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The World Still Undiscovered

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The World Still Undiscovered

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Table of Contents

Hands of Tyranny

Daddy used to take me to town once every year, after the snow melted off the mountain and the way into the valley was clear. He'd get the guns and ammunition together, pack a case full of rations in the back of the Jeep, and drive us down through a heavy cover of pine. The road would be almost gone by then, everything washed away except a narrow space between the trees. Before winter came again, Daddy would have to roll out a new layer of gravel so the trail wouldn't get lost in the meantime. The county didn't lift a finger to maintain it, but we were glad for that. It was our road. A private road.

I remember in 1995, the melt came late. I was eleven years old. The day before we were set to leave, news of the Oklahoma City bombing came through the radio. When Daddy heard the FBI arrested a militia man, he got off his armchair and went out to the garden. Through the window, I watched him pace up and down the rows of newly planted vegetables, yanking out whole mounds of crabgrass, their roots coming up clumped with dark, damp soil.

Daddy knew war would come one day. He always told me it would be a clash between the forces of liberty and those of tyranny, the kind of battle all true patriots would have to fight. He told me about the sacrifices we'd have to make. The bad things we'd have to let happen. Now that I was getting older, Daddy was teaching me what I would need to know to survive the days that were coming soon. He taught me how to hunt and fish, how to cover my tracks so no one could follow me through the woods. He taught me how to pack broken glass and gunpowder into a water pipe, how to thread copper wire so it wouldn't make contact with the detonator. I always liked that kind of work. My hands were small and quick, and Daddy liked to say that I was made for something so careful, so exact.

That night, Daddy brought a rabbit back from one of the traps. We cooked it together, me on hand with the spatula, him minding the fire. I tried to get him to let me handle the coals, but he didn't like that. I'd have to get too close to the heat, he said.

"I'm old enough," I said.

He looked down at me and smiled. "Not yet," he said.

After I ate, he loaded up the stove, lowered the damper, and told me it was time for bed.

"You need your rest," he said.

"Eight hours," I said.

"Eight hours," he said. He handed me my toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste.

I went to brush my teeth in the creek out back, and then I came back inside and slid under my covers. In the dark, Daddy was rinsing dishes in the basin on top of the stove. I could hear water splashing, a gentle, soothing sound that made me believe what we heard on the radio wasn't the start of anything at all, that Daddy had settled back into our quiet way of living, and everything was going to go on as it always had, without war or sacrifice.

I woke up later to see Daddy outside the window, holding something with his hands cupped around the middle. A bomb. That was the one thing Daddy carried so gently, but I'd never seen him take one out of storage before. He always said they weren't toys. They could hurt a lot of people. I watched him fold the bomb in newspaper, tie it up with a string, and leave it sitting on a table in the front yard.

I was awake most of the rest of that night. Before then, the bombs were only a way for Daddy to test me, to see how much I could learn, and then they went and were

kept inside the bunker, with extra rations and firearms and rounds of barbed wire. Now, I imagined them as something with real power, something like the surface of the stove but hotter, able to tear a person into a thousand pieces.

I would've liked to talk to somebody about the bomb, but there was no one to ask. Mom had been gone a few years by then, leaving with the pickup and all of the bed sheets and hand towels, off to live, Daddy said, in a condominium in Spokane. I didn't remember much about her, except I used to hate her cutting my hair, thinking she was somehow ripping off a part of me, and I'd scream and cry until she threw the scissors down with my hair half-cut and say if I wanted to look like a savage, that was fine by her. It wasn't like anyone was going to see me up here.

Sometimes I imagined talking to her about things I wouldn't talk about with Daddy. I'd ask her how to make a proper cover stitch or what to do now that my chest had grown too big for the t-shirts I bought last year. I had to come up with the answers myself, but just pretending to talk to her made me think of things. I'd ask her about the bomb, say, and she'd tell me not to worry. Daddy knew what was right.

We set out for Clark Junction early the next morning. It was still dark, before any other cars were on the road. As we drove, all I could see were shadows of trees rising around us and the outlines of sharp mountaintops ahead, but I could feel myself slipping back and forth across the seat as Daddy steered us through every hairpin curve. There was safety in that feeling, knowing he held the steering wheel in two hands, that he watched out the front window, somehow seeing through all that darkness, and whatever crossed our path, he'd know what to do.

The first we saw of Clark Junction was always the flag that hung in front of the Conoco station, as big as the parking lot that sat beneath it, and then the white houses that ran along the Piegan River. Trees, starting to leaf by then, sprang up along the streets, not dark and prickly like the trees back home, but open. Welcoming. If I had wanted to, if I had been a kid who lived in Clark Junction, I could've climbed on the branches, swung from them, reached the top and looked out over the roofs of the houses, all the rows of grey shingles spreading out into the distance just for me to look at. There was something exciting about being there, in the world, that made me imagine things that way. The world was something big and colorful, with crowded restaurants that made pancakes larger than my head and a Kmart that sat at the north end of town, the bright white of its lights making everything, the clothes and the metal racks and all the people, shadowless.

I knew when we got to the Kmart, I would get all new clothes for the year. I knew we'd go to Gertie's, where we'd sit in the corner with our backs to the wall and watch everybody come and go. The waitresses at Gertie's wore high-heeled shoes that clacked over the floorboards. They gave me crayons for the paper placemats and a kids' menu. I never ordered off the kids' menu. I always got a hamburger like Daddy, but I liked to look at it and pretend I was the same as all the other kids there, the ones climbing on the backs of booths and getting ketchup around their mouths, so their moms had to wipe them off with Wet Naps.

Daddy didn't feel the same way about town. Clark Junction was just a place with more rules than it ought to have had. The mountain was where he felt free. He always said that we were settling on the land, the way people did two hundred years ago, when they lit out from Ireland or Germany or the east coast for territories so far from the hand

of government that tyranny could never reach them. They came out west, where land was free and open, the mountains higher than clouds, where there were no towns and no law, and people made their own way in the world. The West, Daddy said, was where a man could do what he wanted.

Clark Junction was still asleep when we got there. On a usual day, we'd go to Gertie's first, but instead Daddy followed a street that ran alongside the river, not one we'd ever taken before, past two-story houses with front lawns coming up green. We stopped at a house with a basketball hoop over the garage. Parked out front was a truck painted a creamy color of green, green like water coming just off the glaciers. Along the side, there was the crest of the United States Forest Service.

Daddy got out, closing the door softly. In the rearview, I saw him standing at the back. Then he came around to the sidewalk, carrying the bomb flat and steady, so the wire wouldn't make contact with the alarm clock suspended inside. It was only when someone who didn't know better grabbed it by its middle, and turned it, that the timer would activate.

Daddy slid the package into the mailbox. He jumped back into the Jeep, closing the door in that same soft way he had before. He turned the car around. Then he looked at me.

"A very bad woman lives there," he said.

* * *

Daddy pulled us into the driveway of a farmhouse a few miles back toward the mountains. It was an old, rundown place, with chipped paint all over the outside walls and a roof that looked like it was about to cave in. There was a woman waiting on the porch next to a stack of old lawn chairs. I knew she was waiting for us, because when we got out of the truck, she stood up from the chair she was sitting in, and she came down to wrap one arm around Daddy. She was small for a grown up, about my height, and her hair hung low past her shoulders.

"You must be Martha," she said. "My name is Gloria."

Daddy nodded at me to say it was okay.

"Pleased to meet you," I said.

She showed us inside. We came into a big room set up with tables and chairs and a bar and kitchen toward the back. It looked like it was maybe supposed to be a restaurant, but it was nothing like Gertie's. There was a row of automatic rifles on the walls, the same kinds Daddy kept in a case in the back of the Jeep, and a flag with a black cross on it, for the Western Montana Militia. The chairs were the same lawn chairs she had on the porch outside, and when I sat in one, I found it was leaned back too far.

There were two other men there, both of them in camouflage coats and hats with brims that hung over their eyes. Daddy said their names were Mr. Potter and Mr. Dean. He must have known them from the few times a year he came down alone, because they were friendly, clapping each other on the back and shaking hands. It was strange to think about Daddy going somewhere without me.

"The famous Martha," Mr. Potter said when Daddy introduced us.

"I'm not famous," I said. "Just Martha."

"Your daddy's told us a lot about you," Mr. Potter said.

I got the feeling that he was laughing at me from the way he smiled, but I couldn't think of what I had done that could be funny.

Daddy had brought some things to sell, antique rifles he'd refurbished and furs from the animals we'd trapped, and he was going to take the men out to the truck to have a look. I wanted to help, but Daddy told me to wait inside with Gloria.

"You two can get acquainted," he said.

"We sure will," Gloria said. She craned her neck up so she was looking Daddy in the eye. "I've been telling your Daddy that he should be taking you to town more."

Daddy pinched the shoulder of her coat. "She goes to town plenty."

Gloria turned to me, looking like the two of us were planning something together. "A young woman needs more than a cabin in the woods."

Daddy coughed and put his hands in his pockets. "A female influence, I guess."

"I do all right," I said.

They both looked at me, like they'd somehow forgotten I was there, even though they'd been talking about me the whole time.

"I'll bring out some eggs," Gloria said.

"You like eggs," Daddy said. He clapped a hand on the back of my chair and went outside with the two men.

First, Gloria brought me a mug of hot chocolate with marshmallows in it. Daddy always said that marshmallows were nothing but sugar, and bad for my teeth besides, so I picked them out when she wasn't looking.

"You know, you're very lucky to have a daddy like yours," she said. She sat down in the chair next to me. "He's raising you to know how to protect yourself."

"Daddy said an education doesn't mean anything if you can't protect yourself."

"It's a dangerous world out there," Gloria said. "He's right to prepare you."

Gloria said she came out to Clark Junction because it was one of the last free places in the country. She was from South Carolina originally. I didn't know where that was exactly, besides south, but I didn't want to ask her because she seemed so sure I'd know. She said she came out here because all the old places in the country, the cities and the state governments, were full of corrupting influences. She said there were people out east who had no right to be there. Not like out here. Out here was where people like us could build up the world as it was always supposed to be.

"Did your daddy tell you about the man who blew up the building in Oklahoma?"

"Daddy said a war was starting," I said.

"He may have been right," Gloria said. "But they're the ones that started it. They started it with Ruby Ridge."

The attack on Ruby Ridge happened three years before. I remembered Daddy telling me the Militia was holding their own memorial for Sammy and Vicki Weaver, the two who died. There was a Marshal dead too, but the memorial wasn't for him.

Ruby Ridge was when things really started to change for our family. Maybe because it was so close to us, or maybe because it was Randy Weaver's fourteen-year-old son they'd killed, but that was when things got serious. Daddy put up barbed wire around the property, and he started a stockpile of rations and ammunition. And then the bombs. Before Ruby Ridge, we only had blasting caps to scare off grizzlies when we needed to,

but after that summer we built all kinds of things. Daddy said we needed to protect ourselves. The government had no right to attack children like they had.

I thought about what Daddy had put in that mailbox. I tried to think of how he could do something like that so he wouldn't hurt anybody, so he wouldn't be as bad as the people who'd done things to the Weaver family, but I wasn't sure how that could be, exactly.

"What happens?" I asked. "What happens if we don't fight the war?"

"We have to fight," Gloria said. "We have to fight for our freedom."

She cleared my hot chocolate, gone cold by then, and brought out eggs covered with some kind of orange sauce. I'd eaten eggs before, fresh eggs, but I didn't like them very much. I thought they shouldn't be so soft. I didn't eat the ones she brought me, just sort of played with them on my plate so it would look like I had.

Daddy and the other men came back inside. Daddy put one hand on the back of my chair and the other on the back Gloria's.

"Did you two have a nice talk?" he said.

"Sure did," Gloria said.

Daddy sat down with the other two men.

"We're not going to Gertie's?" I whispered.

He squeezed my arm, saying sorry. "You'll do better to sit here, with these people," he said. "You'll learn more."

But nobody really spoke to me after that, so I didn't know what they were supposed to be teaching me. Eventually, Daddy and the two men got to talking about the National Forest Service. I listened close at that, remembering the green pickup truck. Mr.

Dean was a rancher, and his land came up against the Flathead National Forest, where he let his cattle graze. The government had just seized all two thousand head because he hadn't been paying them money for the land.

"I'm not the only one, either," Mr. Dean said. "They're moving in on a lot of us."

"You know they'll take anything they can from the people who work for it," Daddy said.

"Why didn't you have to pay?" I asked. I didn't mean anything by it. I just knew Daddy would have the answer. "If it's their land. Why isn't that stealing?"

Everybody turned to look at Daddy, and I knew I'd said something wrong.

"That's all right," Daddy said. "I want her to ask questions." Then he turned to me. "The land out here is free. It shouldn't belong to the government. It should belong to the people."

"Yeah, but," I wasn't sure how to ask what I wanted to. "Is that like what they did at Ruby Ridge?"

Daddy's voice got low. "They're both an attack on freedoms. Any government that does that is declaring war on its own people. Do you understand?"

Everybody at the table was still watching me. I mashed my eggs with the flat side of the fork, watching them ooze around the prongs until they were all broken up, and they no longer looked like anything. I said that I understood.

* * *

When we got back into town, I figured we'd go straight to Kmart. I found that I wanted to get out of Clark Junction as soon as I could, back up to the mountain where everything would make sense again. We were driving north on the highway when Daddy spied the green truck parked at the bank and a woman standing outside at the teller machine. She had on a heavy coat, and workpants, and a pair of winter boots, and though her hair was tied up in a bun, I could tell it was long and shining.

She finished up at the machine, and then she got back in the truck. Daddy was idling at the cross street, and when she pulled out, he started driving down the street after her.

"You don't mind a detour," he said.

I told him I didn't.

She parked at the Albertson's, and we did too, in a row opposite, back a bit but with a clear view of the car. After a while, she came out, her arms full of a box of Campbell's soup cans. She was having trouble with the weight of it, and I thought for a minute Daddy might help her, the way I'd seen him do sometimes, but he didn't.

"You can never tell," Daddy said. "You can never tell what people are like just by looking at them."

Daddy stayed back far enough that she didn't see us. We followed her to the craft store, where she came out carrying fleece fabric. Daddy said that fleece didn't wear right and I should always stick to wool. We followed her to the flower shop, where she came out with a bouquet wrapped in cellophane. Daddy said flowers were the biggest waste in the world, all that money and they last one week, maybe two. We followed her to the

food bank, where she brought out the box of Campbell's soup. Daddy said even bad people could do good things.

As we followed her, I tried to see in her what Daddy saw. I tried to see her as somebody who meant to harm us and the way we lived. I watched her through the store windows. She stopped to talk to the people behind the counters. She made them laugh and talk on and on, like they were best friends. People waved to her. One woman crossed the street to give her a hug. I tried to see each and every one of them the way Daddy did. He always told me that townspeople weren't like us. They moved around the world with all of the comforts that town life gave them, and that made them blind to the way their country was being destroyed. They were ignorant, he said. And ignorance was no excuse.

By the time we followed the green pickup to Kmart, there were already cars in the lot, and people coming and going with heavy plastic bags, more people than I'd seen in the whole rest of the year. Hutterite families, the women in long dresses and bonnets, the men in white button-ups, their kids walking in a cluster. A blind woman following a dog fitted with an orange vest. A man in the Kmart uniform pushing nested shopping carts.

Daddy glanced at his watch. It was past noon by then. "We better get everything," he said.

We went inside. I found clothes for girls my age at a wall of folded jeans and racks of t-shirts in shades of pink. I picked out a few things, what Daddy said I should have: jeans, sweatshirts, and anything with long sleeves, one size up from the ones we'd bought last year. I went into the change room. The legs on the jeans were too short. I came back out.

"It doesn't fit," I said.

Daddy stopped a salesgirl. “Do you have bigger sizes?”

“In women’s,” she said.

“My daughter’s only eleven.”

The salesgirl glanced at me. “Definitely women’s.”

In the women’s section, the sizes were different. Small, medium, and large. I wondered how could someone be medium, if I was medium. The jeans were named “Relaxed” and “Slim.” I didn’t feel like I was either one, but I couldn’t be sure.

There were bras in the back corner, and I started toward them. I’d only ever seen bras when Mom lived with us. She used to dry them hanging on the pot rack, and I’d play with them, twirling them around a broken fishing pole, waving them like a flag. I stopped a table backdropped by a poster showing girls my age in summer dresses, smiling.

“We’re looking for jeans,” Daddy said.

I let my hand hover over the stacks of bras, fanned out so I could see them in full. “They say they’re age eleven plus.”

Daddy shoved his hands in his pockets. “You don’t need one.”

“I don’t,” I said.

“Are you hungry? You didn’t eat much at Gloria’s.”

“A little.”

“I’m going to get groceries,” Daddy said. “Only pick up what you need.”

He left, and I was alone in the underwear department. I thought about asking somebody for help, but the only salesgirl around was sitting behind a counter, flipping through a catalog. I wandered down that one table and onto the next. Some of the bras had lace sewn around the straps and elastic bands, delicate threads drawing images of

flowers and leaves. I knew that this was what Daddy was talking about when he said female influence. It was this whole world of beautiful things, all of the colors and patterns done up so perfectly. I picked up a white bra, plain cotton, and turned it over in my hand. Inside the cups, there was foam padding, soft when I squeezed it. I knew somehow that Daddy would never let me have one, that this was the kind of frivolous, comfortable thing that only townspeople liked. A feeling welled up inside of me, a longing. I stuck the bra in the pocket of my coat. I looked around the store, to see if anybody was watching.

The woman with the green truck was standing beside a rack of sale bras. She shifted through each one, running her fingers over the material. Sometimes she grabbed one and hooked the hanger over her arm, but most of the time she left them alone. She seemed so assured, like she knew just what she was looking for, like she knew how to tell what was wrong from what was right.

I must have been staring, because she looked at me and didn't look away.

"Not much I can do with something like this." She held up a bra that was all red mesh in the cups. "Doesn't do much good when you work out in the woods."

I realized she was telling a joke, so I smiled. People in Clark Junction could be friendly like that. Daddy always said that whenever people wanted to share something about their lives, I should just smile.

"Why do you work in the woods?" I asked.

"I'm a forester," she said. "I study trees. If they have diseases. That kind of thing."

“You keep trees healthy?” I didn’t know there could be such a job in the world. It didn’t sound to me like such a bad thing at all.

The woman glanced down the aisles of the underwear department. “Is your mother helping you shop?”

