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# View from the Glass Casket

Presented to the faculty of Lycoming College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors in English.



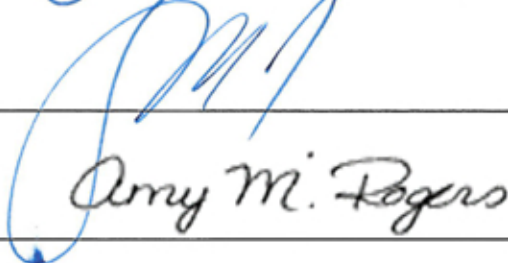
by

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**VIEW FROM  
THE GLASS CASKET**

A NOVEL

**SAM RUTAN**

**DISCLAIMER:** What you are about to read is a rough draft—a visit to a film set where the actors haven't memorized their lines, the cameramen and green screens are all too visible, and the director is in a panic because his stubborn, leading actress refuses to follow the script.

For what works, I take full credit. For what doesn't—blame the characters; they became more real than I ever intended.

Four of them, all male and over forty, held hands and smiled at each other as they waded into the river in their white gowns. Gwen Foster—not male, not smiling, and only just turned nine—stood on the end of the line, already waist-deep in cold water. The sun burned her arms and face while the water bit into her thighs, and the gown kept getting tangled between her feet.

“If I’m going swimming, why do I have to wear a dress?” she argued on the car ride over, pulling at the thick cotton front.

“It’s not a dress. And because. That’s just what you do.” Her grandmother always said things like that—it’s just what you do.

“I don’t want to go. It sounds stupid.”

“We’re going. Don’t you want to see your mom again in Heaven some day? And hang out with your old Grammy and Bill, after we kick the bucket?”

Gwen tried not to think about her mother. Bill, who seemed to sense her discomfort, turned around in his seat and smiled. “It’s not so bad, pumpkin. It’ll be over before you know it.”

*But what if I don’t want to go to Heaven?* Gwen thought of her father, who hated church and wouldn’t be allowed in.

Two pastors, one senior and one in training, stood further out in black gowns. Gwen imagined their reflections on the water as evil twins lurking below the surface, and for a moment, the two sets seemed to merge—a legless pair of Siamese twins, rising from the water on invisible cables pulled by God. Gwen looked down at her own reflection and wondered what it would be like to live inside the river. Her reflection beckoned to her, smiling with the knowledge of another world.

“Welcome! My friends, join me in prayer. Lord, Father, Savior—thank you for allowing all of us to be here today, and to—” The Pastor's words echoed back flat and hollow, as if the dead trees along the bank sucked the marrow from the sound. Cicadas chattered, and somewhere, a crow cawed. A frog splashed, and the pastor droned on. Gwen picked up her left foot and giggled, the mud sucking around it. She did the same with her right and started hopping back and forth from foot to foot, relishing in the squishing between her toes.

Her grandmother hissed her name from the bank. "Stop fidgeting!"

Gwen twisted around. Helen—or Grammy, as Gwen called her—stood in the dry grass in her open-toed white shoes, wearing her pretty Sunday blouse with all of her gold jewelry glinting in the sunlight. Bill hovered by her elbow, and the loved ones of the other soon-to-be-baptized crowded the bank with their small cameras and big smiles and shiny jewelry.

Gwen tilted her head back and groaned.

"I'm sorry, Lord. Sounds like we better hurry this thing along, then." The pastor said. His congregation laughed. Gwen's grandmother laughed too, although she faked it. The man next to Gwen laughed the loudest. Gwen realized, in that moment, that she hated them—all of them—and especially the man next to her—his hand was dry like construction paper and warm like a chair someone else had been sitting in for too long. And she hated the way the pastor kept saying 'father'—she only had one father, and he would've hated them too, but Grammy made her promise not to tell.

Helen nudged the woman standing next to her and apologized for Gwen's behavior. "She's gifted, you know. The school had her tested and everything. They want to put her in special classes."

The woman nodded and smiled. "She is just the cutest."

A crow, maybe the same one as before, cawed again—once, twice, three times—as the pastor finished his prayer.

“In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.”

"Amen." Gwen didn't say it with them, only looked down at the water.

"Come forward, Child." The pastor beckoned to her.

Gwen took two steps forward, then looked back. Her grandmother had a disposable camera out, held up in front of her face. Bill had disappeared—he snuck back to the car for a cigarette.

"Go on, sweetie," Helen said. The crowd cheered.

"Don't be afraid, Gwen. It's okay." The younger pastor said.

The line of white gowns clapped and goaded her on.

She finished the walk, with the water now up to her armpits. The two pastors flanked her, placing a hand on each elbow like the safety bar coming down on a roller coaster. *Wait, I think I want to get off.*

"Do you, Gwen Foster, accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and savior?"

She looked to her grandmother. The camera flashed. The little wheel clicked as she wound it back up for another shot. Still no Bill.

"Yes."

"Then upon your profession of faith and in accordance with the Lord's command, I baptize you, Gwendolyn Elizabeth Foster, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Buried in the likeness of His death and raised in the likeness of his resurrection."

Gwen's feet were off the ground.

"Wait—"

"Plug your nose."

"What—"

Water shot up her nose and got in her mouth, crowding in behind her eyes and distorting her view of the world. She tried to stand, but her feet kicked at nothing. She twisted and thrashed, but a dozen hands gripped her—the entire line of white robes had crowded in to hold her under.

*Don't you want to see your mom again in Heaven?*

The pastors' faces stretched and changed behind the rippling surface, their smiles too big and their teeth too long. *Laughing. They're all laughing.* The crow circled overhead, screaming now. *Don't you want to see your mother, don't you want to see—*

*Dad! Dad, help! Dad, please!*

*You have to promise not to tell your father—*

She flailed and broke her arms free. Her right fist connected with black fabric. She hit the bottom of the river and pushed off along the mud. A hand wrapped around her ankle and pulled—not from above, but below. Pain clawed against the inside of her lungs and she punched and kicked. Sand and dirt shot upward and enveloped her in the dark, but even through the cloud, she could make out black hair billowing around a pale face—

*Mom?*

*Don't you want to see don't you want to—*

*Yes, clawing her way up from—*

*don't you want to be with your mother again?*

*Mom, let go—*

*Dad—*



And then she wasn't underwater anymore. She coughed, sputtered, and tried to wipe the water from her eyes, but the pastors held her arms.

"I can't see."

"It's okay, dear. You're okay." The two men laughed and pounding her on the back.

"Let me go." She ripped her arms free.

"Are you okay, Stan? Looked like she got you good."

"I'm okay. You wriggled right out of our grasp, Little One."

Everyone laughed and clapped and cheered. Gwen's cheeks burned. Her grandmother laughed too, snapping and cranking away on her little camera. Gwen marched over to her, pushing past the four white gowns who clapped and patted her on the back or squeezed her shoulder as she walked by. She ripped the camera from her grandmother's hands.

"I want my ice cream now."

But of course, she had to wait and watch the others pushed beneath the surface before they were allowed to leave.

Every night, their ritual began the same. Gwen read from a fat, leather-bound tome that smelled of damp basements and occult symbols drawn in chalk. She conjured wolves and forests, witches and trolls, goblins and devils, while John, hands clasped and head bowed, listened beside her bed. That night, she read of mirrors and poisonous apples, of a woman trapped inside a glass coffin and of the seven ruddy-faced dwarves that found her. She read until the words began to slither and crawl, and to keep them from pouring off the page, she closed the book with a heavy thump.

"Your turn," she said, and set her copy of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* on the nightstand.

"Bravo," John said, as he hoisted his own *Necronomicon* onto his lap. John's books had bigger words and smaller monsters, but Gwen still liked them—all those extra syllables felt good for her, like taking vitamins or doing push-ups. Tonight, he read of a talking bird and a severed heart that continued to beat long after the victim's blood had spiraled down the drain. "Thump, Thump, Thump," John said, as he licked his thumb to turn the page.

"I want to undo it," Gwen said.

"What?" The echo of the phantom heart faded. The character of the madman and his well-oiled lantern evaporated like smoke, leaving nothing but the phantom limb of her baptism dangling between them. Gwen told him about it as soon as she got home, and John still wasn't sure what to say. He bookmarked his page, leaned forward, and tried to read the zigs and zags of the carpet for a proper, grown-up answer—an answer she would probably remember for the rest of her life. He wasn't one of those bald, goateed atheists that read a lot of Nietzsche and considered Sunday School child abuse or one of those scientific types that deemed religion outdated in a world of science. No, John simply didn't want his daughter baptized because he

believed Eve created Adam, and God, if such a being were real, was an old Indian woman who watched the world through a bonfire and wept. Tabitha, despite her own qualms with the Bible, never let go of her faith, but the two agreed to wait until Gwen was old enough to make her own choice. "Just try to forget about it."

"But what if Grammy is right?" Gwen saw herself reaching through the bars of the pearly gates for her father and watching, helpless, as he was carried away by winged imps. Helen would be there, shaking her head and saying that's what he deserved. *But would Mom? Bill smoked cigarettes--would he be allowed in Heaven?* "I'm not going to Heaven if you're not going."

"First of all. Neither of us is going anywhere for a long time. And second, that's not really how it works. Just because you're baptized—"

"I know how it works. No one knows what happens when you die because you can't come back to tell anybody. So Grammy might be right. I don't want to go to Heaven. I want to go to Hell with you."

John didn't say anything for a long time. Tabitha watched, her ghost silent, from a small portrait atop Gwen's dresser.

"I want to undo it. How can I undo it?"

"I heard a joke once. When missionaries discovered Alaska," he digressed to explain what a missionary was, "they bumped into a small tribe of Eskimos. And these Eskimos welcomed the missionaries into their igloos with open arms. They sat them around their campfires and introduced them to their children and wives and fed them dinner, and these missionaries, in between bites of smoked salmon or roasted seal, tried to teach the Eskimos about the Bible. Well, the chief Eskimo politely stopped them and explained that they already had their own gods. 'Why should we abandon our beliefs and traditions for yours?'"

"The missionaries sat up a little straighter, fidgeting with their little wooden crosses, and said that the Eskimo gods were false, demons in disguise, and if they didn't convert to Christianity, they would all burn in Hell. 'And Hell,' the missionaries said, poking at the embers of the fire, their hands still shaking from the cold outside, 'is a plane of eternal fire and heat. It would be like living beneath these coals forever.'

"The Eskimos gasped. They shivered under their winter furs. Mothers hugged their children and husbands kissed their wives. And the chief leaned forward, his eyes the size of snowballs, and said, 'I can have the sleds ready by morning. Will you take us there?'"

Gwen waited for more words, and when she realized no more were coming, her face crumpled as slowly as the missionaries' must have. She punched and kicked. The springs of her mattress rang. "What's that supposed to be mean?"

John laughed. "It means it's all a matter of perspective. If—"

He continued to talk, but Gwen couldn't hear him over the loud whistle in her head from trying not to cry. *Don't you want to see your Mommy again?* The pastor's finger, sizzling like a brand, crossed her forehead and hot tears leaked from her brain like motor oil. She looked out the window, a black mirror, and watched a parade of old neighbors, old teachers, and her mother's old friends march forward from the dark to pinch her cheek, rub her back, squeeze her against their funeral shirts and blouses and whisper in her ear: all part of God's plan, God took her, she's with God now. *God. God's fault. All Praise Be to God.*

She sniffled, choked on a sob, and coughed. John jumped up from his chair, his arms flailing for a newspaper or a paper towel as if she had spilled something. He looked to Tabitha. *You never could handle a woman crying, she would say. What are you going to do when she*

*goes to high school?* The frozen smile seemed to laugh. *She's going to have you wrapped around her finger.*

"Un-baptism. Got it. Wait here." As John ran for a pack of matches, he remembered watching his father eat a cellar spider when he was around Gwen's age. He came home from school that day and said he learned that daddy long-legs—that's what they always called them—were the most poisonous spiders on Earth, but because their mouths were too small to bite, they were harmless. We'll see about that, his father said, and he took John and his older brother out to the barn. He plucked one from the wall of web, one tiny leg pinched between two massive fingers, and John and his brother yelled. Their father tried to drop it in his mouth, but the spider clung to his thumb and crawled up the back of his hand. He bit it off his wrist, swallowed, and joked about its legs sticking to the back of his throat for the rest of the night.

Years later, John asked him why he did it, and his father only chuckled and said, someday, when John had a son of his own, he would understand. John found the matches, got a candle from his bedroom, and scanned the bookshelf for something witchy or satanic. *Double, double toil and trouble, fire burn and cauldron bubble.* He tucked his copy of *Macbeth* under one arm. *Something wicked this way comes.*

"I learned this from that new dishwasher we hired. I guess he's a magician on the weekends. Judging from his tattoos, I'd say he knows what he's talking about." John pulled Gwen's nightstand between them, turned off her lamp, and set it on the floor. *Play it up.* "Gwendolyn Elizabeth Foster. Do you truly wish to be unbaptized?" His voice echoed in the dark.

"Dad. What are you doing? Turn the light back on, stop it—"

The match flared. He lit the candle and placed it on the nightstand between them. *John, you're not serious*, Tabitha would have said, but the candlelight couldn't reach her picture. The shadows knew what was coming and crowded in to watch. *Can't be worse than eating spiders*. He brought the still-burning match to his face. The dishwasher's words flickered back to him: *A typical match burns at around fourteen-hundred degrees Fahrenheit. No joke. It will burn the roof of your mouth if you let it*. He opened his mouth wide. The flame's intangible heat danced across the bottom of his upper lip and brushed over his gums.

"Dad!"

*Inhale slowly. Not too fast, or you'll blow it out. Just enough to suck the heat down into your lungs*. John clamped the end of the match between his teeth and grinned, a human jack-o'-lantern, and listened for the faintest whisper of pain. The heat slid down his throat and filled his chest like a thick soup. Pride and wonder flickered across his daughter's face. *I get it now*. If his dad were still alive, he would have called him. His orange mouth glowed in the window. *But what do I do when I'm full of breath?* The dishwasher hadn't mentioned that.

Gwen laughed and clapped and cheered.

The pain hit him at once. He grunted and the exhalation blew it out. The roof of his mouth throbbed and burned, but if he ran for a glass of water, the whole trick would have been for nothing. He smiled, dropped the burnt match into the candle, and made her promise to never—ever—try that, careful of where he put his tongue on the consonants. "It only works when a dad does it during an un-baptism. Understand?"

She said she did, and he made her promise once more.

"Alright. Now let's find the right ritual." The book's pages were thinner than a Bible's and fluttered to the whims of its witches and sprites, always a scene away from the one he wanted.

They stayed within *Macbeth*, but kept returning to the end of Act 1. He thought his eyes were playing tricks on him, that the words were rearranging themselves. He held the book up to the candle and skimmed the page. *Actually. This is perfect.*

"Did you know that your grandmother used to breathe fire?" he said.

"What? Nuh uh."

"Yeah huh. Ask her. Tell her, 'Daddy says fire and brimstone used to come out of your nose when you were mad,'" John chuckled. "She'll tell you. That's why her breath stinks now."

"What does that have to do with the un-baptism?"

"Nothing. I just thought you should know that." He picked a new match out of the box and set it on the nightstand. "She was also one of the first tadpoles to slither out of the ocean and grow legs."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't they teach you about ol' Darwin in schools anymore? I'm going to have to give that Ms. Trundy a phone call tomorrow, aren't I?"

"Dad!"

"Alright alright, here we go. Take my hands, and repeat after me. Come, thick night."

"Come, thick knight."

"And cover—"thee?"—me with the darkest smoke."

"And cover me in the darkest smoke."

"So neither Hell nor Heaven may peep through the blanket of dark."

"So Hell and Heaven can't peep through my blanket of dark."

"And claim me for their own."

As Gwen repeated the last line, John tore his hands free and picked up the match and strike box. "Gwendolyn Elizabeth Foster, by the powers vested in me by Black Sabbath and the Beatles, I now pronounce you." He struck the match an inch away from his nose and breathed deep. It's going to burn, the dishwasher said. *And try not to let them see your eyes water.* The match lit as he caught and held the initial sulfuric fumes. He swallowed the cough and showed the match to Gwen, shook out the flame, and pretended to catch the smoke with his fingers. He tapped his chest. When he opened his mouth, thick coils of smoke—more smoke than what the match visibly produced—poured off his breath and bathed his daughter in her blanket of night. "Unbaptized. Now get some sleep."

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Gwen had been drowning on a dream she couldn't remember when the low, earthy growl of tires pulled her awake. She ran to her window as red taillights nodded and bobbed down their driveway. A true monster of a car; an old Buick or a Lincoln—the kind of vehicle one could just as easily imagine driving the cobbled streets of a plague-ridden London, crushing rats and peasants alike under its white-walled tires, as stopping at a 1930's Mississippi crossroads with a trunkful of rattling moonshine and a resonator guitar on the backseat, or, in a modern-day New York City, pulling into a subterranean parking garage where a man with a matching red hat and jacket would carry the driver's luggage. The moon, though half-eaten and buried under a blanket of clouds, still held the sky, and Gwen wondered what time it was. *Not a car someone drove, but a car someone got dropped off in.* She imagined footsteps across the porch and the rusty whine of the screen door. She held her breath, waiting for the knock, and before she could keep the thought from breaking through its leash and biting her, she wondered if her mother had finally come home.



The car turned at the end of the drive and vanished, the howl of its engine echoing off the stars.

The only light left in the yard, a mock-Victorian lamp post not much taller than Gwen, glowed, like the moon, with stolen sunlight—a light soured and haunted by the theft—and a thin fog pooled around its base, casting the world an otherworldly grey. Gwen wondered what invisible creatures gathered around the light like swarms of phantom moths. Crickets and cicadas babbled and a coyote yipped as she waited for something to happen, and when the car didn't come back and nothing knocked on the door, she crept into the hall. From her father's room, an air conditioner hummed over a 3 a.m., hour-long infomercial. She wondered if she should get him. The idea that the car might have belonged to an intruder hadn't occurred to her; she might go downstairs and find the TV and stereo gone.

*No. Whoever it was left already.* She took the stairs as quietly as she could and turned the living room light on, blinking hard until her eyes could adjust. The furniture was all there, although the loveseat looked ashamed of seating someone else. The whole room, in fact, seemed to whisper of a strange presence, a human residue hanging on the air like a perfume. She checked the closet, the kitchen, and the foyer. Two wine glasses sparkled in the sink, a sip of red stagnant in the bottom of one, but both could have been her father's—he often forgot where he set his cups. She opened the fridge and took a slice of cheese, nibbling through it as she slid on her boots and undid the deadbolt on the front door. Her steps thudded across the porch, and the night air, still bloated with yesterday's heat, smelled like an oncoming storm.

"Hello?"

The distant whine of a coyote—maybe the same one as earlier—answered, along with the muffled tapping of real moths bouncing off the pale light. A bat dove low, a slash of black. *Was*

*it all a dream?* She reached into the house and fumbled for the porch light. Tire tracks cut through the gravel beside the Subaru. *Real tire tracks.* She checked the mailbox for a mysterious package—empty—then leaned over the banister and searched the side yard. Both swings rocked on a gentle wind, their metal hinges creaking like warped violins, but nothing dashed across the yard or leaped into the closest tree. Nothing stared at her from the brush and no branches, echoing like snare drums, snapped on the other side of the dark. She went back inside and bolted the door.

She got another piece of cheese and ate it at the dinner table before going back to her room, the mystery car as forgotten and meaningless as her dream. She laid down and tried to figure out how John held the match in his teeth without burning himself, and wondered if his unbaptism actually worked. *Come, knight, and cover me in the blackest smoke so Heaven and Hell can't peep...* Something about being invisible from Heaven and Hell chewed at the corners of her heart.

*Mom.*

She got the earring out of its hiding place, rolled the small pearl on her palm, and was grateful for the day she found it. The moving truck had a picture of a grizzly bear on the side, and the movers made a bridge between the back of the truck and the porch so they wouldn't have to take the stairs. They wore dirty, neon-yellow shirts over their red, hairy arms and didn't talk much, shuffling box after box into the house like a line of mutated carpenter ants. John helped with some of the big stuff, but for the most part, directed traffic in the living room while Gwen played in the yard. She alone heard the quiet clink of something bouncing off the metal ramp, and searched the grass until she found it. The earring landed pearl-side up, a small piece of the

moon or the shell of an angelic snail. She picked it up and kissed it before slipping the nearly-lost relic of her mother into her pocket.

Gwen realized she could no longer remember what her mother's voice sounded like. The sound had disappeared, gone from its place as if a stranger had slipped into her mind while she slept and stole it. *What else can't I remember?* The earring's clasp glimmered like a coin at the bottom of the well, a hook that had once pierced her mother's ear. Could the clasp remember? Could the hook?

*So Heaven and Hell can't peep my blanket of black. What if Mom is a ghost, and I haven't been able to see her because she doesn't know where we live?*

*Well, she can't see you now. You're invisible.*

Gwen went back downstairs, unlocked the front door, and ran into the yard. The grass was wet and cold beneath her bare feet. The lamp post burned like a light house for the dead, and she hung the earring on the top peg, closed her eyes, and begged for her mother to see it. She asked the dirt and the trees, the clouds and the fog, and the slowly-rising sun to let her mother know where they lived, and to tell her to drop by.

*But she's with God now.*

The world is made of threads. A hundred crows, a black storm of feathers and talons, their loud caws murdering the early quiet, ascended from the forest like a wave of locusts. The flock had been disturbed by the eventual finder of the earring, a living myth, his stride matching the earring's sway as he walked the woods, whistling neither the melody of the snake-charmer nor the song of the snake, but something else—the chorus from a forgotten pop song, or maybe an ad jingle from the '70's. He wore an old 1920's bowler and a tattered, three-piece suit and clicked his walking stick—Thump, Thump, Thump—in the dirt as he weaved between the pines,

each tree a thick, black thread stitching the Earth to the sky. A man of many names and many titles: the Storrie Mountain Ghost, the Susquehanna River Hermit, the Man in Black, the Phantom of the Fog. They called him a murderer, a rapist, a thief, a devil, a madman, and a bedtime story, but he was only, truly, two of those things. The man cocked his head at the birds and smiled, hearing something in their cries that no one else could, before vanishing once more between the threads of space.

And of course Gwen didn't see him. No, she only saw the birds, rising to answer her call. She went back inside and poured herself a bowl of cereal. When she came home from school, the earring was gone.

Ms. Trundy wore a green blouse around her stomach like a compression sock. She perched herself on the edge of a rainbow-painted stool in the back of the room and made the class gather around her on the floor. The kids crawled over each other as they claimed a square on the checkered carpet. "Criss-cross-applesauce everybody. Not like that, Jeremy. Remember the song? Criss-cross-applesauce, give your hands a clap," she sang, bringing her flippers together. "Criss-cross-applesauce, put them in your lap."

The class clapped along—all except Gwen of course, who sat with her shoulders hunched, glaring like a German shepherd as she pulled at the short bristles of the rug. Ms. Trundy sat with one leg heaved over the other, bouncing her foot inches away from Gwen's face. Her toes were painted an ugly teal and crammed into a pair of jelly sandals, bones and veins bulging under red, puffy skin. Gwen thought about stabbing her pencil through it.

"Why do we have to sit on the floor?"

"Because it's good for you. And I bet it's lot cooler down there than at your desks. Isn't that right, Izzy?"

Izzy's eyes always sparkled under the spotlight. "I *like* sitting on the floor, Ms. Trundy."

*Of course you do.* The funny part was Gwen usually did, too. She sprawled out on the carpet at home all the time, reading or drawing in front of the TV. If given a choice between sitting at her desk or on the checkered rug, she would have picked the rug. But Ms. Trundy didn't give them a choice. No, she hovered above them on her rainbow throne like an evil queen. *You have no power over me, Trundy.*

"Today, we're going to read *The Story of the Frog Prince*, by Mister Will Henry." Ms. Trundy picked the book off the side table beside her and held it out for the class to see. "From

the cover and the title, what do you think the story is about?" A little girl in a crown stood by the edge of a pond, and behind her, a pair of eyes watched from the water.

Gwen raised her hand.

"Yes, Alex?"

Alex, not expecting to get called on, pulled his finger out of his nose and wiped it on the carpet behind him. "Um. I forget."

"Can somebody help him out?"

Gwen raised her hand again.

"Jeremy?"

"My dad told me a story once about this guy who would eat goldfish at the carnival. The guy swallowed them whole and said he could feel them swimming around in his belly."

Some laughed. Others said "Yuck" or "Gross." Benjamin said his dad was a liar, while Alex said he ate a goldfish himself once. Ms. Trundy called for the class to quiet down. Timothy told everyone he had a turtle named Jerry. Oscar had two frogs, a white one and a brown one, but neither were princes. Gwen twisted her back to raise her hand as high as she could.

"Alright. I guess we'll just have to read the story and find out, since you all would rather talk about eating goldfish and your aquariums."

Gwen brought her fist down on the rug. The kids around her turned, but Ms. Trundy ignored her and opened the book to the first page.

*Stupid. You're all stupid.* Her fellow classmates—*snaggle-teeth, runny noses, sticky fingers*—sat around her like a tribe of hairless chimps. Gwen was missing one of her own teeth—the top left canine—but she didn't leave her mouth hanging open for everyone to see. *Why am I even here?* It was too easy for her to imagine them all on an island, covered in

warpaint and dancing naked around a bonfire with one of their own roasting over the flames. Who would they kill first? *They won't take me alive.* She saw Ms. Trundy laid out on a fancy silver dish with an apple jammed in her mouth and giggled.

"Once upon a time, there was a young princess." Ms. Trundy read about the princess's golden ball and how she played catch by herself down by the pond. "All the princess ever really wanted was a friend to play catch with." She held the book up for the class to see the watercolor portrait of the princess holding her golden ball and turned the page. "Before I read on, can any of you look at the picture and guess what happens next?"

The princess kneeled at the edge of the pond, her golden ball floating out of reach. Trees lined the bank like gnarled and twisted tombstones, and the water bled down the page in murky shades of green. Gwen could almost hear the dragonflies buzzing across the water and the ravens croaking from the tree line. Behind the ball and hidden from the girl lurked the same pair of eyes from the cover. This story was starting to look familiar—had Gwen read it before? She raised her hand. *The frog is going to drown her.*

"Izzy?"

"Her ball looks like a big scoop of ice cream."

Thomas laughed, called Izzy stupid, and said there was no such thing as golden ice cream. A class-wide argument erupted over which was better, chocolate or vanilla, and Jeremy whined about getting a splinter once from the wooden spoons they served ice cream with in the cafeteria. Ms. Trundy set the book on her lap and banged her hands together like fleshy gavels.

"One two three, eyes on me."

The class clapped three times in response. Gwen looked at them all with disgust.

Ms. Trundy opened the book and continued to read. The frog didn't drown the princess, at least not yet. He leaped onto the bank and offered the girl a deal: he would get her ball for her if she promised to be his friend. "'Yes,' said the princess. 'I'll do anything. As long as you get my golden ball back.'" Ms. Trundy held up the picture, turned the page, and continued to read. As soon as the princess got her golden ball, she ran from the frog. She burst through the heavy oak door into her castle and ran the deadbolt into place behind her.

"The frog knocked three times. Thump, Thump, Thump," Ms. Trundy hammered on her thighs. "Her father, the king, came into the foyer and asked who was at the door. 'An ugly, stinky, smelly, talking frog,' the princess said. 'Well, what does he want?' the king asked. And the princess told him about the deal she had made at the pond. 'You must keep your promises,' the king said, as he undid the deadbolt and invited the frog in."

Gwen drifted. She thought of Snow White waking up in a coffin with seven large-nosed dwarves looking down on her, their faces black with coal dust, their eyes burning like rubies. *How did you find me here, asked Snow White. Why, replied the oldest-looking dwarf, the frog told us.* The frog prince wasn't by Will Henry, it was one of Grimm's. She raised her hand to tell Ms. Trundy that Will Henry was a liar and her book was a fake.

"What do you think, Gwendolyn?"

Ms. Trundy's tone caught her by surprise. She felt the class staring at her. She must have missed something. "What?"

"Why did the princess try to break her promise?" Ms. Trundy smiled around eyes as pointed as bullets, her little cross glinting around her neck. She loomed forward on her stool like a puppet with the hand of a giant thrust up her shirt. Her shadow crawled across the carpet and enveloped Gwen as her classmates licked their lips and pulled spears from behind their backs.



