretending his smooth back was hers.

For a while everything seemed perfect. The snow fell outside, and we were warm and cozy, burrowed inside the basement. Stephanie and I grew close. We went to the bathroom together, Stephanie pulling down her cotton panties right in front of me. We cuddled on the couch, saying stupid things and laughing until we could hardly breathe. Stephanie advised me on the best eye drops, the best ways to sober up quick before going home.

But when Hayden forgot about Valentine's Day, Stephanie started pulling away. On February fifteenth she sat curled up in the corner of the couch with her legs, cased in tight, black

jeans, pulled to her chest. She had recently lost her fedora, and now her blond hair fell in a sheet around her pale face. She sucked on a heart-shaped lollipop I'd given her and stared at the floor.

"It's a fucking Hallmark holiday, Stephanie," Hayden said. His voice was low and sharp. "I thought you didn't care about that shit."

"You could have just gotten me some flowers," she muttered. She slipped the heart into her beautiful little mouth and sucked on it.

"And what would that prove?" Hayden stood in front of her, waving his cigarette in her face. She refused to look at him.

Carl and I stood nearby in a corner, our arms crossed. "Should we go?" I whispered.

"Maybe."

Neither of us moved. Where would we go? Our friendship was now based on Hayden. And his drugs.

"It would prove that you actually care about me," Stephanie said. "You don't even know anything about me."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Hayden ran a hand through his bleached hair.

"I'm sick of this." Stephanie stood up and threw the lollipop on the ground before marching up the stairs and out of the house.

I walked over and picked up the candy. It left a sticky red heart on the concrete, and I rubbed it out with the sole of my shoe.

In the middle of March, Stephanie broke up with Hayden, and she was gone from the basement altogether. No one was quite sure what had prompted the break up, and Hayden didn't say

anything about it. I knew it had to be more than just the lack of a Valentine's Day present. I imagined all sorts of things: he had hit her, or she was secretly having an affair with Mr. Benson, the cute English teacher.

Afterwards, I saw her around at school sometimes. She stopped wearing make-up, which made her look younger, and she joined the cross-country team, often coming to school in her over-sized track sweatshirt and spandex leggings. When I saw her, she smiled at me, but that was it. After all, I was still hanging out with the Ice King crowd. Now I stood under the oak tree in front of the auditorium and talked to Hayden, Carl, and Grant about where we could get some acid, about the price of a dime bag. When my old friend Audrey walked by, smiling eagerly, I nodded at her, but I didn't wave.

Hayden only mentioned Stephanie once. "She'll be back," he said. "She loves me too much." At least, that's what I thought he said. Later I wondered if he'd said "weed" instead of "me."

Since Stephanie was out of the picture, I decided I should go to the Ice King's basement a little less often and try to focus on my school work, which had been suffering. Carl made fun of me when, one Wednesday afternoon, I declined his offer to smoke at Hayden's in favor of going to the library to do research for my paper on Greek mythology. "Come over after that," he said, and I told him I would try.

When I stepped out of the library, my backpack heavy for the first time in months, and saw Stephanie and her mother in the community garden, I wondered if, subconsciously, I'd already known they would be there.

It was a beautiful spring day. The pale green leaves were dewy buds on the trees, and birds hopped along the branches, singing into the slight wind. In the garden, flowers bloomed in

neat rows, and the bushes that had seemed so dry and barren before, had erupted overnight into bright pink blossoms.

They both kneeled in the soil, pulling up weeds and tossing them into a pile on the mulch path. I stood on the steps of the library, unsure of what to do. Stephanie's mother stood up. She had a bright blue bandana wrapped around her head. "Lilly!" She waved to me.

I walked slowly across the parking lot, studying Stephanie. She wore a pair of old jeans and a simple t-shirt. Her cheeks looked rounder, flushed with healthy sun and exercise. She smiled up at me vaguely, as if she hardly remembered who I was.

"How are you, Lilly?" Stephanie's mother asked. She scratched at the side of her nose with her knuckles.

"Fine."

"Good." She stood up and moved down to the end of the row, perhaps to give me and Stephanie some privacy.

"Care to help weed?" Stephanie asked, her tone slightly sarcastic.

"I can't." I looked down at her. "I promised Carl I'd meet him at Hayden's."

Stephanie pulled hard at a weed, and it ripped from the ground, jolting her backwards a little. "You still hang out with them?" she asked, knocking clumps of dirt off the roots.

"Yeah."

She looked up at me finally, and the pity I saw in her pale eyes confused me. She shook her head and gave me a fake, toothy smile. "Well, have fun."

I thought back to a few months earlier in Hayden's basement, to those days when Stephanie and I had sat on the couch laughing uncontrollably about a forgotten joke, or waved

our fingers in front of each other's faces to see trails. Was this girl kneeling in the dirt even the same person?

I began to wonder if I'd ever really known Stephanie Yearling at all. I wanted to confess that *she* was the reason why I hung out in the Ice King's basement. But that didn't make any sense, now that she wasn't there.

"You should stop by sometime," I said. A desperate attempt to keep a connection between us.

"I don't know," she said, going back to weeding. "I'm not really into all that stuff anymore."

I stared at her, confused. As far as I could tell, she had loved smoking, tripping, all of that stuff. What had made her change her mind so suddenly? How could flowers appear overnight out of the dirt? How could warm days suddenly turn so cold?

"Okay," I said. "I guess I'll see you at school." I waved to her mother and walked away through the parking lot.

Maybe I could have just asked for her reasons, but I didn't. I headed to Hayden's house, and later, in his smoky basement, I retreated into my mind and made up my own theories for her behavior. Just like I always had.

The Old Man in the Deep Woods

Deep in the woods, past the painted tree and the look-out rock, around the curve in the creek, across a homemade bridge, and through a patch of poison oak, there lived an old man and his menagerie. Only children played in the woods behind the development, so only the children knew he existed. There was an unspoken agreement among them not to tell their parents.

They didn't go to see the old man very often. It was a long trek, for one thing, and Brian Crowley told terrible stories about what the man would do if he caught kids on his property. Besides, on a summer's day there were countless other things to do. The girls caught ladybugs and scouted out four-leaf clovers on the grassy hill that led down to the woods. The boys marked their cheeks with orange and yellow paint-rock paint and waded through the creek, chasing crawdads and minnows. And everyone played on the tire swing that swung out over the deepest part of the creek. Only when everything else got boring did someone, usually Brian, start up with the dares, so that the children had no choice but to creep further into the woods in their damp sneakers to spy on the old man and his strange collection.

Grace Harvey didn't know about the old man in the woods because she and her family had just moved to the development in July. The Harvey's house was large and boxy and looked just like the houses on either side of it, except for a flag they had hung from the post on the front porch. The flag was purple with a cheerful yellow butterfly on it, which was why, before they knew her name, the neighborhood children referred to Grace as the Butterfly Girl.

