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Excerpt from The Other Side of the Wall

by
Mary Beehm

Thesis
MFA Writing Program
Sarah Lawrence College

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requirements of the Master of Fine Arts degree at
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The lyrics to “Where is My Mind?” belong to The Pixies.
The lyrics to “I’m so Tired” belong to The Beatles.

Chapter One

Step one: open the door.

When all the doors of every hall on three floors look exactly the same, the first obstacle becomes finding it; it is hardly the only obstacle. Consider, for example, the mental state of the searcher: a sober, composed mind shouldn't have too much difficulty completing this task but a fatigued, inebriated, and violated mind will invariably wander the unfamiliar environs lost in some back stairwell, staring at the blood caked to the bottom of their boots, reviewing the evening's events in an attempt to find some explanation that doesn't involve demonic forces, insanity, or cold-blooded murder.

Being somewhat acquainted with such situations, the individual in question may eventually realize a.) that sitting in a stairwell contemplating one's boots is unlikely to lead to any split-second revelations and b.) that their room key is in their pocket. Trembling fingers add further difficulty in extracting said key, but sooner or later it will be fished out and the poor blood-stained itinerant will discover that they're staying in room 213. It is then a simple matter to stumble on over and unlock the door.

Step two: gather belongings.

A quick glance will reveal whether or not unwelcome guests have decided to take up residency in the renter's absence. Once it has been established that they have not, it isn't too harrowing a task to snatch up the various personal articles strewn across the twin bed and stuff them into duffel bags. One may then proceed to the closet-sized bathroom and swipe toiletries onto the pile, shuffling contents around to make room before zipping the duffel shut. Here the

mirror may catch the attention of the woman engaged in such activities. The mascara, so deliberately applied earlier in the evening, may be raccooning the eyes. The lilac-colored hair may not be stylized bedhead so much as disheveled rat's nest. Running one of the motel towels under the faucet to wipe the blood caked to the side of the mouth off may remove the obvious stain, but the split and swollen lip will remain.

She searches for a name for the emotion etched under the skin. She walks away.

Now for checking pockets. Wallet, keys, cellphone: all in place. The half-off Subway stub is new. One new text: don't open it. Is the room paid for? Wisps of memory, exchanging memories at the front desk, though that could've been this motel or one of scores before. She leaves a wad of bills on the dresser for the cleaning lady. Bags thrown over her shoulders, she strides for the door.

The room is left empty and disturbed for the next guest.

Step three: get the hell out of town.

Down the stairs, past the empty tables where Wheaties and Minute Maid will be laid out come morning, past the desk clerk absorbed in online poker, past the stand of pamphlets advertising this Texan waytown's limited attractions, out the door. Standing beneath the concrete awning, the guest-in-flight surveys the darkened parking lot. It is not a bright night; the moon has set. Hurry to the car. Key in the lock, door unlocked, bags thrown onto the postcards scattered across the backseat. The engine turns over, the radio fizzles on, and "*your head will collapse, but there's nothing in it and you'll ask yourself—*"

The engine dies. The woman swears, attempts the ignition a second time, then a third. At the fourth the car resuscitates, and she glances around one last time, clutch in, hand on the gearshift. The car idles. From a jacket pocket she pulls a plastic bottle, its peeling label as

innocuous as the pill she shakes out onto her palm. A shrug, a swallow, and the pill is gone. She can already feel the hangover stirring between her temples. Now the car is in gear. Now she pulls out of the parking spot. Now she is on the road. It stretches ahead of her, an emptiness waiting to be filled with the things she doesn't want to think.

Earlier that evening:

“Science proves that insanity is not hereditary,” Gwen lied to the man who had bought her—well, she couldn't say exactly how many drinks he'd bought her. The woman behind the bar kept making off with the empty glasses, making it a tad difficult for Gwen to pin down the exact evidence for drinks consumed. “It can thus be concluded that *I* am hereditary. I mean crazy. I mean *not* crazy. 'Cause Gram, she's like—like—bat-shit gone. And that means I'm not, you know?”

Smirk? Check. Wandering eyes? He had two of them. The bird (hawk? vulture?) tattooed to his bicep was inflamed; he kept scratching it. Alex's eyes would not be wandering. Alex's eyes would be ever-so-earnestly boring into hers and instead of asking if she wanted another drink, Alex would be insisting that they call Dr. Putter to set up an appointment for the morning. Meds, meds, medi-fucking-cation to solve all the world's woes! Well, screw that. Yes, she wanted another drink.

“Because, really, I mean, does it matter if sometimes I see things? It's not—I'm not—it doesn't happen all the time or anything.”

“Hell, babe, we all got demons telling us to do shit.”

Deep, drinks-boy. Gwen shook her head and flailed; somehow her hand ended up on his

shoulder. “No, no, no. I’m not schizoid. I don’t hear things. Okay, not unless they talk to me, which, I guess, might not be totally infrequent? But I see things, you know? Like—like—important thing is it’s not real, so I’m not crazy.”

Guinevere Marsh knew she wasn’t crazy.

She was, like, fifty percent sure of it. The bar smelled like spilled beer and whiskey, ashes and smoke, mint gum and perfume and sweat-mingled cologne, all tangled together at the back of her tongue. Her companion’s eyes said: *I am imagining you naked*, sinking lower, sinking lower: *I am imagining being naked with you*.

“Haha, what? You’re crazy if it isn’t real, not if it is.”

“That’s, look, that’s not how it works.” Oh! The bartender had another gift for her. The bottle clanked against the wood, and Gwen stuck her tongue out at the woman’s back as soon as she turned to see to another customer. Vodka and rum lined the wall behind the bar, rows of bottled beer visible through the transparent fridge underneath, posters for karaoke nights plastered to the bare spaces.

“Sure,” the man grinned. “So tell me what you see.”

What did she see? Fucking original. She might as well have been trapped back in Putter’s office, slouched in one of his bloated chairs, staring out the window while she waited for the endless interrogation to end so that he could hand her the prescription. Fucking Putter tapping his fucking pen against his notepad: *let’s talk about your hallucinations*

Screw Putter, too, the smug little bastard.

“Lately? I haven’t seen anything.” Nothing that wasn’t actually there. The breakup a couple days before had been its down kind of trauma, but Alex’s face hadn’t split to reveal some

bug-eyed abomination beneath. He'd just been Alex, expression calcified by hurt and anger until there'd been no room left over for anything else.

This beer tasted better than the first couple had, but then, it didn't taste much like anything anymore. She tried to pull her attention back to the man with the infected tattoo. Her gaze slid past him into cigarette haze, and her mind slid with it, oil slick over water.

i could go to gram she thought

drive back to Pennsylvania

walk through the door

she'll hand me a cup of tea and tell me to start crying

The thought soured quicker than the smell of the bar and Gwen followed her apathy to the bottom of the bottle.

alex'd tell me to go to her—he'd say call putter first

The bottle was so deep, too deep to get to the bottom of, and there would be no more advice from Alex. "It's screwed up, isn't it? One minute you're something—like—I don't know—and the next—*wham!*—out of nowhere. It's screwed up."