*Why?* The class started chanting, drumming their spears against the floor and edging closer: why did she run, why did she run. Gwen slipped into the story and stood at the edge of the pond with the golden ball tucked under her own arm. The frog sat unblinking before her. His tongue shot out to catch a fly, a pink streak through the air and gone, his expression unchanged. Gnats buzzed around Gwen's ears and a mosquito landed on her arm. She swatted it, and the bug left a red smear of someone else's blood on her palm. The frog's pupils—long, black slits—narrowed on her, more like living marbles than real organs. Heavy lids came together across one eye and met in the middle, then parted slower than they had closed—a wink. Gwen turned and ran. The weeds scraped against her thighs as the frog bellowed after her, the sun burning her back as her dress tangled between her feet. The frog croaked, 'you promised, you promised,' then disappeared in the grass, only to appear again, sailing above the tallest of weeds, a moment later. 'You promised, you promised.' *But why? What was she so afraid of?*

*Why does it matter?*

She pulled back into the classroom, her classmates spears again hidden. "I read this story before. It's by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. And I remember how it ends."

Ms. Trundy leaned back on her stool, her invisible puppet master gone. She almost looked disappointed. "Well, that's not what the cover says." She tapped the author's name with a long fingernail, her claw clicking against the cardboard. "Thomas, why do you think the princess broke her promise?"

"Will Henry is a liar. He stole it," Gwen said.

Thomas talked over her. "Because girls don't like frogs."

"Frogs are gross. My nanna says they give you warts," Izzy said.

Oscar looked over his hands, examining the space between his fingers before calling Izzy a liar while Jeremy, who had warts, stuffed his hands into the pockets of his too-big carpenter jeans.

Gwen stood up. "Can I go to the bathroom?"

"You're going to miss the story. Can't you wait ten minutes?"

"No."

Ms. Trundy, after making a show of her reluctance, nodded, then turned her attention back to the class.

Gwen pretended to scribble her name on the sign-out sheet by tracing someone else's and slipped the hall pass into her pocket. She closed the door behind her, turned down the hall, and walked past the bathrooms to the cafeteria. She passed the secretary by holding the pass at her side and pretending she was invisible. She let herself into the kitchen. The fluorescents buzzed and bounced off the metal countertops and sinks, her reflection featureless. The space smelled like cardboard boxes, unpeeled potatoes, and industrial cleaners. She had to stand on her toes to get the walk-in fridge open, and had to climb on a bucket after that to reach the chocolate pudding. She got an entire flat box down, found a spoon, and crawled under one of the sinks.

Lola Garcia, the lunch lady, found her three hours later when she heard a strange noise coming from one of the drains. *Sounds like—like a frog.* Gwen fell asleep with her face nestled against the pipe and snored, her mouth a smear of chocolate pudding. When Lola pulled back the cabinet door and found her, the poor woman screamed. Gwen's eyes snapped open like bad roller shades. She whacked her head off the bottom of the sink with a nasty thunk and got sent to the office.

"My Lord," Lola muttered to herself, cleaning up after lunch. "Girl put the whole school on lockdown just so she could eat and take a nap." She shook her head. "My kind of girl."

"Gwen, honey, why don't you come up here and play? A young lady's got no business down there around all them. Dead things," Helen said from the kitchen. The floorboards at the top of the basement stairs creaked. Her shadow uncoiled down the steps and climbed the opposing wall to watch. *A little birdie told me.*

"Ahh, leave her be." Bill spoke around a screw he held clamped between his teeth, his glasses smudged in the yellow lamplight. He picked up the radio with both hands and shook it. The plastic backing fell away and Gwen caught it before it could clatter against the table. He winked at her. "She's helpin' me."

The shadow shifted. "You ain't smoking, are ya? Second-hand smoke—"

"I'm not smoking." Smoke curled from his half-burnt cigarette. He looked at Gwen and held a finger to his lips while he put it out.

Gwen giggled. She loved it in the basement. Antlers poked from the walls like teeth, and the dead things Helen referred to flicked their ears and turned their heads when she wasn't looking. Two foxes pranced along the top of the wardrobe, their mouths twisted into grins, and a turkey gobbled in the corner. Bill said the moose stamped his feet on the other side of the wall, but she knew he was lying and the animal was body-less. Gwen, standing on the couch, could fit both fists inside one of its nostrils.

"How would you like it if he picked your nose?" Bill would say, and they would laugh.

Coyotes circled the room, their faces cinched with hunger, a fish almost as big as Gwen swam amongst the antlers, and two or three different kinds of birds roosted over the mantel. The Great Bear King lorded over his kingdom from the corner on two legs, taller than even John, his massive head cocked to the side with his creased Burger King crown hanging crooked from one

ear. She couldn't wrap her arms all the way around the beast's waist—not even close—but when she tried, she imagined it hugging her back.

Besides the animals, the smell of the basement was the most memorable. Years of cigarette smoke intermingled with the wet dog-like stink of taxidermy, the leather of the furniture, and the butter of the vintage popcorn machine to form what was, uniquely and essentially, Bill. The smell followed him like a cloud and seeped into everything that was his.

The floorboards atop the steps creaked again, and the shadow wavered before rolling up like a rug. "Well, supper will be done soon."

Gwen spun one of the radio's knobs while Bill swept the inside out with a feather duster. "What's wrong with this thing, anyway?" she said. Bill had a habit of taking stuff apart because of a minor malfunction—like a sticky button on the remote or a blown lightbulb on the vacuum cleaner—and when he put it back together, the initial problem was usually replaced with a major one—the remote's button didn't stick anymore but the controls were backwards and reversed, and the vacuum's headlamp came on but the rollers no longer turned—and Helen had to go out and buy new ones. Gwen asked Helen why she kept letting him fix stuff. Helen smiled, and said "he likes tinkering, and I like shopping." She waved her finger at her. "But don't you tell him I said that."

Bill set the feather duster down, unclipped something from inside the radio, and pulled out a green circuit board. "Keeps turning on by itself. S'got your Grammy all spooked." He looked up and smiled; Bill didn't have all his teeth, but he wore their absence like a pirate and not an old man. "Thinks there's a ghost."

"Could there be?"

He plugged the pen-like soldering iron in, unrolled a piece of wire, and clipped it with a pair of wire snips. "Nah. These old radios. Sometimes they'll do that." After the soldering iron got hot, Bill touched the end of the wire to the tip of the pen and a puff of smoke charged the air with the smell of an electrical fire. Gwen asked him what he was doing, and he explained, step-by-step, as he dabbed metallic globs of solder over the circuit board like drops of paint. "That should do her," he said as he unplugged the iron and set it on its side to cool. "After dinner, we'll come back down and put it back together." He arched backwards in his chair and peered up the steps. "I think we might have time for a quick game, though." He leaned forward and fished for his lighter amid the pile of screwdrivers and tools. "Hope you brought your wallet this time. What did we agree on? A nickel a round?" He laughed. "Go set it up while I finish this cigarette." His lighter sparked three times before it finally lit.

Gwen dragged the chess table between the couch and armchair and pulled out the little drawers where the pieces hid. The set was hand-carved from wood, the pieces totems of Bill's dead animals. Helen picked it up at a flea market for his birthday. The king and queen were a buck and doe, the bishops eagles, the knights foxes, the rooks bears, and the pawns trout. Each piece had a green velvet pad glued to the bottom that whispered across the board. Gwen held the rook up to the Great Bear King and compared their faces. The rook snarled, the yellow acrylic of its teeth bleeding into the brown of its fur, while the Bear King only watched, sage-like.

Bill fell into a coughing fit, stooping over and almost stumbling. He slammed a hand down on the work table to steady himself and the plastic lighter, gripped within his fist, clacked against the metal top. Through the hazy window of smoke, Gwen saw his death. Her center fell away, and as if she had broken through the icy crust of a frozen river, she gasped for breath and swallowed his cigarette smoke. Bill's skin was wax-like and yellow-tinged, his eyes and cheeks

sunken. His hands shook and his scalp shone through his ponytail. *He's not that old. He's not that old.* Gwen ground her teeth together and tried not to cry.

Bill waved a shaky hand in front of his face and cleared the smoke, and just like that, the sickness fell away. His skin still looked too thin, the wrinkles too pronounced, but he looked better. "If I ever catch you smoking," he said. He mashed the cigarette out and hobbled over to his recliner.

Gwen plopped onto the couch, making the leather cough. "You ready, Bill?"

"I'm ready." He hunched over the board and traced his handlebar moustache with a forefinger and thumb. She could tell he was thinking of the pack of cigarettes singing to him from the work bench and not about the game. Bill hummed in the back of his throat, a flat 'mmmm' sound, as if he had started to say something and trampled the words with his tongue. Like the basement's smell, that sound was more Bill than the skin that he wore or the truck that he drove. Looking over the board, he looked like the Great Bear King. All he needed was a crown.

"Move already," Gwen said.

"Alright, alright." Bill moved his rook and took one of Gwen's knights. The piece fell into the wooden tray with a quiet knock.

"You shouldn't have done that." Gwen took the rook with her other knight.

Bill swore under his breath. "You know, I'm going to stop letting you win here pretty soon." The truth was, Bill stopped letting Gwen win weeks ago. She played chess better than the program on his work computer, and Bill was the least surprised when they diagnosed her with Gifted (whatever the hell that meant). He moved his queen.

She moved a pawn, the piece almost on the other side.

"I see what you're trying to do." Gwen's queen had fallen early, and she was trying to bring it back. Bill moved his bishop, the wooden eagle swooping across the board to block the way. The bird towered over Gwen's pawn with its talons out.

"Hey, Bill?" She waited until he looked up. "When can I go hunting with you?"

The old face crumbled, as if around a chasm, into a smile. "You see that spot over there?" He pointed to an empty space beside the Great Bear King.

Gwen turned and blindly nudged her bishop one square. Bill didn't notice. "Yeah?"

"I've been saving it for you."

For a second, Gwen saw herself stuffed and propped in the corner, her eyes replaced with dull marbles and a long seam, hidden under her clothes and hair, running up her back. "Can I get a bear?"

Bill leaned back in his chair and laughed. "She ain't never even been in a tree stand and she says, 'can I get a bear?'" He laughed some more. Like a curtain blowing away from a window, Gwen saw a terrible sadness crowding the edges of the laugh and smile for a moment—half a moment—before the curtain settled again. "You really are your mother's daughter."

"Did Mom go hunting?"

"No. She sat with me in the woods a few times, just cause she liked being out there, but she never wanted to shoot anything."

*Just liked being out there.* Gwen remembered what her father said about her mother being a witch. She wondered if she, like her mother, actually wanted to shoot anything, or if she just wanted to spend more time with Bill. *Before he*—she wouldn't let herself finish the thought.

"Grammy let her go?" Gwen could already hear the lecture: *the woods ain't no place for a young lady.*



Bill smiled. "Your Grammy didn't know. Still doesn't, so you keep that under your hat if you want to go with me." He explained how he usually drove Tabitha to school during hunting season since it was on his way to the cabin, and some days he would forge absent notes for the office instead. "Did you move?"

She said she did. "Bill? Was my mom a witch?"

Without looking over the pieces, he pushed one of his pawns forward. "Did your dad tell you that?"

She nodded. "He said that she could see the future sometimes."

Bill smoothed his moustache and made the humming sound again. "I think all women have a little witch blood in 'em. Your mom. Well, I think she was like you. She had a gift. Or was Gift-ed, or whatever. She burned a little brighter than most." He smiled. "Smarter than the average bear. Played with a stacked deck. Couple extra feet to a yard. Take your pick."

Gwen moved her knight out of the way, clearing a path between her bishop and his king. "Check mate."

"Son of a— You did that on purpose, you little sneak." He leaned across the board and tickled her. "Got me talking and all distracted." She shrieked and laughed, and he continued to tickle her after she fell off the couch.

Her right foot jerked and she kicked the chess board over. Pieces clattered off the glass coffee table and rolled onto the floor.

"Now look what you've gone and did." Bill laughed.

Helen's shadow slithered down the stairs. "Alright, you two. That's enough."

"Gwen did it!"

"Nuh uh!"

"Come on up and eat. Supper's ready." Her shadow hovered this time, waiting for them to follow.

Bill pulled Gwen up by the shoulders. "Leave 'em. We'll clean it up after."

As Gwen followed him, something crunched under her shoe. One of the rooks. The bear's face was crumpled and his snout hung from his throat by a thin splinter. She cradled the piece like a baby bird and showed it to Bill.

"Set him there on the work table." He had to stop halfway up the steps and catch his breath. "I can fix him. I can fix just about anything."

Gwen sat down at the kitchen table and looked at the hammer, box of nails, caulk-gun, and red-tipped pry bar laid out on an old dish towel before her. She lifted the hammer, felt the weight of the round, metal head swing back and forth, and let it drop into her palm with a meaty clap. John leaned against the sink, eating an apple and staring through the window, wearing a dirt-stained shirt and cargo shorts.

She set the hammer back on the table, the wooden handle knocking against the pry bar. "Is this stuff for the attic door?"

"No, I'm going to replace some of the siding by the garage. What's wrong with the attic door?"

"It keeps opening by itself." Usually in the middle of the night, as if kicked open by a pair of size twelve, steel-toed boots.

"You're right." He took a bite of his apple. "I keep forgetting to pick up a latch for that, and some spackle for the drywall. Maybe we'll do that next weekend." He had stuffed some wood slivers into the bottom corner to keep it closed, but he couldn't find them after moving Tabitha's stuff into the attic.

"Why does it do that, anyway?"

"I don't know," he smiled. "Must be a ghost."

Gwen, shaking the box of nails next to her ear, dropped them on the table, the lid popping open and the nails spilling out. "Did somebody die up there?"

"Maybe." John remembered breaking into old barns and kneeling in basements as a kid, lighting red tower candles, playing records backwards, and huddling around a Ouija board with his friends. *It's important to nurture a child's imagination.*

Gwen swept the tangle of nails back into the box with her fingers, the sharp points nipping. If she had asked her father when the attic door first started acting up, he would have said the house was haunted when he and her mother moved in. But Gwen didn't ask, because she only noticed it happening after the baptism. They didn't pick up a ghost somewhere—one was branded onto her head with holy water. Or maybe she glowed now, a bug zapper for the dead. *The unbaptism didn't work.* "Won't locking the door with a latch only make it mad?"

"It could." He bent over and picked four or five nails off the floor and handed them to her. "Ghosts like kids, though. You could go up there and check it out for us. Get a better handle on what we're dealing with."

She closed the nail box and thought about every ghost story she ever read and all the scary movies her father let her watch—the one with the girl who got sucked into the TV, the one with the girl who could spin her head around backwards. *What would Ms. Trundy do if I did that?* She tried once, in her room after the movie was over and John went to bed, but she wasn't flexible enough.

"Or you could come out in the yard with me and help me rip up siding."

The pry bar looked fun, but she knew he wouldn't let her use it. No, she would probably stand behind him in the grass holding his tools while gnats buzzed in her ears and mosquitos bit her legs. Besides, the ghost in the attic was her fault. "I'll go upstairs."

"Be careful up there though, okay? Watch out for loose nails, and don't make a mess you can't clean up."

The attic door was in the bathroom at the end of the hall, but she went into her room first, opening her closet and diving out of the way as hockey sticks, baseball bats, an electric guitar missing most of its strings, and several plastic bins full of shoes and winter clothes avalanched

onto the carpet. She climbed over the mess and ripped through her coats and jackets, the metal hangers scraping along their rail as she dug toward the back.

John heard the crash from in the kitchen and winced, setting his tools back on the table. When he went up to check on her, Gwen stood in the hallway facing the bathroom wearing his fleece bathrobe overtop the elbow and kneepads he got her for rollerblading, her yellow rainboots, and her pink bicycle helmet. She leaned on her hockey stick like a staff, her face as stoic as a surgeon's, a real suburban shaman ready to bless their plumbing or exorcise a leaky faucet. *I'm saving up for my own RV.* He bent over in tears.

"I'll be out back if you need me, Kiddo," he said as he caught his breath. "Just open the window up there and yell, and I'll come running with the fire extinguisher. I heard ghosts don't like those." He knocked on her helmet and wiggled it on her head, then headed downstairs.

Gwen glared at the knob of the ordinary attic door and shifted her weight from foot to foot, the hole in the wall winking at her: not ordinary at all. Ghosts could pinch, bite, poke, prod. Throw furniture. Blow up lightbulbs. Cause headaches, nightmares, seizures. The priest in *The Exorcist* died because he wasn't wearing a helmet, and she threw on Daddy's bathrobe because she didn't own a trench coat. *I'm not being ridiculous.* She stepped into the bathroom, where the tub didn't scuttle across the tile on clawfoot feet because it was a boring tub, leglessly set into the floor, and yanked the door open.

The staircase yawned before her, the smell of dust and old rain hot on its breath. A window at the top of the steps cast a grey light and the moth-eaten curtain didn't twist or billow to resemble a figure, only hung unmoving in front of the glass. She stepped onto the bottom step with her hockey stick clicking before her like a blind man's cane, the wood creaking beneath her boot. Holding her breath, she waited for something to appear at the top—*a woman crawling*

*spider-like with black, oily hair dripping from skin cracked and pale*—but of course nothing did. The staircase itself was narrow, the wooden slats of the walls furry with dust and, like the clawed fingertips of goblin prisoners, nails strained to catch the fabric of her bathrobe (and the skin of her arm). By watching the top of the steps, the walls seemed to have grown narrower still, *like Jack being swallowed by the giant*.

Gwen charged to the top clutching the hockey stick to her chest, elbows close to her sides, feet thundering like falling bowling pins. When she got there, with her eyes squinted closed so the ghost couldn't freeze her in place with its terrible stare, she swung.

The blade cleaved through a tower of cardboard. Picture frames, plates, cups, and mugs shattered and crashed across the attic floor, the boxes drooping lopsided as they bled crumpled wads of newspaper. Gwen stared at the shards of glass and ceramic waiting for John to yell or come running.

*Don't make a mess you can't clean up.*

But the house held its breath; silence. He must have went outside already. Glass crunched under Gwen's boots.

*Was like that when I got here.*

The terror the attic had worn only moments ago shattered with the glassware; not even a one-armed and headless mannequin staggered out of the dust, easy to mistake for something else. No jagged-teethed pianos played by themselves, and no black shapes, hunched in the corner on all-fours, growled at her with glowing eyes—only a futon, two end-tables, some ugly lamps, and stacks of cardboard and plastic boxes.

Gwen let her hockey stick clatter down as the carpet of dirt and dust stretched for miles into the desert sands of Iraq, and Assyrian ruins towered out of the plastic and cardboard,

shimmering in the attic heat. A man in a cowboy hat buzzed at her side, told her it was too dangerous, the labyrinth could cave in at any moment. *Exactly*. She crawled under the futon and unearthed two box lids, each crammed with CDs—spine-up like books—their album covers decorated in skulls and skeletons, crosses and monsters, eyeballs, tombstones, and tentacles. *The long-lost Assyrian holy books*. She pushed them behind her for safety and crawled out on the other side of the futon, her hands coated in a chalk-like film of dirt.

Crawling around on the floor put her into a sneezing fit—*Egyptian Sneezing Powder, an old trick to keep out graverobbers*—so she climbed onto a plastic bin to catch her breath and to survey the region. Besides some cookie tins, five or six of them stacked up on the floor next to a dune of puffy garbage bags cascading in the corner, there was nothing but boxes and the little aisles that ran between them. An entire neighborhood of boxes, where tiny box elves lived and drove boxcars to box jobs and wore box hats and box shoes and went home to make box art. She pulled a box in front of her and the duct tape, yellowed and threadbare, ripped off like rotten shingles: Christmas lights, tangled and knotted like fistfuls of writhing snakes. *Assyrians hide their treasure under snake nests*. She dumped them, the LED bulbs clicking and clacking against the wood to reveal—

An empty box. She tried another. More Christmas lights, hiding nothing. Where were the shrunken heads, the golden monkey-shaped idols, the genie lamps?

Gwen pulled the lid off a plastic bin full of cords and wires, the technology of the Old Gods, and found a rotary telephone, bright red with a brass bell in the bottom. *And it's ringing, can't you hear it?*

"Hello?"

Twenty years' silence murmured in her ear. She spun the dial, the disc clicking back to zero and the sound echoing up the coiled wire through the receiver. She imagined she heard phantom whisperings, ghosts of conversations and pizza take-out orders trapped inside the wire pushed out by the spinning of the dial like pumping water through an old pipe.

"Yes, this is her." She twirled the cord around her finger like she had seen them do in the movies, until she felt silly and dropped the phone back into its bin of wires without hanging up.

An old trunk, stout and square with door-knocker handles set into the sides and a large lockable clasp on the front sat beneath the window, the kind of chest full of gold coins or forbidden books, medieval armor or severed limbs, the skulls of Bluebeard's wives wrapped in the summer dresses he married them in.

The lid, of course, was locked. She tried to lift the whole chest and shake it, but her arms weren't long enough. The wood was dark, almost black, and covered with riveted metal strips that formed a grid across its surface. She stood to the side and took up one of the giant, round handles in both hands, the metal squeaking with age, and pulled. Growling through gritted teeth with her back arched and burning, she lifted the trunk off the ground and its contents spilled, rumbling like a rockslide to the other end, and just as she was getting ready to lift it higher, to tip it completely on its end—

Something shifted and pushed back. Her end got heavier.

Gwen dropped the handle as if it had bit her, the glass panes rattling in the window from the crash. Her heart drummed against the side of her neck as she stumbled away from the chest, tripped, and landed on the floor. The keyhole set into the center clasp stared at her, the biggest keyhole she had ever seen, and she couldn't look away because she knew the moment she did, black slime would ooze onto the floor. Or maybe an eye would appear, bloodshot and lidless, or



a long tentacle would reach out and wrap around her leg as the keyhole yawned to swallow her whole.

Reaching blindly behind her, she found her hockey stick and scrambled to her feet with sweat leaking from her helmet. She inched forward, a seven-year-old lion tamer cornering a 500-pound beast with nothing but a wooden chair, and reached across the gap with her stick. The crowd held its breath; the stick, only an inch away from the box now, seemed suspended in space and time. Hours passed until finally, with the dexterity and form of a professional fly swatter, Gwen brought the blade down—tap—and leaped back.

But it was only a box. The keyhole continued to stare, unblinking as a keyhole, and the chest remained a chest.

"Come out," she said, bent at the knees, the bathrobe bunched and swollen around her elbow pads, her hockey stick high above her head.

A songbird chirped beyond the attic window. Somewhere on the other side of the house, her father's hammer knocked against the building like a woodpecker, and even further out, circling above the pine trees, a crow cawed once, twice. Dust swirled in the light from the window and nothing moved, creaked, rattled, or groaned as Gwen inched forward and jabbed at the box again like a boy poking a dead body on the riverbank.

To make double-sure it wasn't playing possum, she swatted the top, the sides, the front, the crack of her stick cutting through the air like pistol shots. She crawled forward and held her eye to the keyhole, but like peering into the gash in the bathroom wall, it was too dark to see inside. She knocked on the lid—*knock knock, who's there?* The man in the cowboy hat appeared again at her side. *Whatever is haunting your house, Miss, is most certainly in that box there.*

She slid the blade of the hockey stick between the trunk's jaws like a pry bar and hammered it in with the heel of her palm. The hockey stick creaked in her hands as she leaned on the handle, slowly at first, the wood fibers trembling in her battle of wills against the shovel-faced lock clasp as she applied more weight. The stick creaked louder, bowing now in the middle. Afraid to push, she held her position, but so did the chest. *Just a little more*—the hockey stick cracked in half, shooting wooden splinters into the air and sending Gwen stumbling forward. The chest, with half her stick still clenched between its teeth, mocked her with its dumb, lifeless face.

Gwen cried out like a true barbarian and kicked the corner of the box. Then, taking up the handle again, she dragged the chest across the attic to the top of the stairs, and with one great heave, sent the trunk tumbling down the steps like a derailed train car, bouncing end over end until crashing through the door at the bottom and skidding across the bathroom tile. Broken glass clinked and pattered as it settled within the wreckage, and Gwen came down and leaned against the wall to catch her breath.

"That was my favorite hockey stick," she said like a sibling forced to apologize to another. "My—"

The box was bleeding. Lying lock-side down, a transparent liquid, thicker and slower than water, pooled around the chest as the hauntingly familiar scent of strawberries rose from the floor like a fog. *It's not real. It's not real.* She watched herself right the trunk, her actions no longer her own. The fall broke the lock-clasp free, forcing the lid open a crack and holding it there, with the liquid—sticky on her fingers now—drooling down the front like a man gagging on a feeding tube. The smell—*not Mom no can't be bad accident how could I forget the smell—*

caught in her throat and brought tears to her eyes. *Mom?* She kicked at the lock and threw the lid wide.

The smell poured from the box in rivulets, formed rose-colored tendrils that wrapped around her neck and pulled her against the lip of the chest—*the executioner's block*—shooting up her nose and down her throat, choking her with what she forgot. A large cross, metal and covered with intertwining snakes, sat at the top of the pile and gleamed in the light from the window. This used to hang in the living room of the old house; suddenly it all made sense. *The ghost, the Ghost, the Holy Ghost: We have your mother, Gwendolyn. Don't you want to see your mother?* She felt herself pulled deeper as the smell got worse. The sleeve of a knit sweater, the blue silk of a dress, fabrics she remembered burying her face in, hiding behind, and crying into whispered across her fingertips and pleaded to be worn. And below it all, yes, her mother, smiling up from behind a sheet of splintered glass, retreating deeper into the dark lake of perfume at the bottom. *Come on in, Gwendolyn. The water's perfect.*

*You'll be happy here.*

*Don't you want to see your mother again someday,*

*Buried in the likeness of His death and raised in the likeness of His resurrection?*

Gwen ripped herself free, crawled back against the wall and covered her ears as a booming laugh—the Ghost showing His true face, His true strength, now that she had let Him out—hammered against the wall of the bathroom. The sound shook the window in its frame and reverberated through the floor. The radiator vibrated with life, pill bottles and toothpaste skittered across their shelves in the medicine cabinet, and the tank of the toilet growled and flushed itself from the pounding, the thump, thump, thump under the window like a jackhammer,

a wrecking ball, the Almighty Hand of God striking the side of their house because she was His now, forever and always, Amen.

"Dad!"

Her scream, initially swallowed, trailed into silence: the pounding stopped. The toilet continued to growl, filling itself back up. The mirror in front of the medicine cabinet hung ajar, and a songbird, probably the same one as before, trilled through another chorus.

Gwen sprang forward and slammed the lid of the trunk back down, tripped on the top step and slid down the stairs (her elbow and kneepads softened the blows), got up, pushed through the kitchen, and sprinted across the yard, the grass kicking dew onto the backs of her legs as her father's bathrobe dragged behind her like a muddy cape.

John climbed down a ladder propped up against the house and grinned. "Did I scare you?" A new piece of siding hung just below the bathroom window half-nailed, the vinyl waving at her. Their neighbor was there too, smiling next to the ladder in golf pants and a Hawaiian button-up, swaying back and forth with his hands in his pockets.

Everything Gwen wanted to say crashed together behind her teeth as she slid to a halt before the neighbor. "Why are you here?"

"Jesus, Gwen. Manners—"

*Yes, Jesus, he's upstairs—*

"It's okay." George leaned down so he was eye-level with her, and she wanted to club his doughy jaw; she hated when adults did that. "I was wondering if I could borrow your dad for a couple minutes. I need him to help me put up, uh—" he looked towards John.

"It's okay. You can tell her," John said.

"I didn't wanna scare her or anything—"

"Someone broke into Mr. Bentley's house yesterday, and he asked me to help him put in a new lock."

"I'm just not as handy as your dad, here," Mr. Bentley said.

"You going to be okay for a minute if I pop over there quick?"

The break-in didn't register—Gwen thought only of the box. *You can't go, we have to pack.* Now that she let Him out, He would infect the whole bathroom and slowly spread to the rest of the house, growing under the paint like a mold. *If He can smell like Mom, He can probably look or sound like her, too.* Would her father be able to resist as she had? *No. No, he can't go back into the house yet.*

"Yeah. I'll be okay."

John kissed the top of her head. "Don't burn the house down or anything, okay?" The two men walked away.

"I'll catch the bastard," Mr. Bentley said, thinking they were out of earshot. "Thought about picking up a couple beartraps and hiding them around the shed. That'll teach him a lesson next time. And you know the police would never get here in time."