At first, they didn't see much of her except for quick glimpses when she and her parents came and went from their house in a sleek, silver car. Finally, one Saturday, Emmie Beacon got

up the nerve to knock on the Harvey's front door. Grace answered and stood behind the screened-in door, looking out at Emmie with watchful gray eyes.

“Do you wanna come out and play?” Emmie scratched a mosquito bite in the soft crook of her elbow.

Grace bit her lip. “I’m not allowed to play with people unless my parents know them and their parents.” She flicked her golden hair away from her face.

“Oh,” Emmie said. “Okay.” She turned to go.

“Wait.”

Emmie turned back around.

Grace shifted her weight back and forth on her bare feet. “Let me go ask and see.” She ran down the hall and disappeared.

She came back a moment later with her tall, droopy-eyed mother. After Grace's mother asked a long string of questions, called Emmie's mother on the telephone, and made Grace swear up and down not to leave the block and to be home when the streetlights came on, the screen door opened, and the Butterfly Girl was released.

Grace quickly became a part of the neighborhood gang, but by that time it was late in the summer, so she might have never even seen the old man at all if it weren't for Brian Crowley and the tire swing.

August in the development was unbearably hot. The freshly paved roads sizzled like black coals, and the parched grass in each square of lawn felt sharp underneath bare feet. The trees surrounding the houses were all young saplings, no more than chest high, so the sun beat mercilessly against the brightly painted siding and the shiny new windows. Inside, teenagers drew the shades and cranked the air-conditioners, while the younger children tumbled down the

hill to take refuge in the cool shade of the woods that stretched for miles behind the development.

One afternoon, Emmie convinced Grace to come down to the creek where the neighborhood children often gathered to take turns on the tire swing. Grace wasn't allowed in the woods, but she figured her mother would never know the difference.

They arrived just as Brian Crowley was getting ready to swing. He stood with one foot on a lumpy tree root and the other foot poised inside the tire. He gripped the rope tight in both hands and called to Grace. "Hey, Butterfly Girl!"

She looked at him but didn't say anything, only put her hands on her sharp little hips and raised one pale eyebrow. She wore a blue and green bathing suit with a pair of jean shorts over top, and her tan, coltish legs were covered in a fine mist of blond hair.

"Hey, Butterfly Girl!" Brian said again. "You ever done this before?"

She shook her head, and her blond ponytail swished back and forth.

"It's not hard," Brian's younger sister, Jenny, muttered. She squatted by the edge of the creek collecting pebbles.

"Just go, Brian," someone shouted.

"You gotta jump off at just the right second," Brian said loudly, his large eyes scanning the crowd of kids. At the beginning of the summer, his mother had shaved his head, but now his hair was growing back in, prickly and dark.

He yanked on the rope and took another step backwards, as if cocking a pistol. "It's deep in the middle," he said to Grace, "but if you jump off too soon or too late, you'll hit the rocks at the bottom and probably die."

"Only if you dive in," Emmie pointed out. "Otherwise you'll just hurt your butt."

Brian shook his head at her. He was big for eleven – not fat, but strong and solid. He had large, aggressive features, and his over-crowded teeth gave his mouth a messy, jumbled appearance. He opened his eyes wide, staring at Emmie. “You mean you didn’t hear about that kid Daniel who used to live here?” he asked.

“Who’s that?”

“Exactly.” Brian paused for a moment, looking at each of the children in turn. “He jumped off the swing at the wrong time and hit his butt, and you know what happened? He got such a bad blood clot that it traveled through his body and up to his brain and he died.”

“No way!”

“You’re making that up!”

“I am not.” Brian looked at his best friend, Johnny Dougall. “Aren’t I right?”

Johnny nodded. “Yeah. That kid died.”

“Just go, Brian!”

Brian yanked at the rope again. He looked at Grace. “You wanna swing with me for your first time?” He tilted his head to one side. “I’ll tell you when to jump.”

Grace shrugged. “I guess.”

Everyone was quiet. Sometimes the littler kids went two-at-a-time, but Brian had never offered to share the swing with anyone. Grace walked towards Brian, and he maneuvered himself to the other side of the tire so that his back faced the creek. Grace wrapped her hands around the rope, just below Brian’s, and put one foot inside the tire. She wore a pair of slim Keds that had once been white but were now a dishwater brown. Her shoe looked delicate next to Brian’s large black sandal with all the Velcro straps.

“We’ll swing three times,” Brian told her, “then on the third time out, I’ll shout ‘jump,’ and we both let go.” He looked at her. “Got it?”

“Yep,” she said.

“Okay, go!”

Grace pushed off from the bank with one foot, and the tire wobbled with the unsteady weight of the two children. Grace didn’t squeal like other girls did, but her mouth opened in a silent O as they picked up speed, and the wind tugged at her ponytail. Brian grinned at her over the top of the tire.

“One!” he shouted as the tire reached the opposite bank and started back across the creek.

Grace turned her head to look at the group of children growing closer and then farther away again.

“Two!”

There was a popping noise from above, and with a sudden jolt the tire lurched a little closer to the creek.

On their third swing out, Brian seemed to realize what was happening. He glanced up at the tree and saw the white flesh of a breaking branch. There was a crack. “Jump!” he yelled.

They both let go as the branch above them split in half. Grace held her knees against her chest, crashing into the water in a ladylike cannonball. Brian and the tire seemed to hit the water at the same time, the tire being followed by the heavy, snaking rope and a sharp piece of tree branch. Grace surfaced almost immediately, and for a moment, everyone on the bank held their breath, wondering if Brian had been conked in the head by the tire or speared through by the tree branch. But a second later his head appeared, and he smacked his hand against the tire floating next to him. “Shit!”

They staggered out of the water, Brian lugging the tire in one arm. The rope and the broken branch trailed behind him. Once it was clear that no one was hurt, the kids began yelling.

“Brian broke the tire swing!”

“You’re too big to go doubles!”

“What’re we gonna do now?”

Brian yanked the piece of branch from the end of the sopping wet rope and threw it javelin-style into the creek. It stabbed itself into the water then floated to the surface before moving slowly downstream. “Who cares about the stupid tire swing?” he said. “I was getting bored of it anyway.”

Jenny, looked up from where she still sat at the edge of the creek. “What are we supposed to do then?”

Brian raised his dark eyebrows. “I say we go see the old man in the woods.”

Jenny shook her head. “No way. You said he was crazy.”

Brian smiled, his jack-o-lantern teeth flashing. “He is crazy. That’s why it’s fun.”

“What are you talking about?” Grace asked.

Jenny stood up, and her collection of stones fell from her lap with a little clatter. “I’m not going.”

“Fine,” Brian said. “Don’t go then.”

Grace shrugged. “I’ll go, I guess. Since the swing is broken.” Her jean shorts were dark and wet, and droplets of water rolled down her legs.

“Good,” Brian said. “Who else?”