“My daddy’s getting groceries,” I said. And then I thought maybe I wasn’t supposed to say that. Maybe I was supposed to keep everything secret.

“Your daddy, huh?” She looked around at all the rows of underwear. “Is he coming back to help you?”

“Yes,” I said.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

I hesitated. Daddy always said that our names were nobody’s business, and that if anybody asked, it was better to say nothing at all.

“Martha,” I said.

“Martha.” She leveled a serious look at me, so serious I started feeling heat rising in my ears. I thought she knew everything, not just about the bomb in her mailbox, but about our cabin in the woods and the way we lived there, all the ways we didn’t, could never, belong in town. For some reason, that one thought bothered me more than anything else.

“You need to put that bra back,” she said.

My hand went to my pocket. I’d forgotten, for a moment, that it was there.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“You don’t need to apologize to me.” She waited while I took the bra out and put it back on the table. I thought she might call somebody over, or maybe just arrest me herself. I didn’t know how it worked.

“I know stealing doesn’t seem that wrong,” she said. “But there are a lot of people in this world, and you have to think about how your actions might affect them.”

“Yeah,” I said.

I wanted to ask her more questions. When she spoke, everything seemed so clear and easy. I was just another person in the world, and the same rules that applied to everybody applied to me. But every question I could think of, all the different ways I could say what I wanted to say, seemed like they didn’t make any sense at all.

“Thanks,” I said.

“You had the wrong kind of bra.” She took the one I’d put back by both straps, holding it in front of her like she was testing something. “A girl your age doesn’t have much use for padding.” She took one from another stack, a band of light pink cloth. When she put it in my hand, I felt how soft the material was.

“That’s a training bra,” she said. “It’s what I got for my own daughter. She’s about your age.”

The training bra was stitched with the image of a high heel shoe in shining red string. I ran my thumb over it. I thought about this woman taking her daughter here, guiding her through all of the tables and racks, always able to answer her questions, giving her the choice between this outfit and that, asking her what she wanted. It was the choice that seemed so important to me, that she’d know how important it was for her daughter to have all the options laid out in front of her.

"You look like you'd be a medium," the woman said. "Here, let me show you."

She started down one aisle. I moved to follow her, to go on and have her show me everything I needed to know, but then I felt somebody squeeze my shoulder. I knew I'd turn around, and Daddy would be there. He would put an end to the day. He'd take me up the mountain before I could finish thinking through what to do next, how to form words the way I wanted to make everything turn out all right. I stayed facing forward a moment longer, watching her walk down the aisle away from me.

* * *

We stopped back at their house after Kmart. Daddy parked on the riverfront street and sat with his hands on the wheel, craning his neck to watch her daughter play in the driveway. She had a basketball out, and she threw it toward the net that was bolted above the garage, always missing by several feet, the ball hitting the door and then rolling down into the street, where she'd have to retrieve it. We watched her for a while, the same thing every time, the girl adjusting her stance maybe, trying to throw from up higher or down lower, but always missing. It was the same no matter how many times she tried.

The green truck pulled up next to the mailbox. The girl rolled the ball to a stop against the house, and she waved. I could see her mother in the driver's seat, reaching back for her purse. She opened the door and climbed out. She came around the front of the truck. She stopped to wave at her daughter. She adjusted her purse around her shoulder. She opened the mailbox door.

Daddy gripped the steering wheel tight. I thought he would get out. I thought he would put a stop to things. I thought my life would keep going in the same quiet way it always had.

"Sometimes," he said, "things aren't so simple."

Then he turned the keys, put the car in reverse, and took us back up the mountain.

It didn't hit me, the full reality of what happened, until long after we left. It was only years later, when I looked up articles on the bombing at a library, that I could bring myself to think about that day in any detail at all. Before then, it existed in the background of everything that happened after. All the ways my life changed.

The daughter sustained minor injuries when shrapnel hit her face. She and her father moved somewhere far away from Clark Junction, but she still sometimes comments in local news whenever there's a new outbreak of militia activity, which is often enough around here, saying something about tolerance and forgiveness. I'm in awe of her. I read about how it happened, what the bomb did to her mother's hands first, and then to so much of the rest of her, and what that must have looked like from her vantage point, how she must have played the day over and over again in her mind, and forgiveness seems far away.

Not long ago, I brought my own daughter to that house on the river. I hadn't meant to drive there. We were on our way to something else, and then we were in front of the driveway, and I was letting her out of her car seat to run to the riverside and throw rocks in the water. The new owners had painted the house a darker color, and the tree out front was taller, and the mailbox was gone, but otherwise it looked the same as it did that morning, which is to say that it was just another house where people lived. I stood in

front of it for a while, thinking if I was there long enough I could travel through time. I could appear in front of that mailbox all those years ago and do what was supposed to be done. I could stop all of it. But then my daughter called out for me, and I went to hold her hand as she waded in the shallows of the river, digging her other hand in the silt, kneading the softness of all the broken down rocks from upriver.

There was the road up to the mountain too, on our way back home. I could still see it off to one side of the highway, overgrown now, the yellow police line shredded, half-buried in the mud, but still with the same curve up into the woods, the same dirt worn smooth and the same tight squeeze between the trees, so small and narrow and unlike any road I'd seen since. But I did not take her there.

The World Still Undiscovered

The whole thing was Elliot's idea. If the thought of hunting bigfoot in the woods between our houses had occurred to me, I would've dismissed it as the wild fantasy of a kid much younger than we were by then. We were headed to Junior High in the fall, and the neighborhood that was once our whole world had started to look like nothing more than a series of shallow cul-de-sacs and young, skinny trees. We were too old to play pretend. Too old to look at the array of sloped driveways and mowed lawns and see something magic. So when Elliot showed up at my house one day late in June, sweat slicking his hair back and words coming out of his mouth in a jumble of a thousand different thoughts and ideas and explanations, I thought he was joking.

"She was right there," he said. "Twenty feet from me. Ten, even."

"There's no such thing," I said. "You saw a person. Somebody in a costume."

Elliot glanced back the way he came. There was something about him standing there on my stoop with his hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans, wearing an expression more serious than any I'd ever seen cross his face, that made me take notice.

"I saw her, Charlie. I swear."

He'd been heading to my house, walking down the paved trail that cut from one end of the woods to the other. She was a ways off, over by the stream that sometimes sprang up after it rained. She was bent over, so she couldn't see him. Her body was covered from head to toe in shining hair the color of garden soil, and when she stood up straight, she was taller than any person could be. Ten feet, Elliot said, maybe twelve. Once she was done drinking from the stream, she started up the hill, and then he could see her profile: a face like a gorilla's, with a wide, round mouth.

"I couldn't move," Elliot said. "I should've followed her, but I couldn't move."

"How do you know she was a she?"

"She had breasts." He held his hands up to his chest, then curled his fingers so they formed giant, dangling orbs.

That's when I knew he was serious. Elliot had never uttered the word "breast" in my presence before. The steady growing of our bodies into two separate, distinct entities was something we both wanted to ignore. So much of our lives together was the work of intricate routines and perfected habits. Meeting at the same bus stop next to a vacant lot off Aspen Lane every school day between September and June. Eating lunch together in the same cafeteria stools that wobbled when we moved. Crossing the path through the woods once, twice, three times a day to go between our houses, never really invited and never with any kind of plan except the continuous exchange of ourselves between one place and another, so the time we spent apart would never be all that long.

Getting older disrupted everything, though on the outside, most things were the same. But that summer I'd decided to stop sleeping over at his house. One morning I woke up from a night on his floor, and I looked at the blue walls, and the shelves of comic books, and the bean bag chair patterned like a soccer ball, all of which smelled, in some suspicious way, just like him, and I felt like an intruder. I knew on some level that it was only a matter of time before our parents put an end to the sleepovers anyway. Maybe I was trying to avoid a confrontation, when we'd have to admit why we couldn't be the way we always had been.

Though I couldn't have articulated it at the time, I must have believed, at first, that bigfoot was Elliot's own attempt to delay the inevitable, an imaginary adventure that

would bring us back to the days when the unreal was more real than anything else. That, I think, was why I humored him.

"So there's a bigfoot," I said. "What are we supposed to do about it?"

Elliot scuffed his foot against the concrete step, tensing his other leg. His posture had a sense of immediacy, like there was something else, some emergency that only we could address.

"I want to show you something," he said.

He led me the block and a half to the woods' entrance, where the pathway arced downhill, past a backyard built up with a swing set and a garden of perennials and a dog that always rushed the fence when we walked by. Then the path turned, and the view of the houses above faded behind long prairie grasses and then behind the trees. Once we reached the forest floor, and everything was shaded and damp, it felt like we were miles from any city. The woods were a dense grove of aspen trees and some low-lying plants. Nothing larger could grow in all that shade, no underbrush, so there was a clear view between the white trunks, from one end of the woods to the other.

Along the trail, propped against one tree, was a flag we'd made a few summers before, a square of torn bed sheet tied to a branch. It was damp, worn from snow, and frost, and rain, but I could still see the faint outline of the designs we'd drawn in permanent marker one day in my back yard. Everywhere in the woods seemed to hold that kind of significance. Every clearing with grass growing from beneath dead leaves was a place we built snow castles. Every fallen log was a canoe we'd paddled along waterways in search of new, unseen lands. The chickadees calling was a tune we once

sang along to, the wind something we'd held our bodies against to pretend we were flying.

"It's back here," Elliot said.

We crept through tangles of roots and the muddy ground, toward the sound of water flowing. I had the sense that we were sneaking up on something, and I found that I started looking, in the largest and most suspect patterns of shade, for bigfoot hiding between the trees. Such was Elliot's effect on me. He could make me see something even when it wasn't there.

Elliot stopped next to the stream, and for a second I didn't know where I was supposed to look. But then, in the mud, I made out a bare footprint. The stream was washing it away, but I could still see the shape, now just faintly pressed into the soil. I thought it was human at first. It was the same basic print, with five short toes at the top. But it was too big, almost as long as my arm. My hand hovered over it, and in comparison the print was large, perfect, and strange. But real, entirely real.

"We're going to find her," Elliot said.

* * *

Elliot always had the capacity for certain kinds of all-consuming obsession. That last Christmas, when it got so cold we barely left our houses for two weeks, he devoted himself night and day to learning how to speak Elvish. I'd call him on the phone, and his mother would try to get him, but most of the time he was too busy pouring over lesson plans designed by people on the Internet. He said he'd call me back, but he never did. By

the time school started again, he was fluent. He tried to teach me, but all I could pick up were a few insults to mutter under my breath in response to the girls in the downstairs bathroom.

That was the way it was sometimes. I was pressing my nose against the glass, watching Elliot dive headlong into his newest enterprise. There was something lonely about it, knowing he was going somewhere I never would. But there was something I liked too. I liked that Elliot's appetite for yet-unknown things was so voracious, especially when mine was so mild. For Elliot, there was always a world still undiscovered lying just beyond his reach, there for him to conquer. And when I spent enough time with him, I thought that I could see the world that way too. I thought, for a minute, that I could conquer it.

That summer, when everything else felt like it was getting away from us, I knew I couldn't stay watching on the outside of things. The risk was too great. This time, I had to join in.

We started meeting at my house to plan. It wasn't long before Elliot discovered the International Bigfoot Researchers Association, IBRA, and printed half the contents of their official website off the library computers. He brought the papers to my house, and we poured over everything we could find. Habitat, diet, behavior. Elliot bought hairspray and rubber cement so he could make a casting of another footprint. He started taking a disposable camera on our daily trips to the woods, because of all the proof of existence you could provide, a photograph was one of the best.

Eventually, Elliot called the IBRA to ask why a bigfoot would end up in a neighborhood like ours. The man who answered told him that they'd never had a report

of a bigfoot in an urban area before. But, if it were true, it might be for the same reason coyotes and deer and bears sometimes wandered through. All were animals whose habitats were being swallowed up by the sprawl.

"I didn't know that happened," Elliot said. "Did you know that happened?"

"Sure," I said. We'd learned about it in school. Elliot may have had singular devotion to certain topics, but he wasn't always attentive when it came to the rest of the reality.

By the end of the phone call, Elliot had not, despite trying, managed to convince the man to send an IBRA representative to look into our claim.

"They said they need more than just one eyewitness account to come out," Elliot said. "*I* saw her. I saw the print. *You* saw the print."

"I guess it makes sense," I said. "We're just kids."

Elliot clapped his hand down on my mom's glass dining room table, shaking the pens we'd laid there. "That doesn't make us liars," he said. "That does mean we're making stuff up."

I couldn't tell him what I really thought, which was that this kind of game wasn't as fun as it used to be. But it wasn't even like the games we used to play, not really. Elliot didn't believe bigfoot was imaginary.

At first I thought those days we spent in the woods would be just like every other day we'd ever spent there, playacting our way through discoveries, and explorations, and all the different roles we could think of. But this was real. We didn't play at all. We went down at nine every morning with our backpacks full of quick stop food, and water bottles, and bigfoot hunting supplies, and most days we didn't go home until dinner. We

had to sit stock still at the base of the same tree, because the IBRA website said you should move as little as possible, so you wouldn't spread your scent. And we couldn't talk either, because the talking might scare her off.

The days were hot. Fat mosquitoes zagged around our heads, their long legs hanging like limp strings. Squirrels who nested in our tree screeched and ran at us from high up in the branches, thinking we were there to eat their children. But Elliot and I stayed, amidst the sound of dry grass rattling against dry grass, part of the sweaty, breathing forest, until Elliot stood up and declared it was time to go home. And every night, by the time I reached my front door, sore and swollen from the heat, it was all I could do to rub cream on the mosquito bites that climbed up my arms in massive, throbbing constellations.

I was losing faith. Even though I'd seen what I'd seen, as the weeks went on, the footprint seemed less like something real, and more like a vague shape in the dirt. Something I'd remembered wrong, something I'd seen in the dim light and filled in with what I wanted to be there. It wasn't that I thought Elliot was lying about bigfoot. It wasn't that I thought he'd lost his mind. I was just thinking that maybe he wanted something badly enough that the sheer force of all that wanting had made it appear to him.

But I still went along. To do otherwise would have been to give him up for some vast and unknown period of time, which, at that point, might have spanned into eternity.

There was one day, well into July, when we came close to something. It was the hottest day of the year, and steam from the ground washed over us. I wanted to leave early.

"She's covered in fur," I reasoned. "Why would she come out in this?"

Elliot said I could go back if I wanted to. He wasn't going to hold it against me. And I knew he wouldn't, but I also knew if I left now, I might never come back.

"If I go in," he said, "and I miss her, what then?"

I stood up. Sweat stuck clothes to my skin. I felt like every particle in the air was clinging to me. "We could play Nintendo."

Elliot looked up at me. I felt like I'd done something horribly, indescribably wrong.

"This isn't a game," he said.

I slunk back down the tree trunk, folding my knees under my chin. My head was beginning to swim from sitting so long in the heat. The water was all gone, and my tongue itched against the dry, cottony feeling of my mouth. A stale breeze stirred the leaves. It was almost dinnertime. I could smell meat cooking on a grill somewhere uphill. It mingled with the wet ground and blooming weeds, all of it producing a strange, delirious sense of something not quite of this world.

"It's her," Elliot said. He sprang to his feet and took off running.

I watched him shrink with the distance.

I stood up. There was the indistinct shape of something moving through the trees, maybe shadows cause by the wind, maybe somebody passing through. Or maybe something else. I crossed the woods at a walk, not quite able to force myself to feel Elliot's immediacy. I came up behind him where he was standing, panting and leaning his weight against a tree.

"She's already gone," he said. At his feet, there was another footprint, or what might have been a footprint, smeared so the shape was difficult to make out.

Elliot's face was bright red from effort, fallen slack. I'd never seen him look hopeless, not in all the years we had been friends. Elliot was a force of nature. He could bend the universe to his will.

"How am I ever going to get anyone to believe me?" he said.

I reached around for my backpack, slung over my shoulder. Even then, I knew that belief was not a series of facts that you could prove. It was a thing you could choose to feel when the moment called for it, when the world was a room turned upside down, and you had tilt your head to pretend that everything was right again.

I bent down with the hairspray and started washing it over the print. When I finished, the casting would come up as nothing more than a blob capped with a few circular toes, but Elliot would take it home and rest it on his bookshelf, where it would stay, gathering dust, for years to come.

"You will," I said. "We'll find her."

* * *

The next morning, I waited for Elliot to meet me at my house. I put on my running shoes, and I sprayed myself down with insect repellent, so a noxious smell followed me around the house. My mom made me wait on the front stoop, which I did, until the sun came around the side of the garage and started to heat the concrete beneath me. An hour or more went by without Elliot coming up my driveway. My imagination ran wild. I thought

about him fallen dead at the bottom of the hill between my house and his, broken into sharp angles, bruised purple. I thought about him carried off by bigfoot and eaten. The website said that bigfoot didn't typically eat anything larger than a rabbit, but I didn't think I could trust them to know for sure.

I knew, even in the reasonable part of my brain that understood there was a better explanation, that it was up to me to look for him. I set off toward his house, back down the hill that led into the woods, and I found him before I had a chance to really start looking. He was sitting at the base of our same tree, a layer of dust and sunshine darkening his face. The sense of stillness around him seemed like an insult to all the terrible things I'd imagined.

"I figure she might come out earlier in the day," he said, "because it's cooler."

"Yeah," I said. I kicked at a tree trunk, trying to release some of the tension built up in my legs. "Sure."

Elliot set the disposable camera on his knee, aimed somewhere off into the trees. "We gotta start getting creative," he said. "We've got to think outside the box."

"I waited for you for more than an hour," I said.

Elliot barely glanced at me before he returned to the forest. "We're going to start coming earlier."

From that day on, Elliot went down to the woods early every morning, and I joined him at some point during the day and stayed as long as I wanted to. I came to realize that Elliot, absorbed as he was, didn't notice if I was there or not. I started to spend more time reading books in my backyard and going out to the community pool

with girls from school, rather than eat up the last summer of my childhood looking for a whole lot of nothing in the trees.

Toward the end of July, a dull ache started somewhere below my stomach, at the bony curve of my pubic bone. It pulsed, and stung, and squeezed, spreading outward to my thighs and my back until all the lower parts of me felt wrung out and old. A dizzy warmth would hit my head, and for minutes at a time I'd feel light enough to float away. Then I'd come back down to earth, indescribably heavy, like the sheer act of being was enough to hammer me into the ground.

