

A PLACE WE CAN'T GO: STORIES

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in English

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April 2015

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ABSTRACT

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A Place We Can't Go To: Stories is a collection of five short stories written in the genre of magical realism. Throughout the five stories, characters move through surreal or dreamlike landscapes, trying to escape, find happiness, or just understand the world around them. Characters include a larger-than-life man on a mission from God, a woman trapped in a mysterious village with no recollection of how she arrived there, a rebellious soul Reaper attempting to wipe out the human population, a man attempting to salvage his marriage with a strange chair, and a mother attempting to answer her child's questions as creatively as she can. The five stories, entitled "Josiah's Bells", "Pylar's Sunshine Chair", "The Train", "What is a Night Mommy? & Other Strange Questions", and "Ree", all serve to provide readers with a visceral experience. Each story explores the intricacies of human relationships with their own mortality. These stories were originally planned to be interconnected, with reoccurring characters and similar landscapes. However, as the thesis progressed, *A Place We Can't Go To: Stories* evolved into a collection of stories that revolved around similar themes and stylistic choices. Stylistic choices range from writing in first person to third person, as well as switching between heavily descriptive language, dialogue-heavy prose, and action-related prose. Inside these stories

are elements of the surreal and the magical. The unexplained offers the reader a sense of imagination and freedom, one that allows them to focus more clearly on the themes and elements of importance. Interconnected themes include life, death, the feelings of absence and loneliness, and how they affect the human psyche.

INTRODUCTION

I've been writing creatively for years now, since before I started my undergraduate degree. But I didn't really become serious about writing until I started graduate school. I took Ron Rash's fiction class in my undergraduate days, but last semester, when I took it a second time for graduate school, I started writing a story that inspired the themes and the genre for my creative thesis.

The story is called "Josiah's Bells"; a version of it is included in this thesis. In the story, set in a dystopian future, a man named Josiah goes on a mission from God to start the apocalypse. I had even worked on a similar version of the story a few years before, under the title of "The Bells of Saint Josiah". That story had a completely different plot, but the image remained the same: The image of bells sitting on a rusted tower. This image was inspired by something real. A few years before, my mother had mentioned to me that there was a strange house down a backroad near their home. In the backyard of this house, a man had collected rusted church bells. I took my car, drove down the road, and happened upon the house. It looked like a perfectly normal home—a little house, one-story, with a car park and a small garden. But in the backyard, there was a little metal tower filled with old, rusted church bells.

The challenge then became trying to understand *why* all these church bells ended up in this backyard. Who collected them? Why did they do it? It came to me as I began to write that while there is probably a simple explanation for it, there is no reason that my explanations ever need to be simple. When I pictured the strange bells, I saw a world where the bells were somehow the last shreds of the man's humanity, or identity. And so I wrote what immediately came to mind when I thought of this image—a dystopian future.

I've always been drawn to the strange and the surreal. The stories and movies that stick with me are often the ones that tell stories of dystopian or apocalyptic futures, or just strange, unexplained occurrences. In the same way, stories with elements of fantasy or magical realism have always had a great impact on me, but I always felt scared to write them, for fear that I would write them poorly. In my undergraduate career, I read and studied many authors that focused on the real. I felt that to be taken seriously as a new writer, I needed to adapt myself to write in the same way, on the same kind of subjects. It seemed to me that writers of fantasy weren't always taken seriously, and that bothered me. Still, I clung to the authors, like Louise Erdrich, that managed to incorporate the feeling of magic and fantasy into a very "real" world. I read Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine* in my senior year as an undergraduate and the way she combined the spiritual world of the Chippewa tribe with the real world challenges they faced was a beautiful way to blend subject matter together. The characters in the novel were incredibly real. Their motivations, conversations, and memories made them into real people. Even though these real people exist in a world very similar to our own, they also have otherworldly connections via their spirituality. Other authors inspired me, as well. Haruki Murakami, Margaret Atwood, Neil Gaiman, Colum McCann, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez were authors that I enjoyed reading. Yet at the same time, I considered my own attempts clumsy, and was reluctant to try and blend fantasy, science fiction, or magical realism into my own writing.

However, when I began writing "Josiah's Bells" for Ron Rash's class, I found myself in a dilemma. From the very first incarnation of this story, written years before Ron's class, I had pictured it in a dystopic future. It was an image I didn't want to give up; therefore, I had no choice but to make a serious attempt at writing the story the way I felt it should be written.

I remember that during the critique of my story in class, Rash told me that he liked the way I used “magical realism”, and that he felt that I blended the realistic elements of the story well with the more strange elements. The moment wasn’t magical, but it did solidify my confidence. Later that semester, when I wrote my proposal for my creative thesis, I decided that magical realism was the genre I wanted to focus on.

For model stories and inspiration, I turned to collections with a focus on magical realism. In Colum McCann’s *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, I found stories like “Cathal’s Lake”, a story where an old man digs victims of violence, reincarnated as swans, out of a pit beside a lake in his backyard. Fred Chappell’s *I Am One of You Forever* contains a story called “Overspill”, in which a mother’s tear turns into a bubble and encloses her husband and son; Haruki Murakami’s *After the Quake*; Gabriel García Márquez’s *Collected Stories and Strange Pilgrims*; H.P. Lovecraft’s *The Thing on the Doorstep and Other Weird Stories*; Ursula K. Le Guin’s story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”; Chappell’s story “The Somewhere Doors”; Ray Bradbury’s “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains”; Neil Gaiman’s *Trigger Warning*; and several others.. For novels I re-read Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*; Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, *Year of the Flood*, and *MaddAddam*. For stylistic inspiration, I re-read Ron Rash’s *Chemistry* and *Burning Bright*, as well as Raymond Carver’s collection *Where I’m Calling From*—three collections of short stories that I find particularly inspiring in their use of language and dialogue. I used these resources as inspiration and guidance when addressing both the problems of genre, themes, and style.

The purpose of magical realism is to create fictional worlds that have both elements foreign to us and elements that are relatable, in order to create a balance between the two. I find that the balance between the foreign and the relatable serves to both remove you from your reality and reinforce it; as a reader, you are called to reexamine real-world concepts from a plane

of thought that allows you to be much more open-minded and perceptive. I found several excellent examples of this in my research into the genre. For example, McCann's "Cathal's Lake" offers a fantastic balance between the violent, relatable world that Cathal lives in and the surreal nature of his labors. The only strange thing about the story is the swans; as the beginning of the story states, "It's a sad Sunday when a man has to dig another swan from the soil" (McCann 185). The magical element is presented in the midst of a sea of realistic details. The young man featured in the story dies in a riot; Cathal ruminates on the boy's existence: "...still alive in his house of burnt skin. Maybe his lung collapsed and a nurse bent over him. A young mother, her face hysterical with mascara stains... remembering a page of unfinished homework left on the kitchen table" (McCann 186). These details only serve to make the magical, his unearthing of the swans, seem even more poignant: "All of them generally shaped, sized, and white-feathered the same. The girl from the blown-up bar looking like a twin of the soldier found slumped in the front seat... And him the twin of the boy from Garvagh found drowned in a ditch" (McCann 193). Throughout my research, this same balance between the real and the magical was in every story, even if the styles or topics changed. Murakami struck the same balance in his story "UFO in Kushiro", where the strangeness of Komura's wife and their relationship contrasts against the stark normality of their life in Japan. In Neil Gaiman's "The Thing About Cassandra", Cassandra and Stuart are both seemingly normal humans that have one thing in common—they made each other up.

As a child, fantasy was my genre of choice. I was a child who did not fit in; avoiding reality was my past time of choice. Bullying was a terrible part of my life, but fantasy novels gave me the opportunity to live outside of my own world. Now, as an adult, I recognize that my love of magical realism extends from my love of fantasy. My reality is much more positive now,

but there is still ugliness in the world. Sometimes there are so many ugly things that it seems impossible to accomplish anything of value. But in my favorite stories, the impossible is commonplace. The same limitations that exist in our world do not exist in the world of magical realism. Magical realism gives me the inspiration to see my own world as someplace full of magic, even if that magic is only unlocked in writing. My hope with writing my own stories is that my readers will feel the same things I feel, and will be inspired to write, think, or feel something new because of them. I want my readers to see the real in my magic, and to focus on it, and hopefully understand their world or their relationships because of it.

The writers I identify with most are Garcia Marquez, McCann, Murakami, Gaiman, and others in the genre of speculative literary fiction. I endeavored to imitate and replicate the same precise balance of real and surreal, and I feel at least semi-successful in that regard. If I do publish these stories, and continue to publish similar stories, I hope that my work will give the reader the same feelings of confusion, excitement, and imagination—the feeling of floating, or falling, or just misunderstanding certain parts. These are the things that make reading magical realism an experience for me.

Each of the five stories in this collection gave me a particular type of challenge. The first story, “Josiah’s Bells”, is set in a dystopic future. Dystopian fiction, such as Peter Heller’s *The Dog Stars*, revolves around a future world that is undesirable, or the opposite of a utopia. What I find most interesting, personally, about apocalyptic futures is that as a reader I constantly search for connections between that world and my own. For example, in *The Dog Stars*, the world’s population is decimated by a super flu. As a reader, it is easy to connect our society’s anxieties about illnesses to the situation in the book. However, media is oversaturated with dystopias, and I found it difficult to create a dystopic future that seemed real, but also seemed genuine and not

trite. To combat this, I decided to focus on the characters. The story is told from the point of view of an orphan named Mary, who represents a more conventional or realistic human; the other primary character is Josiah, the bell keeper. I wanted to make Josiah a larger-than-life, supernatural character. In the story, he is described as physically larger and older than anyone else in the village, but to me it meant more than that. To the reader, I wanted Josiah to seem like a relic of sorts—a representation, to both the villagers and to the reader, of what they describe as the ‘Time Before’. In the same way, I wanted the ‘Time Before’ to be relatable and seem real, even if only in a vague way. And so Josiah’s strangeness—his impossible age, his size, his mission from God—is juxtaposed against the more realistic situation of Mary, the villagers, and the landscape they move through.