In the end, only Brian, Johnny, Grace, and Emmie decided to go. Everyone else went back to the development to play video games.

“They’re just scared,” Brian said as he watched them leave. “Come on.” He started walking along the mossy bank, following the creek past the painted tree and heading towards the look-out rock.

Grace followed behind Brian. She hardly made any noise compared to his crashing steps through the underbrush. They walked without speaking for a few minutes, listening to the babble of the creek and the crunching of their own feet against the sticks and dried-out, brown leaves. Emmie kept close behind Grace, but Johnny trailed far behind, picking up rocks every now and again and flinging them into the creek.

At one point, Brian held back the vine of a sticker bush and turned towards Grace. He handed it to her so it wouldn’t whip out against her bare legs. “Look out for poison oak,” he said. “There’s lots of it around here.”

Grace passed the thorny vine to Emmie and kept walking. “Poison oak? I thought it was called poison ivy.”

“There’s poison ivy,” Brian said, “and then there’s poison oak. Poison oak is worse. If you happen to be allergic to it, you could die from it.”

“That’s not true,” Emmie said. “You just get a bad rash.”

“No,” Brian argued. “If you’re *allergic* to it, and you inhale little particles of it from the air, it can infect the whole insides of your body and you can die. It happened to one of my cousins.”

“I don’t know what it looks like,” Grace admitted.

“You don’t?”

“She’s from the city,” Emmie said. “They don’t have poison oak there.”

“Why’d you move here?”

Grace was quiet for a moment as they walked past a large rock. “My parents thought it would be safer, I guess.”

“Look-out rock!” Johnny yelled, running towards them and scrambling up the side of large rock. He stood on top of it and looked through the trees towards the development, up on the hill. “I can see Brian’s house from here!”

“Shut up.” Brian reached up to smack Johnny in the shin. “I’m not even supposed to be in the woods.”

“Me neither,” Grace said. She plucked a blue wildflower that was growing out of a crack in the side of the rock.

Johnny jumped down. “My parents don’t care what I do.”

“Come on, let’s go,” Brian said. They walked around the curve in the creek quietly, except for Johnny, who had picked up a stick and was smacking it against the trunk of every tree they passed.

The land began to flatten out a bit and the creek widened, flowing quietly underneath a small bridge made of two-by-fours. Brian stepped carefully onto the bridge and pressed his foot out timidly in front of him. The two-by-four wobbled back and forth.

“Be careful,” Emmie whispered.

Brian shushed her and took another step across the bridge. He pointed at some bushes on the other side of the creek. Their leaves were shiny green and tinged with red along the edges.

“That’s poison oak, Grace,” he said quietly.

“It’s pretty.”

“Yeah, well don’t touch it.”

Slowly they made their way across the bridge and past the poison oak. They followed Brian deeper and deeper into the woods, until they heard a loud “Who? Who?” Grace stopped so suddenly that Emmie stumbled into her.

“What was that?” Grace asked.

“We’re getting close.” Brian reached his hand out towards her. His fingers grazed her knuckles before he drew his arm back. “Come on.”

As they walked on they could hear more and more animal noises. They made their way through a particularly thick grove of trees and came out onto the edge of the old man’s property. Although there were still trees here and there, the land had obviously been cleared, and interspersed among the trees were cages. In the closest cage, looking right at the children, a small brown owl perched on a piece of a branch. “Who?” it questioned, staring at them with yellow eyes.

White and brown chickens wandered through the yard, pecking in the dirt between the cages, and past all of the animals, up on a hill, sat the little log cabin where the old man lived.

“What *is* this?” Grace asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

“A crazy old man lives up in that cabin,” Brian said.

“But what’s with all the animals?” Grace moved past the owl towards a smaller cage. Inside was a thin black snake, curled into a tight spiral.

“We think he just goes out into the woods and catches them,” Emmie said.

“Wow.” Grace moved to another, larger cage. The others watched her from the secluded edge of the property and glanced up at the house on the hill.

Inside the cage paced a bobcat. It was about the size of a small dog and had soft, spotted fur and pointy ears. It looked right at Grace, its black-dot pupils growing larger inside gray-green eyes. Its whiskers twitched, and the white patch of fur on its chest seemed to expand.

“Grace!” Emmie hissed.

The bobcat’s ear twitched to one side.

There was a noise from up on the hill.

“Grace!” Emmie said again. The door to the log cabin opened. The others ran crashing back into the woods. Grace looked up at the house on the hill and saw an old man with white hair and a red flannel shirt standing on the porch. He looked right at her and shook his head. Grace quickly turned and ran after her friends back into the woods.

After dinner that night, Grace sat with her mother in the den watching television. “What’d you and Emmie do all day today?” her mother asked.

Grace shrugged. “Nothing much. Just hung out.”

“Running through the sprinkler?”

Grace was still wearing her bathing suit, though she’d put a t-shirt on over it because of the chill from the air-conditioning. Her ponytail had dried into clumpy curls. “Yeah,” she said.

Her mother frowned suddenly, staring at Grace’s legs. “Where did all these scratches come from?”

Grace looked down. Her legs were criss-crossed with thin red marks from running through the brambles in the woods. “Oh,” she said. “I was trying to play with Emmie’s cat.” She lifted up her arm to show more scratches. “See? I tried to pet it, and it attacked me.”

“Goodness. I hope you don’t get cat scratch fever.” She shook her head. “I should call Emmie’s mother. A cat like that around children.”

“Do bobcats live around here?” Grace asked.

“Bobcats? I don’t know. There’s no telling what could be in those woods.” Her mother stood up. “You want some ice cream?”

Grace ran her finger along a raised red scratch on her upper thigh. “No,” she said.

Her mother sighed and sat back down. “What’d you eat at Emmie’s today? You know, I really wish you’d come home for lunch. I don’t like you staying out all afternoon.” She lifted up Grace’s chin and looked into her daughter’s gray eyes. “That’s why I’m staying home this summer, Gracie. So I can take care of you.”

“Mom.” Grace twisted her head away from her mother’s grasp. “Please.”

Her mother’s hand hovered in the air for a moment next to Grace’s cheek before she brought the hand back to her own face and pinched the bridge of her nose like she had a headache. “You know I worry about you.”

“I’m fine here, Mom.”

Her mother just sighed.

Grace told her mother goodnight and went upstairs to her room. She still hadn’t decorated, and the collages of family pictures that had hung in her old room were still in a box in the garage. Grace walked back and forth across the room for a minute, feeling restless. She went to the window and pulled back the frothy yellow curtains her mother had hung for her. Her room looked out into their backyard, neatly separated from all of the others by a tall, wooden fence. Beyond the fence, the grass sloped down towards the dark woods, and somewhere in

those woods lived a man and his animals – animals that paced and slithered and fluttered inside their metal cages all night long.