I stayed away from the woods entirely one day, in the darkness on the couch in my basement watching reruns of old cartoons. By noon, I'd gotten my first period, a circle of tacky blood in my underwear. I never thought it would look so much like something that came from deep inside the body, something with weight and flesh. Every paper cut and skinned knee seemed so pale in comparison.

My mom brought me pads and a hot water bottle to hold against my abdomen. I stayed down in the cool of the basement until late afternoon, when the doorbell rang. Elliot had come by.

"Get your stuff on," he said when I came upstairs. "She's in the neighborhood."

I shifted uncomfortably in my short, flower-patterned pajamas. I thought that I could feel blood on my thighs. "How do you know?"

"I saw her scat," he said.

"You saw her scat?"

Elliot pushed a sheet of crumpled, dirty paper in my hands. It was from the IBRA website, detailing traits of bigfoot scat.

"We gotta hurry," he said. "I figure if we split up, we'll have double the chance of seeing her." He tried to hand me a camera.

"Elliot," I said. "I haven't been out to the woods today."

"Yeah. I know."

"I don't feel well," I said. "I'm sick."

"What's wrong with you?"

I shifted my weight so that I stood, resolutely, on the inside of the door. Sweat had dried on Elliot's forehead, a dull sheen. Bark stuck to the tangles in his hair. There was a look of intense obliviousness to him, an almost aggressive lack of concern. I knew then that there was no language to explain to him how I felt. No way to put our two experiences side by side and compare.

"I'm just sick."

"You don't care about finding her," Elliot said. "I'm doing all this myself."

"It's been over a month," I said. "And we haven't seen her."

"*I've* seen her."

I set my forehead against the frame. "Yeah, so. Maybe that's enough."

"Enough?" Elliot said it like it was a foreign word. And maybe it was to him.

"Maybe you don't have to keep looking for her." I pressed my legs together. My hand went, briefly, to my stomach. "Maybe she wants to be left alone."

Elliot balled his hands in fists at his sides. He stared down at the welcome mat in front of my door.

"You're not in this," he said. "You don't care."

He turned and jumped down the steps, then crossed the street and disappeared down the hill toward the woods. I didn't run after him. I didn't beg for his forgiveness. I just went back inside.

The pain faded as night set in, easing for the first of so many times, every tense part of me releasing so when it was gone, it was like it had never been there. Like I had conquered it for the last time. When I sat up, I felt no different than I had before. Not in the way that I expected to feel, anyway. I was not adult, or womanly, or wise. I mostly felt relieved, to have passed through something.

It was after dinner by then. The moon was full and orange, the way it so often was in summer, when distant forest fires covered the sky in smog. When I stepped onto my front stoop, I could see the way it cast light across the neighborhood, seeming to color the white panels of the houses in an eerie blaze. I put on jeans and a jacket to protect against the cold of the late summer night, and I went out to the woods.

We used to have campouts there on past summer nights, me and Elliot, one of our dads lighting a fire in the stone pit to roast marshmallows. We used to set up Elliot's yellow tent and put our sleeping bags side by side, lying so our shoulders touched. We stayed awake until the sun rose, talking about everything and nothing, but always the things that scared us, our parents or our pets dying, the sun exploding, nuclear war, and all the thousands of childhood fears fading in the face of more immediate things.

There was no one at the pit that night, but I still thought that I could smell smoke and ash, like the scent was made, not by fire, but by darkness itself. The woods were an ancient, alien place in the dark. Not like what they really were, the final, boxed-in

remnants of what the neighborhood was before all the houses were built and the roads were paved. They were magic. They were wild.

I walked carefully, but I didn't need to worry where I stepped. The narrow trails were such a part of my memory that I could avoid the fallen logs and knots of tree roots without trouble. I crossed the forest, rounding the twists and turns of the trees, not sure, exactly, where I was going. As I reached one edge of the woods, a nearby streetlamp shed light on the forest. Elliot was standing there, in profile, hands shoved in the pockets of his hooded sweatshirt. He looked different. Maybe it was the dark, maybe it was the cool night or the silence only broken by the beating of bats' wings, but I thought that I could see in his face the person he would grow into, the lines that would one day form around his eyes and the expressions he would one day wear, the way he would look in moments like this one, moments of pure exhilaration.

Elliot took the disposable camera out of the pocket of his sweatshirt, and he snapped a picture. I looked in that direction, and I saw bigfoot, making her way through the trees. She was not quite as tall as he described, her head only a few feet above mine. Her mouth was rounded like a gorilla's, but there was something human in the way she looked at me. Her expression was gentle, chiding, the way that adults would look at me when I'd wandered into the wrong place. She seemed so distinct, every hair in focus, that she could not have been a product of my imagination. There was simply too much of her to be anything other than real.

She passed just next to me, and I could feel the warmth radiating from her body. I could smell the berries on her breath. If I wanted to, I could reach out and touch her, feel how soft her fur was. She stopped so she was standing next to me, towering, filling up my

vision, and she let out one strong breath, a kind of huff, and it seemed so clear to me, that this was the one time I would be allowed to see her, that after tonight she would be only a memory to look back on. And then she was gone.

Elliot was still standing where he had been. He was looking out into the darkness, back the way I had come. Something passed over his face, a look of uncontained wonder, like he was seeing something magic unfolding before his eyes. It was a look both childlike and not, full as it was of a profound understanding that some things were beyond simple explanation. Some things were too vast, too wonderful for words. That look sent a shiver up my spine.

He was looking at me.

* * *

Elliot got the photograph developed, and he sent it in a priority envelope to the IBRA headquarters. The letter they sent back arrived the day before school started. Fall had already come to our neighborhood, the leaves changing and starting to fall, the first frost biting the flowers in our mothers' front beds.

Elliot brought the letter over to my house, and I sat down and read it right there on my front stoop.

Dear Elliot,

Unfortunately, we cannot accept your photograph for our records. We require any photographs to contain a clear image of bigfoot.

We thank you for remembering us and wish you well in your continued efforts.

Elliot's photograph fell out of the envelope, into my hand. In it, the forest was lit by the flash, making the trees look yellow and everything else look like a long strain of reddish darkness. Where bigfoot had been, there was only an out-of-focus blur, a shape that could be just about anything, or nothing at all. It was strange, to see that moment reduced to something so small, something that could be dismissed.

But maybe that makes sense. Maybe that's like every thing we think about when we're young. All the people we're going to be. All the things we're going to do. It all starts to fade into some dark shape you can't quite make out through the trees. Now, I cannot bring her face to mind in any detail. That photograph was, after all, the only reminder we ever had. The sensations are still there, the cool of the night, the smell of her. The rising thrill of her being next to me. But it's no longer something I can hold onto.

Elliot folded the photograph and tucked it into his pocket. "It doesn't really matter," he said. "I saw her. You saw her. We both know the truth."

"Yeah," I said. "I saw her."

Elliot sat beside me on the stoop. Our hips touched. I felt a warmth rise in my cheeks. I held a hand to my face, thinking he could see, but if he did, he didn't say anything.

"I'm meeting you for the bus tomorrow," he said.

"You better." I folded my hands in my lap. It seemed like I didn't know what to do with them anymore.

"I always meet you for the bus."

Elliot looked out, into the far-off distance that existed somewhere beyond the houses that now blocked his view, where the horizon was, where the whole world was there for his taking. He reached out, feeling for my hand.

Don’t Be Scared

Some time after midnight, I left my house with a purse full of babysitting money, taped a note to the window on the back door, and met Sady Sanderson on the middle island of our cul-de-sac. She wore her coat unzipped, like I did, to show that the cold didn’t bother her, and she was just standing there, underneath the orange streetlamp, letting the rainwater fall from the light onto her upturned face, and after I stood next to her for a moment, awaiting instruction, she said she thought I had chickened out.

“I had to wait for my mom to fall asleep.” I squeezed the shoulder strap of my backpack, already feeling like I’d done something wrong.

We snuck my 1994 Corolla down the driveway in neutral, leaving the ignition off until we got it onto the road. Sady slid into the driver’s seat. I took one last look at the houses, the garage doors all looming like giant, laughing mouths, and then we were gone. We turned down Ash and drove through the last of the neighborhood streets, past the Applebee’s and the Michael’s and out of Mountain View Heights, beyond where the traffic lights ended and the gas stations gave out, where all I could see was the stillness of the mountainsides floating in and out of the high beams and the animal eyes flickering from pockets of roadside underbrush. As we turned south, the road folded into hairpin curves along the foothills, taking us away from the lights of the subdivisions and strip malls that spilled along valley below, and when the rain started coming down, it was just a drizzle.

Sady rolled the window halfway down, even though the wind was stinging and cold, and she let her hair blow in strands around her face. When we hit the interchange, she turned on Highway 115 instead of the interstate. We were heading to Pueblo, and

Highway 115 cut west, around the edge of the Front Range, before meeting up with the interstate not far out of town. On the eastern slope, Colorado is really just one strip of city, state line to state line along I-25. Everywhere else is mountains and plains, empty space with a few towns thrown in.

"There won't be cops out here," Sady said. She glanced in the rearview mirror, though there was nothing back there, not even a road to see through the darkness.

"Yeah," I said. "That's a good idea."

Our plan, which was really Sady's plan, came about Friday after gym class. She walked up to me in the locker room, wearing her gym shorts rolled down at the waist band and her white sports bra, pressing her breasts into perfect half-moons, and she asked if I still had the Corolla. It was a banner moment, Sady Sanderson talking to Anna Howser. Some people even stared.

When we were little, Sady and I used to play together in the pink plastic house my mom set up on our front lawn. We would take pine cones from the tree in my front yard and pretend they were our children, or our cats, or French pastries with names we couldn't pronounce. I always played the husband. I'd burst through the door with a briefcase under my arm and grab Sady around the middle, like I'd seen my mom's boyfriends do. In retrospect, that should've been a pretty clear sign, but for years I convinced myself that what I liked about our game was the Looney Tunes-patterned tie I got to wear.

After a few years, that pink plastic house went away, left unused in our garden shed until it was put out at a yard sale next to old cookbooks and a rack of clothes, sun-bleached and cracked at the fake window boxes. Sady became the kind of girl who wasn't

popular exactly, because she was beautiful, and beautiful was better. She wore shorts that hit high up on her legs, and she starred in an ad campaign for Colorado Tech, and everything about her, even the way she moved, seemed rife with the promise of something dangerous, something that could never be contained in all the cul-de-sacs of Mountain View Heights. I, meanwhile, became a chess club dropout who went on dates with a steady string of barely closeted boys. It was a defense strategy, more for them than for me, since I was too good at hiding for anyone imagine me as anything but a fine, upstanding heterosexual. I wore ballet flats and tank tops that just passed the dress code. I kissed my dates at school dances, our tongues stiff like foam depressors. I told no one. My mother liked to say that all the teenagers coming out now were too young to make such a monumental decision, which really meant that they shouldn't make it at all. So I bided my time, waiting until I could make a break for Denver, or Seattle, or California, and live my real life.

I'm sure my attempts at straightness never ranked on Sady's radar. I swam somewhere in the wake of fake IDs and baseball diamond pot deals and sex in borrowed SUVs, a grand carnival with Sady always at the helm. I don't why she picked me. Why she looked at me and saw an accomplice. But when Sady Sanderson asks you to run away with her, you go.

"I want to get there early," Sady said. "You know, stake out the place."

"Stake out the place?"

Her expression was determined, the face of a noble anti-hero, off to do what she must, whatever the consequences.

"Do they know he's leaving?" I asked.

"Not exactly."

Sady's boyfriend, Tyler, was a resident of the under-25 group home in Pueblo. Six months ago, he'd been convicted of molesting his twelve-year-old cousin. It was all a fix, Sady said, because his aunt hated him. He used to pee in her rose bushes when he was a kid, and now she thought he was a pervert. Sady showed me a picture in the yearbook; he was a senior when we were freshmen. He was wearing a button up shirt, and his hair was swept across his forehead in that sloping, boyish style. I always thought of child molesters the way they were on the nightly news, wearing laundry-faded polo shirts and oversized aviator glasses. This is what he morphed into in my mind: two years on, leering behind the bushes, binoculars hanging from his neck and hairline receding up the crest of his forehead.

"Is that, um," I was looking for another, less technical term. "Legal?"

Sady shrugged, a motion that seemed to suggest that laws were things that applied only to those who did not truly love.

I knew exactly how she felt. I loved Sady Sanderson in that desperate, grasping way you love someone before you know what love is. I watched intently as she swept her hair over her shoulder in American History class, my finger miming a motion that would wind a lock around my hand. I tallied every time she crossed and uncrossed her legs, mirroring her posture, her way of being, somehow both prim and languid, imagining that I could make her love me through imitation alone. I spent late nights imagining the life we'd build together, the rundown loft apartment we'd rent, the books we'd pile along the walls, the draft that would blow through the smudged windowpanes, so cold we'd have to stay under the covers. All I had to do in these fantasies was bide my time until she

realized what I was thinking, that the way I felt was pure and beautiful and—this was key—reciprocated. She was the one who always came to me. To tell her how I felt was never the point.

Instead, I was acting as her getaway driver, banking on proximity alone to stoke wild romantic passion. I thought the mere act of giving someone what they wanted was enough to unlock deep, hidden feelings.

The plan, as Sady thought of it, was to pick up Tyler from the group home and then drop them both at the Greyhound Station. They'd leave on a life of peril and excitement and passion, and I'd drive back to Mountain View Heights, get in bed, and go on living like nothing had ever happened. But I never really thought the night would go that way. At least, that wasn't what I imagined when Sady told me about it. The idea of her taking off on a Greyhound with a convicted felon was just too ludicrous, the kind of scandal that happened to people somewhere else but not to us. There was a limit to how wild, how free, our lives could turn out.

Outside, the rain had started coming down harder. Water flowed in a shallow, steady stream downhill. When we rounded curves, and the headlights turned the right way, I could see all the way down to the bottom of the steep drop off. It felt like we were seconds from careening over the edge, flying into the riverbed and dying on impact, the walls and the windows collapsing in on us like a crushed soda can.

I bent my head down so I wouldn't have to look out the window, and I started rifling through my purse.

"Granola bar?" I asked.

Sady took her eyes off the road to look down at the Quaker Oats bar that I held in my hand. Her silence told me I had failed to live up to the unspoken agreement we'd come to, whatever it was that allowed me to be there in the car with her in the first place. She gave a small, pitying smile that seemed so suited for the situation, a faultless mix of rebuke and forgiveness, that I could only admire her.

"We can get some breakfast in Pueblo," Sady said. "You might have to buy, though. They don't let Tyler have any money."

The thought of sitting down to breakfast broke my fantasy of Tyler as a distant, balding aggressor. Now I had to decide whether he was, in fact, somebody dangerous. I was only just beginning to learn how to tell the difference. Boys, let alone men—which was what I imagined Tyler must be, a man, to have served two months in prison—were a mystery to me. They were dogs behind a chain link fence, their tethers maybe secure, their dispositions maybe friendly, but there was still that fear that they'd break the chain, jump over the fence, sink their teeth into my neck.

"My parents tried to take out a restraining order against him." Sady clicked her tongue, like that was on par with asking her to set the table.

"That sucks," I said.

"It sucks," Sady said. "My parents didn't like that he was older. They said it was statutory rape. Just because he was already on trial for the cousin thing."

"Parents," I said, hoping I sounded conspiratorial.

"I mean, he shouldn't have gotten mad," she said. "He pulled a knife on us. He said he'd rather die than have us be apart."

"Wait." I wanted to get this right. "Was he going to kill you guys, or himself?"

“I couldn’t really tell.” Sady shook her head. I had, I could see, asked the wrong question. Tyler’s exact goals were beyond the point. What mattered was the violence of the event and all that violence implied.

A new image of Tyler was beginning to form. Somehow, the problem of child molestation had receded in my mind with the assumption that we weren’t, in fact, children, and therefore couldn’t be molested. This new information had me seeing him as a maniac with a knife, somebody raving and unpredictable. That danger was somehow more immediate now that it was taken out of the obscure, yes-and-no of sex.

“I mean,” she said, “he wasn’t making a lot of sense.”

Sady was waiting for another response. This was, I understood, a key part of the story. Audience reaction. I had to be aghast, horrified, amazed.

“That’s scary,” I said.

Sady pressed her lips together, and I could see that I was about to get lectured.

“You have no fucking idea,” she said. “You have no idea what it’s like for somebody to do something like that for you.”

“What’s it like?”

“It’s the greatest feeling,” she said. “Knowing you mean that much to somebody. That’s what love really is.”

She gripped the steering wheel, suddenly taken away by emotion. She stared tearfully through the window, hardened, damaged, but not pitiable. Never pitiable. She was, after all, the kind of girl who could inspire such feeling, and who could ever pity that? I looked away, feeling like I was intruding on some private, painful moment.

“I knew you were cool,” Sady said. She wiped the beginning of tears from her eyes. “Everybody else thought I was crazy.”

“You asked other people?”

“Most of my friends.” She looked over at me, fondly. Like she was looking at an old dog. “I knew you’d get it.”

It was hard for me to imagine anybody saying no to Sady. Her very existence seemed to depend on the world would bending to her desires.

“Yeah,” I said. “I get it.”

We’d dipped down into a valley. All there was to see was inside the pool of light that spilled a few hundred feet out from the car. Barbed wire fences spread alongside us, their shadows harsh and fingerlike. I could hear the rush of water in the culvert, all the melted snow coming down from the higher altitudes, which seemed not to drown out any sounds so much as it refined them. The windshield wipers squeaked back and forth. A dozen loose parts rattled gently in the cab. The rain clattered against the roof. It was heavy enough to block any view of the road, so all I could see was water slapping against the windshield. We hit a low point in the road, and a wave swelled around the hood of the car, all the way up to the window.

Sady pulled over on the shoulder and killed the engine. “What the fuck was that?”

We got out. There was water almost to our knees. In the headlights, I could see it flowing back and forth between the flooded culverts, like a miniature sea. We were getting soaked through, and the air was frigid. All I could do was shiver, but it was a massive relief. The night was prevented from unfolding as planned. We were saved.

"The road's flooded," I said. I had to yell over the rain. "Maybe we should turn back."

"Turn back?" Sady ducked back into the car.

I followed her. "Yeah," I said. "It's dangerous to keep going. Don't you think?"

"I did not get this far to turn back now," Sady said. She turned the key in the ignition, but nothing happened.

"Fuck," she said.