My second story, “Ree”, has the same elements of an apocalyptic future. However, the sense of place was a little more complicated. Because the characters move through the spirit world, as they are both technically non-living, I had to create a sort of side-along world that would coincide and contrast with the world of the living that is described throughout the story. In the story, Reapers are entities that are responsible for seeing souls safely into the afterlife. The story itself is told from the point of view of a Reaper’s apprentice; Ree, short for Reaper, is attempting to return herself to the world of the living so that she can end the cycle of death by destroying humanity. I tried to describe the feeling of loneliness and absence that the apprentice feels with realistic details; Ree’s home, in the middle of an endless field of tall grass, is part of the feeling of separation and isolation that the apprentice feels throughout the story. When the characters do interact with the world of the living, I used events more than description to place them in the scene. For each “cull”, or reaping of a soul, I wanted there to be a sense of realism in the deaths—and so I chose easily recognizable situations and events.

My third story, “What Is a Night Mommy, and Other Strange Questions”, was an exercise in pure fantasy. As I texted my mother one night, I left out a comma, leaving my message as ‘night mommy’. Afterwards, I wanted to write about the idea of a ‘night mommy’, and ponder on the questions of ‘what if a night mommy actually existed? What would she be like?’ On the same train of thought, I decided to use other unusual or odd questions in order to write a series of spur-of-the-moment ponderings, such as “Where did mermaids go?” I contrasted this with strange answers to seemingly normal questions, like “Why doesn’t Aunt Cindy visit anymore?” In this small collection, I wanted to focus on language and the power of human imagination and creativity. That was my reason for asking the questions from the point of view of a child, or, in turn, the point of view of someone explaining something to a child.

My fourth story, “Pylar’s Sunshine Chair”, revolves around the story of a newlywed couple and an old chair found in a basement. Pylar and Marsha, the couple, go about attempting to make the chair fit into their home. During the process, they begin to fight, and the unnatural chair becomes a source of dissent in their relationship. After a fight, Pylar dreams that he is scooping sunshine into a jar; when he wakes up, they paint the chair with sunshine, and all seems resolved. Pylar’s content is short-lived, as he becomes more and more jealous of the chair and Marsha’s love for it. The idea for this story was based on a poem I wrote three years ago, about a man painting a chair with sunshine that he gathered up from a windowsill. This story in particular was a challenge for me. I have difficulty writing stories from third person; four out of the five stories in this collection are written in first person. Writing externally is difficult for me, as I am more used to the internal point of view. I wanted to challenge myself and make “Pylar’s Sunshine Chair” a much more external, dialogue-based story. As I wrote, I found that writing in third person, while challenging, allowed me to be much more to-the-point and straightforward

with the action of the story. I also had a much better handle on the movements of my characters through their world.

The fifth and final story, “The Train”, is a story about a strange village in the mountains. A mysterious train comes through the village at times. One day, a strange man arrives on the train, giving a glimpse into the main character’s past. This story, as a whole, is probably the most representative of my ideal style of writing. I enjoy changing my style, but this story has all of my favorite stylistic choices rolled into one. When I write, unless I am planning on a certain style, I normally prefer to stay in first-person, depend on extensive descriptive prose, and also maintain a vague, less driven narrative. I feel most comfortable when I can meander through a story until it feels complete, using language to make beautiful pictures while also accomplishing some sort of story. I appreciate the cut-and-dry feeling of some styles of prose—for example, the style I chose for “Pylar’s Sunshine Chair”. But at my core I enjoy the task of making language beautiful, and focusing on different combinations of words and ideas, until I feel the end product is something both interesting and pleasurable to read.

It has been enlightening to look back on these pieces and look closely at my own stylistic and thematic choices. I don’t often think of style and themes when I’m writing, or at least not as deeply as I probably should. It’s exciting to look back and see the themes that have developed through these stories, and to recognize that those same themes are ones that have also been featured in stories I’ve written in the past. The primary themes of my work are death, human relationships, and loneliness. Four out these five stories, excluding “Pylar’s Sunshine Chair”, involve death, whether in a very literal form (“Ree”, “Josiah’s Bells”) or a more abstract form (“The Train”, “What is a Night Mommy? & Other Strange Questions”). In “Ree” and “Josiah’s Bells”, it’s very clear that the dystopia and apocalyptic futures resolve around the violent endings

of human lives. In “The Train” and “What is a Night Mommy? & Other Strange Questions”, the idea of death and the afterlife is addressed as something not necessarily violent or terrible, but something inevitable. Both of these personify two common ideologies I see about death; to some people, it is something to be afraid of. On the other side, it approaches death from the point of view of the ones who are left behind. To provide a more concrete example, in “Ree”, several death scenes are recounted through the eyes of the protagonist. The deaths are violent; a man dies from anaphylactic shock; another from suicide. In the neonatal ward, waiting for babies to die, Ree “circles incubators like an impatient shark” (6). In “Josiah’s Bells”, the world around Mary and Josiah is filled with violence. Villagers eat one another in the cold months; when Mary finally gets a look at the world from before, she sees the ugliness of the world: “For the first time I looked out at the earth with a clear view, and saw the great destruction that had become of it. Along the valley, not far from the village, the forest was a blackened swatch, coated with mud. Far in the distance, great buildings smoked, still burning” (7). In contrast, “The Train” has a much more vague description of death. It is only implied that the people in the village have somehow met their end. For example, the very last line of the story says: “The village is cold and empty and we are all hollow husks, waiting for something to come and take us away” (6). In “What is a Night Mommy?”, the discussion of death is very abstract, seen from the point of view of the great, theoretical Night Mommy: “She would watch her myriad children die, one by one, always replaced by others, until our fragile human brains would lose count. But a mother who can number the stars and planets would remember each and every one” (2).

The theme of loneliness is seen in all five stories. Josiah is a lonely man, who outlived his generation at the behest of God. Mary is an orphan; she has lost her parents and interacts only with Josiah. The Night Mother feels her loneliness so sharply that she “became sad, watching

each of us extinguish one by one, all across our little planet. Eventually she grew cold and distant to protect herself” (6). Pylar feels his loneliness when he finds that his wife gains more happiness from the Sunshine Chair than she does from their relationship. Ree and her apprentice feel their loneliness in their isolation from the human world. In “The Train”, the protagonist feels her loneliness in her relationship with John, and in the fact that she can only remember and cannot return to her life outside the village. I rely on the intricacy of human relationships to convey this loneliness. Even in more surreal environments, I wanted these relationships to seem real and concrete. As the characters moved through a world that might have seemed difficult to understand, I wanted them to focus on something they recognized and could relate to. As a writer, I see loneliness as a feeling of absence; someone lonely is missing something, whether it is another human, an animal, a world, an idea—the list could go on. Absence of *something*, whatever that something might be, is one of my deepest fears. As someone who has struggled with depression, seen my father board planes to war zones, and watched my mother struggle with an incurable illness, I have felt absence keenly. The absence of a loved one; the absence of well-being; the absence of self-worth. I think I write so much about loneliness because it helps me to understand my fear of these absences, and to pass on some sort of understanding on to my readers, as well.

Overall, I feel that this thesis has helped me to grow and realize my own preferences as a writer. When I wrote my thesis proposal, I had intended on writing a series of interconnected stories based around the world from “Josiah’s Bells”. As I tried again and again to start those carefully planned stories, I realized that structuring my creativity wasn’t a productive way for me to write. Instead I ended up focusing on ideas that came to me throughout the semester, or even old ideas that I had left untouched. The stories that ensued felt much more natural and organic to

me. In the same way, I had to learn about my own writing process. As I had not had the challenge of writing five stories at once before, I had to begin to create ways to balance my workload in order to maintain my creativity. Throughout my life, I have heard countless writers say, “Set time aside for writing.” They refer to certain hours of the day that they designate for just writing. While I understand the benefits, this method does not work for me, and I’ve struggled with it in the past. Instead, what helps me the most is really understanding that I need to have freedom in order to let my creativity flow. Most of my story drafts are written in one to two sittings, and I tend to only work on one thing at a time. I work quickly, or not at all. It’s important to understand your writing process, and I’m glad that at the end of this thesis, I have a better understanding of myself and my methods.

JOSIAH'S BELLS

Josiah returned three days after he'd disappeared, dragging behind him yet another of his bells. He'd twisted the rope around and around, snaking it back and forth across the dented bronze bowl, and then around his broad chest and slab like shoulders. Froth dripped from his lips; the bell, which had to weigh at least four hundred pounds, carved furrows into the earth. His breath billowed in the cold air, a wisp of soul sucking in, out, in, out. I stood on the top of the hill, watching him slog slowly upwards, fighting the weight of the bell. Down in the village, heads poked from tin shacks, half-finished mud bricks stacked high on their sides—a preparation against the oncoming winter. They looked with eager eyes to the tell-tale track on the hillside, proof that Josiah had been up to his tricks again. Before long, they'd be pawing at the door, demanding stories, advice, or his blessings.

Josiah was the village elder. Inside his scraggly, graying head were priceless memories—memories of the great Vanishing and the Earth Before. On grey winter nights, children would bundle up in old quilts and wrap their feet with scraps of cloth in order to climb the hill and listen to his stories. I often sat and listened from the kitchen, sipping bitter weed tea as he whispered about great treasures we had never seen. Devices that could communicate with people across the oceans; water that ran clear out of household taps; rivers that were full of fat, wriggling fish; summers that lasted, with clear blue skies and booming rainstorms that brought the crops to life. The summers were the best stories, I thought. They warmed my belly in a way that fire and boiling hot tea never could. When I mentioned this to Josiah, he laughed, a crackling sound, and told me that the stories were warming my *soul*.

Still, Josiah's stories did nothing to excuse his eccentricity. Once every few weeks, he would vanish with the rope and a sack of hardtack, his much-patched boots missing from beside the door. And then, a few days later, he would reappear, huffing as he struggled upwards against gravity, pulling a giant bell behind him—another for his collection. Afterwards he would lay flat-backed on the floor, limbs spread, breathe heaving like the blacksmith's bellows. Even hours later, after he had fallen into a sound sleep, I could hear the drumming of his heart, fast and loud, as if it were only a few beats away from bursting.

His breath was louder now, as he reached the top of the hill, heaving the bell at last onto the flat space in front of the cabin, coated with muck, its bowl filled with upturned earth and severed worms. He hoisted the bell upright, laying it gently, so its curved taper was pointing towards the ashy sky—what he called Heaven.