"Great idea. Until we find one of our kids in one of them. What did the police say—"

They disappeared behind Mr. Bentley's fence.

Gwen picked up the hammer and box of nails lying in the grass and went back inside. The chest was waiting for her, snagged-toothed with splintered wood from the broken clasp, and the smell was stronger too, as thick as smoke, but she was ready for it and turned on the ceiling fan. She lined up a nail on the lip of the lid and hammered it through, only tapping at first, careful not to hit her fingers, then banging her own chorus against the quiet bathroom.

The Ghost watched, silent and still, as she hammered twenty-seven nails into the lid of the trunk, then dragged it over to the attic door. She seized one of the door-knocker rings and heaved the chest onto the landing, then climbed to the other side and pushed. Her helmet knocked against the side and her feet kept slipping as she shoved, but she managed to get the chest far enough into the stairwell that she could shut the door on it. Then, kneeling in front of the knob, Gwen nailed the door closed, the five nails twisting out of the frame like the fingers of a blackened hand.

When John got back from the Bentley's, Gwen was sitting on the bottom rung of the ladder, her helmet discarded in the grass.

"I forgot to ask you how you made out upstairs. Are we safe, or should I put a call in to the Realtor?"

"Call the Realtor."

John laughed.

## 6

Gwen shot upright in bed. She heard something cry out—a mix of a moan and a whimper, like the growl a bear might make with an arrow in its side. She looked around the room and held her breath, straining her ears against the roaring quiet for a sign that it wasn't a dream. Crickets chirped outside her window, the sky starless and black. The bulb of her nightlight, a little lighthouse, hummed as it threw shadows across the wall. Her heart beat against her ears as she played the sound back in her mind, over and over until she wasn't sure if she was hearing it again or just remembering. She imagined ridiculous sheet ghosts, with chains dragging on the floor behind them as they waved and moaned. She never thought of real ghosts that way, but she supposed the stereotype came from somewhere.

A floorboard creaked. She heard her father's door swing open, the mumble of his TV filling the hallway until the door closed again with a quiet click. He must have heard it, too. Gwen waited for his heavy, confident footsteps and for his head to poke into her room to make sure she was alright, and when she didn't hear them, she imagined him leaning forward, listening like she had. She pulled the covers up to her face and wondered what was taking so long.

"Dad?"

Something ran down the hallway, its steps light and quick, its stride small—a goblin scuttling on all-fours, its front paws clawing the hardwood as slobber and foam flew from its tusks. Gwen jumped out of bed and threw herself against the bedroom door, spreading her hands along the wall and bracing herself for the inevitable collision. She dug her fingernails into the doorframe and planted her feet in the carpet, waiting for the gnashing, fish-smelling thing to slam against her, to worm its face into the room and bathe her with its hot breath. But the steps

ran past, and Gwen realized she was wrong—not claws, but bare feet, padding down the hallway. *A woman in a sick-green hospital gown.* The bathroom door slammed.

Gwen ran across the room and grabbed the yellow baseball bat leaning in the corner. She rushed back and placed her hand on the door knob. The sink turned on in the bathroom, the faucet squeaking, pipes clanking as water splashed into the basin. Holding her breath, she turned the knob as slowly as she could. The latch creaked. She opened the door—just a crack—and peered into the dark with the baseball bat raised over her right shoulder. A line of light ran across the bottom of the bathroom door, the water still running in the sink. She could smell the ghost of a perfume hanging in the hallway, the kind that came in square, crystal bottles by the jewelry section at the department store; she thought of all the flowers in a funeral home.

The toilet flushed, the sink turned off, and the line of light disappeared from the bottom of the door. A feminine figure stepped into the hallway wearing nothing besides a ragged shroud. Time seemed to stop. Its nakedness glowed in the dark. She thought she recognized the curve of the shoulders, the hips, the posture.

*No, too short, too thin—*

*Death has changed her. She's not Mom anymore. We buried her under the ground with the bugs, and she's angry—*

*No, a trick, God playing a trick like the trunk—*

*The trunk—*

The figure pulled the shroud tight across its chest and ran toward her father's room. It hadn't seen her yet, its hair blowing and twirling like a headful of snakes.

*Dad!*



As it passed her door, Gwen pushed into the hall and swung the bat. She expected the swing to pass through the figure like a mist, but the plastic bat connected behind the thing's knee with a snap. The creature screamed and crumpled, hitting the banister and tumbling down the stairs in a blur of flesh and hair. Gwen hadn't realized the physicality and realness of *It*—*if she could hit It, then It could hit her back*. She stared at the empty hallway, the space where the thing had been only seconds ago, and couldn't move.

John burst from his room in his boxers and turned on the light. "Sarah?"

"It's not Mom. I know it looks like her, but it's not. You have to believe me."

John looked from the baseball bat to the stairs and sprinted past.

"Don't get too close. It's dangerous."

But John was already at the bottom of the steps kneeling before the woman. In the light, Gwen saw that she didn't look anything like her mother. She had brown hair, not black, and the shroud was actually one of her father's button-ups. There wasn't anything ghostly or scary about her.

"I'm okay." The woman placed her hand on John's shoulder and allowed him to help her up. She rubbed the back of her head. "I get why you didn't want me to meet her right away now." She tried to laugh, but she looked up at Gwen and remembered she was naked. She slid under John's arm to hide.

"Gwen. I need you to go to your room. I'll call you down in a minute."

Gwen was too confused to argue. She went back to her room, turned on the lamp beside her bed, and waited for him to call her. Her yellow bat was bent at the end, a white crack running through the plastic. She would need a new one now, for the real ghosts. Plates clinked together downstairs, and she knew her father was making coffee or tea. She wondered what time it was.

The sky was still the same shade of black; still no sign of moon or star. Maybe she wouldn't have to go to school tomorrow.

"Alright. Come on down."

The woman sat on the couch with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders and a mug of hot tea in her hands.

"You're not my mom."

"No. No I'm not." She smiled and sipped her drink.

John came out of the kitchen with his own mug and handed Gwen a bowl of vanilla ice cream. "Sit down, sweetheart. We need to have a talk."

The sun looked over the towering pines like a child standing at the foot of his parents' bed. Reaching the first branch had been the hardest; after that, tree limbs jutted from the trunk at regular intervals like rungs on a ladder. Pine cones and scraps of bark pattered the ground as Gwen climbed past an empty bird's nest. She didn't stop long enough to look at the bark she clung to, knowing it was covered in spiders or green, hairy caterpillars, and instead focused on the dull thud of her boots, echoing like a woodsman's axe as they brought her closer to the top, her father's heavy binoculars swaying around her neck. When she got there, she nestled onto a forked limb and made a small nest of her own, huddling against a wind that suddenly turned violent. *Get down, it said. No.* She regretted not wearing a jacket. Her fingers and palms, no matter how hard she wiped them on her pants, were sticky with tree sap.

Gwen inched further out. Her branch groaned. For miles, the forest heaved and sighed. Trees creaked like old bones while birds swam between their outstretched arms like little alarm bells. She looked through the binoculars. A woodpecker knocked somewhere, and a deer—only the white tail visible through the needles—hopped over a fallen log as the sun draped more of its light. Roots grew from Gwen's fingers and wormed their way into the bark as she imagined herself part of the forest. What she couldn't see, the tree told her through the grumbling of its limbs. *An owl sleeps in the hollow of that tree, and a bear cub, yawning, paws at its mother for breakfast.* Where was Grandmother's house? John said it was in walking distance "as the crow flies," but too many hills lolled in the way. She imagined leaping from her branch and sailing across the mountain like a ghost. The sun would warm her back and she could brush the tops of the pines with her fingers. When she got to Helen's, she would hover outside her bedroom window and tap on the glass. Gwen thought of Icarus and the Wright brothers and wondered if

she could use her sleeping bag as a paraglider. *I'll drop it from my bedroom window tonight and see if it floats.* She nestled back into the fork. Watching the forest come to life felt like peeking behind the curtain on how clouds were made or where rocks got their natural color, and Gwen's heart burst with contentment.

The only house visible besides her own was the Bentley's, and from her position, only the roof poked through. Gwen swung around the trunk, navigating the tree as if it were a simple jungle gym—as if she were only two feet from the ground and not two hundred—and climbed to a place where she could see the colonial in all its entirety. A Native American war chief in pink pajama bottoms, Gwen motioned for her Braves to create a perimeter. The moccasins of her phantom warriors crunched across the red gravel as they ducked under picture windows and crept through lilac bushes, their warclubs unsheathed. A lawn sprinkler went off and one of her troops leaped back and growled at it. Gwen scolded him—she was a merciless and harsh ruler—and the poor Native faded from existence.

Gwen looked through her binoculars and realized she could see into most of the upstairs' rooms. Mrs. Bentley typed at a desk pressed against the window, staring at her computer screen as if she were looking at Gwen. She wore her hair tied up in a bun and sipped from a flower-painted coffee mug as Mr. Bentley hovered in the doorway behind her. He wore nothing but a blue-and-white-striped pair of boxers, his penis tenting the fabric as he brushed his teeth and watched his wife work. A glob of toothpaste fell to his hairy chest and he smeared it with his hand, looked at his palm, then wiped it on his shorts. He turned and disappeared down the hall. More with the fascination of a god than the delight of a voyeur, Gwen followed him to the bathroom, where he leaned over the sink and spit. *They're like dolls in a dollhouse.* She wished for her slingshot.

Remembering the Braves awaiting her command, she unslung an imaginary bow from one shoulder and pulled an arrow from her quiver. Mr. Bentley went downstairs. Gwen drew the bow across her chest. The arrow's fletching whispered across her cheek as she aimed at Mrs. Bentley. The string twanged and left an invisible bruise on her left forearm. The window shattered. Pieces of glass slid down the shingles and collected in the gutter, tapping like rain on a tin roof as Mrs. Bentley wheeled backwards in her chair and clutched at her throat. Her mouth opened and closed like a beached fish. Mr. Bentley heard the crash and came running, armed with the spatula he was planning on making eggs with. Gwen gave the signal—the ancient, undulating Native American war cry made by pressing her lips into an 'O' and beating them like a drum—and her warriors stormed the house, crashing through the downstairs windows. Little Big Rock clubbed Mr. Bentley from behind. Noah wandered into the hall to look for his parents and stepped in a puddle of blood, the red staining his race car slippers. Sitting Bear spared the screaming child—his wife always wanted children but couldn't have any, and the boy wasn't too old to forget.

Mrs. Bentley looked up from her computer. She called for her husband.

Gwen leaped backwards and a chunk of bark broke free under her boot. She slipped and reached for a hold. Missed. Her mind surrendered her fate to the gods as the wind rushed her ears. Stray branches and twigs clawed her, snapping and tearing her clothes, but she felt only the vibration of the impacts, like the numbed hammering of a dentist's drill after the drugs kicked in. She caught a branch with her stomach and the limb held, her arms and legs dangling like a ragdoll's. All the blood pooled to her face while the fear and pain caught up with her. The ground, still a hundred feet below, swayed around the tree trunk as Gwen, too shocked to cry, let

out a coughed sob. She climbed into a sitting position and rested her head against the trunk, her eyes focusing on nothing but the air itself while the red slowly drained from her face.

John yelled for her from the deck. She forgot to close the sliding glass door when she left. "Gwendolyn Elizabeth!" He cupped his hands around his mouth.

"Coming." She began the climb down. Her legs shook and threatened to buckle. Hanging from one branch while her feet searched for purchase, she spotted a glimmer of light amidst the green needles a hundred yards off, still on their side of the property line. The branches between her and the shiny thing parted, the limbs whispering to each other as they spread their fingers and let her in on the secret. She looked through the binoculars. At first, she thought the metal glint belonged to one of her father's large kitchen pots, the kind always charred on the bottom and used to boil lobsters or whole chickens, but the object was too big. *Our old garbage can. The one Grammy backed into. Yes, because there's the dent in the side.* The can hovered maybe ten feet off the ground, lashed around the trunk with a snake-colored rope. *Dad said a bear stole it.*

"What the hell are you doing?" John said from the bottom of the tree. He pulled his robe tight and his slippers had mud on them. "Are you trying to break your neck? Get down here."

"John?" Mr. Bentley said, still in his underwear on his back porch. "Is everything okay? This is going to sound crazy, but my wife. She thought she saw Gwen in that tree." He laughed and scratched himself.

"I can see that," he said more to Gwen than to Mr. Bentley. "I found her. Thank you."

Gwen climbed a few more branches and looked down. "Catch." She jumped.

John had the wind knocked out of him, but he still squeezed her to his chest in a hug. "What did you think you were doing? Scouting a treehouse?" He pulled a clump of needles from her hair and looked over her cuts and scrapes, turning her face from side to side by the chin. His

anger dissipated with relief as he carried her into the house and set her on the edge of the tub.

"You're still going to school, you know." He ripped through the medicine cabinet and fought off a smile. "Christ. What am I going to do with you."

"Our trashcan."

"What about our trashcan?" He peeled the back off a Band-Aid, dabbed the bottom with Neosporin, and applied it to her cheek.

"Our old one. The one Grammy hit with her car. I found it. It's up in a tree."

"Uh huh. Sure it is. Now go get dressed."

Sarah stood in the orange glow of the porchlight, the sun not yet lost behind the tree line. Fitting for the evening, the air crept through her outfit with icy fingers. Crickets, hiding under a thin blanket of fog, leered and cat-called, and the forest felt full of eyes. She shivered and considered jumping back in her car and driving home. *Sorry hun, stomach ache.* A horror movie played on TV there, fresh popcorn with extra butter (and maybe some sugar) steamed on the table next to a bottle of wine, and her ridiculous costume could be forgotten forever, balled up and buried in the trash in exchange for a pair of sweatpants and fuzzy socks. Her grandmother would be upset, but John would understand. She rang the bell. Through the diamond-shaped window, the foyer light snapped on and Gwen, wrapped in strips of brown and black fur with plastic bird bones clinking around her neck, trundled up to let her in.

Sarah pulled at the bottom of her already-modest red skirt to make it longer. The deadbolt clicked and Gwen's face appeared in the crack of the door like a gatekeeper, her eyes and lips deep smears of black.

Sarah fought the urge to cover herself. "Scary." She tried to fake a shiver but the wind, still only teasing, made it real.

"I'm a *vólva*," Gwen said, showing black-smudged teeth. "A daughter of Freya. I commune with the dead and can see the future." She reached through the door (her hands black as well, as if she had dipped them past the wrists in a bucket of paint) and poked a bright pink square of flesh through Sarah's fishnets. "Aren't you cold?"

Before Sarah could say anything, John called from the kitchen. "Why don't you invite her in?" Footsteps lumbered across the house. A paw clapped Gwen on the shoulder and the door opened the rest of the way with a whine. Grey fur poked between the buttons of his red flannel,



half-hidden behind a clean apron, and John flashed Sarah a wolfish grin that made her feel slightly less ridiculous. "I'm just waiting on some sugar to caramelize for the poison apples. I thought I made enough, but I ran out. Come on in."

Gwen ducked under John's arm and went upstairs as the two embraced (and kissed) in the foyer. She climbed onto the bathroom sink and checked her makeup again, twisting her expression into evil faces. The wind rattled the window and the attic door creaked—a long, strained sigh, like someone pushing against the wood. Gwen looked through the mirror at the nails and counted them—all five still there. *Tonight doesn't belong to You. The Veil only thins for Odin and Freya, for Samhain and Zeus, and for the dead that aren't allowed in Your kingdom.* Halloween was a safe night, Gwen imagined, because the Earth was flooded with the damned and the old, and like a frail, retired judge too afraid to go grocery shopping after a prison break, God locked the doors and windows of Heaven and stayed inside, watching *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown* with his Son. The stingy jerk didn't leave the porchlight on for trick-or-treaters.

The cap of the lipstick tube pulled free with a pop and fell into the sink, where it spun and rolled dangerously close to the drain. Gwen puckered her lips as she had seen women do on TV and applied a fresh coat of black. She hated wearing makeup, mainly because it made eating and drinking a challenge, and John had promised her there would be all kinds of candy and snacks at the party. It would be better than trick-or-treating, he said, because there would be scary games and music and cake. She argued, of course. Halloween had always been *their* holiday—Tabitha stayed home while John and Gwen prowled the richer neighborhoods for giant Hershey bars and king-sized packs of Reese's in father-daughter costumes, then dumped their bags on the living

room carpet to admire their hoard. They even went last year—John as a crazed Geppetto and Gwen as a haunted Pinocchio, with giant buttons glued over her eyes.

Sarah tapped on the open bathroom door and poked her head in. Another gust of wind, stronger than before, rammed the side of the house and the wood of the attic door groaned, a deep, feminine growl as if from the belly of a bear.

Gwen and Sarah looked at the door, then at each other, united in fear.

"The apples are done. You ready to go?"

"Yes." Gwen hopped down from the sink. As her hand hovered over the light switch, a wooden rustling sound whispered from the attic door. Not quite cracking or scratching, but closer to what a wall spitting out a nail might sound like. She turned off the light, slammed the door behind her, and charged down the steps, pretending she didn't hear the quiet clink of something small and metal bouncing off the tile.

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"You're going to love it at my grandparents' house," Sarah said, twisting around in her seat to face Gwen. Her hood bunched up against the headrest, and Gwen could see her red bra strap bleeding through her undershirt. "My gram always goes nuts for Halloween. She buys all those really expensive decorations, you know. Like the life-sized witches and motion-sensor spiders and stuff."

John's Subaru sliced through the fog with hemlocks and white pines looming on both sides to consume the road behind them. His mask sat on the seat beside Gwen, its eyes large and cartoonish, the yellowed fangs chattering together whenever they went over a bump. Gwen picked up the wolf's head and slipped it on. There weren't actual eyeholes—the wearer looked down the muzzle through the open mouth, his face hidden behind the beast's fangs. The rubber

interior smelled like her father's beard and her breath echoed hot against her cheeks. She looked in the passenger side mirror at Sarah, the teeth of the mask silhouetted against her pale neck. Her costume bodice was loosely held together around her chest with shoestring, her breasts pulling the cord tight, and her lips, more red than her bra, smoldered in the dark. Her perfume—how had Gwen missed it before—filled the mask with apples.

The car slowed and Gwen's head knocked against the back of Sarah's seat.

"Gwen, look." John pointed, his knuckle clicking against his window. "Over there in the field. See them?"

Gwen pulled the mask off and let it fall to the floor. She crawled across the backseat and pressed her face to the glass. "See what?"

"Coyotes," John said, as he brought the car to a crawl. "At least three of them."

"Where?"

"Right there."

"I don't see anything." The fog was thickening and it was too dark, the forest a cage of intertwining branches and weeds. She thought she saw a dark shape leap between two pines, but it quickly dissolved. Her eyes pulled back and found their reflection in the glass. Gwen had forgotten she was wearing makeup.

"They're gone now." John looked at Gwen in the rearview mirror. "Why wasn't your seatbelt on, young lady?" The car began to thrum up the mountain again, but slower this time, both John and Sarah watching the sides of the road. The Subaru's high beams cast a sickly glow on the fading yellow lines and didn't even touch the darkness beyond the first row of trees.

"I always hated staying the night up here," Sarah said. "Hearing them yip and yell all night. When it didn't keep me awake, it gave me nightmares."

John squeezed her shoulder and smiled.

"We have them at our house," Gwen said, as she buckled her seatbelt. She heard them too, but never actually saw one. She stared out her window and tried to focus on the dark spaces between the trees blurring past, pretending to see something large—bigger than the Subaru—loping alongside them; who knows what else lurked within the woods—certainly creatures meaner than bears and mountain lions. Gwen pictured Big Foot dragging a dead deer by the antlers from the side of the road and carrying it back to its den, or the Jersey Devil stooping on goat-like hindlegs to drink from a stream, pushed across the border by tourists. She thought of the arrowhead she found in the dirt behind her house. Mrs. Weaver taught them last year about the Algonquin-speaking tribes that used to roam the mountains of Pennsylvania and had the class make wigwams out of toothpicks and marshmallows. Gwen's lumbering creature dispersed into the eyes of a hundred mohawked warriors, glinting behind every bush and branch they passed, soundless besides the quiet creak of their knocked bows. Looking up at the towering trees, their tops black against an even darker sky, made Gwen all too conscious of the thin metal and fiberglass shell of their car.

"And there it is," Sarah pointed up ahead, where red and orange lights burned like small brushfires, marking the entrance to a private driveway. A skeleton leaned against the mailbox and held up a sign that said ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK. Severed heads and arms hung from the trees lining the gravel drive, and Gwen gasped at seeing even the trees themselves were part of the show—angry eyes and mouths, drilled into the bark, screamed at them as they passed. The Subaru came up on a little bridge, surprisingly plain, and Sarah twisted around in her seat again.

"My grandmother wanted me to tell you to be careful around this creek, okay? The kids usually play outside after all the activities and stuff, and she says the water's been really high lately."

"Sarah's right, Gwen. That current sounds nasty."

The pulse of spooky party music began to vibrate through the car's interior, followed by the loud clatter and murmur of a crowd, and Gwen could still hear the water roaring beneath. She promised she would be careful.

"Is that the same creek that runs behind our house?" Gwen said.

"I don't think so—"

"It actually could be," John said.

"It's a lot smaller," Gwen said.

After the bridge, the trees opened up on the party itself. The house, which probably started as a small, English-style cottage, had twisted into the Gothic through years of additions and renovations, with gables and turrets protruding from a wrap-around porch like horns. Victorian windows, all framed in ornate woodwork, were sheathed in puffy spiderwebs and the glass painted with bloody handprints. Music boomed from a barn that had been converted into a garage off to the right, and between ten and fifteen cars were parked in the grass. Ghosts, superheroes, and half-naked cat-women milled about the porch and front yard with red plastic cups. Gwen wondered how many *real* monsters lurked within the crowd, crawling in from the forest and taking a drink to blend in. Open ground stretched around the two buildings for at least an acre, the outer trees (almost supernaturally) holding back the fog like a dam. A large, isolated oak stood by the creek and a bonfire blazed a few feet away. Kids of different sizes gathered

around the tree, its gnarled branches still bearing leaves, and pushed each other on a tire swing as three older women in witch hats watched from the fire.

John, Sarah, and Gwen climbed out of the car. Sarah pulled at the bottom of her skirt again, stooped to pick up the picnic basket with the poison apples inside, then flipped up her hood and pushed the car door closed with her hip.

John took Sarah under his arm and kissed the top of her head before pulling his mask on. He turned to Gwen. "What do you think, Kiddo? Better than trick-or-treating?"

The wind whipped through Gwen's braids and she breathed in the smell of Halloween—the dead leaves and cold air, the bonfire smoke, and the cheap rubber of everyone's costumes. She spotted a large buffet table on the porch, orange candy wrappers (Reese's—her favorite) easy to spot in the dark. An animatronic witch cackled and lurched at guests walking up the steps, and real jack-o-lanterns lined the porch railing, their smiles and scowls flickering. In the front yard, a dead president shook hands with a living one, a vampire drained his cup and spilled punch down his chin, and a skeleton bumped his elbow off a lawn chair while everyone around him laughed.

Gwen felt like something was missing—or more accurately, that something was there that shouldn't be. She caught the glow of a floating silver coin watching from under the porch. The lattice skirting burned a diamond pattern on the face of a one-eyed farm cat the size of a small dog, the tail of a mouse dangling from its jaws like an old piece of string. As if it were only waiting for someone to watch, the cat dropped the broken body at its feet, then turned and retreated under the house. *An offering or a trap?* Gwen watched as, framed in a dream, the mouse came back to life, hopped through a hole of the porch skirt and disappeared into the grass with a limp.

"Come on," Sarah said, taking John's hand and pulling him toward the porch. "Let me introduce you."

Before she could escape, John caught Gwen by the elbow and dragged her along just as a zombie—possibly the smallest zombie Gwen had ever seen—climbed into the tire swing, his mask a metallic green. The boy squeaked as Superman, not much bigger than the zombie, sent the tire sailing over the creek. Gwen couldn't hear it over the music, but she knew the nylon rope, a weather-stained gray, creaked like a rotten floorboard.

"Hey, Dad?" She pulled on his flannel and stood on her toes to talk in his ear. "Do tires float?"

--

Of the nine kids at the party, seven of them gathered in front of the bonfire to play hide and seek. The three old witches were gone.

"There will be two teams, and the house and garage are off-limits," the knight said, marching in front of them with his visor up. "You're also not allowed to go past the road or behind the well outback." The straps of his chest piece, the same kind found on most backpacks, slapped against the plastic as he walked. Because he was the cousin or nephew to someone who was the cousin or nephew to someone else, he had been appointed leader. He eeny-meeny-miny-moe'd who would be It, tapping each child on the shoulder with his foam sword. "Old, Black, Joe. Roger, you're up."

The wolfman, his face painted brown and black, looked more likely to pee on the rug than terrorize a German countryside. He stepped away from the other kids and growled at them.

The process started again. The knight tapped the cowboy on the shoulder, and not knowing his name, said, "you. Alright, that settles it." He flipped down his visor. "Roger.

Cowboy. Close your eyes and count to sixty." As soon as the two had turned their backs, the rest of the children ran.

Gwen headed behind the house, not realizing the well cut off the forest on the other side, and when she turned around to double back, the other kids were gone. She spotted the knight's helm glinting between two parked cars and heard the astronaut, his space helmet an old pretzel bowl, nestling himself into the branches of the oak tree. She cut for the bridge.

"Thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six," the wolfman and cowboy said in unison.

The grass whisked against Gwen's fur-wrapped boots and when she made it to bridge, her steps thundered against the wooden planks. The water rumbled beneath like a train and vibrated through the soles of her shoes as she sprinted toward the wall of fog waiting on the other side. *No one will be able to find me in that.*

"Ready or not, here we come." The cry echoed off the trees and rocks, as if the fog itself, with a hundred invisible mouths, mimicked their yell.

"Psst." A small, green face hovered over the cement railing at the end of the bridge.

"Under here. Quick." The goblin's giant ears flopped as the head disappeared.

Without thinking, she followed, rounding the orb-topped post just in time to see the bottom of a sneaker slip under the bridge. The crawlspace between the post and the edge of the bank reminded Gwen of the narrow mouth of a sewer drain, and she had to crawl on her belly, her hands and knees sinking into the mud, to get under. Weeds scraped across her face and poked into her nose as, halfway across, the image of the wolfman seeing her legs, trapped and wiggling in the dirt, made her chest tighten. In her head, he had become the real thing, and she watched as the boy sank his teeth into the flesh below her calf. Gwen kicked and pushed harder, finally pulling herself past the central support and into the sanctuary beyond.



The space opened up, and she almost had enough room to stand. She crouched at the edge of the creek and rinsed the mud from her hands as her eyes adjusted to the dark. The water churned through her fingers, its rumble amplified to a roar in the cavern, and a shiver ran her up back as she pictured the rapids seizing her by the wrists and pulling her in. The goblin and the clown sat further up the bank, leaning against one of the supports like two hitchhikers spending the night in an underpass. Flat rocks shifted under her feet as she scrabbled up to join them.

*Snakes probably love it under here in the summer.*

The clown held a finger to his lips and hissed. Gwen froze.

Boots clattered across the bridge in hollow thumps, plastic spurs clicking.

The goblin smiled, his prosthetic nose arching over his teeth like a hook. "They'll never find us. I hide down here every year."

The sounds of the cowboy passed, and the clown, his white makeup glowing around a forever blue smile, pulled a bag of gold-wrapped, chocolate coins out of his pocket—his prize for winning the Mummy Game inside—and dropped them in his lap. "Want one?" He passed a coin to the goblin and held another out for Gwen.

"Thanks." Gwen let the wrapper glide across the rocks. The three of them sat and chewed, staring into the darkness of the crawlspace on the other side of the creek. She imagined seeing three other kids, seated just as they were and eating the same candies, their mouths moving at the same time and in the same way—mirror images, except the fake children weren't wearing costumes. The goblin's double had red hair and freckles. He looked like the type of boy who would spit, scratch, and pull hair to get out of a fight, and the clown's great shoulders, almost buffalo-like, shuddered as if he were crying. Gwen's reflection, braid-less and in her school clothes, waved.

"How long do we have to wait down here? I don't like the dark," the clown said.

The goblin's eyes glinted. "I can see just fine." He finished off his gold coin. "And until they get tired of looking. Hey, give me another one of those chocolates."