Vulture-boy's eyes said: *not as screwed as you'll be when I get you out of here*

His mouth moved and words came out, but they weren't the same words his eyes said, and they weren't the same words his hand was saying, the one sliding up her knee, squeezing. Her nails scratched glass, cold glass against her lips, but the drink inside had run out. When had that happened? She pushed the hand away, looked up for the woman behind the bar to ask for the time, but she couldn't find the woman and she couldn't find the clock and when she looked for the cigarette smoke to remember Gram in the garden with her tea and sympathy, she couldn't find those, either. She slid off the stool, stumbling for the red EXIT sign, and hands guiding.

Thoughts roiling, thoughts tumbling: *no alcohol on the medication*

alex made me promise

Somehow, her head ended up heaving over the pavement, chunky sidewalk art spewed at her feet to decorate the desert night. “Modern art for a modern age.” Hands patted her back, held her up, snuck under her arm. Fuck no, what was the douchebag from the bar doing out here? She tried to puke on him, but her stomach failed her with dry heaves.

Images spinning in the dark.

Brick pressed against her back, gritty cold where the hem of her shirt rose up to expose flesh and the grains of brick caught her hair. Lurch to the side, body pulled against the hands grasping, hands only numbly felt pushing her back against the cold wall. Hands roamed over her belly and teeth teased her throat, the press against her hips, the searching, fondling hands and fingers groping to unbutton her jeans.

Reflex brought her knee up fast and sent her new friend flinching back with a curse.

“You, sir, are no *gentleman*.” One hand against the wall. “Fuck. Off.”

woah

slow down, world

“Fucking bitch tease!”

Something moved in the unseen and in the quiet. Gwen tried to rub the dizziness out of her eyes, but the drunk stuck, pulling her down, stealing the friction from her feet, sliding the pavement out from under her, underneath. “No gentleman ...” His hand took her collar, his other hand drawn back, and the **crack** of fist against her jaw. Laughter bubbled up with the blood.

“Crazy bitch.”

Smacking sobriety back into her, sobriety and laughter, and the shadow standing far off in the light at the end of the alley ... **smack** and the fist spun her head towards the shadow-man, the still-man, the far-man with arms hanging dead at its sides. Stillstill stood the shadow-shape.

dead still thought Gwen.

There was a man-shadow at the end of the light: a man-mouth cursing: girl-arms protesting and pushed aside.

Stillstill the shadow standing at border of lamplight and shade: light catching the shoulders and the top of the head to leave the front all in void: still. And then Gwen watched it shatter. Break apart: breaking outward: and there was nothing underneath: nothing under the fractured splinters of skin shooting outward out-from silent screaming nothing—stretched out not-hands but couldn't reach the sky—streaming spooling nothings racing reaching down alley's throat: surging towards man/woman wrapped up in struggling embrace.

Gwen watched void legion not-hands rear up behind the vulture-man groping eyeless staring held her still. “*i see you*”

crack fist met face. “Look—” the warning but off by another row of knuckles clapping her teeth shut: taste iron. Nothing stretched over stretched under not-hands feeling around the man-hands to touch her shoulder cold-deep in the bone and feel for the warmth inside. And then nothing drew itself back to itself: drew away from the girl-body touched: found the man stuck between. (*blind man dumb man doesn't see his danger*) Nothing wrapped its not-hands around the vulture-man, dragged him back into the shadow. Gwen saw him caught up in the not-there, kicking limbs all twitching, saw the angry want turn to confusion, heard the fear-sounds choked back by shadows. Darkness wound round the man tighter-ever-tighter, and when the not-hands

stretched him taut she heard the wet rip of his chest splitting open and learned they did not lie when they said we all wear red inside. The nothing tore him open and let the shadows in.

You're only crazy if you believe it's real

Gwen thought at Alcohol dragged

her

down

into oblivion

blood pooled

it spread

and when it slugged out far enough to soak through the soles of her boots

to saturate her socks

staining her heels and the soft places between her toes

then she woke up

Half-consciousness carried Gwen through the night on leaden feet down streets to the slumped motel where she wiped the blood off her face through halls and doors and back again.

In the state of un-awake she made her flight through to morning.

The memory of driving endlessly down other roads puppeteered her on.

(sinking into the un-remembering)

She had passed this way before, hadn't she?

Or were all the roads she had ever wandered the same road

a strip of black in the changing landscape

with travelers blind passing one another by spaces?

She drove.

(eyelids heavy)

Forgot her crusty socks inside her stained black boots.

Slowing.

Turning.

Throwing gearlever into park.

She dumped the key onto the dashboard.

(now catch her drowsy)

(sleeping daylight away on the side of the road)

There is a place between sleeping and waking where life swims through shadows.

Pig Story

Once upon a time, there was a girl.

Let us call her the Girl.

It was not long after the Girl moved into Grandmother's house that she made this most wondrous discovery: Mr. Rimkus, who owned the farm next door, owned a pig. She was very large, the pig, a great white sow whose bulbous teats jiggled whenever she moved, and she had a reddish-brown spot that covered an eye and an ear. The first time the Girl saw the pig trotting down the hill past Grandmother's living room window, she caught infatuation as quick as the rash she got that time she tripped straight into a patch of nettles.

It was fevered animal love.

Every morning after breakfast, the Girl knelt on the couch with elbows braced against the back cushions and watched the hill beyond the cobwebbed windowpanes: for every morning, Mr. Rimkus's pig would escape and trot down the hill separating properties, trot right past Grandmother's garden, to vanish into a shiver of ferns at the edge of the woods. Some days, Mr. Rimkus would lope out of the barn and chase that pig of his down, cussing until he caught hold of her, and some days he'd be too busy with the milk cows and wouldn't realize she was gone until a good hour or more had passed. The Girl had usually left the couch by then.

This much was certain: every day the pig escaped, and every day the Girl watched.

"Why doesn't Mr. Rimkus fix the fence so the pig can't get out?" the Girl, who was eleven, asked Grandmother.

Grandmother was canning peaches at the kitchen counter. The window above the sink overlooked the orchard and one strip of dirt road. “He used to, but the dratted thing just kept getting loose again the next day. If he were smart, he’d bring it to the butchers, but he thinks awfully highly of that sow. It is a rather fine looking animal, I suppose.”

The Girl thought so, too. She liked the way it wobbled all over as it went down the hill, and how sometimes it paused to snuffle at the earth by the garden, snout jello-jiggly against the turf.

It was a long summer. The Girl helped Grandmother with weeding the garden, and on the night’s Grandmother forgot about supper, the Girl put Campbell’s soup on the stove. On starry nights, the Girl climbed out of her bedroom window to sit on the porch roof and stare out over the forest at the Milky Way, the salt dusting of infinity going off into the black forever; back home streetlights hid that subtlety. And there were her cousins: Brian, who was older, and Maddie, who was younger. They lived just an eight-minute walk away if you were slow about it. They showed the Girl where the leeks and teaberries grew, how to catch the spotted newts that lived in the creek, and where not to cross into Mr. Rimkus’s land because there was a bull in one of the pastures. Maddie liked to play the princess and Brian liked to play the villain, so it was often left to the Girl to play the hero, though sometimes she got to be a pirate.

Grandmother was usually in the garden when Brian and Maddie showed up. “Careful, children!” she would cry. Brian always rolled his eyes; he was thirteen, and thirteen wasn’t ‘children.’ But Grandmother never saw. “Turn your coats inside-out if you go into the woods! We don’t want you getting lost.”

The Girl and Brian and Maddie didn’t listen. It was silly and it was too hot for coats and besides, they knew the woods so well that they could never get lost.

Not even once.