I fell back in my seat, feeling a chill sweep over my body. I grabbed a flashlight from the glove compartment. I told her how to pop the hood, and I went back out in the rain. In the engine, I saw that the battery cable had come loose. It happened sometimes, and I'd learned a long time ago how to fix it. I jiggled it a little, tightening the connection.

The rain was lifting enough that I could make out shapes in the darkness. We were standing at the mouth of what was, as far as I could see, the only road that met up with the highway for a mile or more. Down that road was a cluster of houses, lit by the streetlamps that encircled them. The houses were tall in a kind of stretched-out way, like someone had taken a regular house by the roof and pulled. Not one had a light on. Some feet from where we were parked was a sign: Chinook Valley Development. Show Homes open 10-5, Monday through Friday.

I shined my flashlight on the waves of water rushing back and forth across the road. I knew that Sady would keep going as long as we could still move. And me, I was caught up in the endless propulsion of her reckless, thrilling adventure.

"Engine's flooded," I said when I got back in the car. "We just have to wait it out."

"How long?"

"Couple of hours."

"What are we going to do about Tyler?"

I rubbed my hands together to bring some warmth back to them. "He'll be fine."

"What happens when I'm not there?" Sady reached to wipe away the drops of water dripping from her hair and down her cheeks. "He'll think I abandoned him."

"Hey," I said. I reached over and patted her wrist. "We'll make it there in time."

We sat there for a while. The heat from our bodies warmed the car, steaming the windows until everything outside was hazy. Drops of water ran from my hair down my nose, dripping like snot. I was aware of my proximity to Sady in a way I hadn't been when we were moving. The noise of the road and the feeling of flying at an exhilarating pace had somehow blocked all sense of self awareness. Now, I was worried about the volume of my breathing, the way my posture in the chair made me look fat, unattractive. This was, I knew, the kind of place where things happened between people. A car pulled off on the side of the road in the dark. I could try something. I could make a move. I could reach out for her.

"Is that a car?" Sady said.

Twin pinpricks of light appeared on the road, wavering and indistinct. They grew wide, glowing like eyes approaching us in the darkness. I kept staring at them, even as they took up most of my vision. They were headlights, attached to a new-looking pickup truck, which slowed as it neared us. It turned onto the road that led to the show homes,

stopping just at the mouth. In the rearview, I could see someone jump down and head for our car.

The man was tall and thin. He wore a black fleece jacket and a baseball cap, like a dad I might see picking his kids up from school. A beard covered his face. He came up beside the driver's side door, and he tapped on the window. Sady rolled it down.

"Car trouble?"

"It just died," Sady said.

"It just died?" the man said. He shined the light inside the car, and for a moment I was blinded by brilliant spots dancing in my eyes.

"You've got to be in high school," he said.

"We're CSU students," Sady said. "Just on a study break."

"Is that right?" the man said. "You look like high school students."

Sady leaned one arm against the steering wheel, making herself look casual, cool. "We're in college."

When the man smiled, the whole shape of his face seemed to change. His cheeks grew full, and his eyes flashed out from the darkness. "I was just on my way to check the houses," he said. "Make sure nobody left windows open." He leaned into the car window. Water from his cap dripped onto the inside of the door. "I can't help with your car, but I can give you a place to dry off."

With him leaning in so close, I was aware of how thin the walls were, how easily he could get in. He could pull on the inside handle, grab Sady, take her back to his truck, drive away. It all seemed possible, now that he was there.

"We can stay here," I said. "Wait it out."

"In the rain?" Sady said.

"Two girls out alone at night?" the man said. "Could be unsafe. You don't know what kind of people come around on these back roads."

Then he just stood there. Not making a move but not leaving either. He looked like he could stay there forever, as long as it took for him to get what he wanted.

Sady didn't need any more convincing. She opened the door, ready to step out. "You're coming, aren't you?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm coming."

We went up the road, to the houses that sat at the dead end. They were all painted beige, with columns around the front doors and looming overhangs. They didn't look so unlike the houses back in Mountain View Heights, except they were bigger, and their front ends were farther apart, and there was nothing to clutter the pavement, no basketball hoops or children's toys. An open field spread out beyond them, going on for miles with nothing and no one around. The man led us up the driveway of a house with a single, feeble tree out front. He went to the lockbox by the door, punched in the code, and got out the key.

We entered into a towering entryway. A gleaming brass chandelier hung from the ceiling. Stairs rose off to our right. The floor was white carpet, perfectly white, unstained and newly vacuumed. Now that we were in the light, and I could see the man's face better, I noticed that he was good looking, in the way I could tell older men were good looking. Not as something I could really understand, except in the way Sady seemed to suddenly perk up when he look off his cap.

"Shoes off," he said.

There was something about a white carpet. I couldn't bear to disturb it. I took off my shoes without even thinking.

The man led us through the entry and down a narrow hall. He stopped in front of a control panel and turned a dial, On. R&B music came through speakers imbedded in the walls. He seemed to relax once the music was on, easing into a walk that kept time with the rhythm of the song.

"You know I don't let just anybody in here," he said. "You should consider yourselves very lucky."

We came into a second sitting room, this one populated by couches in matching white leather, plastic-looking when he turned on the lights. There was a coffee table, artfully stacked with architecture magazines, on their covers houses that looked nothing like the one we were standing in now.

"I like the chandelier," Sady said. She was craning her neck back, staring at the white light emitted behind strips of something translucent, stacked together like a set of broken plates.

"Just glass," the man said. "But it looks like crystal, doesn't it?" He gestured upwards. "Vaulted ceilings. You know, houses like this one really are the American dream. Five bedroom, five bath. Enough for a wife, kids. There's a mother-in-law suite in the basement."

"Wow," Sady said. A moment ago, she had been the girl who was running off into the sunset with her lover, abandoning all markers of a normal life. But now she had switched, so easily, playing the role of someone who thought about chrome fixtures and

window valances. It was all a role, I realized, this and the person she had been before, just a shape for her to take when in the presence of others.

"And a full chef's kitchen," he said.

He took us there. The backsplash was tile, and the floor had radiant heating, and he told us to sit at the stools behind the granite bar. We sat. The appliances were stainless steel and unsmudged. There was no smell in the air, no cleaner, or cooking food, or cold country air. There were no magnets on the fridge. The toaster and the coffee maker sat on the counter, unused.

He got a bottle of vodka out of the freezer and a shot glass out of a drawer. He filled the glass, then set it in front of me. "Something to take the edge off."

He'd set the bottle on the counter too. The label was bright red and reflective. When I leaned over to look at it, I could see the smear of my face shining back at me.

Sady grabbed the shot and took it. Her face twisted into a grimace, and she covered a cough with her hand.

"That's the strong stuff," the man said.

"I can handle it," Sady said. She stuck her chest out. "Think I can't?"

"I bet you can." The man poured out another shot and put it in front of me.

"That's okay," I said. I looked at Sady, who shrugged. "I mean, I'm not twenty-one."

"Go ahead," the man said. He leaned back and stuck his thumb through the loop of his jeans, placing the rest of his hand in his pocket.

I tried to think about all of the different things that could happen next. I had never had a drink before. I'd never really wanted one, except in some abstract, imagined way. But I couldn't get *no* to come out of my mouth.

"It's one shot," Sady said. "Just take it."

I grasped the shot glass in my hand. It was cold because the vodka was cold, but when I lifted the rim to my lips, what sloshed over the edge stung like something hot. I tipped my head back, and the burning hit my throat. I started coughing.

"It's like you've never done one before," Sady said.

"She just needs practice." The man poured another shot and waited until I took it. After the second one, everything started to feel heavy.

The man slid onto the chair next to Sady and reached an arm around the back, where she'd draped her coat. I kept waiting for Sady to tell him off, to brush him away, but all she did was take the bottle of vodka and swirl it around a few times, careful not to look at him. His hand crept up her shoulder, and his fingers felt around her bra strap. They dove down, under her shirt.

Sady stiffened, crouched, like she was trying to make herself small. Like she was a kid getting yelled at. And we were kids. That came to me all of sudden. We were two girls in a strange house with a strange man, right where everyone in our lives had always warned us never to go. I gripped the corner of the countertop, not sure what, if anything, I could do about it.

"I have a boyfriend," Sady said, so quietly it was like she wasn't really saying it at all.

“Do you?” The man’s hand stayed on her, holding down in the chair. If he remembered that I was in the room, he didn’t show it. “Why isn’t he here now?”

“He’s busy.”

“He’s busy.” The man poured himself a shot of vodka and drank it in a few slow sips.

“Yeah,” Sady said.

“Yeah?” The man slid out of the chair. He tilted the vodka bottle toward him, like he was reading the label for the first time. “Tell you what,” he said. “I have better stuff in the basement.”

He left. In the basement I could hear him moving around, the screech of something against a bare floor. Furniture dragging.

“What’s he doing down there?” I asked.

Sady shrugged. She gazed down into the empty glass.

I grabbed the neck of the vodka bottle. I felt its weight in my hand. I held it at my side, feeling something electric course through me. “We’re going.”

“It’s nothing,” Sady said. “It’s no big deal. I’m handling it.”

“No,” I said. “We’re going.”

“Yeah.” She let it out as a long breath, a sigh of relief.

We crept back through the hallway and past a door, now opened on stairs to the basement, unfinished lumber leading straight down. Light from the room below spilled across naked concrete. I could hear him down there still. His heavy breathing. But our steps were muffled by the plush carpet, and he didn’t know we were there. Then my foot hit an uneven part of the floor, and it creaked beneath me.

We both stopped, straining to listen for a sound from below. There was nothing. And then he was coming up the stairs. In front of me, Sady froze. I tried to lean into her, to get her to move forward, but she was completely still. The man reached the top stair, a bottle of whiskey in his hand.

I shifted so I was right next to Sady. So we were facing him together. "It was really nice of you to have us here," I said, in what I hoped was a firm voice, "but we should get going."

The man stepped onto the carpet, and he stood over us, seeming to stretch himself so he could show just how much bigger he was.

"Don't be scared," he said. "I'm not going to hurt you."

He reached for Sady's wrist. She pulled away from him, and he squeezed harder, twisting until she cried out. The sound seemed to surprise him enough that he let go, and Sady shrank behind me, holding her wrist.

"Hey," he said. "I didn't mean it." He took up the whole space, all of it, and we were being choked out, made small enough that he could do anything he wanted.

I pushed him.

He stumbled back. He chuckled at my daring. That chuckle set something off in me, breaking the chains on whatever I'd been keeping locked up that whole night and all the time before, wearing dresses and kissing boys and twisting myself into whatever form I had to so I wouldn't make anybody uncomfortable. I brought the bottle down on his head. The glass shattered across the floor, and he crumpled onto the carpet.

I took off, pulling Sady behind me. We crossed the entryway and grabbed our shoes at the door. We went out in our socks, almost falling into the now-flooded cul-de-

sac. The water had risen past our knees. We waded all the way out, and by the time we reached higher ground, where the highway rose just above the culvert, our clothes were heavy with the water, and the rain kept coming down.

I got in the driver's side of the car. I locked the doors and rolled the windows up. We were both panting, and that sound, our breath, was the only sound I could hear. For a moment it seemed like all we could do was breathe, like anything else would require a strength we no longer had. I started the car, and the headlights flickered on.

He was there, standing in the high beams. Glass was stuck in his hair and in his skin. A trickle of blood ran down his forehead. I switched on the high beams, and he stepped back in a daze. My foot hovered over the gas. I wanted to bowl him down, crush him, and with that crush everything, all the times I'd ever felt small. I could see it all, lying there splattered on the pavement.

I put the car in reverse. I backed up. Then I switched to drive. The man was regaining his sight. He stood up straight, and he started toward us.

I turned us 180 degrees and drove us down the highway, back toward Mountain View Heights. I went as fast as I could over the wet pavement, stealing glances in the rearview to see if we were being followed. I drove through flooded lanes and total darkness. There was no one else on the road, no one in front of us and no one behind.

Some ten miles back up the road, Sady started sobbing. She collapsed against the dash, head in her hands. I pulled us onto the shoulder.

"Why does this shit keep happening?" she said.

I wanted to grab her head in my hands and shake it. I wanted to slap her.

"This was a stupid idea," I said. "A really fucking stupid idea." I reached over and squeezed her arm, the one holding her hurt wrist.

Sady wiped her nose onto her sleeve. "Can we go home?"

"Yeah," I said. "Let's go home."

We drove into daylight. Sady rode in silence, staring out the window, eyes dry, mouth drawn. After a while, I stopped looking at her. I was jubilant, going home a conquering hero, Superwoman in the comic book pages punching the villain in the jaw. *Pow*. There was nothing that could stop me, nothing that could bring me down after I'd tasted that kind of power.

By the time we got back to Mountain View Heights, the streets had dried out, and the first cars were leaving for the work day. I pulled onto my driveway. Everything looked the same. The same shoots of green were coming up in my mother's front beds. The same cherubic lawn ornaments, milk maids and shepherd boys and stern matrons, gazed out at the bare, featureless street. The same flag hung over my front door with the same bright, perfect colors. Red, white, and blue.

Sady opened the door. She stayed there, halfway in and halfway out. "Maybe we could hang out sometime," she said.

"Yeah."

"There's this guy who's been asking me out. I could get him to bring a friend for you."

"I don't like boys," I said.

Sady cocked her head. I must have surprised her, because there was nothing performed in the way she was looking at me. She wasn't feigning any kind of shock or

disgust or even excitement. She was just looking at me. The glare of her looking was almost too much to bear. It was a hot, stripped-naked feeling, like something was peeling back my skin and I just had to stand there and endure it. I was totally, completely seen.

"Yeah," she said. "You have the right idea."

All Our Wild Instincts

As we cross the old logging road, edging the slick embankment to avoid slabs of broken concrete, I bend to pick up a sun bleached rabbit skull. Rabbit skulls are plentiful in the low country—when floodwaters recede, they leave small animal bones—but to find one unbroken, Father says, is a mark of fortune. I place the skull in my rucksack, between husks of corn and a fishing net and my set of thread and needles.

Ahead, my brothers and sisters, twenty-three in all, follow the trail into a copse of trees. In front of them are the Five Mothers in their marriage order, and Father ahead of them, leaning into the length of his waist-high cane. He relies on it more with every descent. I can remember my younger years, when the cane would be used for his stories, for a flourish in the air when describing the floods first coming to this land, back when the roads were clear and the houses peopled. Now the cane, gnarled wood polished to shining, seems evermore his companion.

I pause to listen for the sound of something coming behind us, the soft crunching of paws on the road. A pack of wolves has been following us for weeks, eating off the animal carcasses we leave buried in our wake. We are late this year, and so we did not precede them on our journey to the floodplains. The youngest of my siblings, some of them still infants lashed to their mothers' bodies, are small enough to be carried off. I am now the oldest of the children, and it is my job to watch for danger.

We owe the wolves great respect. Our ways are much like theirs. With each season our clan moves with the migration of prey animals, the ebbs and tides of the floodwaters, the calling of the natural order. This is what Father calls Life. The journey between one place and the next, the triumph of each one of us over death. The honing of

all our wild instincts. We want only to survive. Every day we manage to Live is holy in itself.

It is summer, and we are passing from the high country to the sea. We know the road as part of ourselves, every year the switchbacks eroding further into steep declines, the abandoned mines growing over with bromegrass, new stream channels slicing through mountainsides, sending boulders tumbling to the valley floor. All of this decay is familiar.

We walk in tidy rows, boys in one, girls beside them. I fall in line beside Aaron, and I show him the rabbit skull.

"Female," he says. He is sixteen, one year younger than I. He wears wire-rimmed spectacles, which glint and shine in the sunlight. Now that he is the oldest son, one of our two rifles is slung over his shoulder.

I grab the skull away from him. Only the males are good fortune, but I keep my female anyway, secured between two ration tins.

Aaron looks ahead to where our sister Ruth wanders by the side of the path, out of step with our line. She too is sixteen. Strips of cotton cloth wind around her neck, dotted with her blood. Days earlier, she took a scaling knife and inserted it just above her collarbone, scarcely missing an artery. She walks without care for the wet, unsteady ground below. Her feet slide, her weight shifting so she is perilously close to a fall. Watching her, I find myself doubting that she once ran through the floodplains with us, her gait light and quick.

I do not know how Ruth's transgressions began. I remember that she grew tired easily on our autumn ascent and that when we would play in the streams—taking turns

leaping over them, skipping stones, diving below to look for fish—she would not join in as she once did. She was often found having wandered far off our course, perhaps sitting at the base of some great tree, leaning back with her eyes closed, as though waiting to die.

Perhaps her transgressions began when Father sent our brother John away. John had grown too old to stay with us. This is what happens to the men. They must leave and form their own clans while we women wait to be claimed, biding our time, at the whim of some unseen person who will emerge and change our destinies. These are our ways. Ruth ought to know that. She ought to know that she cannot leave this Life.

"She is not doing better," Aaron says.

"We must keep moving." I begin to walk on, and he follows.

Soon what is left of the road ends in a scattering of broken pavement. We fall into single file down the trail. My boots wrench through the mud. I can feel our weeks-long descent in my knees, a dull burning behind the bone.

In winter we climb to the high country. The freeze draws water away from the land, leaving space enough for us to settle on the outskirts of the villages there. The villagers do not care for our presence, but they tolerate us enough that we can trade simple works—sewing, herbs, and items taken from the low country—in exchange for what we need. But it is not for us to remain in the safety of the villages. To do so would disrupt our very reason for Living.

Our clan follows a bend in the road, which draws us closer to the sea. Ahead, the former city rises behind the final twists of washed-out road, its towers half-buried and crumbling beneath river silt. For many summers now, I have seen moss crawl ever higher

up those grey stone stalks, transforming the network of square buildings into green spires, fleeced like the forests along the northern coasts.

We reach a newly carved channel, which has driven through the road, leaving a jagged cliff where the pavement ends. Below, a stream of water tumbles over the exposed rock. We, the oldest brothers and sisters, begin to secure our siblings for their crossing, cinching skirts and pants. Father and the Five Mothers are able to jump from the cliff, and they are shortly across. I fold a younger sister's skirt into her stockings. Those of us who are big enough, jump down the cliff first. Then we turn to give a steadying hand to those climbing down. We lift the smallest children into the stream. We give no more help than is required, for they must learn on their own.

Water fills my boots, itching the wool socks against my feet. As the stream grows deeper, my younger brothers and sisters begin to swim for shore. I keep count of their heads, ensuring all remain above the current. I hold my rucksack above me. The current is more powerful than I expected, driven by the weight of the runoff, and I must take care not to be swept away.