"No. I'm saving them for my lunches."

"Come on, fatty. Give me another chocolate." The goblin snatched at the bag, but the clown pulled it away.

Outside, something rustled along the bank. Gwen shushed them and crept forward to look. She held her breath, straining her ears against the sound of the current. She thought she could make out the whisper of someone crawling through the grass.

A loud slapping sound from behind made her jump. The clown yelled as the goblin blurred past, the bag of gold coins clenched in his fist. He stood by the crawlspace, ready to dive under.

"Give them back!" The clown cradled his ear with one hand and raised a stone with the other, his rosy cheeks wet with tears. The giant smile let out a sob. "Now!"

"Make me."

He hurled the stone.

The goblin ducked and the rock went wide, cracking off one of the bridge supports. He cackled and stuck out his tongue. "Nice try, fatty." He pulled out one of the coins, unwrapped it with one hand, and popped it into his mouth, allowing the chocolate to dribble down his chin as he chewed. "Now I'm going to eat the whole bag."

The clown picked up another rock.

Before he could throw it, a furry claw wrapped around the goblin's ankle. "Got you," the wolfman said. He yelled over his shoulder for someone to block the other side.

The clown still held the rock over his head while Gwen pushed past him and squeezed under the lip of the bridge. She stood up too soon and scraped her back against the concrete. The cowboy and knight were halfway across the bridge. *Did they find the astronaut yet?* She scrambled up the bank, her back on fire, as the wind clubbed her ears and tried to push her into the creek. The grass along the bank rolled on itself in long tufts, and again Gwen thought of snakes as she gripped the hill, the wet blades slipping through her fingers. She made it to the top and sprinted into the fog.

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Branches and dead leaves cracked like pistol shots. The ground rose and fell without warning and she ran from tree to tree, clinging to the dark shapes like buoys as she waded into the deep end of the dark. The moon charged the fog with a ghostly luminance as blinding as snow, and Gwen couldn't see more than a foot in front of her. The knight barked orders from the end of the bridge, but as if she were underwater, his voice sounded far away—from another plane. *A trick of the fog.* She leaned against a tree to catch her breath. *Freya, hide me.*

"Form a line," he seemed to say. "We'll drive her out."

She had read of hunters doing that, marching through the woods to scare deer in the direction of other hunters, and suddenly felt afraid. *Why? It's just a game.* No, *the trees whispered*, not anymore. *Where did that come from?* She shook the thought from her head. Her best option would be to bed down under some roots or crawl under a downed trunk, wait for them to pass, then run back across the bridge and hide somewhere else. Owls—two of them—cooed back and forth, and Gwen squinted through the fog for their hunched silhouettes. Like coyotes, she had heard but never seen one, and she always wanted to see an owl spin its head

backwards. The line of hunters began their march, crackling into the woods like the start of a forest fire, and Gwen pushed on.

She laid her palm against the peeling skin of a birch as the bellow of a truck horn erupted from the sky. Gwen jumped and stumbled. A root wrapped around her ankle and she landed on her back, staring up into a pair of headlights. The black wings of a giant bird flared out from the branches of the tree, its beak opening slowly—stuttering, mechanical—as the horn blared again: a short blast, then a long one. *Not a giant bird; I've simply shrunk.* She remembered the mouse under the porch, the way its body landed in the dirt and seemed to bounce. *Run! Scamper! Hide!* She was hypnotized. The bird's head swiveled, its spotlights skidding through the fog, before settling back on Gwen. The beak slammed down like a car hood. The wings creaked back and the hot, piercing stare dimmed, the filaments cuts of throbbing orange, before finally burning out.

A Halloween decoration. She followed the wire from the bird's claws—clamps, with talons painted on—to the square motion-sensor stuck to the tree's bark, but her heart, not yet convinced, continued to pound. *Thump, thump, thump.* Her back ached—she was convinced it was bleeding—but she climbed to her feet and ran.

"Over here," they called. The crunch and snap of the hunters closed in, their line cinching around her like a noose.

She held her hands out and sprinted forward, praying her pursuers ate bark before she did as trees lunged from the mist. She ran into a waist-deep patch of underbrush. The barbed twigs scratched and grabbed at her like the arms of the drowning. She kicked and thrashed, but the harder she fought, the thicker the weeds seemed to get, as if the Earth itself was determined to hold her back. The hunters were close. Six of them, running. *They got the astronaut after all.* Patches of faux fur drifted on the fog like black feathers as the barbs broke through her costume

and ripped into her thighs. She fought on, panic fluttering in her chest. She covered her face and marched, growling through the pain, dragging large tangles of vine behind her, the bushes ripped from the ground by the roots—the strength of a child when no one is watching. A strand knotted into her braid and tore her head back, but she pushed on and, finally, broke free.

The ground hardened and flattened out, and she imagined she had stumbled into a clearing. Her boots crunched as if on gravel, but the fog was too thick to see past her waist. She wondered how far she was from the road as she pulled the branches from her costume, trying her best to pinch between the thorns. She pricked her finger and jammed it in her mouth, giving in to the tears. The cuts on her legs stung and her back had begun to throb, but she still felt triumphant and smiled through it. The crash of the hunters, so confident before, dissolved into unorganized bumbling, and she tilted her head back and laughed.

Shouting floated through the woods—adults, from the party, miles away now (but how could they be?). She tried to remember the last time she heard music. *Under the bridge?* The yelling almost sounded panicked. She thought of their red cups and ignored the feeling that she should head back. The hunters, feeling the same inclination, began their retreat.

Gwen cupped her hands around her mouth. "Come get me!"

They ignored her. Gwen waved her hand through the fog and could feel it parting around her fingers. She walked the line of brambles searching for the clearing's edge. *Am I in a field?*

She yelled again. "Olly olly oxen free?"

The Earth purred through her shoes, a quiet rumble like the snicker of a campfire. She was back in her bathroom, staring at the broken jaw of the chest as the Laughter of God shook the window in its frame. But this was different—the tone was older and more grizzled, coughing and sputtering like an old man with a pipe. *A different god.* Gwen used to think it was silly when

fur-wrapped hunters in movies put their ears to the ground and could tell how many horses and how far away, but now, kneeling and pressing her face against the

*asphalt?*

she understood; a pale horse, its whinny playing from the dirt as if from one of her father's records, galloped towards her. Gwen saw a horse the size of a house at the carnival last year with Helen, and judging from the thunder of this one's hooves, it was bigger, its mane blowing behind the face and neck of a galloping mountain. The old god whispered above the stampede like the thrum of tires over an engine and told a joke. Gwen didn't catch the punchline. The horse's eyes, blue fairy fires, held Gwen's face hypnotized against the double yellow line as the grill of a 2002 Ford Thunderbird punched through the fog.

Hands seized her by the shoulders and pulled. Stones burrowed into Gwen's palms as her rescuer dragged her across the road. She turned and watched the car blur past in slow-motion and saw her legs flattened at the knees, her severed feet staring at her from the middle of the road. *No.* She pulled her legs in as the car's tires cut the asphalt an inch from the tip of her boots. Her reflection, there and gone, winked at her from the silver paint of the car's doors. The old god roared with laughter in the growl of the Thunderbird's muffler as its taillights vanished in the fog.

Gwen stared at the ground for a long time, hugging her knees to her chest. *Where have I seen that car before?* She didn't notice the girl sitting next to her, cross-legged and staring, as if she were studying her. When Gwen did notice, she jumped, and the girl laughed. Her savior was dressed up as an Indian (Native American, Mrs. Weaver corrected, but John always said 'Indian' and to use the correct term felt like a betrayal) with a white stripe painted across her face and a black feather sticking from her braids. She couldn't have been much older than Gwen, although she *felt* older—the way she sat, with her head up and back straight, or maybe it was her eyes,

scanning Gwen the way a cat's might. Suddenly the girl's expression darkened, her mouth hanging open like something might crawl out of it.

Gwen turned, worried something was standing behind her.

The girl laughed.

"What?"

She pointed at Gwen and made the face again.

"Are you making fun of me?"

The girl covered her smile but Gwen could still see it in the slits of her eyes.

"It's not funny." Gwen pushed her.

The girl rocked back and made a whooping sound like an exotic bird, laughing even harder. Like Sarah, she wasn't wearing any pants under her costume.

Gwen climbed to her feet and lightly—she did just save her life—kicked the girl's naked shin. "Stop it!"

The girl continued to laugh, and seeing tears running down the girl's face, Gwen finally gave in and laughed, too. She held out her hand to help the girl up, but the Native stared at it as if Gwen offered her a dirty sock. She jumped to her feet like an acrobat, wiped the tears from her cheeks, and waved for Gwen to follow her, her expression suddenly somber. The girl glided through the woods as if her moccasins knew where the roots and stones were, hopping over logs and ducking under stray branches with the grace of a big cat. *No wonder no one could find her. She knows the woods the way a deer knows the woods.* They made it back to the bridge in less than ten minutes, but something was wrong; there was no music, and the adults crowded around the oak tree without their red cups.

Gwen left the Native standing at the tree line as she ran into the crowd, pushing past the milling ghosts and pirates, and got lost in waists and legs, rank with alcohol and sweat. "Dad?" She searched the flailing elbows and costume fabrics for his flannel or Sarah's fishnets, and, not watching where she was going, bounced off the hip of a Mexican wrestler. She tumbled backwards and grabbed at Marilyn Monroe's skirt, pulling the fabric down with her. The woman yelped and yanked the dress back up, her face burning through her makeup. Before the woman could yell at her, Gwen scrambled forward and broke into the clearing around the tree.

The nylon rope hung motionless, its end frayed. The tire was gone.

Gwen climbed down the bank to the churning water. A man caught her by the elbow and pulled her back. "Whoa, where you going? We already lost one kid tonight."

Gwen heard the words as if they were in a different language. She saw, further down the bank, her father. The creek narrowed around the tire, now wedged between the banks, and John, without his mask, stood on one side while a mad scientist—Sarah's grandfather—stood on the other. They stooped and each got hold of the tire. John counted to three, and the men pulled. The tire lifted free. The men tipped it, dumping the water trapped inside its rim, and something flashed, a streak of green, like the glimmer of a trout swimming down a waterfall. The green thing dived beneath the creek then reemerged, the bridge of a nose bobbing on the current. *The zombie*. Gwen pulled her elbow from the man and put her hands over her mouth. The mask got caught on a branch and nodded on the wind before giving in to the fog and sinking under the water forever.

She heard the rope snap and watched the tire bounce and splash. Judging from the angle of the tire when it got wedged between the bank, the zombie was trapped beneath the current. The water stripped the boy from his costume and carried him away, leaving nothing but a hollow



face, a husk for something else to put on and wander the night. Gwen's legs shook and her bottom lip began to tremble. She sprinted down the bank and fell to her knees at the water's edge. People called behind her, but she didn't hear them over the gurgle—*of the boy screaming bubbles underwater, his chest tight, ready to explode*—of the creek. She splashed water on her face and scrubbed at her makeup, but the boy was still there, looking up at her from the creek bed. His hair floated around his head in dark tendrils, his cheeks puffed out, skin turning purple. *No, not the boy anymore.* The face aged and withered like a plum, turned skeletal, into someone she knew but was too frail to recognize. She clawed at her makeup, the skin around her eyes raw. *No, please. Protect him. You have to.* The old man coughed and smiled. *It's not so bad, pumpkin. It'll be over before you know it.* He reached for her forehead, his cold, wet finger breaking through the water. *I now baptize you, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Buried in the likeness of His death and raised—*

Someone, kneeling behind her, pulled her away. "Oh Gwen, there you are. Your father—"

Gwen turned and buried her face in Sarah's shoulder. She sobbed into her red hood, her whole body convulsing, trembling, and suddenly freezing. She wrapped her arms around Sarah's waist and tried to crawl into her lap.

Sarah, surprised, returned the hug. "Honey, what's wrong? Why are you crying?" She cradled Gwen's neck and rubbed her back, cooing. "Eddie's going to be okay, sweetie. He only broke his arm. His mommy rushed him to the hospital to get a cast, and he's going to be fine. Thank God he didn't hit his head."

Gwen pulled back and sniffled. "He's not dead?"

"No, sweetie. He's not dead."

Gwen hugged her again, then got up. *That silver car then—it had the zombie in it.* She remembered the way the muffler laughed as it barreled past. *Not the muffler.* She ran over to the bonfire where the rest of the children gathered around the clown, who was apparently too scared to follow her into the woods and saw the whole thing. The knight sat with his visor up, the goblin still had the bag of chocolate, the astronaut held his helmet in his lap, and the cowboy and wolfman shared a bucket of popcorn.

"Brian screamed for his mom, and she came running over so fast her cat ears fell off. She jumped right in the water and pulled him out, and I swear, I thought he was dead," the clown spoke as if he were summarizing a movie. "Everyone did. His head was all lolling around and stuff," he rolled his head in imitation, tongue hanging from his mouth, "and when his mom laid him out on the grass, yelling for someone to call the cops, I saw how bad his arm was busted up. It was so bad, you could see the bone sticking out from his skin."

The rest of the children gasped. Sarah hovered close by, smirking at the clown's gross exaggerations. She was unable to shake the sense that something else was wrong. The way Gwen had clung to her—not that she wasn't flattered—left her with an unshakable feeling of dread. *Did something else happen in the woods?* She did a quick headcount. *Seven. And Adrianna's boys, on their way to the hospital, make nine. Everyone's here.*

"And then, out of nowhere, he just came back to life. Turned his head and coughed up some water and asked his mom if he was in trouble, like the bone of his arm wasn't sticking out or nothing and he just went for a swim quick."

Animals crowded around her bed. Deer, foxes, beavers, otters, and squirrels. All she could see were their eyes, moonlit quarters, nickels, and pennies climbing the wallpaper or hiding under her dresser. A racoon crawled onto a rocking chair and the ceiling fan bowed under the weight of several crows. Even the fish were there, carried in the jaws of bears—large half-dollars in the dark, sucking in their stomachs to make room. The animals came in through the open window and gathered to see her off. They didn't bring flowers or cards because they knew she wouldn't need them; such things never made the trip.

The bed springs creaked as a fox joined her. Gwen clawed for the call button dangling above her bed, but whenever she came close, the wire jerked out of reach, as if reeled in by a mischievous god sitting on the edge of the moon. *Help. Nurse.* Machines and pumps whirled and beeped. Red lights blinked—just another set of eyes. The fox's muzzle parted around small, syringe-like teeth.

"We are gathered here today," it said. He licked her palm. His tongue was cold and dry like a wet cotton swab and left her skin feeling numb. He snarled and bit down. She watched the flesh part like rubber. No blood, but she felt the heat drain from her body. The rest of the animals advanced.

She woke up. Her room vibrated with the echo of a sound she couldn't remember. Her LED alarm clock read 6:42 AM and her nightlight had gone out. She flexed her fingers and wiggled her toes, making sure everything was still there, and listened for a sound—any sound—to dispel her fear of being alone. No birds. No wind. Even the house, prone to cracking its joints, had died, and she couldn't shake the feeling that her dream had poured from her head like smoke—

*The smell.* Awake, she recognized it, as strong as if she had buried her head in his laundry basket. *Bill.* And what woke her must have been the knock on the door. A fireman or a police officer, pounding against the wood with the end of his heavy-duty flashlight. Gwen gasped and swallowed the dark. *It's happening again.*

--

*Thump, Thump, Thump.* When Gwen found out her mother died, she couldn't cry. She had been reading *Jack and the Beanstalk*, and the noise rippled across the pages as the footsteps of giants. *Fee-fi-fo-fum, I smell the feet of an Englishman.* When her mother read that line to her, she always growled and made a funny face. She grabbed at Gwen's toes and tickled her. Where was Mommy, anyway? *The school. She had to stay late for a meeting.* Daddy was in the kitchen making macaroni and cheese. The wooden spoon scraped around the bottom of the pan—around and around like a washing machine. It was almost done, then; she could smell it. The noises stopped and her father went to answer the door.

Gwen knew something was wrong before he got there. She felt as small and helpless as Jack hiding inside the teakettle. *There are no Englishmen here, the wife said. It's just your imagination. Now go take out the trash while I get your supper ready.* A murmur of voices floated up from the living room; Gwen crept to the top of the steps. Peeking through the spokes of the banister, she watched the wooden spoon fall from her father's hand and spill bright yellow across the carpet. *Mom's not going to be happy about that.* The man standing on the porch wore a yellow-green raincoat with patches running down the front. *A fireman.* Rain drops pattered off his coat.

"I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do? Maybe someone I can call?"

"No," her father said. "No, there has to be some kind of mistake. My wife. She's the vice-principal at the high school. She's at a board meeting—"

"Sir—"

Daddy stepped outside. The screen door swung shut as they walked across the porch to somewhere she couldn't hear.

But Gwen had heard enough. Her mother wouldn't be pulling into the driveway or reading her stories or tucking her in anymore. *With a sudden change of heart, the wife ripped the lid off the teakettle and decided to feed poor Jack to her husband after all—but that's not how the story goes. Isn't it?* Gwen expected the stairs to flatten beneath her and send her sprawling into the wall, for the ground to open up and swallow the house, or for the roof to crack open with a cataclysmic roar and a massive storm to rain down on all their furniture, the couch turning ugly like a possum crawling out of the river and the TV exploding with a sad, electric pop. She blinked at the wall, the coffee table, the slants of sunlight pouring in from the window—at everything staying the same. She stared at the wooden spoon and the cheese on the carpet.

She charged up the steps on all-fours and slammed the bathroom door. The lightbulb above the mirror hummed like a ringing in the ears. Gwen climbed onto the sink and stared at her reflection. Unblinking, dry eyes listening as the hum of light turned out to not be a hum at all, but a buzz; a fly circling the room above her head, unseen. The urge to smash her face into the mirror lashed out like a coiled snake: to see the glass splintered and destroyed, reflecting the bathroom as it should be. She threw up her hands to stop herself. When the tears came, they were out of frustration. Daddy found her curled into a ball on the linoleum floor and cradled her tight to his chest. He cried and she cried some more, but only because he was crying. She cried

because she couldn't cry, and cried harder because she knew her mother, somewhere, could hear her.

--

The phone rang. Bed springs creaked down the hall, followed by a sleep-drenched "hello?" *No one at the door. The phone. That's what woke me up.* As the smell faded, the sounds of birds and rain drifted in and the world woke up. Even her nightlight blinked back to life. She breathed deep and tried to hold his scent—*don't go please don't go come back*—but all she could smell now was the ugly tang of urine. Her sheets and pajamas were soaked. A crack of thunder rumbled through the house like a mother's love and something slammed against the attic door. When John came in to tell her, Gwen was already half-dressed and sobbing at the foot of her bed. She crawled onto his lap. *Why can I cry now? Why can I cry for Bill?*

He didn't have to say it, but he did: "Bill passed away this morning. He, uh. Well sweetie, he had cancer. He made me and your Grammy promise not to tell you."

--

The only person Gwen ever talked to—about not being able to cry—was Bill. She sat on the front bench seat of his old Jeep Wagoneer, the seat covered in a Native American throw blanket because the leather beneath was cracked and flaking. He drove them to the hardware store to pick up some nails for a birdhouse. A wooden cross swung from the rear mirror and clinked against the windshield while the old engine coughed and sputtered like an airplane from a WWII movie. They had both been silent for a while, and Gwen was thinking about the funeral. Bill pulled a cigarette out of the front pocket on his shirt and tapped it against his forearm a few times before sticking it in the corner of his mouth. He punched the lighter into the console and cracked his window. Almost as if he could read her mind, he said: "I just don't know what to say,

Kid. Hell, there is nothing to say. It just sucks. The whole thing just fuckin' stinks." Normally, he would tap her on the shoulder and say, "excuse my language" or "don't tell Grammy I said that," but this time he didn't.

Gwen told him that she couldn't feel sad like everybody else. Her father's face looked like a sponge that had been wrung out too many times and even though Grammy's doctor gave her a prescription, she still floated around the house like a ghost. Even Bill carried Tabitha's death like a gut wound, and he wasn't even her real dad. "What's wrong with me?" Her face crumpled into tears again, but only at hearing the words out loud.

"Aww, honey." He took a hand from the steering wheel and pulled her to him. "There's nothing wrong with you. You're just in shock, that's all. Everybody handles grief differently." The cigarette lighter popped, but he didn't reach for it. "When you see that casket tomorrow, your heart is gonna fall out through your shoes."

--

Gwen rode in the backseat of the Subaru. She wore the same black dress and the same black shoes and wondered if clothes could remember things. John drove with the radio off, and neither of them spoke. He parked down the street, behind a long line of cars. He explained before they left that Bill's funeral would be different.

"His casket will be open. So you'll be able to, uh. To see him," John said. The crumpled pamphlet someone had given him last year laid smoothed out on the counter that morning.

*Talking with a Child About the Death of a Loved One.* It had a picture of a daisy on the cover.

"But you don't have to if you don't wanna. If you would rather remember him the way he was, that's okay. I mean, we don't even have to go, if you don't want to."

*It's not like Bill's going to be there.*

"No. I want to see him," she said, even though her heart screamed that it didn't. "I have to."

--

The silver casket shined at the end of an aisle of fold-out chairs like an altar, and Gwen's heart stayed right where it was. They got there early, and Gwen wandered in to the main hall alone—Daddy, Grammy, and Bill were busy setting up picture boards in the main foyer. Flowers. Dozens of bouquets and basket arrangements, stacked on the casket itself and piled in front of it, the rest lining the room on tables pushed against the wall. All the lilies and chrysanthemums in the world couldn't have made the space smell more alive than the inside of a filing cabinet. Men in tuxedos hovered at the corners of her vision, their leather shoes gliding across the carpet unheard until she felt a hand on her shoulder, a whisper in her ear.

"Are you okay, sweetie?"

"Is there anything I can get you?"

"Does your father know you're in here?"

Deep, hollow voices. If trees could talk, they would sound like funeral home directors. She shook her head and waved them off like flies. *Their ghosts. That's why they're so good at their jobs.* The man who showed them where to park carried a black umbrella over his shoulder even though it was nice out. *So people don't see the sun shining through him.*

"Are you ready to go up?" Daddy appeared beside her, taking her hand. He wasn't crying anymore, but she wished he were.

"What do I do when I get up there?"

"You say goodbye. It doesn't have to be out loud. You can just think it in your head, if you want."



Gwen watched as the casket lumbered closer, not feeling her feet walking her there. The flower baskets had little cards tied around their handles like price tags: *Forever in Our Hearts, With Deepest Sympathy, May God's Grace Console You and Give You Peace*. Her father's hand felt warm and dead inside her own, and the casket itself—almost there now, seven steps away, six steps, five—looked nothing like the pine-board coffin she imagined. Four steps. She couldn't tell if it was metal or only painted to look that way. Gwen stepped onto the burgundy kneeler pillow with her little black dress shoes, and Daddy, not stepping on the pillow, either didn't care or didn't notice. She let go of his hand and reached toward the coffin, half expecting it to burn. The steel wasn't hot or cold, but the same temperature as her hand, her father's hand, as everything.

Her heartbeat thrummed in her ears like giants walking across the pages of a book (*don't open the teapot, Miss*) or her mother beating against the inside of the lid. *Knock, knock. Who's there?*

*But Daddy, why can't I see her?*

*Because she's been in a bad accident. She wouldn't want you to remember her that way.*

*When you see that casket tomorrow, your heart is gonna fall out through your shoes.*

*But you and Grammy got to see her.*

*Bad accident. Heart. Shoes.*

*Mommy?*

Gwen seized the handle of the lid with both hands and heaved.

"Gwen?"

It wouldn't budge. She tried again (*they nail them shut so they can't come back*). Daddy's hand on her shoulder, pulling her away. She shook him off and got under it, pushed, her shoes

sinking into the kneeler pillow, and felt the lid rising (*the creaking of nails*), finally, finally she could see and hurt the way she should, the way everyone else did, but no—her father's arm slipped around her waist and swung her off the ground, carrying her away. A quiet thud. She looked over his shoulder, just a glance, that was all she needed, just a peek—

But the lid was closed. The ghosts in suits flocked to it to check, readjust, and pile on more flowers. She hammered her fists against her father's back and screamed as he carried her out of the funeral parlor. "It's not fair."

"I told you she was too young. Too young." Grammy wailed after them, crone-like, shriveled up and trapped in a hug by Bill, (*his heart in his shoes*).

"Is there anything we can do, sir?" Another of the funeral ghosts, between them and the door. Daddy walked through him.

"No, we're fine."

*There are no Englishmen here, the wife said. It's just your imagination. Now take out the trash while I get your supper ready.*

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*It's not him.* Gwen searched the yellowed skin, melted into the white satin like wax, for a sign of Bill, but all she could see were the individual structures—wrinkled eyelids, curly nose hair, fish lips, creased forehead—as if her brain could no longer pan out. *And it has no smell.* An expression of never having been alive sagged from its skull. Gwen realized she had seen that expression before on the clay faces hanging around the art room. *It's not Bill. It doesn't even look like him. How come no one else has said anything?* Her father looked down at the corpse, silently muttering, and it hit her: *it's a wax figure.* She almost laughed. *Of course they wouldn't set a real corpse out like this.* And then it *did* look like Bill. *But only a little.*

Gwen sniffled and rubbed her eyes. "Where do they keep the real body?" She supposed they needed it close, so they could swap them out before the burial. *Unless that's not real, either.*

Her father looked mortified. "Honey, that *is* the real body. They—"

Gwen jumped off the riser and marched over to one of the funeral ghosts. "Where do you keep the real bodies? And don't lie. I know that one is fake."

The man looked up at John, who followed close behind, for permission. John nodded, and the man explained the embalming process. Gwen looked over at the corpse. The polished mahogany casket had its own gravity. She thought of that dead mouth, something that had never smiled or curled around a cigarette, or those gnarled fingers that never could have moved a chess piece, fired a gun, or shuffled a deck of cards. *No. It can't be.* Grammy stood at the foot of the coffin like a ticket collector, hugging each funeral goer as they stepped up in line—a haunted roller coaster clicking along the track towards the animatronic zombie that lurched out of the coffin like a cuckoo from a clock.

Animals from her dream gathered around the corpse and stamped the carpet with shadowy hooves and paws. They whined, howled, and puffed. *He's ruined.*

"You're lying. That's not Bill." Bill had once explained the taxidermy process—tanning the hides, putting in stuffing, replacing the eyeballs with marbles—the same way the funeral director spoke of needle injectors, trocar buttons, and face makeup. *But Bill's animals move when no one is looking. That thing doesn't move. That thing is dead.* She pictured a famous grave digger rolling in a shallow, washed-out grave. *I knew I should have dug it myself, he said—or would have said, had he been alive. But his wife and kids wouldn't let him—why are you so morbid, they asked. Let us worry about such things.* She reeled herself in. "It's not him. It's not."

"I'm sorry," John said, and captured Gwen in a hug. "We lost her mother last year and she's still trying to get a handle on things. Hell, we all are. I think he looks great. You really did a fine job. You almost can't tell—"

*--that he had cancer.*

Gwen ripped free and ran until she found an empty corner. Her chair creaked and swayed, and she imagined it wouldn't hold anyone bigger. She glared at the crowd of fresh haircuts, shiny earrings, and gold watches, and thought of switching her chair with one of the main service chairs. She laughed, imaging one of those fat, freshly-showered pretenders spilling onto the floor in the middle of prayer. *None of you even liked him.* A cloud of wet mascara and new clothes tangled with the smell of lilies and carnations. The cosmetics won.

"He was such a good man. So—"

"I just feel so bad for Helen. I mean, those two have been together for what, thirty years now—"

"Oh, this old thing? You'll never guess how much I paid for it. I found it on sale at—"

"Benjamin just wrapped up with football, and Lily's in kindergarten now. She just loves it. Takes after her father—"

"Well, you look great. It's so good to see you again." The man caught Gwen looking at him. "I mean, terrible circumstances. Just terrible. Bill was such a great guy." He turned back to the woman. "Are you busy after this? What do you say we grab some coffee—"

She hated them all. Except John and Helen, of course. They were simply too grieved to notice. To them, it didn't matter if the body was real or not—ruined or not—because either way, he wasn't coming back. But Gwen had to see him. She had to know. *We do all our embalming*

*on-site, downstairs in the basement.* What if, somewhere below her feet, the real Bill laughed and cried, knowing that none of his friends could tell the difference?