Chapter Two

flick fsssh snap

flick fsssh snap

Gwen opened her lighter, watched the butane flame sputter, and flipped it shut, over and over, sheltering the flickering behind her hand to protect it from the wind. She sat with her back against the driver's side tire of her car, one leg out straight, the other bent, and the hood of her jacket shadowed her face.

The battery was dead. Again.

flick fsssh snap

She tugged her hood lower. For not having bothered with makeup the past couple days, her face was plenty colorful, the blue-black bruises just yellowing at the edges; she didn't much care for the kind of questions the marks inspired. "*Oh, god, what happened to you?*" and "*Have you gone to the police?*" and, her personal favorite, "*Who the hell did you piss off?*" "*It was a one-eyed, one-horned, flying purple people-eater,*" she sang softly to herself (flick open, burn, and close), though that wasn't one hundred percent God's honest truth. It was a douchebag behind a bar. The purple people-eater had just been a bystander.

Except it hadn't been purple.

And it hadn't been real.

don't think about it: she pulled her hood lower.

flick fsssh snap

“Can I help you, ma’am?”

She looked up, gaze lighting on the raindrops dripping off the brim of the police officer’s cap looming above her, flicking behind him to the cruiser black and shiny in the drizzle: *shit*

She hunched closer to her lighter. “No, sir.”

“Really? ‘Cause the cashier says you’ve been sitting out here the past couple hours.”

Fingers drumming against his belt.

Gwen snapped the lighter shut and pocketed it. “Waiting for the mechanic.” A pause, then: “He was supposed to be here forty minutes ago.”

“Who’d you call, Spencer? He would be late. He’s probably stoned.” He scratched his chin. “You know what’s wrong with it?”

“Dead battery. It happens all the time.”

“Why not just ask someone for a jump then? Wait here, I have some cables in my trunk.”

Rain ran down the Sunoco sign, making the colors bleed, and Gwen and the cop huddled under the hood of her car. Over by the gas pumps, a dog pissed into the weeds, and a van speeding by drove two crows shrieking into the sky.

“Where’re you headed to?” the cop asked, hooking jumper cables up to her battery.

Gwen glanced at the heap of duffels clearly visible through the windshield. Her mouth screwed up. “Meeting some friends. Camping.”

“Really? My kids love camping. Drives the wife and me nuts, though, too much hassle. You renting one of those cabins?”

“Uh ...”

He gestured towards the duffels. “No tent.”

“Yeah. Cabins. Cozy.”

Gwen climbed into the driver's seat when he went to start up the cruiser. Rain drummed against the roof of the car, and she frowned out past the pumps to the highway beyond. *stupid*, she thought. *crack went the fist against her face and the red ribs dripping and if he screamed, nothing ate up the sound before it reached her.* She closed her eyes and blinked away the scene. God, she could go for a drink. Hesitation, and then she pulled out the pill bottle, shaking one of the capsules out and downing it dry.

From the cruiser, the policeman yelled for her to start the engine. She turned the key in the ignition and the car choked and spluttered, the dashboard lit up, engine wheezing, but running, at least. Half of the tension sighed out of her shoulders, and the cop reappeared at her window. "It doesn't look like you're going to make it to your campground before the gates close. Besides, this weather is shit." He passed her a card through the window. "It's not too bad a place. Clean." His gaze flickered across her face, seeing what he wasn't supposed to see, so that Gwen drew back. The line across his forehead deepened. "Won't ask about your man."

"Oh. R-Right."

The officer attempted a smile and touched the brim of his cap. "Get some food in you, and stay safe, ma'am."

"Sure. Right. Thanks. For the jump."

She watched him walk away, the rain haloing him, and she still startled by those parting words; it wasn't often that she got pegged at the victim, especially of domestics.

The cop pulled out onto the highway, and she fiddled with the radio, passing through station after station of static. It wasn't until after she'd ticked through a mental checklist of everything she didn't need from the convenience store and pulled the thirty-years outdated United States atlas she'd stolen from Gram out of the glove compartment that she realized she

was stalling. Her gaze fell on a puddle of rainwater collecting in the dip between the parking lot and the highway. Pale reflections of grey sky striped the black pool, reflections of another pool, ruby glimmer under starlight. She gagged on the abruptly overwhelming iron stink before shaking the memory (the memory of that *smell*) off. It was behind her, with Alex. That was the rule: don't look back, don't remember, just leave it behind and forget. It hadn't happened, never was, just a dream of a place she'd never really been. There was nothing there, no darkness, no red pool spreading—*no*.

Don't think about it.

Gwen pressed her blood-blackened boot against the gas pedal, *it goes away, it'll go away, not blood, just mud, it'll wash off in the rain*, ignoring the headache pricking at the back of her skull.

The grey sky beyond her windshield deepened with oncoming night.

Cruising through the dusk, eyes grow heavy. Trees—road signs—flickering past **tck tck tck**. For a moment, rain lightens and skies clear for a fatal shot of sunset, but the clouds soon roll back in and nightfall looms. The mind throbs; the sky turns black.

And then there's the rest stop filled with overnighting tractor trailers: pull over. Feel the car settle its old bones beneath you, feel it creak as the cold presses against its joints. Not the most comfortable of arrangements, but the seat reclines and there's a blanket in one of the duffel bags. Snuggle down and pretend it's a bed (maybe more of a cot—bed-like nonetheless). Rain drums white noise against the roof. She shifts; squirms; gets all tangled up in the seatbelt when she tries to roll over. Cold seeps in through the rust-cracks, brushes against the skin to raise

goosebumps, and sinks down further, through layers of flesh and fat to bite into the bones beneath.

She's been here before, and she'll be here again.

Shiver, doze, and dream, drifting with the night washing in and out around her. Asleep? Awake? Fumble phone out of pocket to check the time and find that one unread message still there: open it. "yOU HAVE ONE an ALL EXPenSE PAIDD TriP TO the CARRIEEBEEN!!!! CALL THIS ###!!!!!!!!!"

Hit delete.

(the message before, last message received: from Alex: "working late, don't wait up": ignore it: ignore it)

Let the cold sink in deeper.

(and the memories?)

Under her seat, the shadows twitched once, restless. Pebbles, pills, and the bones of baby birds rattled in her skull, jangling out a blood-beat brain-strain, vessels throbbing. She's paralyzed on the floor of Putter's office, naked—an agony—an itch—until the carpet crumbles beneath her and she's tumbling through blue sky, the Earth a silver dime below her—eventually the dime will grow—the egg will crack—and the black wings with burst forth or she'll—

Shhh.

Just a dream.

bang bang bang bang

"How much?" Muffled by the glass. "How much?" Gwen cracked an eye, flipped the shadow on the other side of her window off, and rolled over to sink back into sleep.

bang bang bang bang

“Hey-Hey! How much?”

Grab a duffel from the backseat, drag it over your head, shh shh ignore forget go back to sleep.

Let’s establish the pattern of days that follow (of many that came before): purple-haired woman walks into a bar, finds a corner table far away from the day-drunks, and orders the cheapest beer in the establishment. She’s sitting there staring at the atlas she’s laid out across the table, trying to massage this freaking migraine (that part’s new) back into the abysmal depths from whence it came, and she just isn’t having any luck with it.

But hell, it’s not like she has anywhere better to be. Tracing meandering routes across the maps, eyes flickering over the papers seeing all the places she’s been—all the places she’s never seen. Five years will take you pretty far away from home (Pennsylvania was never supposed to be home), but never far enough.