Aaron fumbles with his rifle, lifting its length above his head while leaving his rucksack to dangle in the stream. He has long struggled to fulfill the role of a man in our family. Father has said that he must work harder to overcome his weaknesses. Father has sought to strengthen Aaron's character by having him carry the rifle. Aaron will leave us soon, and then he will have to survive on his own.

Ruth comes behind us, moving stiffly in the bandages. She cannot guide herself smoothly downhill, and so she tumbles into the water. The current begins to drag her

away. She reaches out for a boulder that rises in the middle of the stream, but she does not hold tightly enough, and soon she is borne away by the current.

I pull myself onto shore and follow her along the cliff. She winds around a bend, coming close enough that I can crouch and offer her my hand. She takes it, but she does not fight to come out of the water. She is a dead weight, and my arm grows tired. But I do not let go. I must preserve her Life until the task is hopeless.

I feel hands wrap around my waist, helping me pull Ruth over the rise of the cliff and onto shore. She lies at my feet, breathing heavily, water dripping from her hair onto the pavement.

Behind me stands Second Mother. The lines in her tanned face are drawn into a frown. We are nearly two hundred yards from where the rest of our clan now spills onto the banks. I look for Father, who is standing just ahead. I wait for him to shout to Second Mother, to reproach her for leaving the circle of parents without permission, but he is looking to the opposite side of the stream. I follow his gaze, and there I see the pack of wolves. The adults, seven in all, are searching along the cliff for a place to cross. Their young hang back, skinny and hungry looking.

* * *

We climb onto the old city streets. Abandoned houses, colored in faded yellows and blues, spread before us in a network of tree-lined roads, each building stuck in tight with the next. In spring, floods fill the lower ground, the water rising to the land mere inches below our feet.

There are those who fear the floodplains. Villagers speak of the whims of melt waters, as though they spread without warning through the lower lands. But there is order to the river, its banks swelling with spring melt and draining in summer heat. Father knows how to read the shrinking snow pack while we are in the high country, its slowed decline signaling the beginning of our journey.

On Father's directive, Aaron leads Ruth, Second Mother, and me down the streets to set traps amongst the houses. We each carry one, a metal mouth with sharp teeth. We walk down a road where the grasses are a tangled mass, good for small animals to nest in. Groves of lodgepole pines form a ceiling, so only spots of sunlight filter through.

It is right that Aaron leads us. Men know far better how to Live in these lands. He stops us in the middle of a lasso of pavement, where we are surrounded on all sides by buildings.

"The best place to set traps is behind the houses," Second Mother says. She bows her head to acknowledge his leadership.

"Yes," Aaron says. He pushes his spectacles back up his nose. "Thank you."

He elects to take his trap behind one of the houses himself. When he leaves, Second Mother is in charge. She has us sit on the sloped pavement outside one of the houses, and she begins to adjust the bandages around Ruth's neck, untying them to look at how the wound is healing. The stitching, which I did myself, now holds closed skin together. Second Mother reaches into her rucksack and pulls out a pair of scissors. She sets to work trimming the thread, holding Ruth's head in one hand.

We do not speak of our matronage, but we all know that Ruth came from Second Mother. No other mother has her bright red hair or her soft, elegant way of walking. Ruth

is the only one of her children who has Lived this long. Some died before their births, while others succumbed to cold winters. Yet another grew sick with infection. And another was carried off by the wolves.

Second Mother rubs a salve on the scar tissue that has begun to form on Ruth's neck. The smell is powerful, one of overturned earth and crushed herbs.

"I would like to change this bandage," Second Mother says. "I believe the wound could still open again."

Ruth does not respond. I take the rabbit skull out of my rucksack and hold it for the both of them to see.

"Look," I say. "I found it on the floodplain."

My ploy works for a moment. Ruth awakens, taking the skull in her hand. "It is female."

"It is Rabbit herself," I say.

"Oh yes," Second Mother says. "I see it now." She holds the skull, running a thumb over its eye socket, down the snout and over the sharp edges of the chipped front teeth.

"Rabbit wanted the grass from around Rattlesnake's burrow," she says.

The story always begins this way. Rabbit asks for help from her friends, though which friends help depends on the telling. Second Mother describes a bridge built by Beaver, which Rabbit breaks. Then Blackbird tries to carry her, but she squirms, and he drops her in the bush. Bear offers to take her in his mouth, but Rabbit, knowing of Bear's mindlessness, hesitates. Bear says he will tie a string around his finger to help him remember not to eat her. Rabbit agrees.

"But then Bear goes foraging for lingonberries," Second Mother says, "and the string gets caught on a briar and slips off his finger."

"What happens next?" I ask. I know, of course. But it is part of storytelling, that asking.

"Bear takes a fistful of the red berries," Second Mother says, "and he stuffs them in his mouth, and he chews and chews, until the juices start to flow between his teeth. Only then does he realize what he has done."

"He ate her," I say.

"Yes," Second Mother says. "And Bear cries, for there is no going back."

I see that the story has made her sad, but she attempts a weak smile.

"Why did Rabbit want that grass?" Ruth asks. It is the first time she has spoken since the story began, though I know she has been listening.

"It is better grass," Second Mother says.

"Better," Ruth says. "But she had other grass."

"Yes," Second Mother says. "Yes, I suppose she had other grass."

"But she wanted better," Ruth says.

I have never thought about Rabbit's desire. She wanted the grass because she wanted the grass. Now I worry that it is a wicked story, and that Rabbit got what she deserved.

Second Mother returns the rabbit skull to me. "You ought not keep it," she says. She is right. The skull serves no purpose in our Life. It only takes up space. But Second Mother does not order me to throw it away, so I tuck it back in my rucksack.

Aaron returns to us soon after with a cut on his hand from setting the trap. Second Mother looks it over and deems that it is a minor wound but one that will bleed considerably.

"Perhaps we will want to look for bandages," Second Mother says. "For the both of you."

Aaron digs the butt of the rifle into the soft, pliant road. "Yes," he says. "That is a good idea."

"In one of the houses," Second Mother says.

"Yes," Aaron says. He points to one across from us. "That one."

The inside of the house is dark. There is a fan hanging from the ceiling, its blades drooping like a dying flower. Mold soaks through the carpet and the furniture, staining white sofas green. On the main floor, we find kitchen knives. I place one in my rucksack. I will have to give it to Father later, but he will be pleased that I found it. Knives have many uses.

We go upstairs. With every stair sinking under our feet, we release the smell of old water, not from the floods but from rain, which came through a rend in the roof tile. We split up, Aaron with Second Mother and me with Ruth. In the bedrooms, light-bleached bedspreads are pulled taut over mattresses, clothes piled haphazardly, shirttails hanging out of dresser drawers. Objects sit undisturbed on armoires: books, and photographs, and stopped clocks, and rows of half-filled perfume.

Ruth goes to a bottle, and she takes it in her hand. The dark liquid sloshes against the side, and she tilts the bottle, watching it slide back and forth. Then she rights it, pressing down on the nozzle. A cloud of droplets releases into the air, spreading the smell

of wild flowers and warm honey. She holds out her other hand and sprays the perfume onto her palm. She rubs her hands together, and then she dabs at her chest, and then her neck, where her wound is.

"You will attract bugs," I say.

"I want to smell nice," Ruth says.

I lean in to touch where the perfume sits on her skin. My fingers want to stick to it. "Why?"

Ruth overturns a wooden box, spilling the necklaces inside. She opens the top drawer and begins to pull out first socks and then strips of silky fabric. I realize after looking at them for a moment that they are under things.

"What need would anyone have for those?" I ask.

"They feel nice," Ruth says. She hands a pair to me. The fabric snags on my fingertips, which are dry and flaking. I touch it instead to my wrist, feeling its softness there. I have never known people to wear anything so soft. I try to think of a proper purpose for them, a thing that will bring something important to Life. Then I could take them with me. But they have no purpose. They are only objects for the pleasure of people long dead.

Still Ruth plays with them, crumpling a pair up into an infinitesimal ball, small enough to hide in an unseen corner of a rucksack.

"You cannot take them with you," I say.

Ruth shakes the under things out. She folds them as they were folded before and replaces them in the drawer. "I know that."

From far off, I hear Second Mother's voice calling for us. We go out into the hall, where we can hear her more clearly. *Wolf,* she shouts. *Wolf.*

We break into a run. A trail of blood, planted with paw prints, leads toward one bedroom. Inside, Aaron and Second Mother are standing on the bed. Aaron has the gun held under his arm, pointed toward a dark corner of the room, where there stands a single, skinny wolf. He stands on only one front paw. The other is soaked in blood, mangled and half-missing. I have seen animals caught in our traps before, as this wolf must have been, and I know that the predators will chew off their paws rather than starve. It is their instinct.

I look to Aaron, but his hands shake holding the rifle. He is unable to stay steady long enough to aim. I take the knife from my rucksack and squeeze the hilt in my palm. The wolf howls, and whines, and bears his teeth, his lip curling back to show the redness of his gums. Before I can stop her, Ruth kneels on the ground in front of him, leaving her neck exposed. I want to think that she is merely distracting him, but she is motionless, vulnerable. The wolf tenses his back legs and crouches down, ready to pounce.

I fly from the doorway, landing on him mid-jump. He is skinny and weak from his injury, and I am able to best him to the ground. My knife finds the back of his neck, nicking at his fur, and I feel him seize and buck beneath me. I plant my legs on either side of him, and I stab the knife into his neck, feeling the warmth of his blood slicking my hands. The knife slips in my fingers, and in trying to grab it, I release pressure from my hold. The wolf twists around and bites my leg. I kick at him until he releases me, then I push him onto his back where he struggles, trying to right himself, smearing the pool of his own blood. I bury the knife in his chest, and he collapses, finally still.

Blood dripping from my leg drops onto the floor, mingling with his. Second Mother helps me to my feet. With help I can place weight on my leg, though the pain feels like teeth breaking my skin anew. Second Mother binds the wound. Ruth hands me my rucksack and a handful of bones. In the fight I rolled over the rabbit skull, and it snapped in two pieces. When we depart from the house, I leave it on the dresser, next to the perfume.

* * *

Aaron carries the body of the wolf himself. He says that we will tell Father that he was the one to do the killing. We are right, I believe, to tell Father this story. As a woman I am not supposed to defend us the way that I did. It is Aaron who should display strength.

"What will we tell Father about your sister's leg?" Second Mother asks.

"We will tell him she was attacked," Aaron says.

Second Mother purses her lips. "That is true, at least."

We meet the rest of our clan at the rendezvous point, outside of a square glass building. Roots erupt through the expanse of concrete beneath our feet, breaking through the last smudges of white and yellow lines. Thick trees have kept the weather's worst effects away from this place. Most of the windows are still intact, reflecting the red light of the setting sun.

Father hears Aaron's story with approval. Though he does not speak, we have all learned the signs of his deepest feelings. Had he crossed his arms around the crook of his staff and looked off into the distance, as though searching for an answer in the

wilderness, we would have been in trouble. Instead he toys with his waist-length beard, twisting it over and around his finger.

"Why did you not use the rifle?" he asks Aaron.

I can see Aaron searching for me in the corner of his vision. I pinch my fingers to my nostrils.

"The bullet might have spoiled the meat," Aaron says.

"You have made a wise choice then," Father says.

He has us, the women, take the body for preparation. We will perform the necessary cleansing in order to ready the meat for eating.

I move to join Ruth by the fire. I walk with a limp, the bandages stiffening my steps. The cloth has begun to feel wet as the blood soaks through, and I reach down to touch it through my skirt, the warmth of it, the pulsing feeling of veins still bringing blood to the area, the pounding, desperate feeling of being alive.

Second Mother brings us skinning knives, and we set to work on the body of the wolf. Ruth has charge of the legs. She begins with the injured paw, cleaning it with a rag until all of the blood has disappeared. With the knife, Ruth peels the skin back and separates it from the grasping strings of sinew, leaving the meat exposed. I watch her with the knife, and I realize that I am poised to leap at her and wrestle it out of her hand. I wonder how long I will need to watch her. If her desire to die will ever recede.

"Why do you think he chewed off his hand?" Ruth asks.

"He wished to prolong his Life," I reply.

"It is a desperate act," Ruth says, "and he did not prolong it for very long."

"Life is always worth preserving," I say. "When you can."

Ruth takes the saw and begins to detach the injured leg, dragging the blade back and forth across the bone, making a shrieking, grating sound. She says nothing more.

I grab a shovel and begin to dig in the coals that have formed around the fire. I take the strips of meat we have carved, and I lay them side by side in the pit. Once buried, the meat begins to cook, and the smell of smoking flesh billows from the ground. A perverse feeling fills me. I think what a great triumph it is that I have provided this meat, how strong I was to save my family from the wolf. As the feeling comes, I try to quell it. Pride is a useless, deceptive emotion.

Some of the younger brothers have been tasked with tending the fire, and they take logs from the edge, ones with weak flames spreading along the grain, and they beat them on the ground, throwing sparks at one another. I call to them, telling them that they are behaving dangerously, but they do not mind me. They never have to. They are boys.

Father stands apart from the rest of our clan, observing the scene. When he sees that I have finished burying the meat, he summons me, tapping the ground beside him with his staff.

"Were you careless with the wolf?" he asks when I reach him.

"I do not believe so, Father."

He holds his staff in the crook of his arm. There are times he has used it to punish us, though I do not believe my transgression, whatever it was, merits such a thing.

"It was careless of you to allow the wolf to come so close," he says.

"Yes, Father."

He gazes out at the rest of our clan. I would like to tell him the truth of what happened, that I was the one who defeated the wolf. I want to believe that he would congratulate me, but I know he would not. I have broken the natural order of things.

"In the future, you must take care," he says. "Wolves are dangerous creatures, and you are unable to defend yourself."

I find that I cannot look at him. I do not know what to do in this moment, when I know something that he does not. For he possesses all of the knowledge that any of us need to survive this Life.

"Thank you," I say. "Thank you, Father, for your advice."

* * *

I wake late that night to the smell of the meat cooking, the smoke and the fire. The clan lies around me, all of them still with sleep. I take the shovel and begin to overturn the coals. The meat has begun to brown, and as I turn it the juices bleed into the ash, forming a stream, trickling and pink.

I remove one of the smaller cuts of meat. It is not so hot that I cannot hold it in my hand, feel how the fat drips from the sides. My teeth sink into it. Inside the meat is still red, soft and tender. Juices drip from my chin. I grab another slice, and then another, tearing at them with my teeth, swallowing before I can chew.

Ruth stands back from the fire. She is fully dressed, and in the firelight her face looks indistinct, almost translucent. She has been watching me the entire time. She does

not speak. Her expression does not change even as we regard each other. The taste of the wolf meat still coats my lips, and I reach to wipe it away.

This breaks the spell. Ruth turns away from me, carefully picking her way through the sleeping bodies of our clan. I stay standing as she crosses the clearing, heading for the trees. I wait for her to step into the forest, for the darkness there to envelope her, so I can see her no longer. Then I lie in my bed and wait for daylight to come.

In the morning, we will find Ruth's body, or we will not find Ruth's body. Perhaps it will be carried away by scavengers or the wolves that still follow us through the low country. Or perhaps it will be there, half-eaten, like so many bodies we find on the floodplains. Either way, we will make our way down the coastline, the same familiar road we have walked every year for the entirety of my life. Already, my legs are heavy from the journey.

Summoning Spells

Last night was the full moon. That always gets something going in me, how the white light casts new shadows over town, across the old company houses and the mine owners' mansions, now converted into hotels that no one ever uses. I always want to do something drastic on a full moon. Run naked through the supermarket. Rob a liquor store. Set a car on fire. Nick says that's the wild thing in me talking. That in a previous life I was one of those coyotes who stalk the streets around here, the ones you see in your headlights out by the sports bar dumpsters, their eyes all glowing and strange. Of all the reasons that's depressing, I think the worst is that means I've never left Daly, Montana. At least, not in my last two lives.

But it's hard to know if Nick means the things he says. He's been around in some form for over 10,000 years, the original invention of some stone age tribe in Normandy, the cult god of a few peoples here and there scattered around the planet, back in the good old days, as Nick calls them. But then, once monotheism took hold, Nick was the demon exorcized out of a handful of young girls—always girls—and the familiar of various witches and cunning folk in the interim, so he's pretty much gotten around in this world in any way he can, on falsehoods and metaphor and charm.

I've known Nick since I was thirteen. I was a wannabe Wiccan with dyed-black hair, a few candles, and a spell for summoning a familiar that I printed out from the Internet. I sealed his spirit to the closest object I could find, a strawberry-banana-flavored lip gloss, and then he couldn't leave. He had to keep me company, always.

Now that it's morning, the wild feeling has gone away. Me and Nick are sitting on the couch watching *The Flintstones*, the last of the weed dotting the open page of my

grimoire, which is open to a purification spell. With one long finger, Nick picks the stems from the pile. He puts the leaves in a mortar and pestle, and he taps them a few times. He lays them out along the paper and rubs the ends between his fingers, and the leaves begin to align, his hands working them into a single perfect line.

When he finishes, he holds the joint out to me. I pinch one end, sending heat through my fingertips. A fire blooms, curling the paper back. Then on my command it slows to a dim, glowing burn.

"Go easy on it," I say. "It'll be a while before the new stuff cures."

Nick takes one slow inhale. Then he leans back, watching the embers lick at the edge of the paper.

Familiars are supposed to guide young witches. They're supposed to teach us how to perform spells and consolidate our power. And maybe Nick did that. Though he's never approved or disapproved of anything I've done. Mostly what he's done is just be here. Back when I was a kid, Nick was only visible to me. He could shift into anything. One minute he'd be a Yorkshire terrier, the next he'd be the kid from *The Omen*, staring me down from the other end of a long hallway. He liked to try things out. He liked to scare me.

You know how in horror movies there's always a creepy kid who can see ghosts? It's not fun being that kid. That kid talks to herself. She gets sent to a therapist, who gives her breathing exercises, and then antidepressants, and then the kinds of anti-psychotics that force her to drop out of high school. So she gets her G.E.D. online, but she never gets a real job, and she never makes any friends in the corporeal world. Instead she earns enough money for rent by writing hexes and mixing love potions for her fellow

overweight new age nerds, and by growing the best weed in western Montana for everybody else.