Gwen expected John to be mad when he found her, but he wasn't. "You okay, sweetie? You want to go home?"

"No, I'm okay. I need to use the restroom."

He offered to show her where it was.

"It's okay. I can find it."

John sat down, felt the chair buckle, and moved to one beside it. He felt as if he should have followed her, but Tabitha's voice whispered from the back of his mind to let her go. *Give her some space. She needs to figure this out on her own.* He allowed himself, for a moment, to pretend that his dead wife sat beside him. He breathed in her strawberry perfume and fought off a sob as her invisible hand wrapped around his.

He looked at the coffin and at Helen, shaking and sobbing on someone's shoulder. "Jesus Christ, Bill. You couldn't have waited one more year?" He forced a laugh, rubbed his eyes on his sleeve, and got up, leaving his dead wife in the rickety chair. He stepped outside, nodded to the group of smokers—mostly Bill's old poker buddies—and called Sarah.

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All of the doors were marked with grey placards. OFFICE. STORAGE CLOSET. DISPLAY ROOM. She fiddled with an urn, unscrewed the top, and peeked inside. No ashes or bone fragments—just a little bag of silicone. A greeting card rack housed pamphlets like the one her father dug out that morning. *Grieving as a Woman. Grieving as a Husband. Grieving as a Parent.* They all used the same font and the same soft shade of purple and the same picture of the same daisy. She surveyed the room. Most of the funeral directors were distracted with the crowd.

She found the door she wanted.

BASEMENT.

The knob turned and she let go, stepping into the dream.

The basement was an architectural collage of places Gwen had been and places Gwen had yet to be. The wide staircase, with its rubber-padded steps and baby powder smell, came from the nursing home Helen dragged her to every Christmas to pass out fruit baskets, but the electric chair-lift was replaced with a simple ramp. The stairwell bled onto a dimly-lit hallway routed from her school, the only differences being the black gurney tracks on the floor and the loud thrum of the ocean bearing down on the brick. *An underwater tunnel, closed off from the animals. A place only God can see.* Her ears popped. Cages hung around the orange sodium lamps. Gwen held her breath.

*I now baptize you, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*

The large metal door of the walk-in freezer—pulled from her father's restaurant—had a padlock hanging from the latch. She wrestled it free and dropped it, and the heavy thud echoed from the bottom of a mineshaft. Rubber seals broke with a quiet hiss, and four invisible horsemen rode on gusts of cold, unleashing the stench of a high school biology lab upon the world. Death of the dead, the smell of animal intestines floating in glass jars like green olives. The roar of the ocean had really been a large exhaust fan, only strong enough to keep the smell from upstairs. Gwen hugged herself against the cold and choked on the fumes.

*The first thing we do is bathe them. Trim their nails, wash under their armpits and behind their ears. Sometimes they need a haircut so we cut their hair.*

The very real corpse laid across a human-sized sink and stared at the ceiling like a beached whale. He was older than John but younger than Bill, with a beer gut and a race car

moustache. His chest and arms were covered in hair and his skin was an unnatural ashen color. Waves of radiation pulsed from the naked flesh and held her. His penis poked from a bush of pubic hair like a small nose. Gwen tried not to look at him—to focus on the puppy calendar on the wall, the pair of shoes, carefully arranged atop a pile of carefully folded clothes as if they were for sale, or the long tube pumping a bright pink liquid into the base of the dead man's throat.

*After the face is set, we hook the body up to a pump, like a mechanical heart, and replace most of the blood with embalming fluid to. Give the body back its natural color, and slow the process of decay.*

A cupboard slammed, and a chef wearing a face mask and rubber gloves danced across the small kitchen. Music, only the drums audible over the exhaust fan, clicked from his headphones like the world's smallest typewriter falling down the stairs as he began to rub the man's arms and legs. The cook hadn't seen her. He poked, prodded, and squeezed. She saw her father grilling steaks, poking the meat with his finger. *Still a little rare. Leave it on for another five minutes.* The centrifugal pump, a round, clear container spinning pink liquid like a washing machine, suddenly looked like an expensive turkey baster. A tuxedo hovered below the exhaust fan and swayed in its drycleaner body bag, a gold cross glinting through the plastic.

*Buried in the likeness of His death.*

*Slow the process of decay.*

*Raised in the likeness.*

*Bill.*

*Mom?*

*Fee-fi-fo-fum, I smell the feet of an Englishman.*

Gwen sprinted down the hallway. She slipped on the bottom step, landed hard and crawled the rest of the way, slamming the door behind her. She waited for someone to pick her up and carry her away from the dream and the basement and the corpses and the flowers and the people and the urns and the pamphlets and the uncomfortable, rickety chairs, but no one did. The crowd had migrated.

She found John waiting outside the bathrooms.

"Hey, where—"

"I want to go home," Gwen said.

A speaker popped, and the crowd gasped and covered their ears against the squeal of feedback. "Sorry about that, folks," the voice of God said, echoing from the ceiling and the televisions and every room at once. "If everyone could gather and come take a seat. The service is about to begin."

John leaned in. "What was that? I couldn't hear you over the—"

"I want to go—"

"Oh, there you are!" Helen wrapped her tentacles around Gwen. She planted hot, wet kisses on her cheeks and kneeled to bury her face in Gwen's shoulder. She said something, but Gwen couldn't make out what it was. She let her go. "This is my granddaughter," she said to a woman standing behind them. "Her and my Bill were so close." She pulled a used tissue from her pocket, wiped her nose, and put it back. She took Gwen's hand. "I want you to sit up front with me." She looked at John. "Your old Grammy needs her little munchkin right now."

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Even the good chairs were lumpy and hard. Gwen poked her grandmother. "Is it almost over?"



Helen, without turning her head, patted Gwen's knee. "Almost."

A pastor Gwen didn't recognize told stories about and quoted people she never heard of. He described life as a game, as seasons, as a candle, and as mountains and rivers. *Which is it?* The man's robe—more of a poncho—would have made a better rug, and between the robe and his John Lennon glasses, he looked more fit to roll cigarettes or read a poker table than transcribe the word of God. He opened his Bible. Pink, yellow, and red tape marked certain passages like fake fingernails glued to the Holy Book. The man flipped through them. Read, explain, repeat.

"And the Lord sayeth. To every thing there is a season. A time to be born, and a time to die. A time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted—"

"The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away—"

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God. Believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you with me—"

*Prepare a place for you.* Gwen saw the basement kitchen, the human-shaped sinks, and the tube of pink liquid.

He closed His book like a judge bringing down a gavel. "God has a plan for each us, whether we like it or not. Remember that you are all where you are supposed to be. You see what He wants you to see. You hear what He wants you to hear. And you feel what you are supposed to feel." He looked at Gwen. The curtains parted like a pair of black wings, and a slant of sunlight took one of the pastor's eyes. He smiled and tipped his head, no longer just a poker-playing priest, but a god in disguise. "Let us mourn our dear friend and move on. After all, right now, as we speak, he's drinking wine and, knowing Bill, trying to play a round of cards with the angels." The crowd clapped. Some laughed and some sobbed. Helen laughed and sobbed.

"And now, I would like to invite all the followers of Jesus Christ to partake with me in holy communion." He pulled the top off a circular tray of shot glasses and rang the metal lid off the side. Gwen tried to get up, to run to the back of the room and find her father, but Helen seized her arm. Before she could protest, the crowd rose to their feet and pushed forward. She saw John, waiting against the back wall, and silently cried for help, but there was no way for him to get through the stampede. Helen pulled her forward as the pastor uncorked a bottle. The crowd formed a line, and each took one of the shot glasses. Gwen's was heavier than she had expected. Wine glugged into a gold chalice and, before corking it, Gwen watched the man of God take a swig. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and grinned.

A man in a real pastor robe appeared with a loaf of bread, and the two holy men marched down the line as the crowd held out their cups. A bruise had formed on her knee from the fall, and it began to throb. *Thump, Thump, Thump*. The pastors murmured something to each person as one filled the crowd's glasses and the other passed out bread. Everything she had seen had caught up with her at once. Her legs wobbled, and a loud ringing started in her left ear. She squeezed Helen's hand.

"I want to go home."

"I know, sweetie, I know. Soon. We're almost done. Hold out your hand."

The new pastor placed a piece of bread in Gwen's palm. She ate it, hoping it would make her feel better.

"Body of Christ," the man said. "Body of Christ." He gave Helen a piece. "Body of Christ."

*What?*

"Blood of Christ," the other pastor said as he poured. "Blood of Christ." He stopped at Gwen. "You're a little young, aren't you?" He smiled. "Well, I guess if your Grammy says it's okay." He tipped the chalice forward.

*Body of Christ.*

*Blood of Christ.*

*We replace most of the blood—*

Thick, red wine flowed. Small bubbles appeared around the rim. The piece of bread in her stomach turned. *Still a little rare. Leave it on for another five minutes.*

Gwen dropped her glass. Wine spilled on her shoes and soaked into the grey carpet as she lurched forward. She threw up on the pastor's hands, his robe, and into his pretty, gold cup.

Gwen climbed into the backseat of her grandmother's SUV after school and buckled herself in. Helen stuck her bookmark—a metal mermaid with a little bead tied to its tail—into her Western and dropped the book on the passenger seat before asking her how her day was. The car always smelled like newspaper because of the boxes of recyclables piled up in the trunk. Bill used to take them.

"We got a quick errand to run," Helen said.

Gwen liked running errands with Helen; her grandmother knew everyone and would stop and talk to people in the middle of the grocery store while Gwen played with the hose attached to the produce cooler or slipped a box of cookies into the cart, hiding them under a frozen bag of peas or broccoli. Grammy would laugh, introduce Gwen as 'her little Munchkin,' and put the cookies back on the shelf when Gwen wasn't looking. When they were checking out, if Gwen didn't do anything too bad, Grammy would wink at her and throw two candy bars onto the conveyor belt.

Since Helen kept the windows locked, Gwen played with the button while she drove. She pretended the SUV was stuck on a track like a train car, capable of only going forwards and backwards, and that she was actually driving by holding the 'up' button down. When the car stopped at a red light or a stop sign, she hit the other button. The church loomed out of its empty parking lot like a mausoleum, the red paint on the cathedral door flaking, its black hinges rusted.

"What are we doing here?" Gwen had never been to church, but she immediately recognized it for what it was.

"I have to drop something off for Pastor Ryan quick."

Gwen didn't move to unbuckle her seatbelt. She followed the steeple up to its spiraled point and imagined what God must look like, lurking behind the stained glass windows or peering out from behind the giant bell like the hunchback of Notre Dame.

Helen opened her door. "What are you waiting on? Let's go."

"I want to wait here."

"Why don't you come in with me. We'll be in and out, I promise."

Gwen groaned. She unclipped her belt and slid off the seat, dragging her feet across the gravel parking lot. She stepped into the church like a soldier being escorted through an enemy camp, her grandmother's hand on her shoulder as the heavy door closed behind them with a definitive bang. The hallway smelled like what Gwen imagined the cobwebbed space between two columns of a radiator must smell like, and the carpet runners, sanded flat from decades of shuffling white Velcro sneakers, crunched under her shoes like cardboard. Dust swirled under the amber glow of electric candles like cigarette smoke and the woodwork, dark mahogany with painted green and red trims, seemed to breathe.

"Wait here while I find the Pastor."

"What'd I come in for if you were just gonna make me wait anyway?"

Helen pretended not to hear her and hustled off the main hallway into what looked like a series of lounge areas with overstuffed leather furniture. Not that Gwen was upset about it—she didn't want to talk to the Pastor, anyway. The silence of the high ceilings and paneled walls seemed to hum and echo off the metal crosses, candleholders, and fake plants, and Gwen suddenly felt naked. She surveyed the foyer for possible hiding spots. There was a coat rack beside the door they came in, bowed in the middle like something from a thrift store, and a large vase at the end of the hall she could probably fit inside. She ventured further and stopped.

On the wall in a golden picture frame, the yellow color bronzed under several inches of dust, was a painting of Jesus with a hole in his chest, his exposed heart wreathed in thorns and bleeding fire. Gwen didn't realize it was a painting at first and dove into the side room her grandmother had entered. She peeked back around the corner after she caught her breath. *Even though it's just a painting, He can still see me through it.* Gwen imagined a hidden walkway behind the wall where Jesus could stand and slide a piece of wood and fabric from behind the frame, replacing the eyes of the image with His own. *That's silly. He is His picture; every painting a camera and every cross a microphone.* She shivered. She didn't want her grandmother to catch her following her, so she got down on her knees and peeked out into the hallway again to see if anyone was coming. She took a deep breath, counted to three, and somersaulted across the hallway into the room on the other side.

She stood up in the heart of the church, the electric candles brighter, the silent hum louder. Two rows of pews led up to Jesus himself, the real Him and not a painting—twenty feet tall, head bowed, naked, nailed to a cross, and bleeding all over. Gwen ducked between the pews and silently begged the floorboards that He hadn't seen her. A cough drop wrapper under the pew in front of her scraped across the floor on her breath. She thought she heard something creak—*his wooden neck, as He raised His head to look around the room. That's not His blood that He's covered in.* She thought of those giant biceps and the bulging, rippling muscles in His abdomen and knew that cross wasn't holding Him back. *He's faking, waiting like a tiger does in the tall grass.* She wanted to shout at Him that she wasn't fooled; she knew that after the church closed and the pastors went home, He climbed down and stretched.

*What does He eat?*

*Cats and dogs. He hunts strays in the back alleys and when He can't find any, He breaks into people's houses and steals their pets.*

Gwen pulled one of the heavy psalm books out of the wooden holster and army-crawled to the aisle. Jesus's head hung forward with his chin on his chest, his face a smear of crumpled agony. *Faker.* His eyes flicked upwards, an unearthly, orange glow burning behind the wood, and His mouth twisted into a grin. His stomach heaved—a chuckle. *Come closer,* He said, *I eat children, too.* Gwen pulled back behind the pew and clutched the psalm book to her chest. The cross creaked again, its chains rattling as He pulled first His right hand free, then His left. Dust billowed from His joints and His giant feet hit the floor like logs falling off a truck. He bent backwards to stretch and His spine popped like wood knots bursting in a fire. *Ahh,* He said, *that's better.*

Gwen, like pulling the pin from a grenade, pressed the psalm book to her lips for luck and lobbed it over the pew. Its pages fluttered, and by the time the book landed with a dull thud, Gwen was sprinting down the aisle. Jesus hissed, the collective scream of all the half-digested cats in His belly, as Gwen slipped on the runner and stumbled into a pillar of black, musty-smelling cloth. She landed on her tailbone and cried out. Pastor Stanley, the older of the two—the one Gwen elbowed in the nose—loomed over her with a child-sized butterfly net clutched in his bony fists, his round glasses inhuman orbs of reflected candlelight in an otherwise walking shadow. *The pastors are in on it! They know!* Gwen covered her face with her arms and braced herself for the swoosh of the net. *Does Grammy?*

But the net didn't drop. Jesus was silent behind her, and the pastor stumbled a little himself. Gwen lowered her arms and, still half-flinching, peered up at him. The skeletal figure trembled as if, at any moment, he might dissipate into a hundred cockroaches. *He's laughing.*

She crawled backwards on her elbows before standing up. Jesus was back on his cross where He belonged, head bowed and pretending to die.

"You know, if I didn't know any better," the pastor's giggling caved into an awful coughing fit, the old man's fist shaking over his mouth as he doubled over. It was hard for Gwen to believe how resolutely he had stood before. *I thought I ran into a wall.* He straightened and wiped the tears from behind his glasses. "If I didn't know any better, I might think that you were tryin' to kill me." He pointed at the cross with his net. "You aiming at our friend up there?"

"He was chasing me," she said, without turning around.

"Nah. He's more scared of you than you are of him." He settled into a pew to catch his breath and patted the space next to him. The man's skin hung from him as if he were deflated; Gwen thought of mummies as she climbed onto the pew, keeping one eye on the net. "I had a grandmother that was afraid of birds. She was attacked by chickens as a girl, and the mere sight of anything with feathers sent her running." He pulled his head in toward his shoulders like a turtle and shielded his balding head, chuckling. He smelled like incense and her grandmother's hand soap. "Normally this is Pastor Ryan's job," he nudged the butterfly net with his foot, now propped against the back of the pew in front of them, "but he's busy talking with your Grammy. So I said I'd do it. I'm not too old yet."

"What are you talking about?"

"Why, the bird up there. What'd you think I was talking about?" He motioned toward Jesus again, and sure enough, a pigeon edged its way across the cross arm above Jesus's shoulder. The bird bobbed and swayed along the wooden beam like a drunk, a splotch of white spilled across its gray, puffy chest. "Been in here for a few days now, I think. They get in through the bell tower. Big church like this, so many cracks and openings," he shook his head.



The bird pecked at Jesus's cheek and neck, the hollow clicking lost beneath the hum of the lights. "I don't mind 'em myself, but I don't have to clean up after 'em, neither." He bumped Gwen with his shoulder and smiled, his dentures too big for his face. "And I suppose some of our congregation might be scared of 'em like my old Nanna was."

The bird hopped onto Jesus's shoulder and pecked His ear. Something caught its attention there and it pecked again, burrowing its bullet-like head inside. *To tell him a secret.* Gwen imagined the head pulling away with a black, worm-like tendril clamped in its beak—a piece of Jesus's brain, or one of those parasitic Guinea worms she saw on a documentary once. *The worms could grow up to three feet long, and you had to be careful pulling them out or they could break off and slither deeper in.* The bird's head reappeared, wormless, and without a warning, the bird took flight, sailing across the high ceiling to nestle on top of a chandelier. Gwen saw the electric candles burning for real and the bird going up in flames, a defeathered, fully-cooked rotisserie chicken bouncing off the floor.

"In the Bible," the pastor said.

Gwen jumped. She had forgotten he was there.

"Birds are God's messengers." He leaned towards Gwen and looked at her from overtop his glasses. "They're His eyes." He pointed to his own eye and pulled the bottom lid down, revealing thin, spidery veins snaking from the red across the white. The iris, the blue-green color of a lake, looked too young—the eye of a boy trapped in the dying head of an old man. "Watching, and flying back to report." He leaned back and scratched his chin. "My son thinks I'm crazy when I tell people this, but I was in a car accident a few years ago. Big ol' trailer-truck ran my little Coop off the road. I woke up upside down, the Coop at the bottom of a ditch, and the steering wheel keeping me there. Now, I won't gross you out with all the details," he stared at

the pigeon while he spoke as if the bird had been there, the remembered pain flickering across his brow like a door thrown open and slammed closed.

Gwen saw it; she wasn't exactly sure what a Coop was, but she saw the pastor's shiny forehead cracked and dripping like a ruptured watermelon, heard the *tap, tap, tap* of blood pooling on the car's ceiling—the ceiling where the floor should be—while the pastor blinked, dazed, behind his shattered glasses, his mind swimming in pain and the stench of gasoline. The car's tires continued to spin, thrumming against the sky.

"But I was in pretty bad shape."

The pigeon's entire body rippled like a dog shaking off water. A gray feather seesawed through the air as the bird cooed and waddled to a different wrung of the chandelier.

"And then I heard this clicking. This tapping. I look up. The windshield's gone, of course, and this bird—not a dove or an eagle or anything like that. No. A common sparrow, just as ugly and plain as our friend there—hopped along, maybe this far from my face," the pastor held his hand up in front of his nose. "Pecking at the shards of broken glass. I tried to yell, to scare it off. 'Don't eat that,' I tried to say. 'You'll die.' But I couldn't talk," he motioned toward his chin.

"Broken jaw. But this bird, all of a sudden, as if he could read my thoughts. He looked up at me." The pastor took Gwen by the shoulders, his hands warm and dry like her doctor's, and brought his face close to hers. His breath stank of coffee and menthol. "He looked me right in the eye, just as I'm looking at you now. And he flew off." He let go of Gwen's shoulders and snapped his fingers. "Just like that, he flew off.

"When I woke up at the hospital—I don't remember much about the paramedics or the ride there, or any of the surgeries—I found out the guy driving the truck died. Killed on impact, they said. Him, a young guy in that big truck, and here I am, still kicking. Don't make much

sense, does it?" He shook his head and chuckled. "Anyway, they gave me this notepad and a pen to talk with, since my head was all wrapped up, and I asked 'em who called the ambulance. We were on a back road that didn't get much traffic, you see, and whoever the good Samaritan was, well, I wanted to thank 'em. And the doctor, he just kinda smiles and says, 'I did.' 'It was the strangest thing,' he said. 'I live up that way, but I always take One Eighty. Quicker, and I don't have to worry so much about hitting any deer. But I don't know. This morning I just got this weird feeling not to take the highway.'" The pastor smiled. "'I don't know if you're a God-fearing man,' he says," the pastor winked at her, "'but I think you got someone watching over you.'" The pastor looked up at the pigeon and didn't say anything for a long time. Gwen wondered if he fell asleep.

"What, and you think it was the bird?"

The pastor laughed himself into another coughing fit. "You sound just like my son." He patted her on the back, then scrunched up his nose and spoke in a nasally whine: "Yeah Dad, that bird flew all the way up to Heaven and told God to send a doctor." He laughed again. "Makes more sense than Him seeing me in a crystal ball though, don't it?"

The pigeon took flight again, its shadow gliding down the middle of the runner to join the darkness of the foyer. The plop of guano hitting the carpet was unmistakable. Gwen and the pastor looked at each other and laughed.

The pastor cupped his hands around his mouth. "Oh, Pastor Ryan."

They laughed harder.

Gwen remembered Jesus and the funniness of Pastor Ryan, kneeling with a bucket of soapy water and cursing Pastor Stan under his breath, drained from her face. She looked up at Him, terrified that the story had only been a distraction and He would be gone, but the giant

remained nailed to His post. Worse than a wink, the long pointer finger of His right hand twitched. *Don't worry, He seemed to say, I can be very patient.*

Pastor Stan, gripping the armrest, pushed himself to his feet and hobbled toward Him. The psalm book Gwen had thrown laid splayed out, binding up, in the middle of the aisle. The pastor stooped with one hand on his back and gave out a little cry as he picked it up and smoothed its pages. Gwen realized they weren't in on it—the pastors were just as fooled as everyone else, unwitting pawns, spared only because He needed them to hang up crosses and paintings. *That's why He killed the truck driver and saved Pastor Stan.* She thought of the pigeon sticking its head in Jesus's ear. *What did it say to Him?* The pastor came back and handed Gwen the psalm book. She slipped it back into its holster.

He took up his net like a cane and nodded toward the door. "Let's go find your Grammy."

Gwen followed him out of the nave, not allowing herself to look back; she knew He would be staring at her, His mouth a toothy grin of splinters. She shivered.

Izzy told her how to do it.

Gwen peeked into the dark hallway. The house held its breath, the ticking of the bathroom clock thudding inside its hollow walls like a heartbeat. Her grandmother's door hung ajar—she started leaving it open since Bill died, like one day he might make the walk from the cemetery and come back to bed—but no light burned within.

"Grammy?" Her whisper felt amplified. "Are you awake?"

Old bedsprings crunched, followed by the short trumpet of a snore.

Gwen left her own door open. The moon, a half-closed eye, watched as she tiptoed down the stairs. Even though she took each step on the side closest to the wall, the old boards creaked, and when she got to the bottom, she waited for a sign Helen woke up. Izzy's voice played from the back of her mind: "if you're interrupted, bad things happen." Like what, Gwen had asked. "Bad Things. Whatever you do, don't let the candle go out. And don't let anyone else come into the room." She told Gwen about a boy in Ohio who went missing because his parents walked in on him. "They told the cops they see him in the mirror sometimes when they're brushing their teeth."

The only reason Gwen believed her was because Izzy's last name was Sanders, and the funeral home was called Sanders' Mortuary.

The old woman snored.

Gwen let out her breath and padded across the foyer, the tile cold and slick under her bare feet. The smell hit her first—cigarettes, popcorn, and animal fur. That hollow feeling, like she had turned into a nesting doll and her smaller figures had run away, hit her again. A shape darker than the rest of the room waved from Bill's recliner. The battered chair didn't rock, but its

stillness was more obscene somehow, like a ball stopping mid-roll. Gwen fell onto the couch. The tip of his cigarette glowed a brighter orange before blinking out.

*Hey, Pumpkin.* Another wink of the cigarette.

The chair didn't rock because he had been waiting up for her. She scrambled for the lamp's pull-chain. Her hands shook and her skin tingled on an electric current. The pull-chain bounced off her hand and clinked against glass. She tried again, caught it, and pulled. She thought she heard the light blow out, but the bulb swelled like a collapsed lung with an ugly yellow light.

A pair of Bill's black pants were draped over the back of his chair. *But the cigarette?* The red LED clock above the stove blinked—forever twelve o'clock—and the light reflected off the belt buckle. A pang of grief punched a hole in Gwen's heart. *Bill wasn't waiting up for me because he's waiting up with Mom. Neither of them will wait up for me or yell at me or make me put my coat on before going outside. They won't make me do my homework or the dishes or ground me for getting in fights.*

"Now, don't you go messin' with no Ouija boards," Bill said, the memory rising from the dark water of her mind like a ghost. "They're bad luck." He leaned back in a lawn chair on the deck of his cabin, the metal hinges creaking, while the local rock station buzzed through an industrial-sized radio. Gwen played with the tab on her soda can and almost cut herself. Mosquitos bit at her ankles and she swatted a gnat away from her ear.

Tabitha sat down next to them on the Bad Lawn Chair—the rusty one that sometimes dumped its guests on the ground. The chair liked Tabitha though, and never spit her out. "John let her watch *The Exorcist* last week," she said, as she rummaged through the cooler for a bottle of something Gwen couldn't pronounce. The bottle made a popping sound when she opened it,

and a genie-like mist danced along the rim. "You better listen to Bill. Ghosts aren't something you should fool with." She brought the bottle to her lips and swallowed the genie.

"Nonsense," John said from the grill. He pressed a burger with the back of his spatula. Beads of blood dripped onto the flames and the burger hissed as white smoke engulfed the meat. He closed the lid, hung the spatula on the handle—a drip of grease splashed in the dirt—and took a sip of his soda. "I think a Ouija board could be a great learning tool. Help her out with her spelling." He smiled. "And I didn't let her watch the whole thing."

"No, just enough to give her nightmares," Tabitha said.

"Nuh uh," Gwen said. "I don't get nightmares." And she didn't; they didn't start until after her mother died. She loved the idea, however, of an invisible friend. *My own Captain Howdy*. She drew the alphabet on a sheet of cardboard and used a glass for a planchette, but it didn't work. John said it was because real Ouija boards were made out of a special wood.

Tabitha kissed the top of her head and pulled her into a short hug. "I know. My brave little warrior." The smell of strawberries hung around her neck.

Helen, her lips clamped in a tight, white line, slapped the arms of her chair as she got up. "I don't think it's funny. A little girl has no business watching that. That trash." She stomped up the steps and slammed the cabin door.

The three adults exchanged smiles. "I better go calm her down," Bill said, but he didn't get up.

*Poor Bill.*

The kitchen clock blinked, another pulse of the phantom cigarette, another reminder that Bill was gone. *Izzy said it would only work at three a.m.* Gwen turned off the lamp and wore the dark like a blanket as she half-carried and half-dragged a chair from the dining table and propped

it against the hutch. Outside the window, moths bounced against the streetlamp and the hum of large trucks echoed from the highway. Helen's driveway was empty and a thin coating of dew shined on the roof of her car. She thought she saw the glimmer of eyes, a deer or a fox's, amidst the brush, but she couldn't find them again.

Izzy said it had to be a white candle. Gwen climbed on top of the chair and, standing on her toes, tried to open the cabinet. She pulled harder. The doors wouldn't budge. She was afraid of pulling too hard, for when they gave, she might topple from her chair. She tried again. Three large, white tower candles taunted her from the other side of the glass. Gwen ran her fingers over the handles looking for a keyhole or a latch, but the pieces were simple rings set into flat, bronze plates—no hidden mechanisms or secret buttons. The cabinet simply refused to open, as if it suddenly had motivations of its own. Her reflection whispered from the glass not to do it, go back to bed, *don't go messin' with no Oujia boards*. She pulled again. The doors opened, splitting her reflection in two. Gwen took one of the tower candles, pushed the chair back, then rifled through the junk drawer for a lighter. The trigger clicked and a small, blue flame leaped from the tip. She crept back to her room.