She orders another beer and squints at Canada.

Before she knows it, two drinks have become eight. It’s dark outside, and the bar’s filled up with locals whose sideslant glances express all their half-hearted curiosity, whose backs-turned-toward-her express their ultimate indifference to the wraith-of-a-girl in their midst.

And the wraith-of-a-woman sits there and wonders

whether I ought to go back for that

tea and sympathy

(to lose herself in the forest)

(of familial woe)

(or whether)

I ought

to drive on

Low hum of conversation buzzing along with crackle dissipating through her skull **knock**
knock hello who's calling?

Her head hurts.

She's sleeping in the car tonight. Don't worry: the lingering buzz will keep her warm.

Postcards scattered across the back seat:

The City's classic skyline, the thousand-eyed skyscrapers bright against a night sky,
bridge yawning over a black river. The tourist-trap she'd bought it at had been wall-to-wall with
cabbie plushies.

COLORADO big and bold rolling across sunset mountains.

(heat-lightning-flash across the sky)

Mardi Gras dancers brightly feathered shimmying down the street. She'd rolled in for the
week for the drinks and spectacle, but hadn't stayed long, restless.

(turn any of them over: blank)

Last postcard face-up: (the rest covered, flipped over, slid under the seats): the ghost of
some Appalachian mining town, grey in morning fog.

(trees blur past: green lightning flashes: the rumble of thunder doesn't make it over the
radio) (singing along: ... *maybe I'm the one, maybe I'm the one—who is—the schizophrenic
psycho, yeah* ...) (headache-easing cup of coffee sitting untouched after it burnt her tongue)

Had it always been this way?

Always—but always, there'd been breaks. A few weeks. Months here and there. Years? Yes, years, once. There'd been that time, there'd been that place, where a smaller Gwen, a younger Gwen, had lingered years away, that limbo-land between transience, that summer that stretched beyond summer and beyond summer and beyond summer again.

How long ago had that been?

Only a forever age—only five years.

Pig Story

Sometimes Grandmother forgot to tuck the Girl into bed at night. Sometimes she forgot to do laundry or dishes, and she never remembered to dust anything so that the Girl would leave clean tracks and smiley faces and flowers in the places thick with grey. Sometimes she forgot that she had to go to the store. Sometimes she forgot her sons were dead.

“Only Melanie ever calls,” Grandmother moaned at night. “Three boys, but only Melly ever comes to visit me.” Once, on one of those rare days the Girl and her cousins decided to spend at their house instead of Grandmother’s, the Girl had asked Aunt Melly why her calls and visits weren’t good enough. Aunt Melly had made a face.

Sometimes Grandmother forgot that the Girl lived with her. The Girl would be sitting on the couch or out under the peach trees and Grandmother would walk by and see her and stare. “What are you doing here?” she would ask. “Where are your parents?” Then the Girl would have to explain: Grandmother, I’m your Granddaughter. I live with you. Sometimes Grandmother would blush and sometimes Grandmother would grumble, but it was best when Grandmother said, “Of course you do, dear,” and patted her and gave her some toast with peach jam, the homemade kind Grandmother saved for Special Guests.

Chapter Three

She checked into a motel somewhere on the East Coast. She didn't know which state. By the time she pulled off the road and killed the ignition, she'd forgotten how many state lines she'd crossed that day, and it was only the tang of salt water hanging in the air as she stepped out the door and grabbed her duffels that told her she'd passed into the next time zone.

There she is, accepting the room key the Pakistani man at the front desks holds out to her. There she goes, back outside, climbing stairs, the neon ROOMS AVAILABLE sign painting the walkway red. Shadows twist behind her, and she passes through fields of sound: muffled voices behind thin doors, coyote-scream from across the highway, and the clatter-crash of some night-bandit raiding the dumpsters below. There's our purple-haired girl stopped before a dark room. There's the pass of keycard over lock, and the red light spills inside.

Another Spartan room indistinguishable from all those other rooms, those other nights, before.

She enters, and when she shuts the door behind her, she falls back against it, aching forehead pressed against the fake wood.

For a long minute, she leans thus.

(she must be thinking)

bzz bzz from the phone in her pocket: ALEX Q flashing across the screen: tossed onto the bed where it can vibrate itself into silence, then buzz twice more for ONE NEW VOICE MESSAGE, white glow against shades of charcoal.

Flicks the lamp on.

Shuts the blinds.

Peels off shirt, jeans, crossing over bathroom tile, reaching for her bra clip. In underwear and socks, twists the taps, lost momentarily to the sudden cascade of chlorinated water. Slips out of that last shred of modesty, waiting for the mirror to fog.

The socks stick to her toes when she peels them off, and they stink of mildewed foot and iron; when she throws them into the sink, they turn the water yellow. She will not look at her feet. She will turn her hand palm-up into the water to test the temperature, and then she will step under the showerhead, not looking at her feet.

Water running. Down the scalp, down bruised knees and calves to the blue-veined feet. Hair plastered to the purple skin around her eye-sockets, lips nose eyelids lifted towards the showerhead. Suds swirl down the drain, slick and rusting. Breathe steam. Scrub the calloused soles, scour away thought, dull head-pain eased in the humidity. Water falls. It strikes runs rushes through the holes under her toes, drain crowded by suds and flaky water, swirling rising, bubbling, thickening soap and grime climbing, pushing her foot up, pushing her back, not-there hands reaching through the formless mass of soap-bubble and burst—!

Step back, and oh! the basin's rim against the heel!

Gwen slammed the faucet off. Where was her jacket? There, discarded by the bed. She grabbed it, shook until plastic hit the tile, scooped up the bottle before it rolled under the toilet. Another little white capsule on the tongue.

Gwen wiped condensation off the mirror, met the raccoon-eyed gaze staring past the beading moisture, and turned away.

(let me out)

Once upon another time (let's say seven months ago), there was (another) bar. It's probably still there, with the same hefty bartender huffing behind the counter pressing a handkerchief to his forehead, the same dead drunk knocked out in the corner, the cowgirl-booted women bitching about bosses, boyfriends, and mother-in-laws. The second stall in the woman's bathroom is permanently out-of-order. It loops for an eternity: the molasses drawl of country music, the regulars swinging in and out, the hiss of the cap of the bottle of beer popped off before the piss-yellow liquid is poured into the glass. It goes on and on until one day the health inspector comes in and says the place is a fire hazard and also infested with termites and might have a problem with semi-fatal mold and shuts it down. But that is not this day, the evening that took place seven months ago.

So back to Once upon a time.

You might recognize the woman leaning over the pool table cue in hand. She isn't a regular. She's only passing time while passing through, in for a couple solitary rounds to break up the monotony of a long drive through flat country. Her leather boots don't come up past her shins and her hair, pixieish, is palest purple: our dear friend Guinevere Marsh, fresh-faced, unblemished. She stretches out over the green felt, and with a sharp jab, spectacularly fails to sink any of the balls.

She doesn't know he's seen her yet. Seven months later, when she leaves him, she still won't know how long he sits there watching her before he pushes off from the bar, picks up the second pool cue, and tells her that the loser's going to buy the winner drinks.

By the time the game ends and she's buying their beers, the conversation has come around to her trip. His gaze is so sincere she can't believe he's real. Alex, oh, Alex. When he

asks her how long she's sticking around for, she could tell him the truth: *planning on leaving the state tonight*, but the words form in her head and never make it any farther: the truth behind them dissolves, and instead she takes refuge in a sip of beer before answering. "You know any decent motels around here?"