“How's the homestead?” He asked. Sweat soaked his brow and his worn shirt, the one with mismatched buttons. His strange yellow eyes gleamed in the fading sunlight. It hurt me to look him in the eyes, sometimes. I blinked the sunspots from my vision. “Fine,” I said. “The village will be glad you're back.” He laughed, and it boomed across the hillside, echoing down the valley—louder than the sound of the bell's clapper. “Tell them to let me alone, dear Mary,” he sang, his deep voice cracking. “I'm off to sleep for a year.”

~

We mark our years by winters. I've survived sixteen years of snow stacked higher than my head, wild dogs roving the mountainside, and the tight-bellied, sharp-cheeked hunger that inevitably follows, until the final layer of ice has soaked into the soil and the sun returns for a short season of bounty. I've been with Josiah for six of those years, appointed by the village after my parents died of the midwinter sickness. I remember the day they died clearly. Inside the

freezing cold shack, their bodies ran hotter than I'd ever felt, even without the blankets I'd layered on top of them to keep in the warmth. They sweated through the blankets, through their bedclothes, and threw up the meager gruel I concocted. After two weeks of hacking like sick cats, they succumbed at last to the fever, leaving me an orphan.

The townspeople burned the shack as best they could, including everything in it—even my straw dolls and the dresses my mother made me. Then they led me up the hill to Josiah's cabin, through the freshly-dug snow trench they made every few days so that he could come and go freely. Inside, Josiah, taller than anyone else and three times as wide, had studied me with his yellow eyes. The light in his fireplace bounced off them like a sharp, many-faceted stone—the kind that we children would split open by the creek side in the summer months. The fear slid up and down my spine, tiny pinpricks of sensation, until his eyes slid to someone else. “She'll do.”

From that time on, I was a resident in Josiah's cabin, as an assistant of sorts. I tended his garden in the warm months and collected firewood in the cold, piled blankets on him in the dead of the night and stoked the coals to build his fires. And every now and again, it was my task to help Josiah with the bells.

Josiah kept the bells in the backyard, all along the tall, rusty tower. It had been there for as long as anyone could remember. Metal limbs, the color of dried blood, sank deep into the ground, holding it firm against storms and snow. Every fifteen feet there was a latticework of metal, casting crisscrossed shadows along the ground when the sun was high. On this latticework lay the bells, all upright and pointed towards Josiah's Heaven. The bells were all shapes, sizes, and colors. Some were missing their clapper tongues, forever doomed to silence inside their rusty prison. Every summer Josiah polished them until they shone, blinding those who tried to look at them—a halo of metal atop the hillside, looming over the village. When asked about them,

Josiah would turn his head until his yellow eyes fixed upon you, staring, until you looked away. He was like the bells, sometimes. Too bright to look at.

~

I began cleaning the bell, the newcomer, the next morning. The muck was frozen to the bell metal, cold and hard in the dim morning light. I chipped away at it with a stick as the sun rose, digging out the worm corpses and the filth until only a thin layer of scraped, gouged mud remained, clinging to the bronzed metal beneath. Then came the hot water. I'd been boiling the bucket over the fire for hours, and heaved it over, the tips of my fingers burning through the rags I'd wrapped around my hands. The onrush of steam flooded my face, leaving it hot and flushed, strands of my hair sticking to my forehead and cheeks. But the outside and inside of the bell washed clean, and after a few rubs with a cloth, shone. The bell was lovely, pinched at the top and broad at the bottom, engraved with tiny flowers around the brim.

Josiah said they came from churches, his bells. Churches, he told me, were where people came to worship their merciful God, and the bells would ring out three times a day to mark the time. "God built this earth for us," he said. "He made it beautiful and good, full of bounty, and built it with great care. Much like the way people built these bells."

In the village, we worshipped no such God. The same God had come down for the great Vanishing, taking all his children with him in a yank of smoke and wind, leaving behind the great storms, pollution, and earth shakes for the rest of us. Josiah had told me the rivers ran black with soot and poison, killing those who came to drink, animals and humans alike. Entire cities burned themselves into shells, empty and hollow. And now we lived on, the forsaken children, as the winters grew longer and the summer days grew shorter—more and more like a fleeting wind.

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Winter came early and swept the village up in a grand sweep of dirty snow, leaving us buried in heaps of gray. On the hill, just the windows of the cabin peeked through. They were real glass, from the Time Before, and the thick panes were icy to the touch. A quick breath and a sweep of your elbow could reveal a whole world; little gray mounds where the reinforced tin shacks once were, their roofs peeking through in places like little plants in an icy garden furrow. A few foxes and the occasional bird wallowed in the snow. Behind the cabin, the bell tower stood like a great frozen monster, icicle teeth hanging from its beams, the bells all wearing little gray hats, as if to keep themselves snug.

On days like this, Josiah's deep voice would awaken in his chest, like a fire, kindled to keep off the chill. Each morning, sitting at the old wooden table, sipping bitter root tea, he would tell me about the bells. Even covered in snow, he knew them all by heart, each and every one—a lifetime of bells all stored inside his head, with names and dates. The tower, with the newcomer sitting primly on a corner, was almost full now. Only the top was empty now, waiting, Josiah said, for the most important bell of all.

“I've been looking for it for years now,” he said. A deep cough had started in his lungs the night before, and he spat red into an errant bowl before continuing. “I saw it once in a dream. I know that when I find it, I'll be through.”

“Through with what?”

“Life.”

Suddenly the weight of the quilt on my shoulders seemed suffocating. What would I do without Josiah? What would the village do? It seemed to me that Josiah was a man built to defy death. He was a man of God, but the villagers said that even God couldn't displace Josiah during the Vanishing—that he had planted his heels in the dirt like tree roots, and had resisted on

stubbornness alone. But Josiah merely smiled, his mouth red with blood. “God gave me a task,” he said, coughing. “And I’m going to finish it.”

In the Time Before, he had been a preacher, sworn to proclaim the word of the One True God for all eternity. When the Vanishing came, he raised his arms to the sky, ready to depart from this earth. But instead God placed a dream in his head, deep inside, where he could only see it in the dead of night.

“I dream of it,” he told me. “Every night, the same thing. A great bell, sitting in the wilderness, placed by God, just waiting for me to find it. And by God, I’ll find it. I’ll find it.”

~

Long months passed. The village people grew sharp through the face, angles chiseled out by the long bitterness of the winter. The village men strapped their rusted guns to their backs and went foraging, bringing back canned goods, emaciated deer, and occasionally a body of a fellow villager who had died victim on the raid. Good meat wasn’t to be wasted. Josiah wouldn’t have any of that meat up to the cabin—he would turn them away, no matter how hungry we were. But the garden had done well enough, and there was hardtack and canned tomatoes to fill our bellies over the long, dark days. Each day, over our frugal meals, Josiah would pray, his veined hands clasped tight around each of mine, yellow eyes closed, chin tilted to the sky. As if his God’s great hands were tilting his head up. That winter he seemed to shrink, though he was still as tall and broad as he’d always been. But something inside of him had grown small. He saved his strength and slept for days, as if he were a hibernating bear, holed up in its cave. When he awoke in the night, he lit tallow candles and read from his old leather book, his lips moving in silent whispers, his eyes glowing in the candlelight.

When the spring came round, he packed up the last of the hardtack and laced his boots. I was prepared for him to disappear completely, but he returned just two days later, holding a pair of leather boots the size of my feet. "Come along, Mary," he said. I laced the boots tight. "I'll need your help this time."

We wandered for days up the mountain, along the swampy earth, filled with sucking mud fed by the melted snow. It pulled at our feet. If you stayed still, Josiah cautioned, it would suck you down completely. "The Devil's hands, Mary." He told me this, his voice grave, his hand over mine. "Don't let him stop us." We sidestepped the patches of mud and earth slides that came with it, trees and debris thundering down at high speeds, sometimes missing us just by a few feet. They'd hurtle off the side of the mountain, slapping more trees as they fell, cracking thick limbs like they were nothing. In the distance, the great outlines of the mountains were bare and naked. The trees that had made it through the winter were like lone soldiers, peeking over the crags. We climbed higher and higher, until we reached the very top of our mountain. For the first time I looked out at the earth with a clear view, and saw the great destruction that had become of it. Along the valley, not far from the village, the forest was a blackened swatch, coated with mud. Far in the distance, great buildings smoked, still burning.

"It's the same everywhere," Josiah said. "The earth is dying. The people in the village will die soon, and so will you. The magic of this earth is gone." I felt the kindling fire in my chest, what Josiah called my soul, fizzle down into a candle flame. Bright enough to lead my own way, but no one else's.

We traveled for what seemed like weeks. Up and down the mountains, eating hardtack and spare game when we could. Josiah was now shrinking on the inside and the out, his body visibly failing. His cough racked his chest through the nights and days, echoing off of still,

lifeless mountain tops. We huddled for warmth in the chilled nights, his cold body eating my warmth, leaving me shivering. At last we came upon it, couched high in a mountain top, amidst the wreckage of an old brick building.

The bell was massive, the biggest I'd ever seen. It gleamed even without polish, unscathed by rust, as bright and yellow as Josiah's crazed eyes. Together we roped it. This time the ropes went around both his chest and mine. It seemed Josiah's strength hadn't failed after all. He heaved the bell along, down the mountain. Each night we slept inside of its huge bowl, our bodies sore and torn from the straining of the ropes. The metal was always warm to the touch, as if the sun had given it a piece of its own warmth to hold inside. When Josiah slept inside, his breath came smoothly in and out of his chest, and his heart beat slowly, at an even pace.

The great weight of the bell seemed inconsequential to the two of us as we dragged it, on and on, up and down the mountain sides. Before long we crested a mountaintop and saw again the smoking husks of buildings, the black swaths of forests, and the village, far below. The tower was a pillar of reflective metal, the bells bouncing light back along, like a beacon. As we dragged the bell closer, the tongue clapped of its own accord, a deep clank that echoed down the mountain and across the valley, far too loud. But still we dragged it on, my ears ringing from the sound. Josiah was laughing now, without words—just a deep, booming laugh. It called the villagers from their shacks, what was left of them, and they gaped as we dragged past, the bell bigger than the two of us, yet moving smoothly across the ground. Josiah and his orphan keeper, bringing God's bell back to sing its final song.