The next day, the kids gathered again by the creek and stood around the old tire. They knew that someone needed to climb the tree and retie the rope to a new branch, but the tree looked impossible to climb, having a smooth, slippery trunk and no low branches. In fact, no one knew who had originally hung the tire swing. It seemed to have been there for as long as anyone could remember.

“I’m going back to see that old man,” Grace announced suddenly. “I want to talk to him.”

The other kids stared at her. “What for?”

“He’ll kill you!”

“Nobody’s ever talked to him.”

Grace shrugged. “Well I’m going to,” she said. “And I don’t care if nobody comes with me.” She turned and began to walk away along the creek bank.

“Wait!” Brian ran to catch up with her. “I’d better come,” he said. “You’re a city girl.”

She stopped and looked at him coldly. “So?”

“So, Butterfly Girl, you probably wouldn’t even know what to do if you saw a water moccasin.”

“What’s that?” She began walking again.

Brian followed behind her, laughing. “You really don’t know anything, do you? You probably think it’s a type of shoe.”

Grace walked faster, and Brian trotted after her. “I’m just telling you because it’s a super dangerous snake and if one bites you, you’ll probably die.”

Grace said nothing, just quickened her pace, and Brian half-stumbled to keep up with her. They went on like this for a while, Brian watching the flash of her skinny legs as she stepped lightly through the woods.

She stopped in front of the big tree that was marked on its trunk with a swath of blue paint, and Brian bent over, leaning his elbows against his knees and breathing heavily. Grace put her hands on her hips and looked out at the creek as it tumbled over the rocks. Her small, snub nose and plump cheeks were flushed.

“I guess there are a lot of ways to die,” she said.

Brian stood up. “Yeah, I guess.”

“My older brother died,” she said quietly. Brian had to take a step closer to hear her. “He got mugged on his way home from school.” She knelt down and picked up a stone from the bank. Brian knelt down next to her. She rubbed her thumb against the pebble then closed her fingers around it tightly. “They took his bag and pushed him down on the sidewalk so hard the back of his skull cracked. He was in a coma for a week, and they said he might be okay, but then he died.”

She stood up and tossed the stone into the creek. It plopped in and sunk immediately.

Brian still knelt on the ground. He pressed his hands into the dirt for a minute before standing up. “I’m sorry,” he said.

Grace just spun on one small, dirty tennis shoe and continued walking. Brian followed her in silence.

When they reached the homemade bridge, Brian paused. “Are you really going to talk to him?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Grace said. “I want to find out how he caught the bobcat.”

Brian crossed the bridge slowly. “Maybe I should be the look-out. So, like, if something bad happens, I can run and get help.”

“That’s a good idea I guess.”

They walked until they began to hear the cluck of chickens and the hooting of the owl. Brian hung back in the cover of the trees and watched as Grace walked out into the open, among the cages of animals.

She went to each cage in turn. In addition to the owl, the snake, and the bobcat, there was a smaller cage with a turtle, and a larger cage with at a family of fat, brown rabbits. There were also a couple of possums, curled up asleep in the corner of their cage, and an albino squirrel that ran around in a flash of white fur and looked at Grace with blood red eyes. After she had looked inside all of the cages, she went back to the bobcat. The animal’s fur prickled at the sight of her, and it sat very still, watching with calculating eyes.

Just as before, the door to the cabin opened, and the man with white hair and a red flannel shirt appeared on the porch. He looked at Grace, and she looked back at him. For a moment, neither of them moved. The leaves in the tree above Grace’s head rustled in the slight breeze, the chickens clucked, and the owl called out “Who? Who?” The bobcat began to pace in its cage.

The man made a motion with his hand, and Grace walked towards him. The chickens scattered in either direction, their feathers ruffled. The old man came slowly down the steps of

his front porch and began to descend the hill, walking sideways down the slope. They came face to face at the bottom of the hill.

“Who’re you?” he asked, staring at Grace. His face was creased all over, and big pockets of puffy skin hung below his translucent blue eyes.

“My name’s Grace. I live in Shady Crossing.”

He nodded and made a grunting noise. “I don’t get many visitors these days,” he said.

“Fraid I’m not much of a host.” His lips seemed to sink into his face when he talked.

“I was wondering about your bobcat,” Grace said. “Did you catch it in these woods?”

He looked out across his yard towards the bobcat cage and nodded slowly, as if trying to remember. “I did,” he said after a time. “I caught all my pets in these woods.”

He looked at her again and smiled. He didn’t have many teeth. “Pretty yellow hair,” he said. “What’d you say your name was?”

“Grace.”

He nodded again. “I thought so.”

Grace rubbed her arms. She had goose bumps, even though the back of her neck was damp with sweat. “Are bobcats very dangerous?” she asked. “I mean, if I met one out in the woods?”

“If you met one?” The old man’s face wrinkled into what was possibly a smile. “Oh, it’d probably leave you alone. Except if you came across a mother defending her cubs. Then she just might attack you.”

He began to walk towards the cages, and Grace followed. “I haven’t fed Thomas in a few days,” he said. “You can watch if you want.” He stopped in front of the cage of rabbits.

The man slid back the metal gate, reached in, and grabbed a baby rabbit from the pile by the scruff of its neck. The rabbit squirmed as he walked slowly towards the bobcat cage. He opened a small square at the top of the cage and dropped the rabbit through. The creature barely had the chance to move before the cat was upon it, ripping into its neck with pointy white teeth. Blood appeared on the bobcat's muzzle, and down the front of its soft white chest as it ripped the rabbit open. Grace turned away and stared down at her own feet. "I didn't know you were gonna kill it," she said.

He shrugged. "Seems to me I ain't the one who killed it."

"It still wasn't very nice."

"Everything dies by and by," he said. "Except for me, I reckon." He laughed strangely so that it almost sounded like he was clearing his throat.

"Is it happy in there?" she asked after a moment.

"The rabbit?"

"No. The bobcat."

He grunted. "Don't know. Who says everything's gotta be happy?"

Grace scuffed the toe of her tennis shoe in the dirt. "Why do you keep them all?"

He watched the bobcat chew at the furry pink flesh with an open mouth. "I like having things to watch over."

"But they could take care of themselves in the wild."

"Maybe so." The old man squinted his eyes at her. "I haven't had anybody come talk to me in a very long time, you know."

Grace pulled at her ponytail and twisted her hair through her fingers. "I'm sorry."

The old man's eyes glowed inside the folds of his papery skin. "I do know why you come."

"You do?"

He pursed his sunken lips at her. "You come to ask about him." He looked towards the bobcat. "You know, you can never understand some things about the world. But I guess it's a good thing to just keep on trying."

Grace stared at him.

"I'm glad you come. Pretty little thing." He reached out his hand towards her blond ponytail.

Grace backed away, jerking her head to the side to avoid his reaching arm. "I have to go now," she said. "I'm sorry I bothered you."

The old man didn't say anything, just looked at her, not moving, with his arm still outstretched.

Grace walked away slowly, past all the cages. When she reached the edge of the woods, where Brian stood waiting, she began to run.