But why bother paying for a motel when the serious-eyed stranger offers you his couch? And why hurry on to that undreamed of destination when you somehow miss the couch and end up in his bed instead? And it's nice, isn't it, to pretend to be normal for a little while? Let's just pretend, Alex, that you're just a guy and she's just a girl, and she's not hiding anything from you, not a single secret at all. Her eyes aren't open to eyes you can't see.

Can't we pretend, Alex, for a little while?

Just a little while.

(once upon a time moves on)

(out in the desert: they dance. clawed feet stamp dust under starlight: naked-feet drumbeats against packed earth. in the deserts, link arms and revolve in circles one way then the other moving towards the center then apart releasing one another and twisting stomping away. they pound their fists against their thighs. they toss their heads in pain and ecstasy. listen to the voiceless chant: low drone rolling over the circles)

(there is a night desert, and it is full of unseen motion)

The next morning, there were two voicemails on Gwen's phone. She ignored the first and opened the second, squinting through the blinds at a row of yellowing trees across the road. "Hello. This is a courtesy call regarding GUINEVERE MARSH'S appointment with Dr. Putter for 10 o'clock October—"

"Fuck you," she whispered to the ceiling and deleted the message.

There was a different man at the front desk when she checked out, and he didn't smile. Gwen appreciated this, as it meant she didn't have to try. She tossed her duffels into the back seat, crawled into the front seat, and when she turned the keys, the ignition clicked and did absolutely nothing else.

"Shit." She tried again. "Shit!" A third try, a fourth, **click click clickickickick** "Fuck!" and she threw the keys against the passenger window. They bounced off the glass and fell out of sight. "WHY? SHITTY PIECE OF FUCKSTAINED SHIT URGH!"

The dashboard didn't light up.

The fucking battery had died again.

She tried the mechanic she called at the Sunoco station, heard a stoned, "Yeah?" after half-a-dozen rings, remembered that'd been several states ago, and hung up. She yelped a local mechanic, held her voice even during the brief conversation, and promptly punched the steering wheel when the call ended. The burst of car-horn stuck a needle through that stupid buzz of fuck this planet headache humming around her temples, and she winced, pushed open the door, pulled the bottle out of her jacket pocket, stepped out, twisted the lid off, slammed the door shut, poured a pill onto her palm, swallowed, and stomped an ineffectual distance away.

"That help?" asked a sympathetic branch lying on the ground.

Gwen started to flip the branch off, thought better of it, and slumped down to lean back against the front driver's side tire.

"What a wreck," said the branch.

Gwen did not ask if it was referring to her or the car.

The branch, a gnarled thing some good two-and-three-quarters feet long, sprouted bright green centipede legs and wandered off. Gwen pulled out her lighter.

Flick open, burn, and close.

"It's pretty much FUBAR." The mechanic scratched his scruff. "Alternator shot, some kind of nest around the engine. Can't figure out how that didn't catch fire. Break lines ready to go. You sure you've been driving this around?"

"No, I've just been living like a hermit at this middle-of-nowhere crap motel," said Gwen.

The mechanic squinted at her. "Ha. Right. I'll give you fifty."

That wasn't how this went. "What? No. Fifty? I'm not selling—"

And his face lifted, eyebrows shooting up and mouth opening in much louder "Ha! You what, you want me to fix it up? This thing? There are easier ways to kill yourself, and without going broke to boot."

"I've been driving this car for—"

"Way too long," he finished, grinning.

Gwen ran both hands over her face. "Just let me know how much it will cost."

He told her how much it would cost. The calculations flashed through her head: how

much was left in her wallet, and how much could be left on the credit card, and what would Alex do if she used it? That was it: nothing else.

“What if you didn’t fix that other stuff? Just got it to start again?”

The mechanic didn’t even respond to that.

Gwen stuffed the atlas and the postcards into the lightest duffel bag: Colorado, New Orleans, Oregon, flat Midwest stretching to a farmhouse. She paused over the one printed with that classic City skyline, then stuffed it into her back pocket along with the fifty bucks.

October bit through her jacket, and the headache kept up its irritating background noise.

“You want a ride anywhere?” asked the mechanic.

Gwen shouldered her bags. “The nearest Greyhound bus stop would be nice.”

Psychiatric Progress Notes

| | | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| Patient Name | Guinevere L Marsh | Provider Name | Henry R. Putter |
| Social Security | --- -- ---- | Date of Exam | June 15, 20-- |
| Date of Birth | Nov 5, 19-- | Time of Exam | 10:30 am |
| Medical Records No. | 0004109 | | |

...

Identification 23-year-old white female employed at the Lucky Dime motel. Arrived at appointment with live-in boyfriend.

Chief Complaint Ms. Marsh contacted our office after an accident involving a visual hallucination.

Notes Patient was very reticent. Referred to the car accident as, "The thing with Alex," and refused to discuss it. Body language became defensive and patient refused eye contact when I pressed the subject, her only comment about it being, "It just had to happen. I just had to blow everything." We

talked briefly about her partner, Alex; she closed down when I asked how her hallucinations affected their relationship. Tried to move the subject to patient's family. Was met with silence.

Patient appeared uncomfortable and never spoke at length. Gaze constantly wandered. Paranoid? Patient described mood as, "annoyed."

Prescription pending on a more comprehensive evaluation.

Current Meds N/A

Medical History N/A

Allergies N/A

Henry Putter

Chapter Four

A-one, a-two, a-one two three four—

“... I’m so tired ... I haven’t slept a wink ... I’m so tired ... my mind is on the blink ... I wonder should I get up and fix myself a drink....”

The boy across the bus aisle was watching her. Again. She ignored him, as she’d been ignoring him the last hour, shook out a pill, and downed it dry. When she slid the white bottle back into her pocket, it barely rattled.

“... you’d say, I’m putting you on, but it’s no joke, it’s doing me harm, you know I can’t sleep, I can’t stop my brain, you know it’s three weeks, I’m going insane—you know I’d give you everything I’ve got for a little peace of mind ...”

“Psst,” the boy leaned across his mother’s lap. “Are you on drugs?”

“Don’t be rude,” said the mother. Then she took one look at Gwen and her mouth turned down.

Rumble-strips, radio, that obnoxious laugh somewhere in the back; all conspired to keep her awake. (steady throbbing ache at the base of the skull) The bus bumped into deeper shades of orange, into trees caught mid-shrug with only half their bright garments cast about their roots, and she watched the landscape change. Trees gave way to houses, hills gave way to suburbs, brick and concrete, parking lots and malls, and they were stuck at the toll gate, crossing the bridge, the steel forest spread out opposite. Gwen pulled the postcard out of her pocket and lifted it to compare, but the angle was wrong.

The bus stopped, hydraulic-door-squeal slicing through the gauzy migraine wrapped round her skull, and she tripped out with the rest of the sheep, herded onto the sidewalk with duffels slung over her shoulder.

She took a deep breath, and the synthesis of exhaust and subway stink and roadside fruit vendors hit her. How long had it been? Four years? The buildings rose taller than ever, scaffolding outlining the dreams of tomorrow. Alex would hate it here: scraping shoulders with strangers, the rush, the lost-ness of it, the just-another-brick-ness. She remembered: fingers tracing love-spells across her shoulder blades, his voice low and sleepy in her ear: *We should get a dog.*

She'd laughed. *A dog?*

Yeah. One of those old guys at the shelter.