*Open the window. Light the candle. Place it behind you.* Gwen sat down in front of her mother's vanity mirror and ran her palms over the smooth, mahogany surface. The wood purred at her touch. *It recognizes me*. She looked into the dark, rippling water of the glass and saw not the muddied reflection of her room—her mother's old room—but first her mother, putting in an earring or fixing her hair while a five-year-old Gwendolyn hovered at her elbow. The memory receded into the black, and then she did see the room, the corners and edges of her mother's childhood dresser, bed, and lamp shifting and stretching in the flickering dark. Cold crept in like a fog and Gwen slipped her arms inside her shirt.



*Stare into the mirror, Izzy said, and imagine falling into the glass.*

*Mirror Mirror, on the wall.*

Thirty pairs of eyes stared at her. *The dolls.* Gwen hated dolls, even though these, like everything else, belonged once to her mother. The first thing she did when she got to her grandmother's house was to turn them, aiming their blank faces and pointy shoes at the wallpaper. Their shoes still pointed away, but their porcelain heads had spun on broken necks. Gwen's throat tightened as she imagined them climbing down from their shelves. The little cadavers fell over each other and marched across her bed, tiny hands outstretched, the tips of needle-like fingers whittled into claws. She got ready to run.

*But—*

No. Just a trick of the light; whenever her eyes settled on a specific doll, Gwen saw nothing but the back of a braid or a hat, the candlelight trapped in their plastic curls. The dolls at the corners of her vision continued to peek and smile, turning away just as Gwen's eyes shifted. *Mother, may I take five steps forward? No child, but you may take three. Mother, may I turn around?*

The dolls whispered to each other—the language of dead leaves. *Whatever you see in the mirror, Izzy said, don't look behind you.* The curtains billowed. Gwen jumped and shivered.

*It only works at three a.m.*

Gwen stared into her own eyes and tried to ignore everything else. She swallowed.

"Mom?"

*There's no magic words or anything?*

*No, Izzy said, you just say their name.*

Gwen wanted Shakespeare and magic tricks. She wanted talismans, a circle of protective salt, and symbols drawn in blood. *What if I call the wrong person?*

*You won't, Izzy said.*

"Tabitha Elizabeth Foster." Like the real names of all moms, the words sounded foreign and sterile—not her mother's name at all, but the heading of an obituary, as cold as the tombstone it was carved on. The dolls' whispering grew louder. She knew they were all staring now. Gwen filled the mirror with her mother's face and the smell of strawberries. She conjured her mother's favorite sweater in the dark pool of glass and dove in, pressing herself against its fibers and clinging to the memory. The dolls and the room and the cold broke apart and trailed away as Gwen drowned in the imagined embrace. Her mother kissed the top of her head and rubbed her back. She opened her mouth to speak, and Gwen's heart swelled at the chance to remember the sound.

*What if it's not her? What if it's an imposter?*

"—now I know what you think. You think you are going to live forever. But you are not. You. Are going. To die," the words of an angry God boomed through the old man's voice, pulled from the air by the twisted antennae of Bill's radio somewhere down the hall. "And when your heart beats for the last time. When your lungs fill up on their last mouthful of air, your spirit is going to leave this earthly plane. Are you prepared? Do you know where your soul is going? Hell is real, people. Hell is—"

The mirror ripped Tabitha's presence away and Gwen gasped and choked on the dark. She jerked backwards and knocked over the candle. Liquid wax doused the flame. Doll limbs, louder than the radio, began to creak, and Gwen could just make out the fluttering, skipping,

prancing of wedding dresses and birthday gowns and the patter of tiny shoes. She crawled toward the door and put her palm in the puddle of hot wax. She screamed.

"—the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the Blazing Furnace, where there will be Weeping and a Gnashing of—"

The voice stopped as the radio crashed to the floor, the plastic splintering, the glass cracking. Helen's bed crunched and footsteps marched. Her bedroom door knocked against the wall as Gwen scrambled to her feet and ran. They met in the hallway and Gwen buried herself in the old woman's arms.

"It's okay, sweetie. It was just that. That Damn radio—" Helen cried and laughed. "He never could fix nothing, could he?"

The two rocked, crying because it felt good to, and when they couldn't cry anymore, they returned to Helen's room and crawled into bed together because the house felt full of ghosts. As she stared out the window and waited for sleep, Gwen saw a shooting star. She wondered where it landed and what it looked like, cold and embedded in the Earth, as she made her wish.

Gwen had a nightmare that she was taking a bath and the bottom of the tub dropped out from under her. She tried to swim back to the surface but only sank deeper and deeper into the darkness. She could see her father and grandmother in the bathroom looking down on her, her father in a suit and tie, distracted by something else in the tub and not seeing her at all, and her grandmother in a black dress, waving, smiling, and digging through her purse for a camera. Something waited for her at the bottom of the depths, something familiar, but Gwen couldn't remember what it was.

She woke up, her nightmare still hanging on the dark like a fog, and saw something black fly across the ceiling of her room. She sat up and reached for the switch to her lamp, but her fingers fumbled along the cord and couldn't find it. A shape loomed in the doorway of her closet, the head and shoulders of something peeking out from between the shirts and jackets, one eye glinting in the little bit of streetlight coming in through her window. *He's constantly watching over you—over all of us. He sees everything. Even when we think we're alone, he's there.* Gwen knew it was the wooden Jesus from her grandmother's church.

He must have ripped his hands and feet free from their posts and followed them home, his wooden limbs creaking and cracking as he ran along the highway, a terrifying Pinocchio trailing sawdust and splinters and blood. She heard something like a tree branch snapping free—*his head, splitting open to form a maw.* She gave up trying to turn on her lamp and wrapped her fist around the snow globe on her nightstand. She hurled it. The glass shattered, and a mechanical roar sounded from the closet as she slid out of bed. She pictured his insides full of cogs, gears, and birds as she ran down the hallway to her father's room.

John was already awake when Gwen burst into his room babbling. He turned on the lamp and rubbed the sand from his eyes while piecing together what Gwen was trying to tell him—that Jesus was hiding in her closet, and that he wanted to eat her. He stepped into the hallway to look. Something whined, screeched, and moaned from her bedroom.

"Wait here," he said.

She nodded, but followed him anyway.

John burst into the room and turned on the light. The figure Gwen had seen was nothing more than a wide-brimmed sun hat and jacket hanging from her closet door, but the sound continued from deeper in, a water-choked gurgle that John suddenly recognized. He shoved her clothes aside. The floor was covered in broken glass, and a large dark spot dripped down the wall from where the snow globe exploded. He picked up the base, croaking out its last couple notes of Mozart, and showed it to Gwen.

"See? No Jesus." He let her sleep in his room anyway.

Gwen ran into the house, tracking mud across the kitchen floor. "I found a tent. In the backyard. Down by the water. I think someone's living down there. Come—"

"What were you doing down by the creek? I told you to stay within shouting distance," John said, as he stirred a pot of noodles on the stove. "And what did I say about taking your shoes off when you come in the house?"

"I was trying to find our stolen trashcan, the one I saw tied to a tree, and—"

"What did I just say about taking your shoes off? No, don't walk over there—sit down, take them off, and carry them back to the rack."

"But the campsite! It's real, I'm not making it up, we need to—"

"I already know about that. Rumpelstiltskin lives there. It was one of the reasons we got the house so cheap."

"Dad! I'm being serious!"

"I know, honey. Can you get us some glasses?"

"But—"

"It's actually kind of nice sometimes, having him around. I bought some hay from the Jacksons last summer, and for just three of your baby teeth, the little guy spun the whole bundle into gold for me. Can you get some silverware out—" He slipped on a pair of oven mitts and pulled a casserole dish from the oven.

Gwen tilted her head back and roared. "Look!" She reached into her pocket and thrust her hand toward him. John took off the oven mitts and braced himself against the counter, swallowing the urge to

*--not a toy what if you lost it what if—*

yell. The white bead rolled on Gwen's palm, the clasp stained with mud, the pearl chipped. One reason John left the attic boarded up was to keep Gwen out of her mother's things—not because he wanted them for himself, but because he thought she would appreciate them more when she was older. *It's just one earring. There are others—*

She told him how she hung it on the lamppost so her mother's ghost could find them. "I was scared she wouldn't know we moved. But then when I came home from school, it was gone. And then I found it at the—"

*It's hers anyway—*

"—and there was a ton of old books and folded clothes under this tent thing and—"

*No big deal no big deal no—*

"—and I cut down our trashcan and dumped it out, and it was full of cupcakes and candy and like, snacks and stuff. There's somebody living out there, Dad. I'm not making it up. I'm not."

When John spoke, his words came in a whisper. "Can you give that to me, please?"

She handed him the earring, and he set it on the counter.

"Go wash your hands. Dinner's ready."

--

He said he believed her, but Gwen knew he didn't, and when she got home from school the next day, she didn't tell him she was going out. She took a blanket from her closet, a bag of pretzels and a box of cupcakes from the pantry, and stuffed everything into her backpack before slipping out the glass door into the backyard. John heard the door and called down.

"I'm just going to play in the yard," she said.

He came down the steps. Gwen threw her backpack over the railing as he turned the corner.

"Stay in the backyard this time, you hear me? No going in the woods."

"I will."

"Promise?"

She promised.

"Okay. As soon as I finish patching up that drywall, I'll be out to check on you."

She closed the door behind her, picked up her bag, and sprinted into the woods. Her feet remembered the path, but when she got to the clearing, the tent was gone. Gone too were the coffee cups that dotted the fallen leaves like pinecones, and the pots and pans that dangled and clanged like ugly windchimes, and the piles of musty-smelling but clean, folded clothes that sat beneath the now-missing canopy. She knew her trashcan hung from a tree somewhere else, better hidden and most likely on the other side of the creek, and that her visitor was gone.

*Why take the earring? They must have known, must have seen her—*

The only thing that remained was a small pile of stones—a cairn built to hide the Dakota firepit—and Gwen knelt before them and whispered,

"Come back."

She took the blankets and food from her bag and set them on the stones like an offering, and the Hermit watched. He came back, wearing not his stolen suit but one of Mr. Bentley's button-ups, to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. His mind didn't work the way it used to; time slipped, memories blurred, and he no longer trusted himself. He had to double-check, to double-check everything. The murmur of the creek disguised his footsteps, and Gwen couldn't see him. He swallowed and cleared his throat. He stepped forward.



John's voice echoed off the trees, and Gwen got up.

The Hermit froze.

She turned and ran. "Coming!"

--

Gwen broke through the trees panting, her backpack unzipped, the knees of her pants black with dirt.

John's arms were crossed, his face red.

"I found Rumpelstiltskin," she said. "I tried to get him to fill my backpack up with gold, but he wouldn't do it."

"Uh huh. Get in the house. You're grounded."

Gwen and Cousin Theodore watched through the bushes as the Plymouth Voyager ran aground in the front yard. The van door swung back, and two sets of shiny penny-loafers claimed the mud. Dead eyes and bowl cuts, the boys could have been twins if one weren't taller than the other. Their parents got out, and the boys set to work carrying pies and dishes inside, their pastel button-ups and Sunday pants creaking like robotic limbs. The mother and father glowed with a secret, cult-like happiness as they walked up the porch steps.

"Who are they?" Gwen said.

"The Bradfords," Theodore said. "I hate the Bradfords. They came to my birthday party last year and busted up Grammy's little fence out back and blamed it on me." Theodore was the type of boy who always had a stuffy nose and insisted on wearing glasses that were too big. He liked talking about the Scientific Method and every time Gwen came over, he made her look at the dead bugs he kept under his bed. Despite all that, she liked him. They were in the same grade and ate lunch together at school, and Theodore's father died a year before Tabitha. His mom, according to Helen, had to go away and work in California somewhere, so Theodore lived with Helen's sister (Gwen's Great-Aunt Susan).

Helen greeted the couple at the door and led them inside, then appeared again on the porch. "Gwen! Come on in and meet your cousins."

"Don't do it," Theodore said.

Gwen climbed out from under the bush. "Do I have to?"

"Yes, you have to. They drove all the way up from Massachusetts. And you too, Theodore Allen. I know you're back there. And don't you make me ask twice. I know your Grammy won't be happy if I tell her you're digging around in the dirt."

They followed her in. The living room crawled with adults—cousins and cousins of cousins, the aunts and uncles of so-and-so, the brothers and sisters of what's-his-name. Gwen and Theodore stared at the Bradford boys while Helen explained how they were related. The Bradford boys stared back, their expressions double sheets of drywall. Gwen heard the mournful whistle of an old Western and imagined a tumbleweed rolling between them. *Theodore is a terrible shot. It's up to me to take them both.*

Linda Bradford smiled, her teeth gleaming brighter than her cross. "It's so good to finally meet you, Gwendolyn."

Her husband asked about John.

"He does a charity dinner every year at his restaurant," Great-Aunt Susan said, stepping in from the kitchen. "I don't know why we do dinner here and don't just all pile in over there." She faked a loud, boisterous laugh and another wave of hugs and kisses went through the crowd. With questions about the Bradfords' drive asked and answered and the children working their way to the edges of the room, the ghosts came out. The air grew cold and everyone looked away, either down at their shoes or out the closest window as Helen sobbed and Great-Aunt Susan sobbed and finally Linda caught it, too.

"We were so sorry to hear about Bill—"

"God, I feel like we just saw him—"

"And I can remember Tabitha standing right there at the bottom of the steps—God, she couldn't have been much older than Gwen—saying, 'Auntie, are you *sure* my mom said I can't have another piece of cake?'" She wiped her eyes and tried to smile. "It's almost like I can see her now. God, where—"

Gwen, fighting her way to the door, could see them. Great-Aunt Susan's house served as a temple for holidays, and ghosts were what held the bricks together and kept the pictures on the walls. She saw the specter of Great-Aunt Susan's Tabitha on the stairs, and she saw Richard Bradford's Bill on the couch. Their stories conjured them, each word more haunted than the last. She saw a teenaged Tabitha holding a baby Tabitha while a grown-up Tabitha—Gwen's Tabitha—passed out Christmas presents next to a long-dead Christmas tree, and she saw someone's Bill in the doorway and someone else's Bill telling jokes and another Bill cheering at a long-forgotten Thanksgiving football game. Ghosts flooded the room and filled the air, and Gwen choked on them. She pushed through to the front porch and vaulted over the railing.

"Gwen!" Theodore chased after her. Too afraid to jump the banister, he took the stairs.

Ghosts filled the backyard, too. Bill threw horseshoes, the clang of a phantom ringer echoing from a summer past. Tabitha tossed a frisbee, the knees of her pants grass-stained and torn. Bill, in an Easter bunny costume, waved from the middle of the yard while Tabitha, holding Gwen's egg basket, pointed toward the fence. More ghosts watched from the shadow of a picnic umbrella as Gwen ran and Theodore followed. No corner of the property was safe, no blade of grass untouched by the memory of the dead. Even Theodore's new jungle gym, a series of wooden steps and platforms that rose and fell around a towering steeple, had been built on a burial ground of thoughts like: *Would Mom have raced me to the top? Would Bill have crawled after me through its tunnels? Would they have yelled at me for climbing its roofs or balancing along its ledges?*

*Get down from there! they would have said,* as Gwen edged out along the tower's roof and watched the air between herself and the ground stretch.

"Don't fall," Theodore said. "It hurts."

"Go away." Gwen wiped her nose on her sleeve. The woods behind the fence were leafless—black fingers scratching a barren sky—and the wind smelled like snow. She thought about the campsite. Knowing it was out there somewhere, hiding beneath the sea of branches, she wanted to find it again. She wanted to hunker down with the books and stolen things and disappear into another world.

Theodore crawled under the base of the castle and came back holding a sleeve of cookies and a bag of chips. "I have some snacks down here. I stole them from the pantry before everybody started showing up. I got the good ones."

Gwen began the climb down.

--

The needle-like dart hit the tree with a hollow thunk, the white cap swaying back and forth like something trapped. Gwen ripped the blowgun from Theodore.

"My turn."

She loaded it and fired. The dart hit four inches below Theodore's with the same satisfying thunk. She pictured the white cap embedded in one of the Bradfords' button-ups and smiled; the twins had come into the backyard bearing gifts—candy bars stolen from their mother's purse—and when Theodore had gotten halfway through his, they pushed him off the catwalk and claimed the jungle gym for themselves.

"This is my yard!" Theodore had screamed.

Gwen snuck up behind the twins and rushed them, but the taller one got her by the hair. By the time Helen came to check on them, Gwen had one twin in a headlock while Theodore flung fistfuls of mud at the other. Only Gwen and Theodore got in trouble, and they retreated

into the woods behind the fence. That's when Theodore remembered the blowgun, and lead Gwen to the neighbor's treehouse.

"He stole it from his brother," Theodore said, as he pulled the long, black tube from beneath a pile of moth-eaten blankets and pillows.

Gwen fired another dart into the tree before handing the gun back to Theodore. A bird landed on one of the tree's lower branches. The two children looked at each other and a silent agreement passed between them.

Theodore set a dart in the mouthpiece, pushed it into place with his thumb, and raised the gun to his lips.

Gwen stared at the bird. It was a common sparrow, gray with brown and white spots, and small enough that she could have cupped it in her hands. The leaves rustled, and the sparrow hopped down along the branch. She wondered if she would see the dart or if the bird would just fall, landing at the base of the tree like an acorn.

"Hurry up. It's going to fly away."

"Okay, okay. Don't rush me." Theodore took a deep breath.

Gwen put a hand over her mouth. The bird chirped and jerked its head towards her. She could see its beady eyes—perfectly round, black, and unblinking—but only for a second before it looked away—up, down, left, then back at her. *Does it know?* It didn't stay still for very long; the bird hopped along another inch and chirped. Gwen noticed a red stripe along the top of its head, and that it curled its toes around the branch. *Will its grip loosen when it dies, or will it hang there forever?* Gwen pictured its snow-covered corpse in the winter, hanging upside down like a bat. *Something will probably come along and eat it before then.*

"Theodore."

And there it was, a little puff of air, and the dart ripped through a cluster of leaves a foot away from the sparrow. The bird flew off.

"Did I get it?" Theodore only breathed through his mouth, and his front teeth were still too big for him.

"No. Give it here. Now we have to wait for another one."

"Look."

The bird circled back around. It landed on a branch higher up, chirping to mock them. Gwen wiped the inside of the mouthpiece off with the bottom of her shirt and dropped in a new dart.

*Birds are God's messengers.*

*His eyes.*

She raised the blowgun to her lips and fired. Nothing seemed to happen—the children didn't see the bird, they didn't see feathers, and they didn't see movement. All they saw were the leaves, undisturbed, rustling as they had before.

*That bird flew all the way up to Heaven and told God—*

They heard the thump. Like an acorn.

Theodore licked his lips. His breathing was heavy, and Gwen could hear the mucus growling in the back of his throat. "You killed it." He stared at the gray lump laying at the bottom of the tree like it was something holy.

Gwen ran to it. The dart had gone through the bottom of its neck, the tip poking through the top of its skull, shiny and red with blood. It tried to flutter its wing—once, twice—then tried curling its beak toward its chest, but the dart was in the way. Its whole body shuddered, then relaxed. Gwen nudged it with the tip of her shoe. She thought it looked less like a real bird up-

close, and more like one of those ugly fake ones Helen bought at craft stores to clip on wreaths. Its feathers had a plastic sheen, and it wasn't bleeding everywhere like she thought it should.

*Like the man at the funeral.*

*If I go and prepare a place for you—*

She picked it up by the head of the dart and held it out in front of her. She turned to show Theodore. Its left claw was still twitching, trying to grip at a branch that wasn't there, and underneath it, she saw the Bradford twins stepping from behind a tree. She set the bird down atop a flat stone and the children gathered around it. When Helen called them in for dinner, they didn't say a word.

The Bradford twins sat one on each side of Gwen. The taller one turned to her.

"Can you pass the salt?"



Snow swirled around the Subaru's headlights in thick, bloated flakes, its exhaust rising from the rear like smoke from a dragon's nose. John came out earlier and started it so the cab would be warm. The storm started shortly after school let out and it had only come down heavier since, but only a dusting coated the driveway. Gwen dragged her glove across the roof hoping for the makings of a snowball, but the snow parted around her hand like powder.

"The ground's not cold enough for it to stick yet," John said as he opened the driver's door. He had his black and orange Flyers beanie on and his breath trailed away like the car's exhaust.

Gwen looked up at the black sky and opened her mouth to catch the wet, tasteless cold before climbing into the back. She pulled off her gloves with her teeth. "Think I'll have off school tomorrow?"

"I wouldn't plan on it." He smiled in the rearview mirror.

Gwen's window fogged up while she watched the snow. She dragged her coat sleeve across the glass and blinked at the diamond-shaped glimmer of passing streetlamps and headlights. Last winter, John brought her to work with him over Christmas break so she could build an igloo in the parking lot. The snowplows created a mound over ten feet high and Gwen tunneled into the bottom of it, packing the walls and ceilings ice-like. On TV, the insides of igloos are always well-lit with a blue glow, but after Gwen got a few feet in, she couldn't see anything and got scared—she was no longer within shouting distance of the restaurant but trapped in a cave somewhere in Alaska, the growl of a frost troll nearby and, upon realizing she couldn't turn around, her claustrophobia set in. She screamed, and Chip, watching from the patio on his smoke break, pulled her out by the feet. "Why don't you dig in through the top," he said,

taking a drag on his cigarette. "Then you'll have a hole in the roof for light." Gwen took his advice, throwing shovelful after shovelful of snow over her shoulder, sweating so bad she had to take off her jacket. It worked, though; once she got to the bottom of the mound, she dug from the inside out. When she was done, John gave her a piece of peanut butter cheesecake, and she ate it in her igloo, staring at blue sky while she listened to the quiet drip of melting snow.

John turned off the highway and drove past the front of the restaurant. The parking lot was full. An old man in a black trench coat and fedora shuffled along the sidewalk at a pace almost painful, watching his feet as if they might run away. His older wife clung to his elbow, her face red, clamped between a pair of oversized earmuffs. Snow collected on the man's hat brim and in the woman's dyed hair, and Gwen thought the couple looked like they had stumbled out of a black-and-white gangster movie. *He's got a tommy gun under his coat. That's why he's walking so slow.*

The Subaru's wipers scraped across the windshield. "Full house," John said.

Whenever Helen mentioned 'the pearly gates,' Gwen pictured the front of her father's restaurant; the doors were framed with two marble pillars and its name, Old 33, burned in blue neon atop a theater-style marquee. Spotlights hiding in the bushes lit the white stucco with a holy glow, a sharp contrast to the cool darkness of the bar inside, and tonight, a sandwich board sign sat in front of the door. The sign read: LUTHERAN CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER'S 52nd ANNUAL BOAR'S HEAD DINNER.

John turned down the alley and pulled into his parking spot behind the building. The rear face was unimpressive and ugly, the only break in the brick a dented metal door propped open with an empty propane tank. Gwen thought it looked like a slaughterhouse, which she supposed

it was, in a way. Chip sat on an overturned milk crate just outside the door. He waved at Gwen as John shut off the engine.

"How's everything coming?" John said, climbing out of the car.

"Good." Chip stubbed his cigarette out on the ground and stood up, the black sleeves of his chef's coat rolled halfway up. "I think your pig's done."

"Come check this out," John said to Gwen, tapping her on the shoulder as the two followed Chip inside.

The heat hit her first and then the smell, always the same strange mix of foods and chemicals, individually unidentifiable besides the aroma of fryer oil and bubbling grease. Something sizzled on the grill and the dishwasher gurgled. A waitress pushed through the double doors from the dining room and dropped a stack of dirty plates on the counter with a crash.

"Sorry." She batted her eyelashes at the dish boy and spun.

He stared her butt as she pushed back into the dining room, his head snapping back the second she was gone. *Did she have something on her pants?* He peeked over his shoulder to see if anyone noticed.

The double doors, one marked IN and the other OUT, swung back and forth, giving Gwen a glimpse of the dinner party: a choir of old women in white robes stood trancelike, singing in front of the buffet table. Chaffer dishes gleamed on a pretty tablecloth and a pastor hovered nearby—dressed also in white, different from Pastor Stan and Ryan's black, but his face was glued into that same grin, a smile only holy men are capable—and bobbed his hands along to the music as if he were rolling a die. The voice of the choir was lost over the crackle of Chip's radio. Something heavy, angry, and satanic growled through its half-blown, waterlogged speakers, and Gwen giggled; the women's mouths synced up with the words, their wrinkled

throats swaying like turkey gobblers to the growl of distorted guitars. She imagined Helen cowering in her pew at church with her fingers in her ears as her own choir turned into a group of a human speakers: *"They're possessed, Pastor Ryan! Do something, quick."* *"The holy water,"* Pastor Stan said. *"Get the holy water."*

"Right behind ya." One of the line cooks squeezed past Gwen to wash his hands. "What are you laughing at, small fry?"

The doors settled, their IN and OUT signs glaring like two gatekeepers. "Nothing." *Is it IN-to the dining room, or IN-to the kitchen?* The waitress pushed through both. "Hey, Dad?"

"Just a second, Kiddo." John had slipped into Work Mode. It wasn't that he was no longer aware of Gwen, but her presence (and whatever he had wanted to show her) had faded into the background. He pulled a ticket from the printer, hung it on the line, pointed to one of the cooks—a man with messy hair and long, skinny arms—and told him to get something from the dining room, then turned to Chip and started asking him questions about the catering.

The man sang along to the radio as he passed Gwen, untied his bloody apron, and hung it on the plate rack. "Fill this up for me about halfway," he said as he pulled a large pot from under the line and set it on the counter for the dish boy, then disappeared through the OUT side of the double doors. The door swung back and bounced off the wall with a thud, but before it had a chance to settle, the waitress came through the same side. *They should just put an X on the one they're not supposed to use.* The dish boy filled the pot, and Chip heaved it onto one of the stovetops. Blue flames licked the bottom as the burner clicked to life, and Gwen thought of a witch story Helen had read her.

After the small Puritan village had figured out who was dancing in the woods with the Man in Black, they locked the woman in a giant, metal elephant and lit a fire under it. "So the

woman would know what it would be like in Hell," Helen said. The elephant's belly glowed orange, black smoke billowed from its trunk, and the woman's screams murdered the village square. She kicked at the door of her cage until the skin on the bottom of her feet bubbled. 'I repent, I repent,' the woman yelled, and the village priest threw a bucket of water on the flames. He opened the hatch with a long hook, and the woman tumbled out, blackened and smoking. Her skin was red and cracked, her hair singed, her eyes cooked hard as marbles, but she was still alive. "The end," Helen said as she closed the book.

Gwen was furious. "What do you mean, 'the end?' What happened to the woman?"

"She prayed to God and her soul was saved."

"That's the worst story I've ever heard." If a village had tried to cook Gwen alive, she would have went back into the woods and cursed them all.

John pulled her out of the memory. "Come here." He guided her behind the line to the ovens. "Careful. Just assume everything's hot and you won't get burned."

Chip shuffled past them and ripped another ticket from the printer.

Heat radiated from the charred burners and made it hard to breath. The aisle was narrow and cramped, her father on one side and Chip on the other. *Why does it feel like it's getting hotter?* Water boiled inside the pot to her right. She could almost make out her reflection in the splashguards behind the grills, faceless in the dull stainless steel—*her soul*—but her eyes were drying out and she had to look away. Chip dropped a burger on the flat top, and it was only too easy for Gwen to imagine her own hand sizzling. She tried to sneak past her father, but he wouldn't budge. She was trapped in one big oven, shiny in spots and blackened in others, like a sterilized needle.

"Stand back," he said as he pulled on a pair of oven mitts. The stove door screeched and clanged, falling open like a drawbridge across the Styx. Gwen backed up against the counter with her hands in front of her face. Roasting inside the orange glow of the elephant's stomach on a foil-wrapped cookie tray was the head of a pig, its mouth shriveled into a grimace around something silver—a *poison apple dipped in mirror glass*. Blotches of orange and red, shiny and plastic-looking, covered the snout and forehead. Flesh sagged around holes where its eyes should have been, and Gwen wondered if they fell out or burst. She imagined eyeballs tasted like black olives and shook the imagined taste from her mouth. Its ears were pulled back like a scared puppy's, and Gwen saw the pig as it once was, running through a field of tall grass and squealing to the cows for help as—a *preacher, an old butcher's apron tied over his robes and a cleaver raised high*—chased it down. She shivered. *It doesn't even look like a real pig*. "Look out," John said as he pulled the tray from the oven rack and set it on the counter. Her stomach growled; despite the pig's plastic sheen, it still smelled like a Christmas ham. Chip helped him lift the head out of the cooking tray and onto a bed of leaves. With a pair of tongs, he wrestled the ball of tin foil from its jaws and replaced it with a real apple. The balled-up tinfoil, still hot to the touch, swished through the air and bounced off the lip of a trash can.