PYLAR'S SUNSHINE CHAIR

Pylar found the chair deep in his parents' basement, hidden behind an old chest of drawers. The chair itself was draped with quilts and dust, but it looked solid enough. Its four legs were rough-hewn and square, and once he'd dragged it into the dim fluorescent light, he could see its color. It was a truly hideous shade of green. He sat, and found that a few legs wobbled. But Pylar was newly married, and Marsha needed kitchen chairs, so he loaded it into the back of his hatchback and took it home.

Once home, Marsha placed it in the middle of the kitchen, then the dining room. All of their chairs were mismatched, but Marsha had managed to make each one fit somehow. This one, however, she didn't know what to do with. It was *so* green, she said. Pylar agreed. For a few days they made a joke out of it. Every time they passed the chair, they'd make some new comparison, each one wilder than the last.

"Moss green," Marsha would say, as she folded the laundry.

"Swamp monster green," he'd reply.

"The color of rotted Astroturf."

"The color of your mother's green bean casserole."

"The color of a 'Nam vet's gangrene."

"Ooh, too far."

When the weekend rolled around, both agreed that the green needed to go. So they put on their house work clothes and headed down to the local hardware store. There, they picked up sandpaper, paint, and a paint scraper.

“It’ll be prettier if we strip it down first,” Marsha insisted. “I saw it on TV.” Their house was filled with a great many things that Marsha had seen on TV, from the “edgy” DIY paper lanterns to the “rustic” mason-jar light fixtures in their bathroom. But Pylar humored her anyways, because he loved to watch Marsha turn junk into slightly improved junk. Her face would scrunch up and she would get paint or glue all over her hands. When she realized, she would curse loudly, and try to scrub it off. Once, she kept touching things and getting stuck to them. He’d laughed until his ribs ached. She decided to stick herself to him. They ended up making love on the floor, laughing as inanimate objects clung to their joined hands.

Now, at the hardware store, he just nods and lets her buy the paint scraper. At home, Marsha sets up her workspace. A set of disgusting puce sheets (a wedding gift from Marsha’s aunt) are sacrificed to the floor. She spreads them neatly, then places the chair in dead center, as if it is under some sort of spotlight. As a sort of farewell for the chair’s current identity, they recite their favorite descriptions of it.

“I think my favorite was the gangrene,” she says. “Even if it was a bit too far.”

“I don’t know. I’m fond of ‘duck shit pond scum’.”

She laughs, and then they begin. First they douse the chair liberally with paint stripper, carefully painting the caustic chemicals up and down its squared off legs and slightly rounded seat. Then they wait a few moments as it eats through the layers of paint. After a few minutes they rush about, opening the windows to let the lung-burning stink dissipate. After that is unsuccessful, they spend ten minutes searching for their only box fan and two bandanas. Finally, looking like cartoon bandits with bandanas tied tight around their noses, they begin to strip the paint.

The chemicals, while lung-scorching, are effective. The paint oozes off, building up in layers of green and white and brown until all the colors run together to form a river-pollution rainbow. He shows his glorified metal spatula to Marsha, and she wrinkles her nose. “Ew.” It seems like the chair has endured enough layers of paint over its years of existence to smother it. After they scrape three different colors off, Marsha wipes the sleeve of her shirt across her forehead and swears.

“Jesus! How many times has this chair been painted?!”

“I don’t know,” Pylar replies. “I don’t ever remember seeing it. I think it’s been in the basement since before mom and dad bought the house.”

Marsha crosses her arms over her bright blue t-shirt, which bears the logo of her elementary school. The same shirt has been with her since she was nine years old and the shirt was three sizes too big. At thirty, the cartoonish pirate stretches across her breasts. When she raises her arms to stretch, Pylar can spot the rip in the left arm pit’s seam, and the dark pin-prick hairs that peek through it. Somewhere in his mother-in-law’s house, there is a photo album that has one picture of nine-year-old Marsha wearing it as a dress. In the picture, the newness of the cotton causes it to hang straight and boxy. Now, after hundreds of rounds with the laundry machine, the material has no more shape or resistance. Pylar’s eyes move up from Marsha’s shirt to her mouth, where she has twisted her lips into a quirked line.

“See something you like?” She says, raising only one of her sharp thin eyebrows.

He blushes, even now, after three years of being with her. Her hand sneaks downwards towards his butt, which is numb from sitting cross-legged, and gives it a squeeze. He jumps out of habit. She winks.

“Alright, Pylar,” she says, and winks again. “No getting distracted.”

After a few minutes of giggling, they continue. They scrape four more layers of paint off (pink, eggshell blue, vomit-colored, and off-white) before they admit defeat. “We’ll finish up tomorrow,” Marsha says.

Her brown curls are sticking to her forehead, Pylar’s forearms are burning, and the puce sheets have successfully been ruined. They leave the chair sitting in the middle of the room, a mucky, speckled thing, surrounded by piles of stripped paint goop. The next day, Sunday, they wake up with sore backs and arms, and complain over breakfast.

“I swear my ass almost fell off, it was so numb,” Pylar says. He is making pancakes. At the table, Marsha’s curls are tied back in a moplike flop on top of her head. “Tell me about it.”

As they eat their pancakes, sitting in mismatched chairs, they discuss The Chair. They agree that it is now officially “The Chair”, with capital letters. It is a proper noun. They agree to scrape off two more layers and then, if The Chair is not satisfactorily wood-colored, to call it quits. After two more layers, however, The Chair is vomit-colored (again). “Again?!” Marsha yells, throwing her scraper across the room. “How did this poor chair get painted two different shades of vomit?”

They scrape off the vomit layer after negotiating a truce. “If the next layer is vomit colored, I vote we just sand it and paint it.” Pylar says. “Fine,” Marsha says. “You can live with knowing that you allowed The Chair to be covered in vomit colored paint for an eternity.”

It turns out, however, that it is the last layer. Underneath, they reveal unstained oak. Pylar breathes a sigh of relief. The sight of the wood, plain and natural after so many chunky layers of color, is surprisingly refreshing. Bit by bit, they strip away the paint, until the chair sits, almost pristine, in all of its natural wood glory. They sand it smooth, then step back to look at it.

Now that all the paint is gone, The Chair looks almost naked—vulnerable in its most pure state. Without the distraction of the color, Pylar can begin to appreciate its clean lines and sharp angles. He can imagine some handy man nailing it together, stepping back in pride after to admire it. He can imagine it, most importantly of all, sitting at their dining room table. He kneels down to open the can of stain, so that they can finish the project, but Marsha stops him.

“I don’t want to stain it,” she says.

“What?” He replies, incredulous.

“I think I want to paint it.”

“Are you serious? Marsha, really? We just spent hours of our lives scraping paint off of this thing and you want to put more on it?”

“I don’t know. I just think it needs a really... *special* color, if you know what I mean.”

Pylar doesn’t. But he doesn’t open the stain; they resolve to take the stain back the next weekend and exchange it for the paint. Until then, they tuck the chair under the table next to the rest of their dining room chairs. When the weekend rolls back around, they pull it back to the center of the hideous puce sheet and stare at it.

“What color, do you think?” Marsha asks. “Blue?”

“No, no blue. We already have a blue chair.”

“Pink, then?”

“No, not that, either. Anything but blue or pink.” He pauses. “Or green.”

She laughs at that. “No, no more green. I think the poor chair has had enough of green.”

Still laughing, they set off for the store. There, they peruse the paint for a full hour, picking up paint chips, then putting them down again. Finally Marsha settles on an orangey-

yellow. The paint chip describes it as “sunset orange”. “I don’t know if it’s quite right,” she says, as they watch the paint being mixed. “But it’s a start.” They go home and set the paint next to the chair, still covered.

“Do you want to paint it now?” Pylar asks.

“No,” she says.

Marsha shifts back and forth on her feet, he notices. The chair is special now. It is a couples’ project. Maybe, he thinks, she doesn’t want it to be over yet. So instead of painting the chair, they cook dinner and watch TV.

During their meal, Marsha’s eyes keep trailing back over to the chair. “I don’t know about that color,” she says, more than once. “I just don’t know. I don’t know what color that chair should be. But I feel like it should be a special color.”

Pylar doesn’t think much of it. Marsha gets attached to things easily, and he is attached to Marsha. “The chair can wait,” he replies, rubbing his hands up and down her back. “We’ll find a perfect color for it, I know.” But they don’t. They try orange, yellow, and black. Red, purple, and gray are next—all different shades. The people at the hardware store recognize them by sight.

“Here to pick up another shade?” They laugh. “It must be some chair!”

Marsha and Pylar smile back, but at home, the chair is beginning to cause tension. Now, when they reject another shade of paint, they do not laugh. Instead they sit in silence. That night, after they paint the chair a shade of maroon, Marsha throws her paint brush across the room, sending a bright splatter across their living room wall.

“I can’t take it anymore!” She yells. Pylar sits in silence. The cat’s tail vanishes underneath the couch; he wishes he could do the same. “Marsha, it’s just a chair. It doesn’t have to be perfect.”

He feels wretched. Inside his body his stomach clenches up. His muscles tense and coil. They are newlyweds, he thinks, and newlyweds should not fight like this. But Marsha is spoiling for a fight. She picks up the chair and throws it down, knocking the back left leg loose, and then turns on Pylar.

“Why did you even bring me this stupid chair?”

He cannot answer. His tongue feels thick and clumsy in his mouth, like it is not his own tongue, but the tongue of a stranger. “Well? Answer me!” He cannot.

Marsha goes to bed and he stays up late into the night, cleaning the paint off of the wall and soothing the traumatized cat. At last, he turns to the chair, still sideways in the middle of the room. He stands it up again, and its back left leg sags outwards, leaving it lopsided. Sleep tugs at his eyelids, but the sight of the chair, off-balance and alone in the middle of the room, makes his heart hurt. He heads out to the garage to fetch a hammer and nails, and carefully, quietly, he sets the leg straight, until the chair can stand without wobbling. He sits it back in the center of the room and makes up his bed on the couch. It wasn't discussed, but he knows in his gut that Marsha does not want him in their bed tonight.

The couch is a gift from Marsha's parents, and it is the type of couch that is well suited for an afternoon nap, but not a restful sleep. Still, Pylar drifts off, sad and alone.