I finally managed to channel Nick into a physical form around the time I turned eighteen, when I ended up dating a twenty-six-year-old ex-con who worked at the Sinclair gas. Nick helped me bind his spirit into the boyfriend's body, and then instead of a deadbeat boyfriend I had Nick, which at the time seemed like an improvement. But sometimes I'm afraid to be alone with him. When the light hits him just right, over the five o'clock shadow on his chin or the scar under his eye, I remember the time he, meaning the boyfriend, dangled me head-first out of the second story window. Just to be funny. Just because he wanted to show me what it's like right before you die.

Nick switches channels, from cartoons to The Weather Channel. He used the remote. Though I guess he could've used the other thing.

"When's he going to wake up?" he asks, nodding to my bedroom door.

He means the man who slept here last night.

"I don't know," I say.

On the TV, a tsunami takes down a village in Indonesia. A Weather Channel helicopter pans over the devastation. We have it on mute, so we can fill in the commentary ourselves.

"Another town decimated by an angry god," Nick says.

"Our correspondent reports the god can be chastened by the sacrifice of seven virgins," I say.

We go back and forth with this for a while, but eventually Nick goes in the kitchen to warm Spaghetti-Os on the stovetop.

I hear my bedsprings creak. There's the sound of his feet on the wood floor, the ringing of a belt being clasped, and then Joseph is standing in my doorway in his jeans and Pizza the Pie uniform, a black-and-red golf shirt with the logo embroidered in several places, unbuttoned. His stomach is mossed with a trail of whiteish hairs.

Now that it's morning, he looks old. Like I must look old. Not old in the span of all human endeavors, but older than we were in high school, before anything real could happen to either one of us. Joseph's whole family was Mormon, so he didn't drink or stay up late on a school night, or have sex in anybody's car in the student parking lot during free period. I don't think he's Mormon anymore, at least I'd guess not, but we haven't talked. Ever, really. I've seen him around town in his uniform, driving the same Subaru Impreza he had in high school. Pizza the Pie has the worst pizza in town, but I still ordered it last night.

I hoped he'd leave after. It might be that I over-identify with the witches of old, the ones who always lived in the middle of swamps to keep away from all the pitchfork-wielding, bonfire-building townsfolk. It doesn't pay to get involved with the villagers. I mean, I don't want to get burned alive.

But then Joseph didn't leave. Maybe that's a Mormon thing, like they think it's rude to just leave in the event that they have sex with the last delivery of the night. If in fact Joseph is still a Mormon. He didn't fuck like a Mormon, though I suppose I have no other Mormons to compare him to.

I keep waiting for him to say something. He's standing there in the doorway, just kind of blinking at me.

"Maggie," I say. "I'm the girl from last night."

"We had U.S. History together," he says. "You pinned a dead rat to the chalkboard to protest the textbook's eurocentrism."

"It was a deer mouse."

I'm surprised he remembered. We've never interacted much, but we went to school together starting in Kindergarten, so technically I've known him longer than I've known Nick.

"You still talk to anyone from high school?" Joseph asks.

"I didn't really know anyone in high school," I say.

"I thought you were friends with, what's her name, the art girl."

"I wasn't friends with anybody."

He walks back and forth across the room, not pacing exactly, but certainly not sitting down beside me. His feet are bare, and they make a soft swishing sound across the floor. He's not looking at me. Maybe he's remembered some of the stories about me. Like how I once stripped off all my clothes in the middle of a lesson on *Leaves of Grass* and ran down the hall yelling incantations into open classroom doors. It was all that stuff about atoms. I wanted to keep my atoms for myself.

"Do you?" I ask. "Still talk to people from high school."

"Oh," Joseph says. "No."

He's found his way over to my altar, a TV tray covered in a purple placemat. He spends a long time over there, just looking over everything. Incense, crystals, the strawberry banana lip gloss. It feels intimate, him looking over my things. Like he's running a finger inside a cut, right through the middle of me.

He picks up one of my ceremonial daggers, the athame, the one with the curved blade and the bone handle. The one I use for blood sacrifices. He turns it so the blade catches the light.

"It's for witchcraft," I say.

"Like spells?" he asks.

"Like spells."

He puts the dagger down and picks up the bar of cloudy, green-flecked citrine, meant to channel hope, new beginnings, and happiness. Wishful thinking, in other words. Joseph turns it over, his fingers finding the flaws, the streak of quartz, the chip out of the middle from when I dropped it on the floor. In his hands, the citrine looks like something real, not an item for energy concentration or spell casting, but a thing that came out of the ground.

"Will you show me?" he asks.

"Seriously?" I wait for him to crack a smile, so I can be in on the joke, but he doesn't. "Need a curse put on your enemies?"

"You curse a lot of people?"

"A few."

He sets the crystal back on the altar, turning it so it sits exactly as it had before. "That's not very nice."

"I'm not very nice," I say.

He looks at me like he doesn't quite believe me. Suddenly I want to tell him everything, about every hex, and malediction, and momentary bad thought. All the times I've made somebody fall off a ladder or their hand slip while holding a knife. All the

different ways I've made people do what I want them to do. The people I've made love me. How I've made them stay.

Joseph picks up a few of the seeds left scattered on the placemat. He brings them up to his nose.

"Cloves," I say. "For exorcism." And love. And passion. But I don't say those out loud.

"Hey," Nick says. "We don't use that word in this apartment."

Joseph starts at seeing him there, standing in the kitchen doorway, holding a wooden spoon and the saucepan of Spaghetti-Os.

"I'm Joseph," Joseph says.

I realize from the way he sticks his hand out, too eagerly, trying to smooth something over, that he thinks Nick is my boyfriend.

"Nick's my roommate," I say.

"Pleased to meet you."

I figure that schoolboy politeness in *pleased to meet you* means he's going to leave. I can hear what he says next. Well, last night was fun. Let's do it again some time. I'll call you.

I think of all the ways I could make it so he wouldn't leave. Face South. Light a red candle. Burn rose petals. Appeal to a fertility goddess. Etcetera. I can tell myself not to. I can tell myself it doesn't count when I do it that way. But I know it'll work.

Joseph stays standing there, his hands in his pockets. And I realize this isn't him leaving. This is the other thing, the people who show up at my apartment heartbroken and looking for a quick fix.

"Can you talk to dead people?" Joseph asks. "Like a séance, or whatever?"

"There are séances," I say. "Or whatever. But I can summon spirits, too."

"What's the difference?"

"When I summon them, you can hear them talk."

Joseph looks from me to Nick, and I can tell he thinks we're going to make fun of him. "My fiancée died a couple years ago," he says. "She got into a car accident."

"Oh," I say.

I'd like to tell him I'm sorry, but the first thing that pops into my head is mistletoe. To banish grief, crush the mistletoe in a mortar and pestle with eucalyptus oil. Get some soil from the ground where she was buried and mix it in, then burn the whole thing over an open flame. Let the ashes go over moving water. Preferably a large river, but a stream will work in a pinch.

"Was her brain damaged?" Nick asks.

"When she died?" Joseph says. "A metal rod came through the windshield."

"So she was impaled?"

"That's what they said."

"That's good," Nick says. "Because if her brain's damaged, that can affect the quality of the communication."

"I thought it was about souls," Joseph says. "Not the brain."

"You'd think so," Nick says. Which is the kind of thing he says to people he finds stupid.

Joseph looks at me. I won't lie and say I want to summon his dead girlfriend. It's a bad idea for a number of reasons. For one, I don't like to do any summoning around the

full moon. The moon can confuse things. It can make the dead think they've come to stay. And then there's the fact that I don't want to play host to a woman that he loved. But if I tell him no, that's it. He'll leave, and that'll be the end of it. I'll once again be the girl with no one in her life but a 10,000-year-old demon.

"We can summon her," I say. "Where'd you meet her?"

"On my mission," he says. "In Ghana."

"No shit." I was expecting some Mormon girl in a suburb of Salt Lake City. Somebody blond, with a name like Mercedes or Veronica. I was imagining the two of them with matching Toyotas and a well-hydrated front lawn.

"We got any cocoa powder?" Nick says. He turns his laptop around. He's got the CIA *World Factbook* open. "It's one of their principal crops."

"They grow cocoa for export," Joseph says. "I don't know if that changes anything."

I go over to the altar and start taking off everything we won't be using. Incense, goddess icons, the citrine. "What do they grow for themselves?"

We talk it over for a bit and decide to use some rice. All we've got is 5-Minute Instant Rice, but I figure it'll work just the same. I set out the rice, a purple candle and a black one, my athame, and a plastic Tupperware bowl.

There are many ways to cast a spell. It's all a collection of choices and personal taste. I like to go by feel. I've found out my instincts serve me better than anything. For a summoning spell, it's all about coaxing something here. Reaching out, and making a connection.

So they're not my specialty.

I start by burning some sweetgrass and some white sage, just to try to make the space more hospitable. I get out my compass, and I set the altar facing West.

Technically you're supposed to contact the spirits outdoors, in case they get loose and decide to haunt you for all eternity. But it's the dead of winter, and I figure we're just going for a chat for a while.

"I need her name," I say.

"Ama," Joseph says. "It means born on a Saturday."

"Good thing today's Saturday, then," Nick says. "Born on a Saturday, summoned on a Saturday."

"The dead like symmetry." I open a canister of salt, and I use it to draw a pentagram around the altar. I set one point at the open window; then each of us will sit at one of the others: Nick, then me, then Joseph. I pull the rocking chair around to sit at the top of the pentagram. That's where she'll go.

"What was she like?" I say. I'm trying to get an image, something to look for on the astral plane. The specific things you draw to yourself are important. What you draw affects what parts of the dead come back. You think about all the bad things about a person, and only the bad things come back.

Joseph sits down cross-legged on the ground. "She was really funny."

"Funny, ha-ha?"

"She had a great sense of humor."

I look over at Nick, who shrugs. Funny is not much help. The dead aren't much for funny.

I make the final adjustments to the altar, aligning the candles just right, and then I settle into my point on the pentagram. “She’ll want your blood,” I tell Joseph.

“Definitely your blood,” Nick says. “Neither of ours will do the trick.”

I expect Joseph to balk, but he doesn’t. He takes the Tupperware bowl and the dagger when I offer them.

“From your palm,” I say.

He twists the point in the soft part of his skin. He does not flinch. The blood drips on the Tupperware, and with his good hand he pushes a little out, and then a little more, enough that it coats the bottom.

“That’s good,” I tell him.

He presses his fingers to stop the bleeding. I give him a Band Aid, and I take the dish from him. I throw some grains of rice in and some ashes from the sweetgrass. I trim some of the wick off the candle, and I throw that in too, fire and all, and the rice scorches a little before the flame goes out.

My instinct is to stir what’s there with my finger, to add a personal touch, but I don’t want scare him off. So I go and get a teaspoon.

I set the bowl next to the candles. I light the black one. We chant her name seven times, our voices growing louder each time, so eventually we’re shouting. Then I begin a new chant, and they join in. Know I call to you. Think of me. Know I call to you. Think of me. Know I call to you. Think of me.

I try to think of Africa. What pictures I’ve seen of it. There’s red soil, I think. Small, pale buildings. An ocean. Maybe an ocean. It’s hot. Of course it’s hot. Maybe if I

focus on the heat, then I can find her. But my apartment is cold. There's a draft filtering in through the windows and the door. I can hear the wind stirring the branches outside.

I think about Joseph. How she would know Joseph. I think of his voice when it gets low. I think of his fingers.

At first spirits appear to you only as a feeling. Ama comes to me as the feeling of wearing a red dress. A sexy one. Eyes sliding up your back, the prickle of air over your bare skin. I taste something hot on my tongue. Chili pepper. She's right next to me, though I can't see her. Her face is inches from mine. She's trying to tell me something, but she can't make a sound that I can hear. It feels like she's trying to wedge a thought into my head, a square peg into a round hole.

"She misses you," I say. "She misses your laugh."

"She's here," Joseph says.

"She is."

"I can feel her," he says. "It feels warm."

The dead always feel cold. There's no other way for them to be. He must be imagining things. He must really be desperate.

I strain hear something more, but she's slipping away. Going out of focus. I think she's angry. Jealous. Of me. My physical body, more than anything. I try to keep thinking of Joseph, the things I know of Joseph, but I'm running out of things to know, and I think I'm just pissing her off. She's done with him now.

I crack one eye open, and Joseph's just sitting there, across the circle, eyes squeezed shut. I don't know how I know it, but I know he's praying.

"Ama," he says.

“Yes,” I say. “Yes it’s me.”

I feel him slide his hand over mine. I feel the Band Aid against my skin. His thumb strokes along my palm, my life line. I let him hold on to me. I let him forget who I am, thinking perhaps if he can forget, then eventually I can too. But I’m still here in this room, surrounded by the candles and crystals and bags of dried herbs, nowhere to go but outside, where there’s only the wind and the town of rundown buildings and boarded up mines.

“She’s gone,” I say.

His hand releases me. I want to grab for it, but I don’t. I open my eyes and wait for Joseph to open his.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him.

“No,” he says. “No, that was perfect.” He stands, smudging the line of salt in front of him. He faces away from me, toward the open window, where the air is coming in.

“Do I owe you any money?”

I reach to blow out the candle, but he speaks before I can. The flame flickers, the heat uncomfortable against my lips. “No.”

“I just thought,” he says, “I don’t know, it seems like something I pay for.”

“You don’t,” I say. “Not today.”

I follow him to the door and open it for him.

“Well,” he says. He tries to sound funny. “This was fun.”

“Yeah.”

I close the door when he leaves, shutting us in on the other side. The salt is now spilled across the floor, the black candle beginning to drip onto the placemat. Nick's standing now, picking herbs off the altar and blowing out the candle.

"You sure fucked that up," he says.

She is there, I know. Sitting on the rocking chair with her legs spread, feet planted on the floor, moving the chair just a little, back and forth, back and forth, making the floor sigh. The gap in her abdomen is bleeding, the blood translucent and red-tinted, real but also not real, and her grin is the grin of the mocking dead.

Mermaid Hour

I put my tail on ten minutes before the night's last show. The tail is a thing that only makes sense in the water, where stage light shines on the sequined scales, and the silicon fins allow me to glide, fish-like, around the plaster shipwreck. On land, it holds my legs together in a vice.

I stretch the spandex over my calves, smooth the wrinkles around my knees, and clasp the see-through belt around my waist. The tail for Mermaid Hour is different than the one I wore a few hours before. It rests lower on my body and tighter around my hips. Its backside is padded. In the reflection of the wall-length mirror, my body looks swollen, like a blister about to burst.

There are five of us packed together in the narrow catwalk above the barroom of the Sink and Drink Saloon. Everything—the walls, our skin—is choked with the smell of dried chlorine. We have to maneuver carefully, awkwardly, to avoid crashing into each other. I knot my bralette behind my back and stuff the cups with padding. I slip my makeup compact next to my breast. I clasp a plastic seashell in my hair.

When I walk in the tail, I keep my eyes fixed straight ahead. I ease my hips side to side, one hand on the wall. I never stop. If I stop, my feet will catch on the fins, or my ankles will strain against the tight fabric, and I will fall.

The catwalk turns to wrought iron just before we reach the tank. Below, the heads and shoulders of customers look like strange, wobbling lines. They are drunk. They are always drunk and loud, even when there are only a few of them. Tonight, there are many. In front of me, Callista keeps her head down, trained on the crowd. I find myself

wondering if her fins will catch on one of the rails. If she will trip. If she will land on the decking in a wild heap. I stay standing right behind her, so she knows to hurry.

Once we reach the tank, the five of us sit on the decking with our tails poised above the water. We pass the mask, taking gasps of pure oxygen. Our makeup, the splashes of green on our cheekbones, the glitter around our eyes, is perfect. Soon the chlorine will strip away the sealant we've applied, and when we emerge our faces will be stained from the dye, the colors settled deep into our pores.

Amphitrite dives in first, then Callista, Halia, and Neptunia. Ten beats between each. I watch their sequined tails flash around the shipwreck below, all of them swimming in an intricate array, trying to catch the attention of some man on the other side of the glass. None of them bothers to look up at me.

I leave the side of the tank and ease my way through the backstage to the fire door. When I open it, a rush of winter air hits my skin. I take the compact from my bralette and balance it between the door and the frame, leaving a near-invisible crack. Then I return to the tank. I take no more than one minute.

I let my tail relax on the water and take another slow breath of oxygen, then another. The mask leaves the taste of rubber in my mouth. I lower myself into the tank, treading water until they announce my name: Skylla. I dive.

I see the shine of the spotlights first, then a more distant glow, the bar's neon signs. The water ripples around me as the others swim up to take a breath. I alone stay in the tank, in the center, where I can be seen. As I near the glass, I see their faces, made monstrous by the water. This is Mermaid Hour, the ten o'clock show: their eyes, glittering.

* * *

I killed my first moose when I was nine years old.

I was living with my grandfather by then, in an off-grid cabin in the crook of the Cabinet Mountains, three thousand feet above where the Sink and Drink Saloon sits at the end of a brief, unremarkable town. Grandfather built the cabin after he came back from Vietnam, on the last scrap of ranchland his family held onto through recession and plummeting cattle prices. He raised his children there, in three rooms and a half-built porch, but by the time my mother dropped me off, Grandmother had gone back to be with her family in Da Nang.

Grandfather taught me to survive. How to start a fire from a lens of ice. How to shoot each of the eighty-three different firearms that he owned, practicing first on aluminum cans and then on the creatures that passed through the yard.

One day at dusk, he came and found me in the place I usually spent my time, sitting on the overlook where I could see the highway winding around the foothills below, the cars following bends in the road like rats searching a maze. Grandfather had a rifle with him, and he said that there was a bull moose drinking from the creek that ran through the backyard.

"It's time you take responsibility," he said. He left me to hunt alone.

I found the moose a half mile from the cabin, stripping bark from the trunks of lodgepole pines, chewing the woody pieces in that slow, soft way, leaving the trees bare in places, their undersides bleeding sap. He was a beautiful creature, twice my height,

with fur that gleamed even in the dimming sun. He had the shapely, well-muscled form of an adult, but he wasn't old. He was in the prime of his life. A powerful, dignified specimen.

I followed him upstream. He walked in that gradual, ambling way moose walk, but his legs were long, and I had to stay at a run to keep up. By the time he paused to rest, my lungs burned. I raised the rifle over my shoulder and looked for him in the scope. The exhaustion of my body made my hand unsteady, and when I fired, the bullet missed, hitting him in the neck.