"Good throw," the dish boy said as he bent over to get it.

"Shut up," John said. He flashed a large chef's knife across the pig's face with the finesse of a painter and came away with a sliver of cheek. He bit off half and passed the rest to Gwen.

She put it on her tongue like a communion wafer. Sweeter than ham, chewier, and with a more jerky-like taste. She reached for the knife to cut off another piece.

John, without realizing she was reaching for it, picked up the knife and twirled the handle in his palm, the blade throwing light across the counter. He smiled at Gwen and, still chewing his

piece, said, "Doesn't suck, huh?" He turned to Chip. "Are you sure you'll be alright?" The knife clattered back on the counter out of Gwen's reach.

"Yeah," Chip said. "Take it out there, smile and shake some hands, then go hang out with your kid." He clapped him on the back. "Not my first time, big guy. Besides, you did all the heavy lifting this morning."

John guided Gwen away from the ovens and told her to hang out in the prep room while he talked to the church people for a minute. Gwen watched to see what door he would use, but carrying the heavy pig's head, he pushed through both. The pastor's face, in between swings of the double doors, lit up with hunger as he followed John to the buffet table, his back hunched and hands clasped in front of him like Nosferatu. She imagined them gathered around the pig with their heads bowed. *Let us prey.* After their prayer, the choir would start into another song while the crowd ripped into the severed head with their bare hands, blood and spit leaking down wrinkled chins and staining their white robes while bits of charred fat clung to their rotten teeth. In Gwen's mind, the pig not only had its body again, but was wriggling and squealing as the congregation peeled chunks out of its belly with yellowed, claw-like fingernails. She didn't allow herself to think of the tall, creaking figure waiting for a doggy bag back at the church.

The doors settled, but before Gwen retreated into the prep room, the scrawnier cook came through with a lobster. He held the thing by the tail, its bound claws hanging limp while its legs crawled on air. Its body arched as the cook raised it to drop in the pot, and just before he let go, its eyes, like two black stones set into its shell, shifted toward Gwen. She didn't hear the splash. The cook reached for the space where the tongs had been (the pair her father had used to replace the pig's silver apple) and, finding it empty, picked up a long, three-pronged fork. He pinned the creature under the boiling water. *This is its afterlife. The crab died the second someone—*

*probably a little boy, his father standing behind him, saying "pick me a good one, son"—pointed him out in the dining room aquarium. The boy actually pointed to a different one, but he didn't say anything when the scrawny cook caught that lobster instead.*

Gwen covered her ears.

Chip, pulling a baked potato out of the microwave and sliding it onto a plate, mouthed something at her: *what are you doing?*

"The lobster," she said.

He looked at the scrawny cook, laughed, then wiped his hands on his apron. He led her into the prep room.

"I didn't want to hear it scream," she said.

"That's just a myth." Chip shuffled through the dessert fridge—something Gwen frequently pillaged when John set her up in the prep room to do homework—and set a thin slice of carrot cake on the table in front of her. "Sometimes they make noise, but not often. And when they do, it's just steam escaping their shells. Those lobsters don't feel a thing." He stepped back into the kitchen.

Gwen liked lobster. When her father made it, he melted butter in a coffee cup so she could dip it. He joked and said she really only liked the butter, but she tried drinking it once and almost threw up.

Chip came back and handed her a fork. "Don't tell your father I gave you that."

Gwen shoveled a piece of cake into her mouth and smiled. "This is good."

He asked if they had dinner yet. Gwen said no. Chip leaned against the fridge with his arms crossed. "Know what you're having?"

"Burger King!"



Chip clicked his teeth and shook his head. "That's not right. Your dad cooks up this feast for over half the town, then goes home and feeds you Burger King. You oughtta put your foot down, young lady. If I was you, I'd tell him I want a T-bone steak."

Gwen finished her cake and gave the dish to the dish boy before John came back. They said goodbye to everyone and left. As John pulled into the Burger King drive-through, he asked Gwen what she wanted.

"A T-bone steak."

Without missing a beat, he said "they don't have that. Pick something else."

"Fine." She settled for chicken nuggets.

"He sees you when you're sleeping. He knows when you're awake."

Mrs. Stone sang along from her desk while Gwen and Theodore finished their art projects. Even without the hat, Storrie Elementary's art teacher looked like one of Santa's elves; her nose sloped upward to a soft point and, standing on her toes, was only as tall as the average seventh grader. It didn't help that she usually padded around the classroom barefoot, the ring on her pinkie toe jingling against the tile like a silver bell. Snow swirled behind the first-graders' red pinch pots, and, on the second-to-last day of school before Christmas break, Theodore and Gwen were the only students in the art room.

Gwen folded her final paper heart. Seven hearts, seven unbreakable seals, each with a rune etched in squid ink at its center. She lined her clay watchmen along the edge of the metal table, and one by one, dropped a heart into the mouth of each, naming them as she went. *Leech. Pan. Egg. Wick. Gloom. Goat. Scratch.* She imagined she could hear the construction paper fluttering inside their stomachs like origami hummingbirds, breathing life into their thick eyebrows and bulbous noses, their giant ears and small, pointed teeth.

"Mrs. Stone? You promise they'll be done in time for me to take them home tomorrow?" Gwen said.

"Yes, dear. I'll put them in the kiln first thing after lunch." She clicked something on her computer and walked over to look. "They're a little spooky, aren't they?" She scrunched her nose and stuck her finger in Goat's mouth.

Gwen willed the statue to bite.

"Are you going to give them as Christmas presents?"

Theodore answered for her. "No. Golems only work for the person that made them. They're going to stop Gwen's nightmares. Right, Gwen?" He looked at Gwen and smiled, a Golden Retriever waiting for a treat. The first part of their projects had been a research paper, and after they were finished, Ms. Trundy made them read their work to each other.

*They're not nightmares.*

"I see." Mrs. Stone took a step back and examined Theodore's trebuchet. While Gwen had been reading Jewish folktales, Theodore poured over blueprints and analyzed physics formulas he only pretended to understand. He built the medieval contraption out of popsicle sticks, tooth picks, and yarn, following a set of instructions he found in a Boy Scout's manual. Mrs. Stone brought in a fishing sinker for the counterweight.

"And how are you making out? Does this thing really shoot?" Mrs. Stone said.

"The glue isn't actually quite dry yet." Theodore bit the collar of his shirt and his eyes dipped towards the window.

*He's crushing on Mrs. Stone.*

The teacher helped Gwen carry her army to the firing rack and asked if she had any exciting plans for winter break, what she hoped to get from Santa, and if she thought she had been naughty or nice this year.

"Santa isn't real." Gwen said, then shrugged. "I was worse last year and still got presents."

Mrs. Stone glanced at Theodore, his back to them, and held a finger to her lips. "I don't know. I think he might be real. Some of the other kids would—"

"You don't have to lie for Theodore. Theodore doesn't believe in anything."

"Not true," Theodore said. "I believe in the Scientific Method. Step one," he pulled the pin from his catapult. The throwing arm creaked forward, the metal sinker dipped, and a small

rock tumbled through the air like a dead bird. A vase exploded above their heads, and Mrs. Stone yelled. Gwen jumped backwards, cradling Wick and Scratch to her chest.

Theodore climbed onto the table and started to dance, thrusting his hips for an invisible hula hoop, his head split like an egg into a grin too big for his face. "I lied about the glue. It was ready to shoot." He twirled and the rubber soles of his shoes squeaked.

Mrs. Stone looked at the shattered flower pattern sprinkled across the floor, not sure whether to laugh or cry. The holiday spirit nudged the outcome in Theodore's favor. "You're lucky that was one of mine and not another student's." She handed him a broom and dust pan and stood over the boy while he cleaned it up, his smile only spreading in her shadow.

*Smile any harder and the top of your head will fall off.* Gwen checked on each of her soldiers. They all survived the attack.

"Mrs. Stone, do you think I'll be able to shoot Santa down with my catapult?"

"Shut up. You don't even believe in Santa," Gwen said.

Mrs. Stone returned to her desk and turned up her radio. "You better watch out, you better not cry."

"If only this thing was big enough to take out Oscar," Theodore said, carefully packing the catapult away in a shoebox.

When Gwen returned the next day, she tipped Pan upside down and waited for the pink heart to spiral out. Nothing but dust. She tipped Egg, Goat, and Wick. The hearts had disintegrated in the kiln, but Gwen pretended they had been absorbed into the clay, the paper fibers dissolving into veins and arteries, tendons and ligaments, lungs and spleens. She lifted Pan to her ear.

*Thump, Thump, Thump.*

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Sarah jumped when John tapped on the bedroom door. Gwen's ghosts shimmered in the dark like tinsel, her scary stories more pervasive than the colorful lights, music, and the smell of sugar cookies baking downstairs—the ones with pictures of reindeer or Santa set into the dough, Santa's face turning bloated and devilish and the reindeer monster-like in the oven heat. The real meaning of Christmas, Gwen said, was to keep the fire lit and distract ourselves with feasts and presents so we didn't have to think about death, lumbering ever closer through the falling snow. She talked about Vikings and Yule logs, draugr and frost trolls, and explained the druidic roots of Christmas trees and sun-shaped ornaments. Sarah listened, grateful when the girl finally fell asleep, and when she ducked out of Gwen's room and into John's, Gwen's seven dwarves stood watch at the foot of her bed. John had disappeared, to give Gwen one last kiss goodnight, and Sarah hadn't seen him for the last forty-five minutes.

He stepped into his room as he must have once crept into his older brother's as a little boy. *Wake up, David! The presents are downstairs!* Sarah didn't know John's brother's name, although she knew he had one, and was content to think of him as a 'David.'

"Jesus John, I thought you were in the bathroom. What have you—"

"Come downstairs. I want to show you something. Be careful on the steps, though. Don't wake Gwen up."

The Christmas tree smoldered, casting shadows like smoke while the flames danced off the pretty wrapping paper. Crowning the tree sat not an angel nor a holy star, but a cartoonish Viking helmet, its hollow horns brimming with gold—John had stuffed the plastic with leftover tree lights while Gwen and Sarah made popcorn strings. The echo of the Christmas music they had listened to still hung on the air, as if the furniture had caught the infectious choruses and

continued to hum, but despite the wholesome, pagan brilliance of the room after dark, this wasn't what John brought Sarah downstairs to see. Light—regular, boring, not-Christmas light—bled across the carpet from the kitchen, and to this, John led Sarah by the hand.

Stepping onto the cold linoleum and seeing the scene John had prepared, Sarah fell back to a time when she believed actual fairies might congregate in fairy rings for fairy-dances and fairy-weddings, and cows—maybe not every cow, but certainly one cow in particular—could jump over the moon. For a moment, she *believed*, and this, she thought, no matter what Gwen said or what the Bible said or what all those PBS cartoons tried to say, was the true meaning of Christmas—to instill in our children the spirit of wonder our parents once instilled in us, and in doing so, again capture a piece of it for ourselves. For a moment, she truly believed Gwen's figures had come to life.

Pan stood amidst the cookie plate with chunks of reindeer crumbling from its maw, a giant amidst the wreckage of a small sugar village, every cookie they had spent the night baking destroyed. On the counter, Wick admired a crude self-portrait—Sharpie marker on drywall, Untitled—with its paintbrush tucked in the crook of its elbow, the uncapped tip aimed at the sky like a spear, and on the floor in front of the sink, at least two coffee cups and three plates had been shattered. Egg shielded itself with a shard of mug, its handle looped around the creature's neck, while Gloom charged, the tines of its fork as sharp as a gladiator's trident. Sarah closed her eyes and imagined she could hear them—the gremlin-like chuckle, the clash and crack of fork on plate, and the loud, wet chewing noises.

"Look in the fridge, look in the fridge," John said, his ten-year-old's smile a size too small for his almost-forty-year-old face but just as endearing.

She opened the door. The fridge light shined on the glistening egg yolk like a spotlight. Scratch laughed on the catwalk while the unlucky Leech glowered on the stage below. What remained of the eggshell sat perched atop its head like a crooked fedora and tendrils of egg hung from its nose like snot. She imagined the poor thing walking and feeling the egg squish inside its shoes. The puddle ran across the bottom shelf and had begun to drip into the crisper drawers, onto soda cans and beer cans and fresh vegetables, and reality came crashing back with the future burden of having to clean it up.

She turned and meant to ask why he took the trick so far, why make such a mess, but seeing his smile—so proud of his artful destruction, not a crumb or shard of glass out of place—made her laugh. She saw him playing with his daughter's toys in the middle of the night, contemplating if a crumb should go here or there, if a five-inch-tall clay figure was left-handed or right-handed, with the same serious contemplation of a doctor selecting an artery or an architect placing a beam, and she laughed harder. She laughed until snot dripped from her nose like the egg-soaked golem, and John laughed with her.

After they had gotten hold of themselves (and each other, crawling as one being onto the couch), she did ask.

"She wouldn't have fell for it otherwise," John said.

"I don't get it. Why are you okay with her believing in toys that come alive at night, but not in Santa or the Bible?"

"She did believe in Santa," John said, as the ghost of a Christmas past flickered across his face. Sarah made him explain. Their old house would get mice in the winter, and John kept a supply of glue traps under the sink. Gwen got it in her head last year to capture the Big Man in Red, and after lining the bottom of the stairs with the glue traps, she tied a fishing line between

the spokes of the banister and the wall, invisible in the dark, and John tripped, rolled, and landed face-first in the glue. "She's chanting from the top of the steps, 'I caught Santa, I caught Santa,' and I'm laying there, wondering what the hell I landed in and why I can't move my face." Sarah fell off the couch, no longer laughing but dry-heaving, while John described the undercover dominatrix he got as a nurse, and how he only went to the hospital because he thought they would have some kind of chemical to weaken the glue. "Nope. She just pulls on these elbow-high rubber gloves and looks at me and says, 'honey, you ever been waxed?'"

When Sarah caught her breath and their laughter subsided to small bouts of giggling, she said, "Gwen must have a thing for knocking people down the stairs."

"She's a little Napoleon. Always uses the terrain to her advantage." John got their bottle of wine out of the fridge. He brought back two glasses and handed Sarah the bottle. "Check it out. I didn't get any egg on it."

The last five nights before Christmas, John and Sarah rearranged Gwen's statues in different rooms, always leaving one behind to stand watch, clad with a shot-glass helmet and armed with a spoon, at the foot of Gwen's bed. The little soldiers pillaged the bathroom, wrapping themselves with toilet paper and swimming in the sink. They had a food fight in the dining room and an ornament fight in the living room. They drew on the walls of the hallways and, using shoes and slippers as sleds, scheduled (and placed bets on) races down the stairs, Pan the delegated book-keeper, his mouth stuffed with dollar bills from a Monopoly set. No matter the room or the complexity of the scene, each night ended the same: with John and Sarah warming themselves under a blanket on the couch, admiring the glow of the tree and sharing a bottle of wine while their ghosts—Tabitha included—stumbled, cold and forgotten, out in the snow.



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Gwen knew it was them, but she played along because she could tell they were having fun. "Should I start locking them in my room, Dad?" she said over breakfast, and watched John and Sarah look at each other like two love-struck teenagers in the presence of a seemingly-clueless parent. She played along because they always left one statue behind, and despite what the adults thought, posing her soldiers like possessed Barbie dolls in the night, the golems really were magic; she hadn't seen Jesus since she brought them home.

On Christmas eve, however, that changed. Gwen bared her teeth and admired the toothpaste foaming around the lips of her rabid reflection as John and Sarah laughed over the radio. Outside, the wind mocked them, ripping and howling and throwing snow at the windows. The radiator growled and rattled as Gwen spit into the sink and, standing on her toes, watched the shadows of pines shimmer on the white mirror of unbroken snow, searching for the winter monsters from her stories—no yetis prowled the yard, no wendigos or bloated, blue corpses shuffled forward from the woods. The trees, interlocked, white-laced fingers, shivered and creaked, and the Bentley's Christmas tree burned through their downstairs curtains. Red, yellow, and blue lights climbed the columns of their front porch like radioactive snakes, spiraling together along the edge, and Gwen dropped her toothbrush and gasped as a figure, not dressed in red and not carrying a large sack, danced across the Bentley's rooftop.

No sled waited, parked on the air, and no reindeer pawed at the snow as the stranded Not-Santa, dressed in black pants, black coat, and black gloves, jumped from foot to foot and rattled a club over his head in a tribal rain dance. The dark figure stuck out against the white roof like the shiny wreck of a UFO in the desert, and Gwen looked at his club, gleaming under the stars, and thought, *pick axe?* Would the villain hammer his way through the roof and descend upon the

Bentley's, swinging his weapon in-rhythm to *The Nutcracker* (which tip-toed, twirled, and finally hammered on John's radio below) and paint the Bentley walls a not-so-festive red? *The Nutcracker* faded out, but the jingle of bells continued to haunt the night, and Gwen realized the man's club wasn't a weapon at all, but a bell-studded noise-maker. The stars watched, unblinking, as whatever god the man danced for stirred behind its curtain of black sky and added its own voice—another howl of the wind, which almost sent the man sprawling—to his song.

"Dad! Come up here, quick!"

As if the man on the roof had heard her, he stopped, and as John thundered up the steps, dragging Sarah behind him, the man retreated, hitching his knees high so as not to drag his boots. As John rounded the corner at the top of the stairs, the man pulled himself over the roof's peak and, pressing his gloved palms against the glass, raised the Bentley's attic window.

"What's wrong?" John said, appearing in the doorway just as the upper half of the figure disappeared.

"There, there!" Gwen stepped back and pointed. "Bentley's! Man! Roof! Look!" The window, frosted in the glow of the bathroom light, had become, for a moment, a dark mirror in which they all stood motionless, Gwen pointing, John and Sarah staring. "Hurry!" The adults crowded in and pressed their faces to the window, their breath fogging up the glass. John looked for a bear or maybe a pack of coyotes while Sarah examined every shadow for the silhouette of a ski mask or a crowbar. Gwen tried to describe what she saw but the words refused to string themselves together.

"I don't see anything," Sarah said.

"Neither do I. Gwen, what are we looking for?"

"Move," Gwen said and shouldered them aside for another look, although she knew the man would be gone. "There, see the tracks?"

Squinting and shielding the light from her eyes, Sarah said she could see them.

"Where?" John said.

"There," Sarah said. "See the edge of the roof? Follow that up, and..." But no matter how she directed him, John couldn't see the large boot prints. She cupped his chin and tried to point him towards them, but the jealous wind threw snow around and made them harder to see. "There, right there," she said, and placed a loving hand on the back of his neck.

The attic door shuddered in its frame. They all jumped.

"It doesn't matter! You have to go over there!" Gwen sat down on the edge of the tub and, after taking a deep breath, finally managed to explain. She pulled her father towards her and whispered in his ear. "I think it's Him. He's going to see all of Noah's Christmas presents and think they're His and—"

"Alright, alright," John said. "Whoever or whatever it was. I am without a doubt, absolutely and positively sure, it wasn't Jesus. Gwen, you have to stop—"

"Are you sure it wasn't just a trick of the light, or maybe a squirrel or a raccoon—" Sarah said.

"No. It was a man. And he was real."

"And he was dancing?" Sarah asked. "With jingle bells?"

But John, watching his girlfriend and daughter argue in the mirror, felt the conversation he and Mr. Bentley had back in September trickle across his arms and neck. *And he only took weird shit. Like, all the batteries in the house are gone. All of them. Even pulled the nine-volts out of the smoke detectors.* "How about I give them a call?"

Back in the kitchen, Gwen and Sarah held their breath while John held the ringing phone to his ear.

"And you're sure—" Sarah whispered.

"Yes!" Gwen said.

"Jingle bells?"

"Hey, Roger. I hope I didn't wake you," John said. Mr. Bentley's words muffled together into a flat, quiet line of sound. "Yeah. Yeah, I know how that goes. Hey, I just wanted to check in with you and make sure everything's okay. My daughter said she saw—. Yep. Yep, that's right." John laughed. "Yeah. Up on the roof."

"What's he saying?" Sarah said.

"Is it Him?" Gwen asked.

John waved them both off and pressed the phone tighter to his ear. He laughed some more and said that something was clever. "Oh no, she already knows. Let the cat out of the bag on that one last year." Mr. Bentley said something, and John nodded. "I had a feeling that's what was going on, but with what you told me back in September, figured it couldn't hurt to check. Hey, did they ever find the guy?" They talked for another couple minutes, mainly Mr. Bentley mumbling and John nodding. Gwen and Sarah stomped their feet. "Yep. And Merry Christmas to you, too." He hung up, and the women pounced on him.

"Honey," John said, peeling Gwen off first. "You saw Mr. Bentley's impersonation of Santa Claus." He explained how one of the boys at Noah's preschool said that Santa wasn't real, and that his parents weren't ready to tell him the truth. "Mr. Bentley said he's very sorry he scared you."

Sarah tried to ask about the break-in, but Gwen cut her off. "Why do grown-ups lie so much? Why do you want us to believe in things that don't exist?"

"That," John said, and looked at Sarah, who could only smile and shrug. "Is a very good question. I think—"

"Why do you keep moving my golems around and pretending they're wrecking the house?"

John rubbed the bottom of his chin as if she had struck him—not hurt but surprised, and once the shock wore off, impressed. "Why did you pretend to fall for it?"

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The night's events slowly distilled in Gwen's stomach and, with the amount of candy cane, sugar cookie, and soda surging through her bloodstream, germinated into a nightmare that crawled out of her head and rippled behind the wallpaper like a hundred cockroaches. Dream and reality mirrored each other too closely to pry apart, and when Gwen forced herself to sit up, she got caught between the two, the monsters of her imagination superimposed over her very-real bedroom. The shadow of her guard, pinned to the carpet by the blue glow of the moon, seemed to shimmer in the ghostly light, to jump up and down and wave its arms and say, *look, look*, and Gwen followed the animated black shape to its inanimate owner: Goat, staring at something in the yard. The thump of footsteps boomed across the ceiling as particles of drywall fell like snow and, as she slipped further into the dream, became snow—real snow, thick, fat snow, good for snowmen and snowballs and snow days and igloos and car crashes. The footsteps stopped just above the window, followed by an impact that rattled through the walls in a way that made the house seem not so permanent. Gwen rolled onto the floor and crawled under the bed, dragging the comforter with her and clutching it to her throat.

Her watchman rocked on its tiny hooves, tried to right itself, then tumbled backward, plunging into the fibers of the blue carpet inches from her nose and sinking like a capsized ship, its clay eyes twin cannons loaded with wet gunpowder. *No*, Gwen screamed, *that's not fair! The odds of even, the odds of even! If a monster becomes real, so do my weapons.* Her window slid open with the same mechanical creak of a retractable razor, and the black, frostbitten tongue of winter raked across the room as her intruder searched for its midnight snack—a little-girl-shaped cookie and a tall glass of milk. The creature's breathing came in ragged bursts, like someone breathing into a paper bag, as its shadow crawled across the carpet and threatened to swallow Goat. Gwen reached out and snatched her clay figurine, and without allowing herself to retreat deeper under the bed, she reached up and placed her golem back on the windowsill and prayed the world would play fair, that her small, handmade totem would protect her, that her silver bullet would work.

She expected a black-furred Krampus, armed with a whip and a cage made of birch, or the wooden, blood-streaked Jesus, His teeth sharper than His dummy crown and His fingers sharpened to points, but the shape that filled her window, silhouetted against the Christmas sky, belonged to a small man wearing a round hat. His movements were fluid and child-like—a dying, dementia-muddled Peter Pan, not a feather in his cap but a shard of glass—and his face, as reflective as the fog, played with Gwen's fear and twisted into the lengthening shadows of dusk, his features stretching, yawning beasts. His eyes, a fractured moon and the barrel of a gun, captured her scream and drowned her with it as the beard split apart—a smile and a cough. He leaned forward and a crust of snow hissed against the radiator.

Gwen tried to back up but she had nowhere to go; she couldn't crawl back under the bed, for she knew the second she turned her back, he would seize her by the ankle. A cloud of rotten

eggs, campfire smoke, and damp earth poured from his sleeves as he ducked his head under the frame and watched her, perched on the sill like a man-shaped owl or an owl-shaped wolf. *Three little pigs, three little pigs, let me in.* He looked at the toy between him and breathed deep—another panicked flutter of a paper bag, another sickening clack of teeth. *My, what big eyes you have.*

"For me?" The man said, his voice clipped and distorted, the sound of a cello left out in the snow. His fingertips, the same gray as the dead man's, poked through his gloves as he picked up Goat and held it to his darker eye. He ran his thumb over the figure's horns before pulling a pair of glasses, bent in the middle and both lenses cracked, from a hidden pocket and balancing them on his nose. He turned the figure over in his talon-like hands, examining each line and curve with the intensity of a jewel smith. A sigh. His hands dropped to his lap and he looked at Gwen.

*He wants an answer.* She looked from one eye to the other—light, dark. Light. Dark. *For me?* She couldn't force herself to look in both eyes at the same time. *Answer him. Say something. Anything.* Light. Dark. *The moon or the gun? Hickory dickory dock. A mouse died behind the clock.* Her own eyes jittered, pinballs caught between bumpers, audibly clicking against the sides of her skull. Dark. Light. The man waited, his eyes calm, steady. Loaded.

*All the better to see you with, my dear.*

Light. Dark.

He blinked.

The ice cracked and the waters of her dream surged below.

She nodded.

The golem disappeared into one of the many coat pockets and she fell, dashed against the rocks in the choking, churning mud of her nightmare. *He has a pocket for everything. A pocket for houses and a pocket for cars, a pocket for planets and a pocket for stars. One for Mom and one for Dad. One for Dog and one for Cat. A pocket of lists and a pocket of food. A pocket of books and a pocket of tools. Yes. The Coat of the Many, Magical Pockets, by the Brothers Grimm. But what was it made of, that coat of the many pockets, Goldilocks asked. Bearskin, her mother said, always bearskin. Not too tight and not too loose, not too long and not too... Mirror mirror on the wall, the cow jumped over the moon.*

When the man picked her up, she didn't scream. She watched, paralyzed—a chunk of the apple lodged in her throat—as the man laid her back on the bed, gathered her blanket, and like a preacher closing the lid of a glass coffin, tucked her in.

--

On Christmas mornings, the sun rattled the blinds of children's bedrooms first. When Gwen woke, its light wasn't strong enough to pierce the smog of her bad dream and, filtered through the smoke, made the house look foreign, upside down and backwards—her Un-Room and her Un-House, her real home trapped in the Looking Glass. She forgot all about Christmas and ran to her window: locked, screen intact, the snow on the roof undisturbed. She felt the carpet: dry. *Just a dream.*

*But where is Goat?*

Downstairs on the coffee table, golems gathered in a circle around an obelisk of yellow burlap, maybe a wine bottle or a large candle, its wrapping crowned with a holly branch tied in a bow, the loops—*bunny ears, crisscrossed 'round the tree*—splintered and bleeding. She counted only five statues, each at the point of an invisible star. *Gloom, Egg, Wick, Pan, and Leech.* Set in



front of John and Sarah's carefully wrapped packages, the mystery present threatened and cursed like a beloved pet, missing three weeks, stuffed in the mailbox with an extension cord tied around its throat. The yellow burlap—*the color of Easter, of wood, of Him, the towering, lumbering Him.*

Gwen scrambled up the stairs and burst into her father's bedroom. She fell on the bed, fought her way between the coiled adults, and told them about her dream, the phantom glow and dead black of the figure's mismatched eyes, and how he wasn't real but He was, he was an omen, a warning, a talking raven that said He was downstairs and they were all in trouble.

"Who? Santa?" John said, rubbing the sand from his eyes.

"No!" She dragged them out of bed. "Him! Him!"

Sarah and John, hair disheveled and still in their pajamas, stood in front of the golems' black mass and faked Gwen's awe, assuming she set the golems up to get back at them. Sarah lifted the object, inspected the knotted holly branch, and scrunched her nose.