You're sleep-talking. Who'd take care of it?

She took her bearings and trudged off.

Where is she going? She must have some destination in mind, buying a one-ride ticket, catching the subway. She rides through that dark for what seems a long time, holding tight to those duffels, and imagines the conversation that will unfold upon her arrival.

"Hey, Tania! Long time no see. Mind if I crash at your place so I can drink myself into oblivion over my recent breakup without having to dish out money for a motel?"

"Hey, Tania! So, funny story, I'm trying to lay low for a week or two since I may or may not have murdered this dude the other night and I don't know whether the cops are going to be after me within the next couple weeks. It cool if I stay with you?"

"Hey, Tania! I hallucinated this shadow-monster ripped a guy apart a few days ago and I was wondering if I could crash at your place until I can make sure that the world isn't going to

tilt off its axis and pitch me into a black abyss of crazy so deep I'll never be able to crawl out of it."

Maybe not that last one.

Gwen climbed the stairs out of the station, and apartment buildings rose overhead. She walked beneath trees in metal cages, and the trees caught the sunlight and spun it into shadows, and the shadows grew fingers and crawled after her. She picked up her pace, shadows trailing the heels of her stained black boots.

Gwen stood in the foyer of Tania's apartment building. Her bags took up half of the hall and had already forced one resident to sidle past sideways to get outside, but she hadn't budged, loitering before the list of buzzers. She knew where it should say "Melnik" in bold capitals: third row from the bottom, second column. Instead, in the spot meant for that surname, was a small card with the name CISSI printed across it. CISSI was not MELNIK. Gwen went through the cards row-by-row, column-by-column, but the Not-Melnik's hid the name she needed to find, refusing to give it up.

Her head hurt. Fuck, but it hurt, drilling holes through her skull, every heartbeat an electric pulse. It wasn't terribly inconceivable, was it, that with her mind/body processing center thus overloaded, the sight-brain-thought function would get all combobulated, resulting in a lack of straight thinking capabilities? It was possible? Maybe?

Maybe CISSI was MELNIK in disguise. She pressed the buzzer. Then she pressed it again, holding it down a beat longer.

Something crawled towards her along the wall, a flicker in the corner of her eye, a shade, fingers inching blind along the bricks. She jerked away and—

—footsteps and a door opening. A man in boxers and socks appeared on the second-floor landing, scowling down at her. “What do you want?”

“I’m a friend of Tania’s.”

The man gave her a practiced once over and, judging by his expression, found her wanting. “Ri-ight.”

“Does she still live around here?”

His cross-examination took a moment longer, taking in the rumpled clothing, the greasy hair with the dark roots visible beneath the dye, pale bruised face; she looked like a runaway returned ten years too late.

“Is her name on the buzzer?”

“No.”

“Did she tell you she still lived here?”

“No, see, I haven’t talked with her in a—”

“Then chances are she’s not here.” He turned to go back inside.

“Do you have any idea where she moved?”

“Do I look like a freaking Wikipedia?” The door slammed shut.

Gwen gave the apartment the middle finger, picked up her duffels, and left.

Out on the street, she counted the money in her wallet as cars rolled by: not enough. She pulled out her phone, punched in Tania’s number, and hung up when a man answered in Spanish. *Fuck this headache* cracking open punctured splintering outward, electric tension coiled down her spine. Pedestrians cast their dubious stares in her direction, but there was nothing for it but to

pull herself together and lug her duffel bags and battered body over to the local bus stop, nothing left but to slump against the sunlight glinting off windshields and close her eyes.

The breeze picked up and blew brittle leaves down the street, a plastic bag against her boots, and a stranger took over the other half of the bench. The autumn chill had stolen the warm urban stink from the air, leaving her face taut with cold. Her head ached, *fuck, it aches*, and she dozed and she dreamed and memories coalesced into visions of things that never were, voices, faces, sensations, and shadows pulled together into a puzzle where every piece was shaped the same.

she stood by the creek at the edge of the wood

(twigs crawled through her hair)

(knotting strands to helmet her head in waxy green)

she saw her hair dappled by leaf-shadow-gaps

the wind tasted too clear to breathe: fragrance of loam and new ferns

Grandmother crouched in the bowls of the trees

hands lost among the roots

Grandmother looked up from whispering dirt

(sly eyes in a weathered face)

“turn your coat inside-out, dear”

words whispered, snaked over dead leaves and roots, up stomach and throat

“turn your coat inside-out or be lost”

Gwen spoke:

“but Grandmother”

“where is your iron sword?”

“your bright-tipped spear”

“all black?”

(Gwen’s shoulder itched where invisible words were scrawled on the bone)

there was a shadow in the trees

man-shadow peering round the rough-barked trunks of trees

shadow-eyes watching Grandmother/Granddaughter/blood/bone/and breath

the shadow-man man-shadow was a man, but sometimes he was a monster

Grandmother’s eyes moved up and beyond

into branches and thick-shadow-leafed boughs

“the iron-black-spear ran away with our mind”

“but I’m not crazy!”

“ran away with our mind”

“wear the coat inside-out or be lost”

in the trees
in the leaves
in the green shadows thick
twig and stem
bark and vein
held the black iron fast
too dull to shine
cold in the fire

(her left shoulder itched)

(spider-bite in the bone)

squat by Grandmother, love, keep her close to your side
she is frail and old, yes, frail and ancient and wise
and her mind may be gone, but so is yours, so is yours, dear

keep close to her side, dear, or die

but she's the one that's dying!

but she's not the one that's dead

“It’s just a dream.”

words whispered in her ear

whispered in the itch

whispered with no lips to shape them

And she woke, knuckles digging sleep out of her eyes.

There are always new kinds of fear to grip the heart, and yet, they all taste the same.

Gwen dug the last granola bar out and winced when the pressure chewing set against her teeth ricocheted off the migraine. She had enough money, maybe, for a roach-infested motel room, if she found the scummiest place in the City. Alright. Good. A motel would have a bathroom, a place she could clean up, and then maybe she could pick up a job. Some place would be looking for someone to wash dishes or swift-vac vomit out of the carpet. Had it been a mistake to leave the car? But she couldn’t have driven it and she couldn’t have paid to fix it, not without using the credit card, and Alex would get the bill for that, Alex would have to deal with her fuck-ups like he’d been dealing with them ever since the night she plowed his truck into the ditch. Alex would have to pay for all her problems.

jerk.

She pawed through the black duffel bag for a good minute before she remembered Putter’s bottle was in her pocket. She pulled it out and pried off the lid, peering down the white throat to see one small oval at the bottom. It tumbled out into her palm, but it was wrong. Plastic. The little stopper that came in every bottle, there to keep the pills from dumping out all that once. Not a pill. Small enough to swallow, but not a pill, not one of Putter’s magic capsules that would make the world all sunshine and daffodils.

She turned to the stranger sitting next to her, wincing at the light their phone shot into her pupils. “Any chance you know how to get to the nearest CVS?”