She ran haphazardly, weaving around the trees and trampling through the underbrush. Brian ran after her. They pounded across the two-by-four bridge, and when they were a safe distance from the old man's property, Grace finally slowed to a stop. She sat down on a flat rock by the creek, blowing air from her rounded lips, and Brian sat down next to her. His big face was red and sweaty.

"What'd he say to you?" Brian asked. "Was he mean?"

"No."

"What happened? I couldn't see much."

Grace's bottom lip trembled. "He just picked out a rabbit to die. Just picked one out for no reason."

Brian reached out and grabbed her hand. He held it carefully in his, watching her face. "Are you afraid of dying?" he asked her suddenly. His voice sounded different: quieter, deeper.

"I don't know." She stared out at the creek. Sunlight filtered through the trees, and bursts of light bobbed up and down on the tiny rapids.

"I'm scared of it," he said. "And I don't even know anybody who's died."

With her other hand, Grace reached over and rubbed Brian's buzzed-short hair. "It's soft," she said, sounding surprised. She pulled her hand away, and they looked out at the creek flowing over the rocks.

The next day, both Brian and Grace woke up with terrible cases of poison oak. Grace's legs and arms burned with red, itchy welts, and Brian's whole face swelled until the skin around his eyes was red and puffy, and the insides of his nostrils itched. His mother put oven mitts on his hands so he wouldn't scratch himself. Grace's mother covered her in minty pink Calamine lotion and made her lie in bed all day. Her mother sat on the edge of the bed, talking.

"What did I tell you about those woods," she said, shaking the nearly empty bottle of Calamine against a cotton ball.

"I'm sorry."

"I think they're developing there soon anyway."

Grace sat up a little in bed. “Like building houses?”

“Uh huh.” Her mother leaned over and dabbed the pink lotion onto Grace’s nose. “You okay? You need some water?”

Grace shook her head. “No,” she said. “I’m okay, Mommy. I promise.”

Her mother smiled and nodded.

When Grace’s poison oak healed and her mother let her back outside to play, the neighborhood children gathered at the cul-de-sac to discuss what would happen to the woods, and to the old man. They kept expecting that any day now the contractors would find the old man and his collection. They would probably call Animal Control or Wildlife Services, and maybe the old man would go to jail. Grace wondered out loud if someone should go into the woods to warn him, but no one volunteered, and even Grace had the feeling that she couldn’t go back there.

Then it was the first day of school, and all the kids went back to their busy lives of books and sports and piano lessons. Months later, when morning frost covered the ground and pumpkins sat on the porches, there was an brief article in the newspaper about a small, empty cabin that had been found in the woods where workers were bulldozing for a new development. Not much else was said. There was no mention of animals or cages or a strange, old man. The cabin was demolished along with everything else in the way of the growing suburbs.

By the next summer, families were moving into the houses in the new development. Instead of playing in the little patch of trees that was all that was left of the woods, kids spent the summer running through sprinklers or playing kickball at the end of the cul-de-sac.

Brian and Grace didn’t play with the neighborhood children anymore, now that they were in middle school. On the hottest summer days, Brian stayed inside, watching television with

Johnny or doing push-ups in his room in front of the air-conditioning vent. Grace and Emmie cloistered themselves in Emmie's room, putting on make-up or calling up the local radio station to request songs. Sometimes, in the evenings after dinner, Grace sat alone on her porch, watching the fireflies blink on and off in the yard. The old butterfly flag flapped in the breeze above her head, and from the trees came the shrill whine of crickets. Brian would walk past on his way to Johnny's house or the new basketball court. He would look up at Grace on the porch and say hey, and she would say hey back. He'd continue on down the street, and she'd go back inside, but their words would hang in the humid summer night, heavy with hidden meanings.

Blanca

When the nurse handed her the baby, it was blue in the face and silent as a stone. The mother took one look at it and screamed, thinking it was dead. She thrust the lump of flesh away from her, back towards the nurse.

At the sound of the mother's screams, the baby opened its tiny red mouth and began to wail. A hint of pink flushed its translucent cheeks, and it fluttered one thin, ghostly arm. The mother reluctantly brought the baby back towards her chest and looked down at it. Her husband stood next to her, squeezing her shoulder. "Just a little pale," he said over the infant's screams. "She's perfectly fine."

"She's so white," the mother complained. "Look, you can see all of her veins." She touched the baby's cheek, tracing the mesh of spidery blue lines just under the skin. She followed a thick blue vein up the middle of the soft white forehead until it disappeared under tufts of black hair. If she hadn't just pushed the thing out of her, she wouldn't have believed it was hers. Her parents were from Colombia. Everyone in her family had golden skin that turned brown in the summer sun.

"You're tired," the husband said, slicking hair away from his wife's sweaty face. "Don't worry. She's a perfect little baby girl."

The mother sighed. Her whole body throbbed, and her eyes burned from hours without sleep. She continued to look at the baby.

Her husband considered the child, touching the tiny fingernails on one hand. "You can't expect a baby to get tan inside the womb," he joked.

The mother smiled. Her body hurt too much to laugh. “Our little blanca,” she said, hugging the baby to her sore breasts. And that’s what they called her.

Nearly two years later, when the mother was pregnant with what would have been Blanca’s brother, the doctors diagnosed her with cervical cancer, and instead of creating another life, her own life came to a slow and painful end.

Sharon met Robert on an internet dating site, but she was too embarrassed to tell people that, so she said they met at church. In fact, Robert didn’t attend church, but he was still a true gentleman, and their courtship moved through a progression of dates until he finally took the next step and invited her home to meet his seven-year-old daughter, Blanca.

Sharon was nervous. She didn’t have any children of her own, although she’d always wanted them. Her first husband, it turned out, after many years of tests, was infertile, and when Sharon began suggesting other options, the marriage quickly went downhill. Sharon thought anxiously about Robert’s daughter. She’d never seen pictures, but she imagined a smiling, pink-cheeked girl with soft brown hair just like his.

She parked her car in front of Robert’s house and looked at herself in the rearview mirror. She still wore her blond hair in loose waves to her shoulders and rimmed her blue eyes in liner, just as she had done all through her twenties. People always told her she looked young for her age, and Sharon loved hearing that, especially now that she was nearly thirty-five and not feeling especially young anymore. Of course, some people said she must look so young because she didn’t have any children, a bitter compliment to swallow. Sharon brought out a tube of lipstick

from her purse and dabbed some on with her finger, rubbing the pink excess onto the back of her hand when she was done. She smiled at herself in the mirror.

Sharon walked to the front stoop of Robert's house, a brick colonial much too large for one man and one little girl, and rang the bell. The heavy wooden door opened slowly. She took a breath, ready to say a cheerful hello, but she was so unprepared for what she saw that the words stuck inside her throat and she coughed instead.