He cried out. A screeching sound. A hollow sound. He stumbled back, then took off at a splayed run. I could not keep up. I could only follow a trail of blood through the trees, first a trickle on the fallen needles, and then a glistening stream stamped with impressions of his hoof. I found him lying on the ground a half mile farther. I crouched near his head, far enough that he could not strike me with some sudden movement but close enough so I could see the black slits of his pupils, slowly snuffed out. There was a smell of metal and ripeness in the air, the smell of death as it is in the wild. I stepped back, surveying the whole of his body, all of the elegant lengths of him. Beautiful, yes. But I had made him something else. Something that belonged to me.

When I brought Grandfather the antlers I'd cut from the body, he said that I should shoot to kill, to keep them from wandering.

"We can't get the meat now," he said. "The bugs'll get to it before we ever can. Still, you're just a girl. I didn't expect much."

I understood then that there was some weakness inside me. I cursed my body for its slowness, for all of its needs.

Soon after, Grandfather took me to the Sink and Drink Saloon for the first time. He ordered two plates of Siren Fries and three Shipwrecks for himself—rum, coconut, and water—and we watched the mermaids. We stayed with the young families and the smiling couples through the Atlantis show at three and Enchantment Under the Sea at seven. By Mermaid Hour, the crowd had thinned to only men, most of them around Grandfather's age, all crowding the tankside tables. Grandfather's third Shipwreck settled in, and his gaze turned steadily toward the mermaids, now dressed with long stretches of skin exposed, dancing underwater to the low strains of music, all eyes on them totally, utterly captivated. Including my own.

I was too young to notice that the mermaids swam up to the surface every minute or two for a breath. I was entranced by the flash of the costumes, their powerful arms moving them easily from place to place. I thought they had no need for air.

Grandfather's land abutted the State Forest, where a gentle arm of the Kootenai River passed along the lowlands. In the river I trained myself to hold my breath for two, then five, then ten minutes at a time. There is no trick to it. It is a simple matter of not breathing. Over the years I learned not fight the sense of drowning, the burning in my lungs, the pressure of water closing over my head. I would drift below the river's surface, letting fish fill around my near-still form, feeling the tug of current in the space around my ribcage pulling me like a rope downstream, and my mind would go blank.

Lung cancer killed Grandfather the week I turned eighteen. I took his truck down to the Sink and Drink Saloon to apply for a job as a mermaid. At four in the afternoon, Cyril, the owner, was sitting at the bar with a pile of receipts and two empty bottles of

beer. When I asked him for a job, he looked me up and down and told me to come back in a bikini.

My first time in the tank, I almost died. For my audition, Cyril took me to the upper level and gave me a tail. I took off the robe I wore and set to work easing the fabric over my legs.

"You're exotic," Cyril said.

"My grandmother was Vietnamese."

He watched me struggling to untangle the belts and clasp them around my middle. "Exotic is good," he said.

The tail felt so strange that first time. The spandex cinching around my ankles like chains. The fins resting, heavy, on top of my feet. I balanced next to the tank, shifting from foot to foot.

"You'll have to do a five minute routine," Cyril said. "You ever use oxygen to dive?"

"I don't need oxygen," I said.

"You don't wear it in the tank."

I looked down at the mask he held out to me. "I don't need it," I said.

"Suit yourself."

Cyril slid back the grate on top of the tank. Inside, the water was a deep, unnatural blue. I slid into it.

In the river I'd practiced keeping my legs together by binding my ankles with electric tape. But as I sculled along the surface, the tail moved smoothly through the water. I dived. The water was clearer than in the river, where the dimness obscured

everything but the space directly in front of me. When I opened my eyes, I could see Cyril watching from a tankside table.

I swam as mermaids do, swiveling my hips. I somersaulted all the way around, letting the fins trail behind me. I did not have to expend my breath fighting a current. Everything was still. I thought I could stay down longer than I ever had before. Then I felt the tail pull toward the back corner of the tank, and after that the rest of me, with a force strong enough to hold me underwater until I drowned. Everything in me screamed forwards, my arms pulling water to my side, my legs attempting to jettison to the surface. The tail was dead weight behind me, something for the suction to grab.

I am not the first to be caught in the Saloon's malfunctioning filter. Callista told me her own story of near-drowning, how she lost breath and strength in the current. Loss of air did strange things to her mind. She believed it would be better to give in and drown than to keep fighting. In her hesitation, she was pulled full force back into the filter. After she told the story, she washed the makeup off her leg and showed me the thick scar that ran up her calf.

I never felt hesitation. After the first spurt of energy, I slowed my stroke. I felt the familiar weakness of my body, the strain in my lungs. In my panic, I'd wasted air. The pain from a lack of oxygen spread to the outward reaches of my body, my hands, my legs, all burning with need. But I swam. I kept my last exhalation trapped in my lungs. I knew that if I stayed calm, I would last.

I did. The suction stopped, and I pushed to the surface on my last gasp of air. Cyril was waiting.

"You're breathing," he said.

I pulled myself out of the tank, ignoring his outstretched hand. My arms felt heavy. For a moment, I could not make them move. Cyril tossed a towel on my lap and told me I was a mermaid.

There are never more than eight mermaids. The eighth spot had been vacant for a few months, after Aquaria turned thirty-five. I met them all during my training, but Callista was the one who befriended me. I was on my own on the catwalk trying to dress, and she showed me how to wrap the belts of the tail so it would stay. In those first weeks, she stayed between the three and seven o'clock shows to coach me. She taught me how to dive smoothly, how to use the water to help carry the heavier props, the glitter cannons and the tridents.

"We all have to look good," she said. "Or none of us look good."

She taught me proper arm placement, how to kick in the tail. She taught me how to swim for the early shows, smiling and waving at the children, and how to swim for Mermaid Hour.

"If you pull your top down a little, they know you're good to go," she said. We were resting on the precipice of the tank, unclasping our tails.

"I'm not," I said.

Callista leapt down from the deck. "Mermaid Hour's just the preview," she said.

After my first Mermaid Hour, I sat sipping ginger ale and watching the customers, the men, swarm around us where we came to sit after the show. They crowded us at the bar, ordering our drinks, touching the places we left our skin exposed. I watched Callista with a boy passing through from North Dakota, how she rested her hand on his back as they laughed, how she whispered in his ear. There was a force between them, an urgent

kind of desire. A need for something that only the other could give. One of his hands gripped the base of her neck while his other slipped folded bills into her purse. Once it got late and enough empty glasses sat before them on the bar, she took him to the Super 8 across the street.

I have never allowed a man to touch me. When they offer me money, I turn them down. I imagine that such a thing would plant an illness inside me that would take hold and slowly rot everything away. I do not stand too close at the bar. I pretend that there is still glass between us. But still, sometimes, I go home with their smell on me.

* * *

Last January, a man came into the Saloon. I saw him the way I always see them, through the glass and the hazy water, sitting and drinking while I perform the Conquered Nymph, an escape artist routine where one of the girls handcuffs me to the mast of the shipwreck.

The customers always gather around the tank to watch me. The longer I stay, the more excited they become. The more money they put in my jar. They move closer without knowing they do, and they smear their fingers across the glass. As the minutes tick by, there are murmurs. I cannot hear them, not through the water, but I can see them. They wonder if I am in real danger. They wonder if they should call someone over. If they should break the glass. The longer I stay down, the less they seem to worry. The more thrilling it becomes for them to watch. As though I hold my breath for them.

But this man was not watching. I caught sight of him through the crowd, here and there through the spaces between the bodies. He was writing something in a palm-sized notebook. His back was turned half away, and his hair fell across his face.

He talked to Callista at the bar that night, but he did not go with her to the Super 8. He left before any of us did. He set his money on the bar and slipped his notebook in his back pocket. I saw him sitting at the bar the next night and the next.

When I picked her up for work that week, Callista handed me his business card. *Paul Patterson, Private Investigator.*

"Aquaria's suing the Saloon," she said. "He works for her lawyer."

The business card was black and white, embossed, and it had the image of a magnifying glass in one corner. The paper felt soft between my fingers.

"What's he investigating?"

"Working conditions," she said. "That sort of thing. You know, do the bosses try to grab us. Are we treated okay." She took the card from me, and she studied it. "He's kind of cute. Not like a lot of the guys we get around here."

"I wouldn't know," I said.

After the show that night, I found him at the bar. He was talking to the bartender, but when he saw me, he took his hand out of his pocket to shake mine.

"You're the one I haven't met yet," he said. He slipped me his card and said he wanted to talk, but not here.

"I want you to talk freely."

"You want me to give you evidence," I said.

"I want the truth."

"Well, then."

He picked the menu off the counter. Along the top there was a drawing of a mermaid. Her breasts, bare, were larger than her head. He squinted, then placed the menu facedown.

"I've been trying to figure this place out," he said.

"We swim in a tank," I said, "and they pay us for it."

"And you're all right with that?"

"It's no different from anything else." I studied the notebook, closed and sitting in front of him on the bar. "You look into people's lives. You learn things about them you shouldn't know. Are you all right with that?"

He laughed. I thought he was laughing at me, but then he said, "I have to be careful around you."

There were nights he didn't come to the Saloon. I watched for him in his place at the bar, near the back, but soon enough some other man would come and take it. Callista told me that he wanted to keep a low profile around Cyril. She was becoming friends with him, and she knew these things. Paul, she said, didn't want to draw too much attention to himself.

There was nothing particularly different about the nights he came. Except that when I looked out on the crowd, he was sitting there, apart from them. Watching, but also not watching, taking in all of the different shapes of the place and writing them all down.

One day when I went to pick her up, Callista told me she needed to make a stop. We pulled up outside the Kootenai Lodge Hotel, and she led me into the lobby.

"Paul doesn't have snow tires," she said. "I thought we could help him out."

The Kootenai is not like the other hotels in town, which serve truck drivers and people who come through to visit the Sink and Drink Saloon. The Kootenai exists for the kind of people who come for the scenery, the forests and rivers and mountains. What they do with it, I don't know. The lobby of the Kootenai was a strange place, the walls like those in a log cabin, but when I reached out to touch them, they were made of plaster. There were heads of animals on the wall, elk and lynx and moose. Plaques below them named the hunters. All of them men.

"It's pretty spooky," Paul said when he came downstairs. He looked over his shoulder at the mountain lion, its mouth open, teeth bared and yellow. "I don't know why people like these things."

We went out to the truck. Callista climbed into the middle of the bench seat, and Paul got in beside her.

"Tell him how long you can hold your breath for," Callista said. She bent forward on her seat, reaching to lace up her boot. Paul looked over her, at me.

"I've seen you," he said. "I've seen you hold your breath for a long time."

"I don't hold it as long for the shows," I said. I don't know why I felt the need to correct him.

"What's your record?" he asked.

"Twelve minutes," I said. "Twelve minutes, twenty-one seconds."

"She's basically a superhero," Callista said.

"The world record's more than a minute longer," I said.

"Well," he said, "when you put it like that."

"A minute's a long time," I said. "When you're holding your breath."

We dropped him off at the Union Club, around the corner from the Sink and Drink Saloon. I stayed parked in front, and we both watched him go inside. He settled into a table in front of the window, hanging his coat on the back of his chair, taking out his notebook, entirely unaware that anyone was watching him.

"He likes you," Callista said.

That night, he was waiting at the bar. I told him to meet me at the Super 8.

The room was smaller than I imagined. Two double beds were crammed together along one wall. There was a tear in one of the comforters, and plastic threads stuck out from the opening. The streetlamp shone red through the drawn curtains. There was a television remote on the bedside table. There was something on the buttons. They stuck to my fingers.

This was where they all went. A dark, dirty crevice like this.

I sat on the desk chair. Paul laid his coat at the head of one of the beds, and he sat at the foot nearest me. He took a voice recorder out of his pocket, a silver square thing, and he switched it on, and he asked me what I had seen.

"You're going to tape what I say?"

"If that's all right," he said.

"But you carry around a notebook."

"I use that for notes."

"What kind of notes?"

"I don't know. Reminders." He took the notebook from his pocket, and he flipped it open. "Look at safety regs on tank," he read. "That kind of thing."

"And the things you've seen," I said. "You can't record what you see on tape."

"Yeah," he said. "I write down the things I see."

"What have you seen?" I asked.

He flipped through the notebook for a few pages, then he closed the cover and tossed it beside him. He slid back, bringing his feet to hang just past the edge of the bed. He only took up one side. The other was empty.

"They handcuff you," he said.

"It's perfectly safe."

He turned his head, looking at me. "So it doesn't bother you?"

He waited for my answer. Waited with the recorder running. What would he hear, when he listened later? The heater shooting heavy air into the room and the shouting from across the road, people celebrating at the Saloon. And what would he hear of me? Would he hear my breathing? I rarely sat in a room so close to other people. I did not know how loud breathing could be.

"You've been here a while now," I said. "Have you found anything?"

"I've found plenty," he said. "But we're not going to do anything about it."

He stood up and went to the window. He opened the curtain. I came to stand beside him, and we watched the crowd spill out of the Saloon, the mermaids and the men. There was smoke around them, from their warm breath meeting the air. Couples clustered together, not breaking apart even to cross the glare ice in the parking lot, even as they slipped along, more encumbered by their togetherness than they would have been apart. As though there were some force fusing two people together at their middles. As though the severing would kill them.

“What Aquaria did when she worked at the Saloon,” he said. “It could come up in court. She could get in trouble. You could all get in trouble.”

I had to crane my neck to look at him. From there, his face looked nothing like it did when we were both sitting down. He looked mangled, strange. I found that I had no desire to correct him, to say that I wouldn’t get in trouble. That I was entirely innocent.

“Then your job is done,” I said. “You didn’t need to talk to me at all.”

“Yeah.” He let the curtain sway shut. “It’s done.”

“Then why did you come here?”

He let out a laugh, which, seeing that I was not laughing too, he disguised as a cough. He scuffed his foot against the carpet, looking down.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“It is a very long drive for me to get home,” I said. I went to the desk. I picked up my coat. My hands shook. “I hope in the future, you will have some consideration for another person’s time.”

He moved aside when I went for the door, and I pushed it toward him, forming a barrier between us. He stepped aside.

“I will,” he said.

“There’s a button release on the cuffs,” I told him. “I can press it whenever I want to.”

This was the last time we spoke. But I did see him once again before he left for good. It was only a few days ago. His car was parked in the lot after Mermaid Hour. The cab was shaking as though by the wind, but there was no wind. Steam dulled the windows. When I approached, there was a shape lurching in and out of the light from the

streetlamp, like an arm making stabbing motion. But it wasn't an arm. It was the form of a man. A boot emerged from below, pressing up against the window, forming a print in the fog. I recognized it immediately. It was Callista's.

* * *

I see the man after I've been underwater for five minutes, well-dressed and sitting near the front. I can tell from his clothes that he is from somewhere far away from here. He wears leather shoes and fitted jeans, damp around the cuffs from snowmelt. He watches me through breaks in the crowd, not approaching the glass. I make sure never to look at him directly, but I catch glimpses as I pretend to struggle in the handcuffs.

He is still here after the show. The other girls try to catch his attention. He is handsome, probably rich. But he does not want them. He wants me.

I sit at one corner of the bar, my down coat drawn over my shoulders. He sits beside me. His hair is flecked with white. When he leans forward, his glasses slip down the bridge of his fine, thin nose. For a moment, I consider forgetting the whole thing. I had expected a challenge.

"You must really be a mermaid," he says, "to stay under so long."

I slip the coat from my shoulders. "I practice," I say.

He orders a Shipwreck for me. It is my first drink. I have never tasted anything that burned in quite this way, not even chlorine down the back of my throat. This is something different. It roars through my bloodstream. I cover my cough with a laugh.

“You need help?” Callista stands beside us. She isn’t wearing makeup, so I know she hasn’t been looking for a man tonight.

“Neptunia’s giving me a ride home,” she says. She doesn’t take her eyes off his hand pressed against my back.

“I can take you,” I say.

Callista watches us both for a moment longer, then goes back to grab her bag. I tell him to meet me in the alleyway after closing.

I let my truck idle in front of Callista’s house while she eases herself out of the cab.

“Paul’s gone back to Spokane,” she says. She hops down from the seat and steadies herself against the door. “He asked about you.”

“I’m sure he wasn’t particularly interested,” I say.

I leave her. I park behind the Saloon, watching the others lead the last customers to the Super 8. Then he comes out. I watch him get into the driver’s side of a blue SUV. The glow of his cell phone reflects off his glasses. I rub my gloved hands together for warmth. I wait until the bartender drives away to flip on my headlights. Then I meet him at the fire door.

“You certainly piqued my curiosity,” he says.

I lead him inside, pocketing the compact as I do. In darkness, we pass through the backstage, skirting a row of bashed-in lockers. I snap on the overhead lights as we pass over the catwalk and up the ladder to the tank. The fluorescent bulbs warble, flickering shadows across the space.

He studies the grease-stained walls. “If you weren’t so little,” he says, “I’d be worried for my safety.”

Standing on the decking, I peel off my sweater and shirt. I unclip my bra. “Do you know how to swim?”

“I can dog paddle,” he says.

I drop my underwear with the rest my clothes. Though I face away from him, I know he is looking. There is power in being able to command a thing like that. It is a power I have never known before, not even in the wilderness.

I imagine coming into work tomorrow, police tape surrounding the building. There will still be officers there. I will tell them that I went straight home after I dropped off my friend. Anyway, everybody knows I don’t take up with customers. Everybody knows I couldn’t stand such a thing.

I dive into the water, feeling the rush of cold and chlorine swirling up my legs. I am stronger when everything moves unencumbered. I swim a few strokes just to feel my body working in perfect, natural harmony. I glide a few feet below the surface, then I look up to see him through the water. He begins to undress. I hear the filter shudder to life. Its ripples tug gently on my toes. Soon they will grow stronger. I crest from the water and swim to where he stands on land. I beckon him, closer.

Human Sacrifice

I did not sleep last night. I kept thinking of a story you told me once, about the first infant who died on your watch. He lost oxygen in some way, as they often do, being caught between life and whatever breathless, dark place comes before. He was born blue, his eyes glazed over and still. Perhaps this is how you described him to me, or perhaps this is how I see him now, with stories of my own to compare. You told me that you massaged around his lungs, trying to make breath flow through his body. Then you demonstrated, your fingers pulsing against the soft part of my palm.

This is the part I turned over in my mind.

I've wanted to ask if you ever hesitate. I've wanted to ask if you ever felt as I do, in my weak moments, that it is better not to be born. I imagine if you had been awake, and I had really asked, you would've said something comforting. Perhaps you're even thinking it now. You're thinking that life is miraculous, the near-impossible confluence of a million perfectly calibrated factors. You are recounting the formation of stars and accretion of planets, the spark of life from strains of chemicals, the tortured processes of birth and extinction that led to us lying there in the first gasps of morning light, as though we were the culmination of something.