He dreams he is in a room filled with light. Sunshine spills through multiple windows onto the floor, latticed with thin shadows from their frames. If he had to describe it, he thinks, he would call it being inside a summer day. Not witness to it, but inside of it. The light drips off of the windowsills and moves, liquid, across the floor. For a while he stares at it, just watching it move as the sun sets outside of the windows, feeling it warm him where it oozes along his body.

The light disappears slowly, as the sun sets further and further. The room becomes colder and emptier, and he finds himself following the sunshine, curling up in the last of it like a cat as the darkness creeps in. A strange feeling of foreboding fills him when the shadows graze him, some nameless terror. The childhood dread of spankings, the harsh freezing pain of loneliness, and the breathless terror of being chased by something or someone larger than you, all rolled into one. It makes him shiver, even in the last few minutes of sun. Soon, it becomes apparent that the shadows are going to catch him.

“How will I keep the light?” He asks himself.

The answer comes to him as natural as air. He will scoop it up and keep it somewhere. He finds now that his right hand is holding a jar, and his left a lid. He scoops the last patches of sunlight into the jar with his hands, catching the last of the drips off of the windowsill, until it is full to the brim. He screws the cap on tight and holds it close to his chest as the darkness closes in. Even when it swallows him whole, the light in the jar keeps him warm with a kind of happiness he has never felt before.

He wakes to the spilling of sunshine through the drawn curtains, hazy from the fabric, but still bright enough to draw him from sleep. He looks down at his hands, but they are empty. In his mind he can still see the strange jar of liquid, and he remembers vividly the texture of it on his hands. But he is awake now. In the kitchen, Marsha is making eggs, her mouth still twisted into a frown, but her body posture loose and easy. He joins her at the table and they eat.

“I’m sorry for yelling last night,” she says. “It’s that chair. It’s so frustrating. I just have this feeling that it could be something special, if only we had the finishing touch.” “It’s alright,” he says. His dream has left him feeling strangely refreshed and optimistic. “We’ll try the next can and if it isn’t perfect, we’ll call it quits.”

They finish their eggs in silence. The last can of paint sits, unopened, next to the chair. “I guess this is it,” Marsha says. She fetches the screwdriver to pry it open. The metal lid flips loose and inside, the liquid is milky gold.

“What?” She says. “This isn’t the color we bought.” Pylar swirls his finger in the color. It feels light. When he draws his finger back out, it is clean and smooth, with no paint on it.

“Maybe they made a mistake. Should we take it back?”

“No. No, Marsha. Let’s paint the chair.”

At first he worries that the sunshine won’t stick to the brushes. But it transfers easily. It slaps over the maroon paint with no trouble. Each stroke down is a stripe of liquid light. When it hits the wood, the color goes as bright a yellow as Pylar has ever seen. He’s a little disappointed that it doesn’t look as metallic and milky as it did in his jar. But it still shines bright. Marsha is rubbing her eyes. “What is this paint?” She asks. “It’s hard to look at.”

“When you’re sitting in it, you don’t have to look at it.”

“I guess that’s true.”

After twenty minutes, their eyes are full of sun spots and the chair is completed. A touch to its smooth surface reveals that it is already dry. They step back to look. From a distance, it looks like a normal, albeit bright, chair.

“What was that paint?” Marsha asks. “Pylar. I know you know.”

“I do know.” He says. “But first, go sit.”

Marsha settles down onto the seat gently, as if the chair is dangerous. As soon as she sits, her face takes on a dopey, blissful look. Pylar suddenly feels a surge of jealousy. She has never looked at *him* like that.

“What is it like?” He asks.

“It’s perfect,” she sighs. “Everything about it is perfect. Oh, I knew this chair was special. It just needed the right touch.”

Just like that, Pylar can see the light draining away from the chair. He’s sure Marsha still feels and sees its light, but inside his stomach is the dark feeling from his dream.

Later, after Marsha has finally left the chair, he sits down in it, just to see if he can recapture his feeling of happiness and safety he remembers from his dream. But there is no relief. There is no more light in the chair for him. He sits in the middle of the room and feels the mounting dread; in the corners, he can see the shadows closing in. There will be no more light for him, now.

That night as Marsha sleeps he takes the chair out into the backyard and breaks its legs off, one by one. In the morning, Marsha will find its ruins in the backyard, merely ashes after the fire. She will cry on the ashes and Pylar will stand over her. The destroyed chair will offer no comfort to either of them, now.

REE

As always, I arrive at the location and find myself alone. I tuck myself back into a dingy corner, watching the people of New York City pass by, a blur of colors and shapes. I'm between two buildings, and down the street, a food truck is cluttering the area just off the sidewalk. Ree is nowhere to be seen.

I wait ten minutes before she appears, a Styrofoam cup of coffee in her hands. The clock across the street chimes noon. Her unnaturally blue eyes are covered by bug-eyed sunglasses; she slides them up as she reaches me, eyes squinting in the daylight.

"I hope I didn't miss the party," she says. She hands her coffee over to me, then fishes out a cigarette and a lighter.

"No," I reply. Down the street, a man who has just swallowed a bite of churro begins to cough.

"Ah," she says, taking a drag of her cigarette. Her smile is manic as she blows smoke into my face. "I was almost late!" She takes off down the sidewalk, drawing her blade out of her coat. In her ratty jeans and sneakers, she fits right into the crowd of the Living.

She likes to pretend sometimes that she doesn't already know exactly when and where things will happen, that her knowledge of death is somehow fallible. But in the end, like a well-oiled machine, Ree is always just on time.

I lean back and wait for it all to be over. The building behind me is solid. I place my hands on it, but the grit doesn't quite reach my palms. I've discovered that part of being dead is a constant separation from the living world, as if someone's coated everything in invisible saran wrap. In contrast, Ree interacts easily with the world of the Living. She drinks their coffee and

smokes their cigarettes, a master of the binary. Not alive, not dead—just a Reaper, the shepherd of souls.

I stare at the sidewalk, sprinkled with flattened gum, holding Ree's coffee. Down the street, beside the food truck, people are crowding around the coughing man. I can hear their screams.

“Call an ambulance!”

“Give him some space!”

They throng around his body, panicked—incensed by the sight of death. In contrast, Ree circles them like a vulture, her face still and solemn. Every now and again she takes another puff of her cigarette. Beyond her I can see the skyline, stretching out for miles, gray and tall. I wait another ten minutes, watching the action. An ambulance arrives, but is held back by the crowd. When the man finally breathes his last, Ree parts the crowd easily to stand by his side. She waits until he stills.

A few minutes later she is back by my side, snatching her cold coffee from my hand. She takes one sip, then gags. “Bleh, cold.” She glares at the man beside her. “You took too long.” Beside her, the man's spirit is standing, looking confused. “What do you mean?”

She sighs. “Never mind. Now, this won't hurt a bit.” She places her coffee on the ground and her cigarette in her mouth, freeing up both of her hands. She feels around inside her coat until she pulls out her knife. It glints in the sunlight. “Now, you going to go quietly?”

The man holds both his hands up in front of him, a useless gesture, meant to pacify. “Look, lady. I got kids. I'm not going anywhere. Where am I?”

It looks like he's going to resist, so I walk away to the corner. I don't like it when they resist. It's never pretty. Just before I turn the corner, I see the flash of sunlight on Ree's knife.

The next street is lined with bright little shops, each filled with people, living their lives, ignorant to the fact that a street away, a man met his end. The ambulance trundles around the corner, no doubt on route to the next tragedy.

A few minutes later, Ree turns the corner, holstering her knife. I can see the silver glow from her jacket pocket, where the man's soul rests neatly, ready for the afterlife. She spits on the ground, then throws down her cigarette, grinding it into the pavement.

"People are cockroaches," she says. With the knife holstered, she looks like any other girl. When she's not busy being ageless and all-knowing, she could be a normal twenty-something in her bug-eyed sunglasses and dirty sneakers.

"What was it?" I ask as we begin to walk down the street. Ree likes to walk. I guess when you can be anywhere in the world in a blink of an eye, walking becomes a luxury. I wonder, not for the first time, what Ree was like when she was human. "What was what?" She asks. She's lit another cigarette, and she turns to me, blowing a neat smoke ring directly into my face.

"You know."

"No, I don't."

"Fine. What killed him?"

She smiles. "Peanut oil."

"Peanut oil?"

"Yep. Peanut oil. They use it to fry their churros. Which are delicious, by the way."

"I bet they are. Doesn't change the fact that I can't eat them."

She looks at me. Behind the reflective surface I can just make out her eyes, squinting. Sometimes Ree looks young, and sometimes she looks old, and right now I can see the wrinkles

carved into her cheeks. Then she smiles, and her face is smooth again. Just another mid-twenties girl on the streets of New York. She nudges my stomach with her elbow.

“Cheer up, kid. You’ll get your chance.”

We continue down the street. All I can think of now is how a marvel of veins and nerves, all the vigor of life, can be brought down to a heap of decay on a dirty sidewalk—all because of peanut oil.

~

I’ve forgotten a lot of things. My life and death being two of them. But I do remember joining the afterlife. I was below water, looking up at the surface, when I saw the soles of her feet, standing flat on the water. As I swam upwards, she blocked out the sun, leaving me in shadow. And when I broke the surface of the water, gasping for air that I no longer needed to survive, I observed that the water was licking over her toes, but when it receded, they seemed dry. I know now that the ocean, earth’s womb, a birthplace for all life, cannot touch Death.

She offered me her arm and pulled me out of the sea like I weighed nothing, and kept me for her own. I don’t know why, even now, after who knows how long. She hacked my soul out, as per routine, but instead of placing it in her pocket and carrying it along to the underworld, she shut it into a locket. She wears it around her neck now, and I follow wherever she goes, tugged at the roots.

I say “who knows how long”, and I mean it. What everyone should know is that the world of the dead has no scale of measurement for the passage of time. The living measure it out, counting every year, month, day, hour, minute, second, millisecond—anything for a little more time to be alive. But when you die, everything that once mattered becomes inconsequential. If you’re lucky, you move right along down the river, placed into the water by one of the Reapers.

Ree tells me that they float along, waiting for Life to pick them out again. If you're unlucky, one of the Reapers decides to train you to be an apprentice, and you travel along with them as they do their business, and sit idly when they don't.