The girl standing before her was tall for her age, thin and shockingly pale. Her long legs descended from cotton shorts like bleached white bones, and her face seemed to glow with a bluish tinge from veins underneath the skin. The only color in her face came from chapped lips, plump and blood red. She looked at Sharon coldly with dark eyes, each pupil indistinguishable from its iris. Her black hair hung in tangles down her back, and she stuck two fingers into it, pulling at a knot as she regarded Sharon.

Sharon stopped coughing and pressed her hand against her chest as if to apologize. She smiled as best she could. "Hi, you must be Blanca. I'm your daddy's friend, Sharon."

Blanca nodded slightly. "I know." She turned and ran into the house. A flash of white limbs and black hair, and she was gone.

Sharon opened the screen door and stepped into the front foyer. The house was a bit drafty from the high ceilings, but tastefully decorated and very clean. She walked past the staircase and down a dark hallway. "Hello?" she called. "Robert?"

"In the kitchen!"

She felt a melting in her muscles and realized that until that moment she had been squeezing herself together in rigid tension. She walked down the hall towards the sound of his voice.

The kitchen was at the back of the house and felt warm and bright, yellow walls and a table set with ceramic plates. A glass door looked out into the backyard where a swing-set with sturdy wooden posts sat in the middle of the dried-out grass. In the blue twilight, Sharon saw Blanca sitting on one of the swings, holding onto the plastic-covered chains and trailing her bare feet in the dirt. Wind blew through the trees that lined the edge of the yard, and they tossed their scrawny branches, scattering brown leaves onto the ground. Sharon had worn her heavy jacket and a scarf, but Blanca, in shorts and a t-shirt, didn't seem to mind the cold.

Robert looked up from the cutting board where he was chopping cilantro. "You met Blanca?" he asked, glancing through the window above the sink into the backyard.

"I did." Sharon watched the girl push off from her toes and swing into the air, leaning her body back so that her hair trailed on the ground. "She seems very..." Sharon paused. "She seems very smart."

Robert opened the oven a crack and peeked inside. The rich smell of melted cheese filled the room. "She's a little shy around strangers," he said. "But I think you two will get along." He moved towards Sharon and put an arm around her waist. He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I really hope you will."

Sharon smiled. She turned towards Robert, and he put his other arm around her. "I hope so, too."

Just then the back door slammed, and Robert dropped his arms, stepping away from Sharon quickly. "Hey, B!"

Sharon turned around to see the child standing behind her. Her dirty, purplish feet looked ugly against the clean white kitchen tiles. She ran to Robert and buried her face in his stomach.

He reached down and placed his hands gently on her sharp little shoulder blades, and she wrapped her skinny arms around his waist. “You ready for some enchiladas, B?”

She made a muffled noise into his shirt. Sharon leaned awkwardly against the kitchen counter, watching as Blanca’s bony arms tightened around Robert.

Robert loosened himself from Blanca’s grip and went to the oven where he pulled out a pan covered in tinfoil. He unrolled it to reveal stringy melted cheese and bubbling red sauce underneath it. “Have a seat, ladies,” he said. “Dinner is served.”

Sharon sat down, and Blanca sat across from her, frowning. Robert came to the table with a bowl of salsa and a bowl of cilantro. “Smile, B,” he said. “Enchiladas are your favorite.”

Blanca’s lips stretched into a strange smile. They were chapped and peeling from the cold, and as she smiled, her bottom lip split down the middle, bringing a bright line of blood. She raised her eyebrows at Sharon as she drew her bottom lip into her mouth and sucked it clean.

Nine years later, Sharon still remembered that day – the day she met Blanca – vividly. Sharon had been so naïve back then, thinking that with a little patience she would soon be braiding Blanca’s hair and reading her bedtime stories.

Sharon thought of that first encounter as she stood in front of the living room window with Robert, holding back the heavy drapes and watching Blanca climb into a jeep driven by a boy named Timothy. All she could see was the side of Blanca’s head and the swish of her black hair as she pulled the passenger-side door shut.

Robert sighed and turned away from the window. “Where did this Timothy boy even come from?” he asked. “I thought she was dating Mark Something.”

Sharon watched the jeep disappear around the corner before letting the drapes fall back across the window. “I guess she and Mark broke up, I don’t know. She doesn’t tell me anything.” She followed Robert to the couch and sank down next to him. “I don’t even think they call it dating. They’re just hanging out.”

Robert shook his head and stared vacantly towards the window. “I don’t like her going off in cars with boys. We don’t know where they’re really going. We shouldn’t have let her go.”

Sharon patted his leg just above the knee. “She’s sixteen. She doesn’t want to sit at home with her parents on a Friday night.” The word parent sounded strange in reference to herself. Sharon had never quite gotten comfortable with her role in the girl’s life. When she went to the open house nights at Blanca’s school, and the teachers asked if she was Blanca’s mother, she still hesitated after all these years. “Step-mother,” she always clarified.

Robert picked up Sharon’s hand and held it for a moment before placing it with distraction back towards her lap. “I should have made her curfew earlier.”

Sharon leaned over and kissed his temple. “You need a glass of wine.” She wished Robert could just relax and enjoy the fact that they had the house to themselves.

It was hard to remember now what things had been like in the beginning. Before they were married, when Sharon still lived on her own, Robert had often hired a baby-sitter to watch Blanca so he could take Sharon out on dates. After dinner or a movie, they would go back to Sharon’s condo where Robert had been an energetic, enthusiastic lover. Once she had moved into Robert’s house, however, things had changed. The baby-sitters and the dates became less frequent, and Robert became much more cautious in bed. “Shh,” he’d say, clasping a hand over

Sharon's mouth when she moaned. "You'll wake her up." He meant Blanca, of course, but Sharon had noticed that the girl was an extremely heavy sleeper.

It seemed like even when Blanca wasn't in the room, she was present in Robert's thoughts. When Sharon had first moved in, he talked endlessly about how to help Blanca adjust to having a step-mother. "Her therapist says it's important for her to have a mother-figure in her life," he reported, "but not someone who tries to take the place of her mother."

"Does she even remember her mother?" Sharon couldn't help asking.

"She only remembers her being sick. In the hospital," Robert said quietly. "But she remembers her."

Sharon hadn't counted on that, but it made her feel sorry for Blanca and vow to try her best. And she did try; she tried very hard at first, but Blanca proved to be a difficult daughter. First there was the eating issue. For the longest time, Blanca refused to eat anything Sharon cooked. At dinner she pushed her food around with her silverware, purposefully scraping her fork against the plate to make noises that sent prickles down Sharon's spine. Later in the evening, she would ask her father to make her a grilled cheese or a peanut butter sandwich, and even then she would only eat a few bites before pushing it away. "She's a picky eater," Robert would say in her defense.