I always imagine you this way. Trying to force, in your gentle, firm manner, everyone to live. I think of your fingers miming a heartbeat long after hope is lost, their steady motion insisting that there is some logic to this world.

I should not have let you go with so little said. This morning, after you left my room, I was gripped with the feeling that I had let something slip away too soon. I stepped outside, and I followed you down the road, wearing only my slippers, which by

the time I got home were soaked through with snow. Not that wet shoes matter anymore. I left them outside, where they will freeze to the ice in front of my door, waiting there for someone to chip them off the ground at some point in the future, long after I am dead.

I watched you leave down the switchbacks that led to the main part of town, your steps, as always, slipping in the melting snow. You did not know that I stood watching you. You have never been alert to the woods, not in the five winters you have spent here. I know every sound, every smell and sight. I know when wolves have captured an elk from faint rot in the air or when the bluebirds are moving south from the timbre of their chatter early in the morning. I know your footfalls before I ever see you, the sound of your unsteady way of walking.

I wanted to tell you about what I have seen in my life. I thought perhaps if I could explain one thing to you, then you could understand everything. Why I am dying. I wanted to tell you about a girl I knew when I was younger. She was tied naked to a split-rail fence and pelted with glass. I don't remember why. She might have slept with the curate. She might have failed to clean her laundry on a Monday. In those crazed, desperate years after the plague, a roving gang of townspeople came out at night to punish those who broke our rules, thinking it was our wrongness, our transgressions, that brought sickness upon us. They punished her, and then they left her there in the cold. I wanted to hold her death in front of your face as proof of something. *See?* I wanted to say. *There was no meaning.*

It was a cruel, senseless urge. But there it is, anyway.

When I returned to my room at the temple, one of the initiates was sweeping down the path. I assume she saw you leave this morning. I wanted to challenge her to tell

the priestesses. There could be nothing more flagrant, more devious, than what I did. The sacrifice to God is supposed to be pure. I put us all in danger.

It is a lovely morning, I said. Isn't this sunshine welcome?

Yes, she said. Lovely.

She went inside, to pray, to wash her face, to do any of the things I might have done a week or a year ago when awoken by the sun. Her hypocrisy does not insult me. If I am declared an unsuitable sacrifice, then someone else must be found. It could be her. It could be a young girl with parents, people to mourn her when she goes. I am heartened that my actions have not caused any greater calamity. In a few hours, when the temple guards come for me, I should like to think of myself as a sacrifice not just for God but for someone more material as well. For a girl to be able to see the snow melt in spring, to help her mother carry water from the creek, to run over the crest of hill that overlooks the town, the brick houses and all of the people outdoors trading gossip and recipes, talking of weather, and fathers-in-law, and nothing in particular.

Memory is enough for me. I remember being young in the fields where my father grew buckwheat, warm air and bees circling the flowers, tramping back to the house with wisps of pollen stuck to my bare legs. I remember my mother chiding me, washing my legs with water from a basin that sat warming in the sun, letting the greenish tinge fall into the dirt, a plume of something alive.

My mother was a formidable woman. You would have liked her. She used to chase coyotes away from our chickens with a laundry fork. She used to stand outside in a snowstorm, watching to make sure the livestock made it into the barn, her bare hands tucked in the fur-lined pockets of her overcoat. I would to slip my own hand in there, to

feel the dampness of her sweat against the fine hairs. She thought that I was trying to warm myself, and she would cup my hand, her fingers knotting in mine. It wasn't, exactly, what I wanted. I would sometimes be taken away by the rash feeling that she and I were not supposed to be two people at all, that we could not survive as separate entities. I wanted to somehow fuse us back together, so I would not have to face the world bare, rootless, and alone.

She died when I was thirteen.

There are many wrong ways to be born. Too early. Too late. Breached. Deformed, spines split like the branches of trees, limbs missing, soft nubs of flesh in their place. I wonder, too, if there are wrong ways to die. Ways that turn us into something scarred and unrecognizable, starved, grasping, deranged.

What your teachers told you about the plague is true. It begins with blindness. Do they tell you about the panic? There is always panic when patients wake up blind. My father was the first in our family to fall to it. He destroyed half our house, throwing stoneware pots from the shelves and upending still-hot firewood, giving no thought to the burns that formed on his hands, the rivulets flames that caught on our carpet. He was never a violent man. But pain works in strange ways on people. He would not be settled, would not lie in bed and let it claim him. Mother kept me locked in the bedroom until the next phase began, until he was too weak to strike out.

You are thinking of fever. You are thinking of nerve death, the severing of all bodily connections. I can only tell you of the sounds, the screaming, the crying out, the silence. Mother came to speak to me only once. Her eyes were bright red, tears streaming down her face. She was going blind.

There is some money in the bureau, she told me. Take it. Do not let anyone steal from you.

These were the last words she spoke to me.

Still, I went. There was no purpose in my staying, only to watch them both die. The neighbors, too, had their dying, but they let me sleep inside their barn. In a few short days, only the mother and one son were living. The plague selects cruelly, parents but not their children, children but not their parents. You would tell me about immune systems, that some of us are made to survive disease, and some are not. You would tell me about antibodies. But that cannot express the emptiness of our village in those years after, the aching silence of the square when evening falls, the madness that swallowed us all for months, for years, as though the plague was not satisfied with our desiccated bodies, that it wanted, in some way, to infest our minds.

When a girl's parents die, she has few options. Families cannot afford to take in more women, not after a plague winter, when farms lose their sons and good, working hands. I went to the temple to enlist as an initiate. I was young, but there were many young girls in those years. We lived, even then, in the walled-off grounds, nearby all that illness and sin and yet never in its vicinity for long. The priestesses—I view them as a collective, a swarm of veiled faces, loose skin wrinkling beneath tight, starched collars—were the ones who dealt with us. There were priests too, but we saw them only in prayer or if we had committed one of the greater infractions. Stealing donation money. Drinking ceremonial wine. Masturbating. I was given a room at the temple and a job cleaning the Hall of Alms and around the grounds, which I did, moving through my tasks slowly, so they wouldn't find more for me to do, so I could return to my room and read books

surrendered by worshippers. There were only ever five or six on the shelf behind the altar at any given time. Most others were sold to the merchants who came through, too precious to burn, too scandalous, too conscious of an outside world, to keep. I used to hide them under my mattress, but I was always found out.

You are an insolent girl, the priestesses used to tell me. You'll never do us any good.

Which really just shows what they knew.

I began my life at the temple with little interest in God. I know you see me as something of a zealot, a benign one perhaps, but nonetheless someone prone to lapses into fanaticism, but in truth He was as the mountains are to me, still and looming, implacable to our own, particular sufferings. I never sensed Him as someone lurking behind the scenes, coveting my life.

What changed me were the words of songs they had me sing in prayer. *His wrath is the burn of white hot flame*, and *In time He will take me home*. I watched them sung by priestesses and the older initiates, their faces upturned, contorted in a keen kind of pleasure, as though they were even then imploring, begging, for every bit of it, the fire and the anger and that quick, final ending.

You told me once, years ago, that there is no proof for a higher power. You must have thought you were offending me, but my faith is not so tenuous. I know that you cannot take as proof what I do. The roiling green of a summer storm approaching from the north. The earth shuddering from an oncoming avalanche. The suddenness of a tree snapping above me in the cold.

You asked me how I could believe in a god who allowed such pain. A god who demands to be paid at a cost that seems, to you, too precious. Too bloody. I did not know how to answer. Of course God is cruel. Of course He is greedy. Of course He *wants something*. If you had seen corpses stacked around the side of the temple, awaiting incineration, if you had smelled smoke from their bodies and seen it cover the sky in a black haze long after the disease has departed, then you would not doubt that the force who turns our world is cruel, thoughtless, and hungry.

We will never agree. You see the world as an order of designations, sick and well, rational and irrational, learned and ignorant. Such chaos, such dirtiness, defies your very being. And I have no desire to do that anymore.

I have never been devout. Or perhaps it is better to say that I have never been obedient. I always managed to separate, in my own mind, what God wanted, what He demanded of me, from everyone else's expectations. The priestesses have long wanted to get rid of me, but they could not—unless they broke their vows in an obvious, visible way—simply turn me out of my room. Marriage was their answer. It was common practice for men to look for wives at the compound, given that there are so few of us. We are a closed-off village. Apart from you, of course, and a few others who pass through.

The priestesses brought a man to see me one day. He was neither old nor young, and he was extremely tall. He had scarring from boils as a child, and as we sat talking of crop yields and goat husbandry, his stomach rumbled periodically, from hunger or indigestion, I never learned. I sent him away.

You have no other option, the priestesses said. This is all there is for someone like you.

It is a good offer, they said. You will never get another.

Marriage, they said, requires sacrifice.

I thought of what I had that could be sacrificed. What I might cut off to make myself suitable. An arm, a leg. I imagined entering marriage limbless.

This was before I knew the difference between the sacrifice I am making now and the one that she meant. I grew up on a farm and was not unfamiliar with the process, but I never thought of it as a sacrifice, or as anything. The priestesses imagined it something invasive, a disease to be endured for the sake of inoculation, protection against the cruelties of an outside world. They thought of it as something done to a discarded handkerchief, soaked through, left to disintegrate in the elements.

Which was not at all what it was like.

That brings me to you. I am sorry to say that I don't remember where we met. I was trained as a midwife by then, the priestesses having decided that I was intelligent enough to do more than simply rot in my room, so I know we met while I was visiting one of the women of the village, but who she was and what state she was in do not come to mind. What I remember is your face, which was tanned from your journey over the mountains. It seemed to me that your face was incredibly moldable. Soft. We in the village are all hardened by our shared tragedies. It is set permanently into our faces, those long stretches of grief. But you were so open. Ready to sense, to feel, anything.

I don't think of this as a religious office, you told me. Do you remember? I had only just introduced myself. You were so distressed by the notion that I might start mumbling incantations over her cervix, in lieu of medical procedure.

I don't think of this as a man's office, I replied. Indeed, there were never any men in the room with us before you came. It was as though birth, the pain of it, was a secret we knew men would not accept.

I must have presented quite the puzzle back then. There you were, the generous doctor from the seaside, off to bring medicine and progress to the backwards mountain people, and you had to trade barbs with the village midwife.

How can you understand a woman's body? I asked you. How can any man?

I read books on the subject, you said.

I should like to read these books, I said.

I never dreamt you would bring them to me the following autumn, when you came again. *Human Physiology*, parts one, two, and three, and others in later years, astronomy and geology and subjects I could never have imagined until they were there before me. How much work they must have been to transport. I struggled even to carry them the distance between your house and the temple.

In this final week, I have taken to reading them over again. For the ceremony, the high priest uses a mushroom that grows on the mountaintops. I looked it up in the book on botany. The entry takes care to note that the mushroom has a unique flavor. Were it not for the inevitable death, it might be a delicacy. With the dose that I will be given, however, my liver will be overwhelmed, and I will lose consciousness in the first ten minutes, when my blood becomes deoxygenated. A shame, really, for I would like to be able to remember that taste for longer than that.

You won't want to hear about this. I can't imagine that you brought me those books so that I could spend nights pondering my death. But this is only their most recent

use. In years past, they have let me experience things I would never have otherwise. They have given me a larger world to hold, not just the hazy images of everything outside of here, beyond the mountains, down the coastline, in every studied corner of the world, but something with weight. Something I could hold in my hands.

I have tried to imagine your city. I seem to be able to do so only in pieces: a shop that you described to me once, with a bell on its door, a house built overlooking the ocean, falling away as the cliff side erodes. I have tried to place an image of myself in your places. When I picture the streets you walk upon, I look for myself on them. In the crowds on feast days, finely dressed in bright clothes. Walking along the seaside on a day when the rain mists in warm droplets. Years from now, sitting with you, close together in spite of the heat from a nearby fire.

But I have no idea how your city looks.

You were different that first year. You did not take easily to this small, isolated place. I know now that you missed the fine buildings of your home, and the weather, and the great variety of people you met there. I took it for snobbery, the way you regarded the village. Perhaps it was. But now I believe that people tend to belong in the places where they feel the most themselves. Isn't this what home is? I, on a brisk walk through the pines, the wind tugging at my back, the snow a hard shell beneath my feet. For you, I imagine it is in your hospital, the one you have described to me so many times, surrounded by the cleanliness of an indoor landscape, medicines and instruments at your fingertips.

Such are people. Not at all the separate, independent beings we like to imagine ourselves, floating unfettered from city to village to countryside. We are stitched tightly to our places, their weight something we carry on our backs.

When you returned the second year, you seemed more accustomed to the village. You began to play games with the children, to joke with old ladies. When we went on walks down the country roads, tree lined and white, you learned not to stray beneath the branches, lest they drop a pile of heavy snow on your head. You didn't mind when I laughed at all of the things you did not know. You came to realize, I believe, the effect of your presence among us. You have been a doubtful eye, casting all of our ways into sharp, absurd relief. Perhaps you did not mean to be. But we have felt it just the same.

I grew used to the cyclical nature of having you here and then not having you. All choices were yours. You came, you left, every year with the end of summer and the beginning of spring. Every year I wondered if you would return. There were times it tormented me to know that I had no say in anything, that I was no one but a strange girl in a village hundreds of miles away from you, someone who could be easily dismissed, forgotten. My own powerlessness has, at times, overwhelmed me.

But then you would return, and I would see you in passing at the village meetings, always standing next to the door, as though there were some things that, once said, would drive you away from us for good. It relieved me when the snows came, keeping you with us for a few months. Winter must be more difficult for you than it is for us, when the cold comes, the frost creeping indoors, over windows and walls, filling everything with an unbearable silence where nothing can grow, and all signs of life are buried. This you have endured five times now.

I've often wondered what possessed you to do so.

You seem to enjoy your work, though I can't imagine our patients are preferable to the ones in your home. I can't imagine you appreciate my exalted place in the women's eyes, though you never complained when I performed examinations that the women wouldn't allow from you, when they told me all the pertinent information they kept from you. Still, we fell into an easy partnership. We do not need to speak to know which task is ours, when to relieve the other. We never stumble over one another, or redo work that has already been done. Our movements harmonize.

But you always knew more than I did. You showed me how to feel for the vaguest heartbeat in those early, fearful months, before the pregnancy is out of danger. You should me how to open a woman when she could not give birth in the normal way, how to feel for the surface of the womb, like wet paper beneath my fingers. You showed me how to sew her back together, your hands ushering my needle through folds of skin.

It is a comfort to think that I will never give birth. Birthing is one of the chief cruelties of the world. I have witnessed thirty-five of them. I have seen four infants born already dead, their skin shrunken and grey. I have seen six born no bigger than my hand, their eyes wrinkled shut. Eight mothers have died while I looked on, a few of them younger than I was at the time. Some have died screaming their pain to the world. Some have passed quietly, while their infant's cries fill the room.

Then there is the time after: three children that I saw into the world died in a freeze last winter. Another drowned in the creek. Another succumbed to disease. A mother I tended to, with six children already, was killed when her husband hit her on the head with an axe. All of these are terrors I will never know.

Of course you do not see death this way. To you, it is the worst of all possible options. To die is to admit that you can no longer extend things, that all of your contingencies and knowledge have ended in failure. You would've wanted me to cry out when I was chosen. You would've wanted me to scream, to rail against the injustice, and the insanity, and the irrationality of it all. The senseless, futile sacrifice. You would've liked it if I knocked over the candelabrum and scorched the floor of the Ceremony Room, caused some sort of fire right there, in front of the high priest's nose, amongst the crowd of villagers, all waiting to hear a name.

Their eyes on me was the worst of it. Of course I did not want to hear my name called. Of course I grieved. I am not so inhuman that I did not feel as though some hand had come down and struck me. But when they all turned to me, the young mothers with their children playing on the floor, and the old women with their brusque winter coughs, and the priestesses with their faces statue-like from sheer devotion, knowing that I was the one who would save them, that because of me the worst of all pain and doubt would be put off another year, I found that I could step forward and take my place. I found that I could endure it.

But then you were here last night. You wanted me to run away with you.

It has, of course, happened before. The girl who is chosen might take off for a city like yours, sneak down the mountain trail in the middle of the night. Some have been found frozen to death halfway down the mountainside. Some have never been found at all. It has happened that girls barter with merchants who come through, though not for a price I am willing to pay.

But you didn't ask that price. That was my idea.

When I asked you inside my room last night, I was thinking, strangely, of summer. I am sorry you have never seen how summer is here. The sun as it first comes through the clouds after months of darkness and overcast, how the warmth erupts against my skin as an entirely new sensation. A thing invented for this one moment of release. Summer is when the hillsides burst with the sort of color forgotten in winter, all the bright shades and smells of things growing a revelation of another side of the world. An awakening. That is the best way I can explain it.

I wish I had said something more. I wish I had known more than what I knew, which was that there was no other thing to do in that moment, save for us to be together. You would take last night as proof of something. That I am dying for something I do not really believe. You said as much, anyway. For how could I believe that this ceremony, this sacrifice, would truly save the village, if I defied its core rule?

It is not an unfounded question.

Have you never eaten yourself sick? Never dived below the water and held your breath just to feel the rush of relief that comes from not drowning? Perhaps for you the world is all consistency. There are natural laws. You can accept and reject things easily. Everything so firm, everything clear and easy to decipher. It has never been that for me. Pain and pleasure have always dwelt in tandem, ever a momentary mistake away.

There was a time when my fear of death was greater even than yours. For I have had it come so close to me, felt always in danger of everything I've ever watched befall a woman. I do not feel this fear now. I have not, even when I would have thought it should have consume me. I do not look at my death the same way I do those of so many people I've seen die. The ones we once strained to revive, certain that they had more breath still

in them, more life, that their deaths at that moment could only be meaningless, devoid of any sense of an ending.

I am different from them. My death is not meaningless, after all. And that is something. It is enough.

I have this letter, a final word on the matter, with your name on it. Something for you to reject, to rationalize. To read, anyway. Perhaps to throw in the fire and never think of again. Or to keep until the paper ages so every fold becomes a tear, the ink fades, and all you have is some bare recollection of what I wrote in my dying hours, when I was thinking of you, eventually forgotten in the swell of whatever life you will lead now that I am gone.

It is almost enough.

Vita

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