The Tale of the Runaway Foot

One day, the king's foot decided it no longer wanted to be attached to his leg. While the king was eating dinner, the foot grabbed the great knife the king used to cleave his mutton and beef and hacked itself off the king's leg. "I say!" said the king. He bled profusely. All the people of the castle, the lords and ladies, the knights and squires, the maids and cooks and bards and pot-boys and dish-girls and guardsmen and whores—all chased the king's foot, but the foot was too fast for them. Sir Redblood nearly caught the foot, but the foot threw the king's knife into Sir Redblood's forehead, and splat! Sir Redblood was dead. When the foot evaded everyone and ran out of the hall, the king ordered his kingdom to hunt the foot down and bring it back to him. Alas! The foot ran all the way to the ocean and jumped into it, never to be seen by anyone ever again.

Eventually the king stopped bleeding. He ruled his kingdom magnanimously, but started to grow fat because he objected to the walking stick the royal craftsmen had made for him, and instead insisted on being transported around his court in a litter carried by six dwarves. His people grew concerned for his health (he was a good king, after all), and so the court magician fashioned for him a magical shoe that would let him walk and run and jump and get all the exercise a king needed. Unbeknownst to all, the court magician was actually the Wizard Rei in disguise! When the king donned the magic shoe Rei had made, the spirit in the shoe possessed his body and filled him with a darkness that split him open, leaving only flaps of skin behind. The darkness ravaged through the court and killed everyone.

Thus ends the Tale of the Runaway Foot.

Chapter Five: DISASTER

“You alright, girl?”

Gwen gripped the railing tighter, watching her boots, black boots, and their crusted stains, as the bus bounced down the street; she swayed with the turns. “I’m fine.”

“Don’t look it.” Eyes closed, and the voice went on. “Somebody done that to you?” Pounding, throbbing sounding, swollen veins and twisting frames bending around her. Nausea dug deeper into her gut. “Swear me you ain’t going back to the motherfucker did you that.”

Oh, humor. A sound like laughter hiccupped against the migraine—it almost slid into sobs. Gwen leaned back against the plastic divider that separated the wheelchair zone from the seats, the clear coolness of contact splitting her head-pain down the middle. “Pretty sure I won’t be seeing him again.” She cracked an eye open to meet the stare of the lanky man leaning against the pole on the other side of the door. “I actually might’ve come out of that particular exchange a bit better off than he did.”

The man considered this as the face behind him melted, drippings filling the metal runnels along the floor of the bus. A pink skull grinned through the liquid flesh. Gwen closed her eyes.

“Ain’t my business,” said the voice after a pause filled by other voices, thought voices and street voices forming a backing track to the ride. “But ain’t nobody needs that. You oughta find some people. Whatever you done, it don’t stay far behind you forever.”

(if she’d killed him, why didn’t the blood go beyond her boots? why did it end in spots and splatters, why didn’t it stain her fate-lined palms?)

“I know, I seen how it goes. You think you can just keep going, but one day it all catches up to you.”

The eyes of the man standing across from her were very white, something like sympathy resting in his heavy face, but he got off at the next stop and the street swallowed him and his words up before she could ask for any more. A girl passed him, trailing fake fur and leopard print, and Gwen saw the patterns under her skin. The baby behind the driver slept softly, the boy in the back bobbing to his earbuds. The melting man filled the cracks under her feet.

(sweet darling Guinevere Marsh, you're falling faster by the hour)

(let me out)

She stumbled off the bus and there it was, a CVS cradled between a Bank of America ATM and the curb, a smokes shop next door with bongos, leaf-printed tee-shirts, and herbal incense displayed in the window. Gwen ducked away from the hunched figure munching on a pigeon over the doorway to the CVS, brushing her hair out of her eyes to hide her shudder. Her shoulder collided with a thin woman stepping out, and, “Sorry,” she was inside, blind to the eyes turning to stare after her.

ting. ting. tingtingtingting—

The girl behind the counter looked up from her phone, irritation turning to misgiving in the time it took to take in the shadows under Gwen’s eyes.

“This,” Gwen slapped the counter. “I need it refilled.”

The pharmacist took Putter’s prescription note, examining the creases where it had worn through to the point that holes had started to tear through the paper. “Um, I’m not really sure that I can—”

“And I’m going to want some Ibuprofen, so just point me in the right direction while you grab that, yeah?”

The pharmacist hesitated, and Gwen’s left eye twitched. “I’ll just check to make sure our database is up-to-date with your prescription.” She rolled over to the computer, lines forming on her forehead as her fingers darted at the keyboard. The clicking stopped. She scanned the screen, gaze flickering to Gwen and back, until finally she said, “It—looks like everything is okay. It’ll just take a minute,” and she hurried into the back.

When Gwen stepped up to the counter to pay, she had to force her fingers to close around the credit card, force them to jerk the hard rectangle from its slot. *alex would want me to buy it—would tell me: do whatever it takes, and i’ll pay him back—send him the money as soon as i land a job.*

i’ll pay it all back.

She left the store with two bottles of shame in her pockets, then ducked into the first alcove she tripped across, ripping the seal off the bottle of anti-psychotics. Her hands slipped on the ridged cap, and she didn’t notice the figure that swayed up behind her until she managed to unscrew the lid and the voice caught at her.

“That’s not going to help you.”

when has it ever helped? “Shut up shut up shut up,” and she swallowed the first pill that fell into her palm.

One light footfall. “I’m sorry, it’s—it’s not my place, I know, but that medicine—it’s not going to help with your problem.”

There had been other conversations:

“You’re telling me I’m crazy.”

“We don’t like to use that word.” fucking Putter always so placating.

“I’m not crazy. I know crazy. It’s her problem, not mine.”

insanity is not hereditary

That’s what she’d told Alex, poor, stupid Alex, but he’d insisted she go to Putter anyways. When she’d tossed the first bottle of pills down the toilet, he’d fought and argued and nagged until she finally went back for the refill. He’d watched her take them every morning, every night, for all those months afterwards. Alex always had so much advice. Poor, misguided Alex, paying for her pills. *i’ll pay him back.*

b-bmp b-bmp b-bmp shooting splinters through her skull.

“I know someone who could help you.” Gwen’s eyes lifted. The woman standing before her, raggedy pea-coat clasped tight about her frame, looked like a woman. Her eyes were eyes and her hands were hands; fidgeting, blistered, blue-veined hands.

“I’m running into all sorts of charitable strangers today, aren’t I?” Gwen opened the bottle of pain killers.

“Charitable? Ha. Ha, yes. You’re troubled, are you not?”

would have had reason to kill him; self-defense would stand up in any court (but the blood never splashed over your murderous hands; the blood only touched your boots). “Damn, did the twitching give me away again?”

The woman glanced back towards the street, then to her feet, then shyly up again. “Well, no. Ha. Yes? It was more your reaction to—your avoidance of, I mean—the Lost One. You had just seen it, hadn’t you, when you ran into me?”

Another lunatic. Lovely. Like-call-unto-like.

“I do try to avoid ‘lost ones’ as a general rule of thumb.”

“Ha ha! So silly of me, so silly, of course.”

Gwen squinted to get a better look at the woman. Maybe she was trying to score? It wouldn't be the first time Gwen had been mistaken for a drug dealer. She searched for a way to slip past outside arms' reach, shoving Ibuprofen into her mouth. *just find some place to lie low for a couple days—then it's Canada: i can make it to Canada.* She would not think of that night. She had Putter's magical medicine now, right? It'd keep the day-terrors at bay.

But the woman went on, her stare unnerving. “I mean the creature you saw above the pharmacy door. It frightened you, yes, so you looked away?”

What? No. Other people didn't talk about these things.