"It smells funny." *Like smoke and something else. Venison? Rabbit?* She turned the strange, bulky cylinder over. "And they didn't put a tag on." She passed it to John and smiled. "That's rude. How are we supposed to know who it's from?"

"I don't know." John held it to his ear and shook it. "It's heavier than I thought. I wonder what it could be?"

They spoke with the same theatrics of adults playing hide and seek with a child, and Gwen stomped until the ornaments rattled and the tree shed. She screamed she didn't do it, she didn't do it, but each stomp and cry only hammered home the idea that she did.

"Alright, calm down," John said, getting the kitchen scissors. "Well." He looked at Gwen and sat down on the couch, the burlap monolith back on the table. "Who should open it?"

The scissors shook, hovering over the holly switch as if Gwen were defusing a bomb. She squeezed. The blades bit into the bark.

*For me?*

"You do it!" She dropped the scissors in front of John and climbed behind Sarah, clinging to her night shirt (one of John's old T-shirts) and thrusting her forward as a human shield. Doubt flickered across John's face and Sarah, for a moment, saw the package as Gwen did and shivered.

*What if she's telling the truth?*

John, annoyed, cut through the cord and ripped away the burlap, the yellow cloth falling to the floor like shed skin. *Did she make this?* He held up the carved idol, a pagan bust of a consumer god—Santa, every hair of his beard a detailed and precise cut, his nose pocked, the corners of his eyes stamped with crows' feet, the top of his hat sanded to velvet. The head, unpainted and unstained pine, cut off at the neck, the base of the sculpture still sheathed in bark. "Wow." He turned it over, looking for a price tag, and found only a dark stain where the severed limb once sat in the mud. *No. Helen must have bought it for her.* The old woman haunted those overpriced import stores, the ones full of furniture you couldn't sit on and candles you couldn't light, the air choked with chemical spices. But no; the lines had too much character and seemed to emanate with the warmth of calloused fingers. *From a craft fair, then.*

He passed it to Sarah, who looked it over and tried to pass it to Gwen, but Gwen refused to touch the cursed wood. She glared at the fat bottom lip, the jolly cheeks, the pointy hat, the primitive, ape-like brow.

"If only we knew who to thank," John said. He got up, stretched, and before heading into the kitchen for coffee, tried to rouse the usual Christmas morning excitement in his daughter with a smile: "Aren't you excited to rip into all these presents?"

Gwen looked over the mountain of boxes with the enthusiasm of a farmer inspecting a worm-infested crop. "Yes."

John was fooled, but Sarah wasn't, and as soon as he left the room, she turned around and pinched one of Gwen's toes. "Where did you get it? Don't worry, I won't tell."

"I didn't do it."

"Oh come on," Sarah said. "Us girls should work together. We could make a good team—"

"Gwen," John said, his voice a dirge between anger and fear. "Can you come out here please?"

The sliding glass door, cracked open like a hairline fracture, whistled, a double-mirror with a long, dark hole where the lock used to be. John asked, although he already knew the answer. "Did you do this?"

"No."

The empty barrel bore teeth marks from a drill. John nudged away the curtain with his slipper looking for the broken lock, but the intruder must have taken it. Boot prints, size 12, cut the deck into thirds.

"Oh my God," Sarah said.

"Do you believe me now?" Gwen said. Sarah took her into the living room while John called the police.

"Someone broke into my house last night. No, it wasn't Santa."

The presents cowered under the tree, overdressed and ashamed of their cheer, like a wedding party stumbling onto a wake. John, too impatient to sit, paced the house and searched for missing things, but everything appeared where it should. He found Scratch on the floor,

dozing under the coffee table, but still no sign of Goat. Gwen glared at the wooden Santa. Sarah fidgeted in the corner.

"Have you ever seen *A Christmas Story*?" Sarah said. "When I was a kid, my dad would sit in his recliner and watch it all day. Back to back, over and over, from the time we stopped opening presents to the time we went to bed. We would go—my mom and sisters and I—to our grandparents, but Dad would always stay home. I asked him once why he did it, how he could watch the same movie over and over like that, and he smiled at me, and said, 'it's on all the channels. It's the only movie they're allowed to play on Christmas.' For a long time, I believed him." She curled her feet under her and shook her head. "The only movie they're allowed to play on Christmas. Isn't that something? It is always on all day though, and I think you would like it." She pointed the remote at the TV.

"Huh. Batteries must be dead."

Gwen drew a picture of a giant and a giant-slayer—a self-portrait. She flooded the bottom of the page with red while John watched a hockey game. The hammer she armed herself with stood taller than she did, and what remained of the giant's head spilled across the bottom of the page like so many broken teeth.

The phone rang, and John got up to answer it. "Your marker's dying."

"I know." She capped it and dug through the box for another one. Her page lifted, and she noticed the ink had seeped into the coffee table. She tried to wipe it off with her hand, and when that didn't work, she moved the decorative placemat to hide it.

"It's for you," John said. They still had an old phone with a cord, and Gwen groaned at having to get up. "You're lucky it's your cousin. I don't like the idea of burying a little boy in the backyard, but I'll do it."

"I'm going to have a boyfriend."

"Uh huh. I thought we agreed you're going to date girls?"

Gwen tried to club him in the arm, but he jumped out of the way and laughed, then went back into the living room.

"Hello?"

"Gwen. It's Theodore. Your cousin."

"I know. What do you want?"

"I need your help." He explained how, during his math test, he caught Oscar Garcia cheating off his paper. He raised his hand and told Mr. Harris, and Mr. Harris sent both of them to the office. "Oscar cornered me by the lockers and said he got detention and his mom is going to take away his Xbox and it's all my fault and that tomorrow after gym class, him and Alex

Gretzky and Thomas Williams are going to kick my ass and make me eat dirt." He sobbed, choking on the swear word. "They're going to kill me, Gwen. They're going to kill me dead. Behind the school in the parking lot, they're going to kill me and then he said after they kill me they're going to stomp out all my teeth and take my shoes. Why do they want my shoes, Gwen? They have their own shoes. I don't understand." He started crying. "And he broke my glasses. He took them off my face and snapped them in half. He—"

"Why didn't you tell Auntie Susan?"

"I can't!" He cried harder. "I just can't." His voice began climbing octaves of hysteria. "And I can't tell Mr. Harris tomorrow or he'll just send me to the office again. 'Go to the office!' 'Don't be a tattle-tale!'" He bawled and howled, and Gwen had to hold the phone away from her ear. Theodore couldn't articulate, even to himself, why he couldn't tell his grandmother what really happened. When he got home, Oscar's threat followed him like a ghost, and when his grandmother asked him what happened to his glasses, he lied—the first lie he ever told—and said he fell off the monkey bars at recess. "You have to help me, Gwen. I'm not tough like you."

Gwen picked something from between her teeth and wiped it on her pants. "What do I get out of it?"

He was silent for a moment. Another snuffle. "What?"

"If I beat up Oscar, Alex, and Thomas for you. What will you do for me?"

"Well. I don't know. What do you want?"

"Answers to the math packets for the rest of the marking period—" She remembered the night vision goggles Theodore got for Christmas and imagined herself creeping around the house in them, hiding behind corners and scaring Sarah. "No. I want your night vision goggles."

Theodore felt a pang of the same despair he encountered when he tried to tell Auntie what happened. "I can't. You know my mom sent me those. I'll do your math packets for the rest of the school year. I'll—"

"Nope. I want the goggles."

"Gwen! Please! Something else, maybe my—"

"The goggles or no deal."

Theodore begged and pleaded. Gwen pointed out that he wouldn't need them if she let Oscar kill him. "But I suppose Auntie could bury you in them. Then nobody will notice your shoes were stolen."

Theodore began to cry again, but at last, he agreed.

"Good." She hung up.

"What was that about, kiddo?" John said.

"He needed help with his homework. Hey, do you know where my old Scooby Doo lunchbox is?"

--

Auntie Susan always packed Theodore's lunch in a brown paper bag. Before he could unroll the top, Gwen pulled it away from him.

"Hey. That's mine."

She slammed her lunchbox in front of him—an old, metal thing, short and stout like the head of a sledge hammer and rusted around the sides, the green Mystery Machine still vibrant, the clasps still strong. She rummaged through Theodore's bag and pulled out his ham and cheese sandwich. "Open it."

Theodore watched her take the sandwich apart, peel off the slice of tomato his grandmother had painstakingly cut for him, and drop it on the bare tabletop. She put the sandwich back together and took a bite. His heart hurt.

"Go on. Open it." She spoke with her mouth full and nodded towards her lunchbox.

The clasps popped with a metallic clack and the rusty hinges squeaked. Theodore's glasses, an older pair with a piece of masking tape wrapped around one arm, slid down his nose as he peeked inside. "It's full of. Rocks? I don't—" He gasped, as if the rocks had whispered something to him. "You're going to throw them at them!"

"No, stupid." Gwen slammed the lid shut just as Mrs. Weaver patrolled past. She snapped the latches and hid the lunchbox by her feet. No one could hear their conversation over the roar of children laughing, crying, and chewing. Someone, somewhere, blew up a plastic bag and sat on it. Everyone searched for the explosion and found the culprits, red-faced and teary-eyed, falling off their stools. Mrs. Weaver sent the table to the office.

"No," Gwen said again, as she dumped the rest of Theodore's lunch between them. She claimed the apple and the chocolate chip cookies and left Theodore with the rest of his half-eaten sandwich, a banana, and a bag of baby carrots. "I'm going to leave the rocks in there and hit them with the whole thing. Like a bat. Or a brick." She took a swig of his chocolate milk.

Theodore looked under the table at the lunchbox and back at Gwen. He broke into hysterical laughter, so pleased with her plan that he didn't mind losing most of his lunch. He thanked her and told her how cool she was and how she was his new best friend. "Well. My only friend, actually. I've never really had friends."

"I know." Gwen felt bad about taking his goggles.



"I can't believe how stupid Oscar is," he continued, as if he hadn't been terrified of the boy the night before. "He's so stupid. Why would he tell me when he was going to do it and. And give me a chance to prepare? What a moron. What a—a—" He tried to remember an insult his grandmother used once on the phone. "A retard! Oh, he'll never see it coming!" He pressed his fingers to his lips and grinned like a little boy on a postcard. "I can't wait to see the look on his face. You hit him hard, Gwen. Harder than you hit Matthew Suey last year. I want to see him bleed."

Whatever momentary remorse she felt vanished and she kept the goggles. The bell rang, and Gwen carried her lunchbox carefully so no one would hear the stones. She daydreamed through the rest of class, imagining herself a mercenary barbarian employed by a weak and feeble king. They played street hockey in gym, their last class of the day, and Gwen noticed the sneers and quiet threats Oscar, Thomas, and Alex shot at Theodore. Theodore had been elected goalie, and Gwen threw herself between these taunts and even knocked Alex down, pretending to block his shot. Mr. Burger whistled and issued Gwen a penalty. She sat down on the bleachers next to Oscar, who was finishing a penalty of his own. The boy, hunched, towered beside Gwen like a boulder.

"Nice hit," Oscar said.

"Thanks."

After the game, Mr. Burger escorted the children down the long hallway behind the gym to the back door, where he left the children to walk the rest of the way around the building unsupervised. Theodore clung to her side as they rounded the last corner and approached the back steps. Oscar, Thomas, and Alex had already disappeared into the sunlight. Gwen's lunchbox rattled and clanked at her side.

"Maybe we shouldn't do it," Theodore said. "Maybe we should just tell Mr. Burger—"

"Shut up," Gwen said.

"But what if we get caught? Or if you get hurt? I mean, I'm pretty sure Oscar is, like,

Twelve. He failed kindergarten twice. We shouldn't do it. We should just—"

"Hey." Mr. Burger clapped a hand on Gwen's shoulder. "What are you carrying around in that thing?" He tapped Gwen's lunchbox with the toe of his shoe. "Sounds like you got a bunch of rocks in there or something. Bring your race car collection in?"

Theodore whimpered, but before he could spill his guts, Gwen cut him off. "Yes. They used to be my dad's. I brought them in for show and tell."

"Ah. Yeah, I used to have a race car collection as a boy." He smiled, lost in the memory. "Well hey, I just wanted to let you know you're not supposed to have that. I'm surprised Ms. Trundy didn't say something. The school banned metal lunchboxes a few years ago. I guess they're worried about you kids beating each other with them or something." He laughed. "Just make sure to bring a regular cloth or bag lunch tomorrow, okay?"

Gwen and Theodore stepped out of the building. She said goodbye to Mr. Burger and waved as he closed the backdoor. Oscar, Alex, and Thomas waited for them at the edge of the playground. The rest of the class was already gone, climbing onto their buses or into the backseats of their parents' cars at the front of the school.

Oscar stepped forward and cracked his knuckles. "You go and get on your bus now, Gwen. I don't wanna have to hit no girl."

Gwen walked towards him with her lunchbox rattling at her side. She didn't say anything and tried to keep a blank face like the patient, knife-wielding slashers of the '80's movies her dad

sometimes let her watch. Her heart beat in her palm, her veins thudding against the handle of her weapon. Her knees shook, but she hid it well.

"I can't do this, Oscar." Thomas said. "My daddy will whoop me if he finds out I fought a girl." He backed away from his friends.

"I don't care," Alex said, still sore about Gwen knocking him down during the hockey game. "If she can hit me, I should be able to hit her." He tried to stand a little taller.

Gwen was halfway across the playground.

"I'm sorry, guys. I gotta go." Thomas jogged around the building.

"What are you doing, Theodore? Get up here. Two on two, that's a fair fight." Oscar said.

"He's hiding by the backdoor," Alex said.

Gwen was almost on them, now.

Oscar raised his fists. "Go get him. Drag him over here."

Alex tried to run past Gwen.

Gwen straightened her arm and swung, the lunchbox weightless. Its momentum whistled through the air like a truck on a far off highway before crashing into Alex's jaw. She felt the shock of it in her shoulder, and the lunchbox exploded. Rocks bounced off the ground as the boy skidded into the asphalt clutching his mouth. Blood the bright color of paint seeped from between his fingers. He screamed.

Gwen dropped the empty lunchbox, its square shape dented inward like a crumpled bumper. *No no no no no no no. I didn't mean it. I didn't mean to—* When she crawled under the bushes that morning, dumping her lunch in the weeds and collecting stones wet with last night's rain, she never thought of the actual damage she could do. She didn't think of the bird, twitching with the dart through its neck, but only of how Bill would have laughed and bragged to his

friends about Gwen taking on a boy twice her size, or how John would have praised her for sticking up for Theodore. She thought of stories Helen told her about her mother.

*My little warrior.*

The reality of what she had done fell upon her stomach heavier than the stones, and these ghosts were drowned in the puddle of blood pooling below Alex's chin. A red tendril hung like a spider web between the boy's bottom lip and the ground—between him and one of his broken incisors, a muddied white floating amidst the red—and Gwen began to cry.

"I'm sorry, I—"

She didn't hear Theodore calling out. She didn't see Oscar step forward.

The punch caught her below the left eye and she spun, the blacktop rushing up to meet her. She hit the ground hard, and before her thoughts could catch up with her, Oscar drove his sneaker into her stomach.

"Stop it!" Theodore said.

Alex spotted his tooth and wailed harder. He picked it up off the pavement and thought about trying to put it back. Instead, he crawled to his feet and ran, holding the tooth out in front of him.

Oscar kicked Gwen again. She couldn't breathe. The thump, thump, thump of Theodore banging on the backdoor sounded muffled and far away. She knew she should do something, but she didn't know what. Her limbs felt heavy, as if she were underwater. Another kick glanced off her arm.

"Cut it out! You win!" Theodore said. He gave up on the backdoor and edged closer to Oscar. Gwen's lunchbox lay between them, the stones scattered.

"You want me to stop? Come over here." Another kick.

Theodore thought about his grandmother's beach picture, her bowl of hard candies, and the little wooden musicians. He picked up one of the stones. "I said stop it! That's enough!"

Oscar pulled back for another kick, and Theodore threw the rock. His elbow snapped like a sling, and the stone left a red gash at the center of Oscar's forehead. The giant stumbled backwards and howled.

"Gwen, get up!" Theodore scrambled for more stones.

Oscar braced himself to charge.

"Hey!" The adult voice shot through them like cannon fire. Both boys froze as Principal Dan, with a mob of parents and teachers behind him, rounded the building. Oscar sprinted up the hill towards the woods and two women in yellow vests—the traffic conductors—tackled him. Theodore hid the rock behind his back and slid it into his back pocket.

John pushed his way through the crowd to Gwen. He scooped her up and held her, asking over and over again if she was okay. She had a black eye and her stomach hurt, but nothing was broken. John turned toward the boy who had done it, but a wall of parents had formed between the two.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I didn't mean to. I didn't mean to hurt him," Gwen said.

Alex went to the hospital. Theodore, John, Gwen, and Oscar were dragged into the principal's office separately. By the end of the day, all four children were expelled.

Sarah couldn't sleep because the house didn't want her to. The walls and floors groaned, and something drummed along the pipes like long fingernails. She heard her name whispered on the howling wind, and on the few occasions where she almost nodded off, she saw, in the space between wakefulness and nightmare, a woman standing at the foot of the bed—the sight of which made her jump, leaving her more awake than she had been before. John snored beside her, and Sarah slowly resented him for it. The shadows of branches scraped across the ceiling and the clock ticked closer to dawn. She squeezed her eyes closed and tried counting backwards from thirty, promising herself she would be asleep by the time she got to zero.

*Thirteen. Twelve. Eleven.*

Down the hall and locked behind the attic door, the trunk of Tabitha's things began to slide.

*Ten. Nine. Eight.*

The attic doorframe stretched, bloated with the heat from the bathroom radiator, and Gwen's nails lost what remaining hold they had. The trunk pressed itself against the back of the door, and when the wind blew—

*Seven.*

—the door flew wide and smashed into the wall. The trunk slid into the bathroom, landing on the tile with a loud thump. Sarah lurched upright.

"Gwen?"

Only the wind answered, rattling the windows and screaming into the snow. She tried to wake John, shaking him by the shoulder, but he murmured his dead wife's name and rolled deeper into a dream.

Sarah pulled back the covers, got up, and walked into the hallway. The wood was cold under her bare feet.

"Gwen? Sweetie, is that you?"

The silhouette of the trunk hunched like a rabid dog, and Sarah jumped. She imagined she saw the woman again, her face peering out from behind the door like a long sliver of moonlight, and instead of investigating the attic, she stepped into Gwen's room. A wave of cold ripped through her nightshirt.

The curtain billowed around the open window, and in the orange glow of Gwen's nightlight, Sarah could just make out the empty bed.

"John!"

--

Gwen got a book of Russian folktales for Christmas, but she couldn't open her presents until the police officers left. Two of them came; one stood in the living room with a little notepad and asked questions while the other took pictures of the broken lock in the kitchen.

*We've gotten similar reports from several houses in the area. Based off what they're stealing and the location of the thefts, we think whoever it is might be camping out here somewhere. I'd keep your little girl inside for a while—*

Gwen didn't like the policemen. Their black uniforms reminded her of pastors' robes, and when John, his face pale, turned to her and asked about the campsite she found, she lied:

*No. I made it up.*

*But you swore, up and down, that you were telling the truth. What about the dream you had last night? About the man with the different colored eyes?*

Gwen wasn't sure why she suddenly felt the need to protect the Hermit. She imagined the note-taking police officer, with a prideful sneer sweating below his crew-cut, handcuffing the figure from her dream while a group of officers ripped apart his camp. The idea made her cry. In a way, she felt responsible for him, as if she had conjured him to her backyard somehow

*Mirror Mirror, on the wall*

and invited him in,

*By leaving him blankets!*

*For me?*

and to help the policemen now would be like leading him into a trap.

*No. I made that up, too. To get back at you for moving my golems around.*

John didn't believe her, but the policemen did. They put the wooden Santa in an evidence bag, and Gwen fought the urge to cry again. *That's mine. He made it for me. You can't have it—* but she let them take it and didn't say anything. She cursed herself for hiding from him that night; looking back, there was something childish and friendly about the Hermit—something familiar. *He was a lovely boy, clad in skeleton leaves and the juices that ooze out of trees but the most entrancing thing about him was that he had all his first teeth.* Yes, her own Peter Pan, but instead of flying to Neverland with him, she got scared and made her father call the police.

*For me, he would say, as the officer slapped the handcuffs on and dragged him away.*

The policemen eventually left, and they didn't find the Hermit. Gwen got to open her presents, and she got to read her new book. Houses built on the legs of chickens scurried across her living room to distract her. Trolls in iron boots danced inside the chimney, and talking foxes prowled the woods outside, although she wasn't allowed out there anymore. She read of shamans who journeyed across the Russian tundra and starved themselves to see ghosts, and slowly, over



the course of the following weeks, the Hermit took on one of these fur-lined mantels in Gwen's mind.

*Mom's earring.*

*The wooden Santa, carved just like—*

*Just like Bill's wooden chess pieces.*

*I can fix him. I can fix just about anything.*

*Did they send him?*

*He'll come back, then. He has to. He'll come back—*

*For me?*

Every night, before she went to sleep, Gwen looked out her bedroom window and imagined she could see a light, a faerie fire, burning somewhere behind the pines, keeping her Hermit warm. Winter break ended and Gwen went back to school, and while she didn't forget about him, she allowed the Hermit to drift.

Until she got expelled.

--

Gwen climbed to the edge of the roof and jumped. She caught the branch of an oak and swung down to her backyard, landing knee-deep in snow. She wore an extra pair of socks and a sweater under her winter coat, and as she pushed past the first line of trees, she imagined herself one of the Russian shamans. Thick boughs creaked overhead with the weight of the dark, and she thought she heard the call of an owl.

Theodore's night vision goggles didn't work; she took them off and threw them.

The wind hissed: *go back to bed, the Hermit is gone, it's too cold. Wild animals. Mountain lions and bears. Hypothermia. What about the coyotes, John? Yip, yip, yip. Cold, too cold. Frostbite.*

Gwen pulled her winter hat tighter over her ears. Her flashlight cut a small hole through the black, but the light flickered with every step and ghosts crowded its edge:

*Your mother went to Catholic school, and she turned out just—*

*She got expelled.*

*I'm sorry, Gwen, but what do you want me to do? I can't afford to quit the restaurant, and you have to go to school somewhere. If there was another option, you know I would—*

Gwen pushed on. Her teeth chattered. *I'm not going to Catholic school.* She sought the Hermit. She could live with him until Alex's tooth grew back and everybody forgot. He could teach her how to talk to the dead.

*To Mom and Bill.*

The wind whipped: *but what if you can't find him?*

She brought her backpack, full of blankets, snacks, lunchmeat, and bread. *Then I'll live like him, and just steal food when I run out. I can—*

*How will you keep warm?*

Her fingers burned inside her gloves. She saw the blades of a small pair of wire cutters— a scene from a movie, maybe—hovering around the blackened toes of a little boy.

*I can build an igloo.*

The wind dragged across her nose like a paring knife and tears, creeping into the corners of her eyes, threatened to freeze. *How far am I? I should be by the creek...* Her flashlight cut round faces of bark that stained the back of her mind as she tripped over roots and brambles. She

couldn't remember how long she had been walking, and the urge to lay down, to crawl under the snow and close her eyes, flooded her stiff limbs.

*Igloo. I need to build a—*

*Yip, yip, yip.*

Gwen stopped, not sure if she heard a real coyote or an imaginary one. The trees heaved and sighed. An owl, maybe the same one as before, called out once, twice, three times.

*With a blow dart sticking through its neck—*

*They're more afraid of you than you are of them.*

Gwen spun, her light searching for something familiar and finding only snow and bark. Her mind conjured the eyes of animals in the black. *The fox, stepping into the light:*

*We are gathered here today.*

A branch snapped behind her and she turned, just in time to see the flash of a moccasin and a patch of naked skin disappear behind a tree. *Laughing, she laughed at me—*

*Indian girl? What Indian girl?*

*Maybe one of the neighbors' kids?*

*Couldn't be. The closest house is the Shaffers', and they don't have any.*

Her flashlight dimmed and Gwen finally gave in to her fear of the dark and the cold. She ran, crying for John, for Sarah, for Helen, her tears freezing to her cheeks. *Bill! Mom! Mom, mommy, please—*

The wind howled and scratched. She tripped and fell, the snow burning, creeping inside her gloves and coat as she clawed her way back up and continued to run, to push further into the dark, her flashlight bobbing, the bulb growing dimmer, dimmer, dimmer, until she finally broke into the light.

Gwen stood on the rim of a mirror, the glass cracking under her snow-logged boots as the moon lit up the frozen water like the flashlight of God. She looked down at her reflection, eyeless, mouthless, and trapped; a shadow upon a shadow, only her pale face discernable amidst the water below. She imagined the frozen corpses of frogs and trout embedded in the mud like pre-Colonial arrowheads. The wind tried to push her back, pulling at her clothes and hair and begging once more to turn back, go home.

On the other side of the creek, an orange light flickered between the black, intertwined branches—the Hermit, warming a kettle of hot chocolate and waiting, waiting for her every night since Christmas the way that she had waited for him.

She took a step forward. The ice held.

*Welcome! My friends, join me in prayer.*

Gwen took two more steps. A third. A fourth. The ice cracked. She waited, then stepped forward again. It held. She walked with her feet pointed outwards like a penguin's so she wouldn't slip—something John taught her.

*Dad, what about Dad, what about—*

*No. The Hermit. He waits. He's been waiting, waiting with Mom and Bill.*

Every step echoed, vibrating through the ice. The orange glimmer was higher up than she thought, not a campfire but something else, a lantern in a window, or—

*A faerie fire—*

*No. The Hermit.*

She reached the middle of the creek and stopped. The moon hung directly overhead, its light cascading off her shoulders with a tangible weight.

*Do you, Gwen Foster, accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and savior?*

*No, wait—*

A strange knock echoed across the ice, bouncing off the trees like a rock thrown down a well. The sound had a ghostly twang to it; it seemed to come from the air itself—a phantom sound—and she heard it in the soles of her boots and the tips of her fingers. The noise reverberated through her stomach and clanged against the walls of her heart, a thump, thump, thump of somebody knocking, walking, stomping—

*Fee-fi-fo-fum*

—pounding, pounding against the other side of the ice, just below her feet. She looked down at the spiderweb cracks slowly spreading and at the billowing, dark shape on the other side, the pale face and open mouth, trapped and gasping for breath—

*Mom?*

The ice gave, and the freezing water wrapped Gwen in its embrace.

## Epilogue

### CHILD FOUND; 'STORRIE MOUNTAIN GHOST' CAPTURED

**STORRIE** – Christopher Thorn, 43, of Bangor, Maine, was arrested Wednesday night in the woods behind Shaffer Hill Road when police were called to search for a missing nine-year-old girl. Thorn confessed to all of the recent Shaffer Hill burglaries, in addition to over 300 others, spanning northern Pennsylvania, New York, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Maine.

"He only took weird stuff," Robert Bentley, resident of Shaffer Hill, said on Thursday. Thorn broke into Bentley's home while Bentley was at work last fall. "Blankets, cupcakes, my wife's paperbacks. He dumped my nine-hundred-dollar laptop out on the bed and stole the twenty-dollar bag. It didn't make any sense."

Thorn only took what he needed to survive, he told police. He left his home in Maine four years ago and has lived in the woods ever since, stealing from homes, restaurants, and businesses to sustain his makeshift campsites.

"Whenever anyone got close to catching him," Pennsylvania State Trooper Kassandra Lane said, "he would hitchhike across a county or state line, and no one ever sat down with a map to connect the dots."

Police apprehended Thorn when he approached one of the search parties. Thorn reportedly pulled the missing girl from Waabi Creek, administered CPR, and carried her to his campsite to

get her out of the cold. The nine year old was released from Storrie Valley Medical Center early Thursday morning and has made a full recovery.

"Taking Thorn into custody was very bittersweet," Lane said. "If he hadn't been out there and hadn't done what he did, that little girl wouldn't still be alive."

Thorn provided no explanation for his crimes, though police speculate his self-imposed isolation could be connected to an automobile accident Thorn had been involved in one year prior to his first burglary. The accident led to the death of Maine resident, Victoria Rawley, and her six-month-old son, and though Thorn was not held at fault, Lane believes Thorn blames himself for their deaths. "I think he's running away from his grief," Lane said.

We reached out to Thorn for comment, but the stoic only made his motives more puzzling by saying, "I just followed the birds."

Thorn is currently in police custody, awaiting extradition to the FBI.