Today we're sitting in her kitchen, eating grilled cheese sandwiches. Ree's house is in the middle of some existential nowhere between worlds. Outside of her kitchen windows, fields of grass seem to go on forever. When it storms, the wind blows the grass until the window looks like a framed picture of a restless sea. There are no trees, except for the one that sits in the gated garden, its limbs peeking out over twenty-foot stone walls. I've never seen her open it.

"How long have I been here, exactly?" I ask. The grilled cheese is hot and melty, but I can't quite taste the flavor of cheese or the richness of the butter.

"I don't know, man." She licks her greasy fingers. "I don't think about that kind of stuff."

I've been asking her the same questions for what could be years. The sun goes up and down, and time passes, somehow, even in this slow, easy place. All I know is that each time we visit the world of the living, it is a little glossier, a little less real. More layers of invisible saran wrap between me and their world.

~

Our next cull is at a hospital. We spend so much time in them that they have all begun to look the same. White walls, a faint whiff of antiseptic, and so many dying that Ree's pockets are bulging with souls when we leave. Inside a sterile room, doctors swarm over a patient like ants on an abandoned sweet. The air tastes stale and recycled, and the scent of disinfectant makes everything bitter. The man is bleeding out—I don't need Ree's supernatural knowledge to know that. A twisted piece of car is protruding from the man's leg, not far from an artery. It only takes a few more moments before he's standing beside us, his palms pressed to the glass. Like all

recently deceased, the man is whole and healthy in death, though the coldness of the afterlife has already leeched some of the color from his skin. His leg is firm and whole underneath him.

“That’s me in there, isn’t it?” He asks. His voice is steady, I think, for someone who’s just bled to death.

“Sure is.”

Ree’s got her knife in one hand and a coffee in the other. Her sunglasses are pushed back into her hair, reflecting the yellow fluorescent lights. The man’s eyes are lingering on the knife.

“You’re toast, friend,” she says. Her mouth is smiling but her eyes are like chips of ice.

“I know this hospital,” he says. “I worked here for years. My wife gave birth here last month, just a few doors down.”

Ree’s smile evaporates. She sinks the polished stone of her blade into his chest, moving as quickly as the flash of light on the blade. The man makes a noise, a quiet sound of despair, before his soul comes free. Ree puts it in her pocket, safe for the return trip.

“Well, that was unpleasant,” I say.

She sneers. “Everything’s unpleasant here.”

I can’t argue. We head three floors up, where the sign outside of the elevator points us right, to the maternity ward. Ree’s shoulders are twitching. Death is inevitable, even in this place where souls pour into new bodies every day, screaming into the world. She is uncomfortable here, out of place. I think there is nothing Ree hates more than the ease of new life. A fresh soul, nestled into its tender new form, can make her shudder. I’ve seen her cull children before, of course, but newborns are different. In this place she circles incubators like an impatient shark, sipping her coffee and twirling her knife, waiting for tiny chests to still, for tiny lungs to expand just one last time. The flurry of nurses moving around us make it worse; the wails or laughs of

parents ring through the corridors. Finally her target stops struggling. All babies look the same, for the most part. The tiny pink cap on the baby's head means it is a little girl.

Ree doesn't make small talk. She never does on these kinds of trips. She has to hand over her coffee to get the proper leverage with her knife. Freshly reincarnated souls, she has explained, are always reluctant to go. They ooze away from her grip. When her work is done, she slides the soft glowing liquid from her hands into a small bag. I never see what she does with them. Ree tells me that all of them are sent to the afterlife. "They'll all get chance to live again," she says, and her voice burns like acid. I cannot help but think of my soul, which hangs heavy on her chest. If she were to release it, would I, too, be born again?

~

That night, she cooks with violence, slamming cabinets and banging pans down on her little stove. Outside, a storm is raging. Every time a crack of lighting illuminates the sky, I can see the garden trees silhouetted against the temporary blinding light, their twisted limbs reaching up as if to grab the night and make it their own. Over dinner, we have wine and Ree tells me about her plan to end the world.

"If there are no more humans, no more stubborn meat shells for souls to return to, it'll all stop."

I sip my wine. "Will it, though?"

"Yes. I'm sure of it. It has to stop somehow."

"How will you get back? You can't exactly change the living world from here, can you?"

"No. But I have a plan for that, too."

Her fingers twirl my soul, safe in its locket. My stomach turns. Ree has told me more than once about the agony of immortality. I don't want to know what kinds of plans she has for me.

“Why can't you just leave?”

“I can't just leave.”

“Why not?”

“It doesn't work that way, idiot. The balance is very complicated. There's a lot involved with this sort of thing.”

I can't help but notice that she is now staring out the window, where the trees are locked safely inside the garden. She watches them for a long time, long enough that I go back to my room to rest. Tonight I think I have received my clearest answer yet.

~

We meet another Reaper on our next cull. Maybe there was a scheduling mishap, I think. Despite seeing thousands of culls, I'm still not entirely sure how the process works.

It actually isn't even hard to pick him out. His eyes were following me as I moved. Normally the living look straight through me, like I am smoke. I float through them, and they avoid me subconsciously, moving their shoulders away and shivering when their limbs brush mine in a crowd. Even if I could, I don't actually want to touch them. I dread the thought of having a polished dagger of my own.

He approaches me. We're on a bridge, and below, Ree is standing on top of the water, fishing out a man who had jumped just moments before. A girl on a bike had tried to stop him, but he jumped anyways. The girl has now set her bike down to cry on the concrete. Overhead, the sun is blinding. It feels almost warm on my shoulders.

The crowd parts easily before him. Death, especially tragic death, attracts humans like flies to garbage. They group around it, frightened by their own mortality, but grounded in their own vitality. When they whisper “How sad”, their mind is really repeating “*Not me, not me, not me.*” The flash of the knife under his coat is the final clue. He moves to stand right beside me, directly in my space.

“Who are you?” I ask.

“Just a spectator,” he replies.

I have always known that there are others. Logically, Ree cannot be everywhere at once. She cannot cull every soul. But seeing this normal looking man, tall and thin, with a nose as jagged as broken glass, unsettles me somehow. He pats me on the shoulder. “It’s been a while,” he says. His eyes are fixed on the water, where Ree is talking to the recently deceased. He seems to be in denial that he has actually died. “Since you’ve seen Ree?” I ask. “She seems pretty intent on avoiding everyone.” He gives me a strange look, then narrows his eyes. “I understand now. She’s keeping it close, isn’t she? Crazy bitch. She’s always been like that. Can never let anything go.”

I nod, feeling uncomfortable. We stand in awkward silence until Ree reappears. When she sees the man, her easy smile grows cold and sharp. “What’s up, man?” she asks. Her easy greeting is tense and sharp.

“Nothing much,” he says. I get the feeling that he is laughing at the both of us. “Just wanted to check out the new meat. Bit of a blast from the past, isn’t it?”

“It’s none of your business,” she hisses. “Now leave.”

The man holds his hands up in front of him, smiling. “You’re a sick bitch, you know,” he says. Together we watch him walk away, disappearing into the crowd of police and bystanders. As soon as he’s gone, Ree turns her sharp smile on me.

“What did he say to you?” She asks.

“Nothing much,” I reply. “Something about not seeing you in a long time. How was the cull?”

She spits on the ground. “He was an idiot. He was convinced that he would hit the suicide nets. He was actually surprised that he was dead.”

I look over the side of the bridge, where the nets spiderweb across the open air. An antidote for a city’s guilty conscience, I suppose.

“It’s funny,” I say.

“What?” She asks. She’s still preoccupied with our strange visitor.

“The nests weren’t there when I jumped.”

She opens her mouth, then closes it. “No,” she says softly. “No, they weren’t.”

I will tell you that even though death is scary, it is also refreshing. Like being washed clean. Being safe and new. Even though I was underneath the water, there was no crushing fear of the darkness below me. Once you pass through, everything seems blurred around the edges. Everything is soft and clean.

I wasn’t afraid of Ree when I saw her. I didn’t feel the fear until she took my soul and locked it up. Then the fear came and swallowed me whole.

~

It is only a little while longer before Ree’s plan begins to come together. It starts with an errand.

“I want an apple,” she says. We are sitting on separate couches in her living room, bathing in the light of the setting sun.

“An apple?” I ask. “You mean from the orchard?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

“Make sure to go to the tree in the middle, though.” She says.

Her voice is muffled by the couch cushions and softened by sleepiness. She has removed her sunglasses in order to better acquaint her face with the damask pillows. Only a single sliver of a bright blue eye is visible, and it is trained on me.

I do as she asks. As I open the back door, the last light of the sun catches the thick chain of her necklace. Deep between the cushions, underneath her body, I can see the faint glow of my soul.

Outside, a storm is brewing. As the sun sinks below the horizon, clouds are amassing in the east, moving swiftly down across the grass plains. The wind stirs my hair. The garden is still padlocked shut, but the gate opens as soon as I touch it. Beyond the gate the ground is overgrown, thorny bushes low between the crush of trees. The twisted limbs interlace over my head, cutting off my view of the sky. The fruit that grows on them looks twisted and strange—a surrealist painting of an apple, perhaps, or a child’s nightmare. In the sickly storm light, all of the greenery is a strange shade of gray. As I walk, my feet dig into the earth, as if my body is too heavy for it to support.

The tree in the very center is gnarled and tall. Its roots have serpentine twists. From a distance, the two gaping holes in its trunk turn into eyes, giving the tree the appearance of a giant, curled snake. The apples that gleam in this tree’s branches are a sharp contrast to the fruit

on the rest of the trees. Each are an unrealistically flawless, perfect in the size, shape, and redness. The ideal example of an apple.

Still, if it is an apple Ree wants, it will be an apple she gets. I reach into one of the tree's low-hanging branches and pluck one easily. It fits into the curves of my palm as if it was meant to be there, as red as bright new blood. Perhaps I will eat an apple myself before I take one back to Ree, I think. After all, they are so perfect.

My thoughts of Ree are thrown aside as my teeth sink into its flesh. The first bite is sweet. Even the juice that runs down my face feels good, refreshing and warm against the cool drops of rain that have now begun to fall. The second bite catches in my throat, where the flesh lodges, choking me. I fall to the ground. Above me, the serpent-tree unwinds itself. In its hollow, black-hole eyes there is a sense of pleasure. The two pits stare me down as I lose consciousness.