But it wasn't just the cooking. Blanca didn't want to have anything to do with Sharon. She didn't want Sharon to comb the tangles from her hair after a bath or take her shopping for new clothes. Instead she clung to Robert, curling up on his lap when he watched television or following him around the back yard when he pruned the bushes. Sharon felt like she never had Robert to herself. He was always with Blanca, or thinking about Blanca. The girl permeated every aspect of her and Robert's relationship.

Sharon remembered one day in particular. At dinner she had offered to patch up a hole that had developed in the knee of Blanca's too-short jeans. "No!" the girl had said. She turned to her father, her black eyes wide. "Don't let her touch my stuff."

Robert nodded slightly, as if in agreement. Sharon's heart dropped into her gut. She sat quietly in her chair, feeling queasy, as Blanca ran from the room.

"She's still getting used to you," Robert said, coming around to Sharon and putting his hands on her shoulders. "She'll warm up."

Sharon turned to look up at him. His face loomed above her, large and pink. "I want to have a baby," she whispered. She knew it was the wrong time to bring it up again, but she couldn't help herself. She kept thinking it would make things better to have her own child. She wouldn't have to convince her own child to love her. And maybe if they had a baby in the house, Robert wouldn't focus so much of his attention on Blanca.

Robert scooped Sharon's hair to one side and pressed his fingers into the muscles around her neck, searching out the knots. "I know you do. I just don't know if it's the right time. I mean, the marriage was a big enough thing for B to deal with, and if we put a new baby on top of that...I just don't know."

They had been married for over a year, and Sharon was almost thirty-seven. "I'm worried if we don't try now..." She paused and took a breath. "I mean, older women have more complications."

Robert's fingers stopped their kneading. He didn't say anything.

Sharon felt tears itching at the back of her throat. "Can we at least try?" Her voice faltered and dropped away at the end of the question.

Robert smoothed her hair back into place. "I guess we can do that," he said.

“Yeah. We can do that.”

And they had tried. Each night Robert had pumped himself into her silently and efficiently, but as time went on, and Sharon didn't get pregnant, they had tried less and less often, and eventually they had stopped talking about the possibility of a baby.

Now they were too old to have another child, and all they had was sixteen-year-old Blanca, the constant, sullen reminder of Robert's first wife, his first love. Sharon sat on the couch and looked at Robert. In profile, his face was soft, and his weak chin drooped a bit towards his neck. She leaned over and kissed his cheek, pressing her breasts up against the side of his arm. It used to drive him crazy when she did things like that, and he would tell her how much he loved her breasts. But tonight he just turned and kissed her vaguely on the mouth, his lips closed. Then he placed his hands on his knees and pushed himself up from the couch. “I'm going to watch the rest of that movie from last night,” he said.

“You are?” Sharon crossed her legs and fluffed her hair with one hand. She pouted her lips playfully.

Robert didn't seem to notice. His eyes were vacant. “Yeah. I fell asleep before it was over.”

He paused for a moment by the end of the couch. “You want to watch with me?”

“Oh no.” Sharon dismissed him with a wave of her hand. “I might go read in bed.”

Robert nodded and headed to the den. Sharon stood up slowly and walked upstairs. In their bedroom, she sat down in front of her vanity mirror. She didn't know what she had been hoping for tonight, but this certainly wasn't it. She considered herself in the mirror. It was obvious that her husband didn't find her attractive anymore. And could she really blame him? She had gained weight in the past few years, and she needed to re-dye her hair. Sharon leaned

forward, analyzing the whispery wrinkles in the delicate skin underneath her eyes. There were lines on her forehead, too. A prominent slanted one right between her eyes: a frown line.

Sharon traced the crease from the edge of her nose to the corner of her mouth, then the identical one on the other side. It wasn't fair. His first wife would always be young and beautiful in his memory, and she was the one who would grow old and ugly.

Then there was Blanca. In the past two years, Sharon had watched as Blanca's frail body filled out: her breasts swelled, her scrawny legs grew into tight thighs and sloping calves. She was still tall and pale as paper, but there was something bizarrely appealing about her as well. Her long black hair was straight and shiny, and her lips had the rich plumpness of cherries, with the same promise of sweet juice beneath the skin. Sharon took out a jar of lip gloss and rubbed some on her thin, colorless lips, before putting on her pajamas and getting into bed with a book.

She woke up at midnight with the reading light still on and her paperback novel halfway open between her fingers. The other side of the bed was empty. Frowning, Sharon pushed away the covers and got out of bed. It was cold in the house, and she put on her slippers and grabbed her robe from the hook behind the door. In the hall, she saw that lights were on downstairs, and the hushed voices of Robert and Blanca drifted towards her.

She pulled on her robe and walked slowly down the stairs, listening. Sharon paused in the foyer, hovering just before the entrance to the living room.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," came Blanca's voice. It was the sweet, high-pitched tone she never used with Sharon.

"Do you know when you were supposed to be home?"

"I'm only fifteen minutes late!"

"I was sitting here, worried that something terrible had happened to you."

So Robert had waited up. Sharon knew she shouldn't be surprised. He always waited up for Blanca.

Sharon moved to the doorway. They were standing in front of the couch facing each other. Neither seemed to notice her.

"Maybe if you made my curfew later..." Blanca pulled at a chunk of raven-dark hair and twisted it around her fingers.

"You have to be home when I say to be home," Robert said. There was a high note of desperation in his voice, like he was pleading with her. "I just get so worried."

"Daddy, I'm really sorry." Blanca fell against him, wrapping her arms around his middle. They were nearly the same height, and she swooped her head forward so that her chin rested on his shoulder and her cheek against his neck. "I promise I won't be late again."

Robert's arms tightened around her, and Sharon couldn't help but think that he must feel his daughter's breasts pressing against his chest. He rubbed his hand up and down her back. "Please don't," he said.

Sharon coughed, and they both turned towards her. Robert took his arms away from Blanca, and she lifted her head from his shoulder.

"I think it's past bedtime for everyone," Sharon said.

Robert nodded. "It really is." He looked back at Blanca. "Get some sleep. We'll talk about this in the morning."

In bed, Robert kissed Sharon goodnight. It was a full, searching kiss, and Sharon thought it might lead to more, but then he sighed and said he was exhausted. He rolled over on his side and fell asleep.

Robert was soon breathing deeply, but Sharon felt wide awake. After an hour of lying rigidly, waiting in vain for the relief of sleep, she got up and went to the bathroom to take a sleeping pill. On her way back down the hall, she stopped in front of Blanca's bedroom door, which was slightly ajar. Sharon pushed the door open and looked in, not worried about flooding the room with the hall light. Blanca, as Robert liked to say, slept hard. She stayed in one position all night, frozen into a heavy, death-like slumber. Even as a little girl, she had never rolled around or had trouble falling asleep. Sharon looked into the room. Blanca was on her back, one white foot sticking out from the bottom of the covers. Sometimes Sharon thought about how easy it would be to kill Blanca in her sleep. Slip a needle into one of her prominent blue veins. Press a pillow against her ghostly pale face. She wouldn't even wake up to struggle. Sharon closed the door and padded back down the hall towards her room.