~

What is good and what is evil? With the flesh of the apple comes all of my soul's memories, from the very first moment my polished knife was placed in my hands. I recognize it even before the memories hit, though, because it is the exact same knife that Ree carries, right down the engravings on the hilt. It was mine first, you see. I am so old that for thousands of years I did not even know what it meant to be human. I was on the face of the earth before Noah, before the flood. I am one of Death's oldest, placed when the knowledge of death had only begun, after Eden and all that nonsense with the original apple.

For thousands of years I culled souls. The drowned, the sick, the maimed, the slaughtered. Women, men, children. It took a long time for me to become tired of death, but not long to find myself an apprentice, like so many others. I found her in a girl with messy hair and ice chip eyes. Her soul fit neatly in my pocket, and it stayed there as I kept her by side, cull by

cull, teaching her my trade for a hundred years. And finally, when it all become too much, I sent her into my own garden to the tree, so that she could know good and evil and serve Death with it. I let her sink her teeth into that responsibility and released my own; I took her soul for my own so that I could push into the afterlife. In that world my soul oozed into a wrinkled red newborn child and I experienced life for the very first time.

After the remembering, I sit in the storm at the base of the tree. In between the feelings of bitterness and anger, I feel a grudging respect, to know that Ree has planned this so well. I picked her because she was strong, violent and clever—all things that I thought would be necessary for the job. It seems, however, that she was a little too good at it.

At the bottom of the hill, Ree is waiting for me, her hand clenched around the locket, the light of my previous soul, her own, spilling between her fingers.

“It took me a long time to find you,” she says. “To get this back.”

She brandishes the light at me, her fingers tight around it.

“I didn’t want you to get it back at all,” I reply.

I don’t feel bad about it. After being around for so long, you don’t feel bad about much of anything. She was my opportunity to live and I took it, like so many other Reapers, anxious to escape my fate. But she’s won fair and square.

I know why she wants to go back. All of her crazy plans are coming back to light. She wants to end the world, so that Death will be out of business. A foolish thought. Still, I think, it could be interesting. I toss her soul gently into the afterlife, and she fades away to nothingness, leaving me alone in the garden. Perhaps she will succeed, and perhaps she will not. She might not be reborn for another hundred years, or a thousand. The Afterlife is basically a giant gamble. It will be interesting to see.

The first cull is a hunting accident gone wrong. A man is pierced through the eye by an arrow; beside me, he argues, trying to buy himself more time. When he turns to look at his own body, I slide my knife into his spine and rip his soul out from behind. For all of her savagery, Ree is a gentle lamb compared to me. I slide his soul into my pocket and think, briefly, of training a new apprentice. It's tempting. In the end, I decide to wait.

~

For another three hundred years I am the best in the business. I search every face, male or female, for her unique blue eyes. I will recognize her soul if I find it, of course. It is partially my own soul, after all. I will never forget the way it smells, or feels, or tastes. It has a specific brilliance, a light that seems sharp around the edges. It smells of coffee and cigarettes.

When I do finally find her, it is in a cracked and blackened field. Over the past two hundred years I have watched the earth deteriorate, bit by bit, but this seems extreme. Shadows are burned into the concrete, and the air is thick with radiation.

She's died in the middle of a desert. Her irradiated corpse's eyes stare upwards, their bright blue clouded by ash, staring lifelessly up at the polluted sky. Her soul is standing beside it, waiting. When she sees me, her eyes grow wide.

"Long time no see," I say.

She puts her hands protectively over her chest, as if she could stop me somehow.

"There's no point in taking me," she says. "I've put an end to it. There's no way they've survived this."

"I'll take my chances."

I hack out her soul, then leave her there, holding my knife, swearing at the sky. If there's any life on this planet, I hope I will find it, squirm myself into it, just to prove her wrong. Maybe

she has ended it, and I will never taste life again. It wouldn't be bad. It would free all of us, slaves to the cycle of life and death. But the vicious, vengeful side of myself wishes for a new body, and for the cycle to continue.

I float on the surface of the afterlife, waiting, waiting, waiting. I begin to think that perhaps she did succeed. But then I am sucked out and into the world. Light hits my brand new eyes, and my soul oozes into a squalling new human, and even as a child I feel the vindictive knowledge that I won. The world I am born into is not beautiful. The skies are choked and the people are sick. An unnatural cold sweeps the earth. But God created a resilient species. We are cockroaches. I live on, through many different bodies, waiting to die and see her blue eyes again. I hope she is drowning in insanity by now. I grow older and I wait.

THE TRAIN

We all came to the village somehow, but none of us came on the train.

The village is between two mountains. Every morning the mist wreathes them like smoke, until the sun rises high and burns through them. The mist scuttles down into our valley and rests in the shade, licking its wounds, and every day the sun's rays chase it back up again. Dogs and cats, back and forth, until the night comes to swallow both of them up. Our cabins sprout like mushrooms around the central path, lopsided and haphazard—natural in a way that human hands cannot reproduce. We all came to the village, and none of us came on the train.

None of us know when the train is coming, or even where it comes from. Sometimes it comes from the east and others from the west. It follows no tracks, at least none that we can see. But we know it is coming by its cry, carried along the wind, no matter the hour. It echoes through the valley, dancing back and forth between peaks, until it sings down through the village like a brutal wind. No one knows where the train is coming, and we do not know where it goes.

When it does arrive, it comes with its all of its coal smoke, enough to choke the village and stain all of our faces as dark as the night. We never know who is getting on it until it is already gone, and when the grinding blackness of the coal dissipates, we breathe once again and tally our numbers to see who it has chosen. Two missing, or one, or maybe no one at all.

There are eight of us now. We wake and sleep at our own pace, and spend our time wandering the forest outside the village. It goes on as far as we can see, over the horizon, an endless blanket of trees and underbrush. The ground is soft moss or dirt, and even the tree roots seem padded against fragile toes.

I came to the village one night, as quiet as a whisper. I went to sleep in my own bed, listening to the sounds of the city through my window, with an inch cracked so air could move through my apartment. I lived high up over paved streets thick with cars and fell asleep to the sounds of sirens underneath my window—some new disaster always fresher than the last, and always blood on the pavement somewhere, in that city.

I fell asleep to sirens and woke to the sound of crickets, a sound from my childhood. I have been in the village ever since.

~

One day the train comes and when it has vanished with its cloud of smoke, like some great steel magician, it has left behind a man.

We stand, our motley group, with our night-faces, and stare through bright eyes. “Who are you?” We ask him. “Where did you come from?” and “Where does the train come from?”

He does not have the answers. His name is John and he does not remember the train, only that before he was an accountant with a cat and a wife and two children, named May and Sunny. He cannot remember the names of his wife or his cat.

He does not have a cabin, so I invite him into mine. That night he creeps from the floor into my bed and I let him. It has been a long time since the man in my city apartment, who brought me flowers and grief and a circle of twisted metal to place on my finger. It has been a long time since I felt any breath warm on my neck.

Afterwards, we lay dissected in pale slices of moonlight, cut in irregular shapes from the holes between the boarded walls. John is different than the others. We all arrived through the voyage of sleep, and through some great mystery cannot leave. I know without asking that John came by choice. I can read it in the way his fingers move across my back, up and down, up and

down. His touches carry the power of knowledge. I can't help but feel that he has touched me before.

"Where did you live before this?" I ask. A stripe of shadow hides his eyes. The moonlight touches his lips, highlights them as they move.

"An apartment," he says. "In a city."

I wonder if it is the same city I came from, or a different one. What was his city like? Did his daughters play on stained concrete, or were the sidewalks power washed smooth and clean, as white as moonlight? I picture them, in little white dresses and blood red shoes, skipping along the concrete, with me beside them. I could tell them that the power washing meant nothing, nothing at all. You can clean the surface, but the memories remain.

In the village, time is like a slow stranger meandering on a street. You don't notice him, and he doesn't notice you, until you realize that you have passed each other too many times for you to be strangers any longer. Every day the sun rises and sets, and the hours between go without measure. We eat when we please, always fruit, because it grows on the trees along the path. The seasons never change, and it is always late summer with a cool breeze. The fruit is always ripe on its trees, but we are never certain what type. Some argue that they are pears and some that they are apples or mangos. Either way, each bite is sweet and sharp. As you eat the flavors pass over your tongue in waves, until you are unsure if you are tasting anything at all. Instead you only have the memory of a taste.

John says that to him the fruit trees taste and look like grape vines. He asks what I see and I tell him apples.

"Yes," he smiles. "Of course."

~

“What about you?”

The question comes out of nowhere. We are lying again in our cabin, on our pile of blankets. Our lovemaking is always short and intense, and afterwards I turn away so he cannot see my tears. I don't know why they come, but they do, along with the phantom sensation of cool metal on my left ring finger, and the faint indentation of a person in my mind, a human-shaped hole without a face.

“What about me?” I ask.

“Where did you come from?”

I think carefully for a moment. The more time you spend in the village, the harder it is to go back. I remember only slight touches here and there—a man, a cat, a small pink dress. A baby's mobile. A hard knock to the head, the sweet burn of heady wine, the taste of cream in coffee. The bright sear of sun on city pavement, until it burned your feet through your sandals. The call of seagulls.

“I lived by the water, I think.”

“The water?”

“Yes. I remember sea gulls. Salt air. It was hot.”

And it was hot. I try to remember what it felt like to have the sun sear my skin, bake it until it was a warm, prickling red that throbbed to the touch. I remember how it felt, but I can't imagine the feeling. I only have the idea of it, somehow. The theoretical knowledge of sunburn, without any of the practical experience.

A city by the water, then, where a surge of tide could, at any moment, come and wipe the streets of their ground down bubble gum and dried blood, leaving seaweed and jellyfish limbs

behind. I try to remember if could see the ocean through my window. I see it in my mind's eye, a narrow slit of a city view, and then it is gone.

“And?”

“That's it. I don't remember anything else.”

He sighs. *Disappointed*, I think. I roll to face him. A sliver of light rests on his cheekbone. I can't see his face, and I realize I cannot remember what it looks like. “I had a wife,” he says, and his hands twist up to grab my neck. “I had a wife in a city by the sea, and two children between us.” His hands are loose on my neck, but I am afraid. His mouth opens, a shapeless black pit, and from it comes the mournful wail of the train.