On Monday night, Sharon decided to do something special for dinner. She found a recipe online for an apple-pecan salad, and as soon as she got home from work, she started on the candied pecans.

Blanca walked into the kitchen as Sharon stood at the stove stirring a bag of pecans into a skillet of butter and sugar. Blanca wore her school uniform – a plaid skirt and matching blue sweater with her name embroidered in white at the top of her left breast. She stood silently for a moment, watching Sharon and fingering a pimple on her chin. The way she touched it, the blemish seemed almost sensual, bursting forth from her pale skin like a rose bud.

“I'm going over to Timothy's house,” she announced. “Okay?”

“Aren't you grounded?”

“No. He said I wasn’t grounded anymore as long as I promised not to be late again.” Around each other, Blanca and Sharon always referred to Robert as “he,” as if Robert was the only man they could ever possibly be referring to.

“I don’t know. You’re going to have to wait until he gets home from work.” Sharon continued to stir the pecans in the hot skillet. The sugar was just beginning to caramelize, turning brown and impossibly sticky.

“When will that be?” Blanca asked.

“Twenty minutes, maybe.”

“Fine.” She reached towards the counter and grabbed an apple slice from the cutting board. Sharon watched her bite into it.

“Ew.” Blanca grabbed a napkin from the table and spit the chewed up white flesh into it. “Mushy.” She threw the balled-up napkin towards the trash can. It missed and landed with a soft thud on the floor. Blanca started to walk out of the kitchen.

“Pick that up, please!” Sharon moved her spoon vigorously through the hardening pecans. She turned off the heat and took the skillet from the burner.

Blanca sighed and marched towards the trash can. She bent over towards the floor, and Sharon watched as her pleated skirt rose higher, revealing the backs of her smooth, white thighs. Sharon squeezed the muscles in her legs as tight as she could. She noticed in the shower each morning how her own body was slowly turning to jelly. The backs of her thighs were mottled, and spidery blue veins appeared in the softness behind her knees.

Blanca dropped the napkin into the trash can and looked at Sharon, her face void of expression. “Happy?”

“Yes.” Sharon moved towards the refrigerator and brought out a bottle of white wine. When Blanca left the room, she poured herself a large glass.

Robert arrived home shortly thereafter, and the three of them sat down to dinner. They all crunched their salads; the candied pecans were so hard it sounded like their teeth were breaking. Robert ate quickly then sat back in his chair, smiling. “I have a surprise,” he said.

He reached into his pocket and drew out a small, velveteen jewelry case. He handed it to Blanca. “It’s a sweet sixteen ring,” he said. “I wanted to give it to you on your birthday, but I had to get it re-sized and it wasn’t ready.”

Sharon tried to catch his eye. A present when she should be getting punished? Robert had never even talked about giving Blanca a ring for her birthday.

Blanca took the case and flipped open the lid. Sharon craned her neck to see. Diamonds glittered from inside the box, casting light onto Blanca’s face.

“It was your mother’s wedding ring,” Robert said. “I thought you might want it.”

Blanca pulled the ring from its bed and slipped it onto her right hand. It glinted there on her slender finger, heavy and full of light. “It’s so pretty, Daddy!” she said. She stood up and ran to him, throwing her arms around his neck.

Robert smiled, his hand on her lower back. “You’re welcome, Sweetie,” he said. “I’m glad you like it.”

Sharon pushed a soggy apple slice around in the bottom of her salad bowl and caught sight of her own wedding ring – a plain gold band. They had both agreed they didn’t want anything fancy.

Blanca sat down in her father's lap. She still did this sometimes, even though she was much too old for it now. "I love it," she said, looking at him with wide eyes. Her head darted forward and she pecked at his cheek with a quick kiss.

"Well," Robert said, "I know you're not my little girl anymore, but..."

But what? Sharon wondered.

Blanca settled her head into the crook of Robert's neck, and he smoothed his hand down her hair. "I'll always be your little girl, Daddy," Blanca said.

"I know."

"Anyone want dessert?" Sharon asked loudly.

Blanca jumped up from Robert's lap. "I'm going over to Timothy's now."

"Nine o'clock," Robert said.

"*Nine?*"

"It's a school night. Nine o'clock and no later."

She patted the top of his head where his soft hair was beginning to thin. "Okay. I promise." She trotted out of the room.

Sharon stood up and began stacking their dishes. Blanca had eaten all of the pecans from her salad and left a mush of spinach and apple slices at the bottom of the bowl. "I'm going to have another glass of wine," she said. "Honey? Wine?"

"Do you think she really liked it?" he asked, staring outside.

Sharon followed his gaze to the old play-set where the wind pushed an imaginary girl back and forth on the swing. She yanked the cork from the wine bottle with more force than necessary. "I'm sure she did."

Blanca came home at nine and retreated to her room. Robert went to bed shortly thereafter, but Sharon stayed up late, finishing off the bottle of wine and watching television. She watched a drama about beautiful high school students and their problems. The girls all had long hair and large eyes and dewy faces. They wore miniskirts and heels to school, their bodies young and tight. Sharon touched a finger to her cheek. It felt flaky from the dry winter air.

When the show was over, she clicked off the television and rose from the couch. The blood rushed to her head, and she stood still for a minute while her vision swam with flashing white spots. Carefully, she turned off the lights in the living room and stumbled towards the stairs. Her body felt heavy, and she leaned on the rail as she pulled herself up the steps.

In the hallway, she stood in the darkness, feeling something descend over her, like she was being covered by a gauzy sheet. She reached over and flipped on the hall light. She could see, but her vision was hazy: unfocused and dreamlike through the gauze. Instead of entering the bedroom she shared with Robert, she walked slowly down the hall towards Blanca's room, her feet creaking on the floorboards.

Blanca's door was halfway open, and in the light from the hall, she could see the girl curled under her covers, frowning in her sleep. Her hair was splayed out against her white pillow, and her eyelids fluttered slightly as she dreamt.

Sharon walked towards her. She stood beside the bed, swaying slightly and looking down at the closest thing she had to a daughter. She was no longer that gangly little girl on the swing-set. Now she had boys taking her out and telling her she was beautiful. And she really was beautiful. Soft skin and long hair. Those ripe lips, begging to be kissed. Sharon's face felt hot.

Without thinking, she leaned down and put her lips to Blanca's. They were damp and fleshy. She wanted to suck the breath from Blanca's mouth, like a cat killing a baby. Sharon pressed her lips hard against the sleeping girl's. Blanca stirred in her sleep. But she didn't wake up.

Sharon stood, suddenly aware of what she was doing. She put a hand against her heart, felt it still beating, and slowly backed away, out of the room, and into the light of the hallway.

She stood there for several minutes, blinking in the brightness, then she reached out, grabbed the knob to Blanca's bedroom door, and pulled it tightly shut.

Vita

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