I wake to sunlight and an empty bed.

~

The next night he stays up with me, his hands stroking my hair as I drift on the edge of sleep. His touch is soft, like a stirring of gentle wind. In the twilight, I try to remember the smell of sea air, the taste of salt on the back of my tongue.

“I had a wife,” he says. “In a city by the sea. We had two little girls, and a cat. One day I went to sleep and when I woke up, all of it was gone.”

“Where did it go?”

“I don't know. That's why I got on the train. To find out.”

“How did you get on the train?”

“I don't know.”

“Could you get on it again?”

“I don't know.”

“Where does it go?”

“I don’t know.”

And maybe he really doesn’t. I listen to his voice in the dark as I close my eyes. My breathing is heavy in my own ears, making him sound far away from me, though I can feel his warmth against my thigh. Outside the crickets chirp, an endless metronome of sound, cushioning out little cabin, padding the silence between us. I feel his hands sliding up my back, then down again. Sleep weighs my eyelids and I close them; the darkness behind them is like an old friend.

I hear the train’s whistle in the distance. A wolf’s cry—lonely and sad, calling for its family. His voice carries on into the night as he moves up from the bed and towards the door. I want to know where he is going, at this time of night, but my body seems impossibly heavy underneath the thin sheets. I hear only his footsteps on the floorboards, soft, and the lonely howl of the train in the distance.

Where does it go? I think. Sleep creeps up into my brain, its feet as soft as cat’s paws. As I drift I think I hear his voice, answering my question. I can barely hear him now. The wail of the train is deafening now. I know that he is leaving me and the village behind. For the first time I hear the train’s cry as a dirge.

Where does it go?

Where are you going?

His voice floats back to me on the wind, and I am sure he is on the train now. Even with my eyes closed I can feel the coal dust settling on my skin, choking my lungs. *Take me with you,* I call. I want to go back to sea air and sidewalks, to a cracked window and the warmth of a husband beside me. The village is cold and empty and we are all hollow husks, waiting for something to come and take us away.

WHAT IS A NIGHT MOMMY? & OTHER STRANGE QUESTIONS

What is a Night Mommy?

A what? Oh, a night mommy. I'm sorry, dear. I didn't hear you. Are you tucked in tight enough? You are? Okay. Well. Just one question tonight, and then you'll go straight to sleep, promise?

First things first—a night mommy is made of the sky. When she hugs you, her vastness envelops you whole. You can sit inside her black hole insides, where there are no sounds. You know that in space, it's very cold, right? Colder than grandma's house in Canada. Colder than ski trips. And there's no air, either, dear. But since she is a Mommy, with a capital M—yes, just like me—she wouldn't let the cold or lack of air kill you. She would pull air from the planets that live inside her and swing you close to the sun so that your blood could warm and your lungs could fill. And it would be a perfect warmth. Not too cold, not too hot. Just right.

A night mommy would never have to tell you goodnight on the phone or through a text message, the way grandma tells me goodnight. It is always important to remember that even though I am your mommy, I have a mommy as well. With the night mommy there would be no distance. No car trips that make your tummy hurt. You could walk outside and tell her goodnight and hug her close, your arms outstretched to the universe. Your arms would never quite fit around her, no matter how big you grew. We would all be permanent children if our mother was the night.

And she could whisper the secrets of the universe in your ear, just like I'm doing right now. Because she would know them all. Mothers know lots of things, true, but she would know more than just the perfect way to iron a shirt or read a book or make a lovely cup of tea. She

would know those things, too, of course, but she would also know how many stars there are, and how to count them. She could teach you, maybe, so that you could count all of her stars. They're freckles to her, little sparks, and sooner or later those stars would be as familiar to you as your own freckles, dusted on top of your little nose.

Even with the sun rises to take her away, you would always be able to see her again. No separation anxiety, just the knowledge that the next night, you could hug her close again. But she would be very sad, wouldn't she? Yes, dear. Very sad indeed. Because the reverse would never be true for her. If there was a night mommy, she would be very old indeed, and we humans don't live to be very old. She would watch us all die, one by one. There would always be more of us, and that would bring her joy, but at the same time, that's a lot of sadness. A mommy who can number the stars and the planets would remember each and every one of us.

Maybe she was our mother once, and in the old times, before the sadness outweighed the joy, she would come down and to walk and talk and whisper in our ears. I bet she tugged the sun right into position so that we could incubate, and that she watched and waited for us to grow. Yes, kind of like how we watched your baby cousin at the hospital. Just like that. I bet she let her freckles guide us across our playpens, teaching us to walk and talk and see further than just our own little world. We are a little world compared to others, of course. But I think eventually she became sad, our night mommy, watching our little flames extinguish one by one. Eventually, I think, she grew cold and distant to protect herself. She pulled back. And so now we can only guess at the number of the stars, and we can only think about the secrets of her great body.

What's that, dear? Who is the night mommy's mommy? The night grandmother, you mean? Well. That's a question for another night.

Why Don't We See Aunt Cindy Anymore?

Ah. So you noticed. Well. We were trying to keep it quiet, but I might as well tell you. Aunt Cindy turned into a bird.

No, not a bird like the ones you see in the birdbath. Though I'm sure there are similarities. She's not quite a full bird. Maybe half bird? It's difficult to tell. We ask her questions, you know, but she just screeches and caws. We're hiring a bird expert to come out and look at her next week, to see if she's a falcon or a goshawk or maybe a particularly large and vicious sparrow. We're not sure. We don't know much about birds. We've always been cat people.

How did it start? Well. We noticed it right after your birthday party. She came to stay for a few days, don't you remember? She brought your cousin Mabel. Yes, I know. Mabel cries a lot. But she's a baby, dear, and that's what babies do. No, she'll be fine. Cindy seems to understand that feeding her mushed up worms is a bad idea. She spits baby food into her mouth, instead. Yes, I know it sounds gross. But think about it, dear. Baby food is already gross, so Mabel's no worse for wear. We will have to do something about her language skills when she gets a little older if Cindy keeps squawking, but that's a problem for another day.

Anyways, at your birthday party, I noticed something a little strange. Not the birdseed. Cindy's been eating birdseed since we were kids. That's always just been a weird thing she did. No, I saw it when she took off her sweater, after Mabel spit up all over it. A single feather, poking out from between her shoulder blades—right about *here*. Sort of like the feathers that come out of the couch cushions and poke you in the side when you're trying to watch TV. Then, of course, there was the cat. Normally, you know, Cindy and Sir Whiskerham the Third get along very well. But that day was different. Sir was watching her like he does the finches that live in

the backyard. Like he wanted to eat her all up. No, don't be scared, you silly. Cindy's still very big. It'd take a lot more than Sir to bother her. You should see her wingspan. It's quite impressive. Anyways, I saw that feather, and I told Cindy about it. We went and looked in the mirror and hemmed and hawed a bit, but then it was time to bring out your birthday cake and we had to go. She promised she'd go to the doctor, or the vet if she needed to, but I don't think she ever got the chance. The very next day she woke up with a full set of wings. Knocked her lamps right off her bedside tables and brained Uncle Harold. He had to get three stitches.

Since then she's been living in the treehouse out back at grandma's. Like I said, we're getting someone to come out and look at her. She still talks sometimes, in between squawks. I'm sure it's nothing a speech therapist can't fix. It's a good thing she's still on maternity leave. The other day I heard her reciting poetry, and Harold asked her if Polly wanted a cracker and she nearly knocked him right out of the treehouse—that goes to show that she's still in there, you know. I'm sure it'll all be fine soon.

I'll take you to visit her and Mabel tomorrow, how about that? You can see for yourself. And you can help me collect some feathers, maybe. The couch cushions need re-stuffing, and Cindy's feathers seem quite soft.

Where Did the Mermaids Go?

Ah. So you saw that special on TV the other day, didn't you? Daddy told me you watched it together.

Well. It used to be, even just a few hundred years ago, that mermaids were having a good old time. They lived in coral reefs, not in those ridiculous underwater palaces in cartoons, good Lord, do people not understand the complications of underwater architecture? Anyways, they lived in coral reefs with all the other bright little fish. Mostly tropical. I think there were some

tribes that lived in the colder areas and hung out with narwhals and belugas and seals, but don't quote me on that, alright? It's been a while since I brushed up on my mermaid history.

Like I said, there used to be tons of them. After all, the ocean used to be a free place, before we advanced enough to map it all out—the surface area, anyways—and cut it up like slices of pie. There were Mediterranean mermaids and Hawaiian mermaids and Icelandic mermaids—all kinds. Some with blue skin and fangs and others with flat whale tails and some with big fan tails that are translucent in the light and all different colors of the rainbow, like the betta fish that swim in those tiny cups at the pet store. Too many to really count. They lived all over the world. They didn't bother with ships and humans much, of course. To be honest, we don't have all that much in common, aside from our taste in seafood. But now it's become a lot rarer to see them.

It's an extremely complicated political issue, so I won't get into it, but. Well. It's hard for mermaids to come together. They're just like us in that way. Different tribes have different cultures and languages and cuisines. Methods of travel are difficult, though some tribes trade and interact and have done so for centuries. And we land-dwellers aren't the best when it comes to treating our own people right, let alone merpeople. So things like overfishing and pollution became a big problem. Can you imagine living your entire life surrounded by whales, only to find that some flabby air-breathers are coming in and hauling more and more of them away? Sometimes not even just to eat. Sometimes just to put them in big fish bowls and watch them swim in circles. Or dropping dynamite in the water, or plastic, or nuclear waste in big tin barrels? I think they got sick of it. They didn't have any control over it.

It wasn't until twenty years ago that most of them started to vanish. I don't think they're dying out, like some people think. Merpeople are mysterious. We don't know much about them.

The people who have managed to communicate with them don't volunteer that information, for fear that someone might use it for harm. What do I think? Well. I think the merpeople have taken to swimming deeper and deeper. Maybe they're slowly trading out their big fan tails and small mouths for giant ones. Maybe they're learning to unhinge their jaws and grow huge eyes and bioluminescent fins so they can see deep where the sunlight doesn't reach. Rows and rows of teeth, instead of just a few. We declared war on the ocean. I think they're waiting until the ocean declares war on *us*.

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