She hadn't gotten a good look at the thing she'd seen—hadn't seen, imagined she saw, *it wasn't real*—crunching away at the bleeding bird-body. Bent, withered, grey skin flaking—*don't think about it.* “Look, lady, I don't know what you're talking about. I didn't see anything.”

The smile vanished. “Oh. You didn't—? Of course, of course, if that's the case,” and she pulled a notepad and pencil out of her handbag, scribbling hastily. “I know, I know. It's really not my place and if you insist you didn't see what you saw, well, then I really shouldn't question it, but I would feel so much better about all this if you would just take this, just in case?”

She held out the paper, fluttering in the breeze.

“It's nothing much, just the place I go to treat my own illness. I've found conventional medicine inadequate for my needs and I think you might—well, if you decide to try some alternative medication, I do hope you'll visit, they're really quite helpful and—and yes, ha, I should let you go, I'm sure you're ready to be about your own business.” The woman pressed the paper into Gwen's hand before she could back away, abruptly urgent. “Don't throw it out,

please? It doesn't hurt to humor strangers from time to time and it would be a comfort to me to know you had it."

"I don't—"

But the woman stepped back, wiping her hands on her skirt. "I do hope you have a lovely day! That chill is coming back into the air, isn't it? But we'll enjoy it as long as it doesn't bring any snow. Stay well!" and she bobbed her way out and was gone.

Gwen looked down at the paper. An address was written on it: *Beckett's Tea & Herbs*. New Age healing crap? She crumpled up the paper and pain shuddered down her spine. "Come on, Ibuprofen. Kick in, already."

The Ibuprofen did not comply. She shoved the paper into her pocket. Medi-fucking-cation to solve all the world's woes.

"Hey," Alex's voicemail began. "God, I knew you weren't going to answer, what's the point? but whatever. What happened this time? I called Dr. Putter, you can't be out there on your own. Did you see something again? After the freaking hospital I figured—I called Dr. Putter, you need help. Don't you get that? Don't come back, if you really can't stand being here with me, fine, don't come back!" His voice was slurred. A toilet flushed in the background and voices, constant voices. "But you're screwed up, babe. Babe, I've never met anyone as screwed up as you. Get help. I know you're running away from it. You think it's me you left? That's bullshit, it's bullshit, you just can't deal, you never learned how to deal with shit, you're all 'leave me alone, let me pretend everything is hunky-dory' and the minute anyone makes you fess up to the fact that it's not okay, it's not alright, you can't fucking deal with it. Take a look in the mirror,

Gwen! You too scared you're going to see something? Take a good look at yourself! Fuck you. Fuck ...," and the voice trailed off booze-blurry.

Gwen sat on the curb in the afternoon shadow of a pawnshop and played the message again, massaging her temples to ease the pressure building behind her eyes.

After listening to it twice more, she hit CALL.

His answering message flew at her, breezing through the words the way he always did when he just wanted to get something over with. "Hey, this is Alex, you know the drill. I'll call back soon as I can."

The terrible beep.

"Alex." His name tumbled off her tongue and left her wordless one beat, two. "I got your message. I guess I wanted to know how you're doing. I'm not dead, so there's that, and I—and I haven't gotten into too much trouble—" *liar, liar, pants on fire* "—but I—I owe you some money. I'm gonna pay it back, promise! Really. Call me, if you want, or don't, that's cool, too, I just—bye."

The phone was cold and dead in her hand.

Her face sank into her forearms. This stupid migraine was screwing up her sense of direction, but she thought she recognized the street names. She'd lived in a hostel somewhere around here for a couple months, had met Tania and some others trawling through the local bars. How many nights had ended leaning on one of those half-remembered shoulders as they stumbled to the bus stop, laughter cutting through the dead streets?

Shadows and shuffling nearer than the street noise. Gwen lifted her head in time to watch the homeless man standing in front of her withdraw his brown hand from a pile of coins that hadn't been at her feet a moment before. He said, "Go buy yourself a coffee," and walked away.

“I’m not—*sigh*—thanks.” She scooped up the change. Some quarters, a few nickels, three ones, and more pennies than seemed strictly necessary. She left the pennies and pocketed the rest. Wouldn’t Gram be proud?

All around her, the streets were filling up. A kid shot by on a skateboard. Sunlight lingered way up beyond the brick and concrete, in that golden-blue strip of sky, but down here where Gwen squatted with her blood(mud)stains and her mound of duffel bags, it was already twilight, the air cool and teeming with small-talk and cigarette smoke, store doorways choked with huddled youth. This wasn’t her scene. She stood and tried brushing off her jeans before accepting the futility of the gesture, and then, shouldering her duffels, set out for **DISASTER**.

Once upon a time, **DISASTER** had been Gwen’s favorite haunt. It crouched between an Irish pub and a laundromat and competed with a place called **BOOM** across the street, but while **BOOM** had the flashier neon sign, **DISASTER** demanded of its patrons that they descend a flight of rusted steps to gain entrance. This was cool. Everyone loved that while shivering in line they could turn their heads and see shoes and taxis rushing past, and maybe even get filthy water splashed in their faces. Gwen used to like the bands that played there, the instruments usually too distorted and the vocals too screechy to understand, but which drowned things out nicely, and she liked that the interior was painted black, making it easy to pull up a hood and blend into a wall while the thumping swirled around her.

The shops fell away behind her, the gold strip of sky overhead fading into deepening shades of blue, betraying east and west with the gradient of evening. The loud venues weren’t popping yet, but still she walked through clouds of sound, laughter wrapped up in smoke and conversation spilling from open doorways, eyes red-rimmed and seduction-lined peering into glasses and scanning rooms. The sounds got tangled up in her headache, pulled the knot tighter,

and she staggered, vision blinking out for a second. “You need help?” from a face in a line of faces floating in the cold, but she pushed away *Ibuprofen, kick in* and there were steps, but no one was waiting. No bouncer stood at the bottom checking IDs. She fell against the door: it opened: she passed inside.

Suddenly submerged into silence, door clicking shut behind her.

There was the white marker by the wall where people who completed the Fifty Shots in Fifty Days challenge could leave an inspirational quote. There were the standing tables as inconveniently clustered together as they’d ever been, and there the stage with only half the drums set up and cords snaking across the floor; she’d once watched the lead singer of some metal group nose dive after tripping over his own mic stand. One of the lightbulbs by the stage had blown, and someone had set up a ladder to reach it, but the bulb was still dark. She almost turned back out to the street, but a voice said, “Marsh?” and she was stuck.

A couple of guys stood over by the bar, one of them fiddling with the soundboard, the other a stocky man with a short red mohawk and arms full of a box of beer bottles. His eyes were already wide, but he dropped the box on the bar, bottles clanking. “Holy shit, it is you! Check it, the great Gwen Marsh makes her return!”

“Who?” said the unrecognized man.

“Me,” said Gwen. She ran a hand down her face (making time to put another face together, nostalgia-eyed and misty-grinned; would he notice the mask slipping?). “You changed your hair, Jeremy.”

Jeremy ran his palm along the side of his mohawk. “You like it? Quince told me the green made it look like I had leukemia.”

“It’s cool. The club—” a second survey (smile slipping) “—hasn’t changed much.”

Jeremy ticked through the box of bottles. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. But where’ve you been? It’s been what, two years?”

“Four.” She dragged her duffel bags over to the bar.

“Jesus, make me feel ancient. Old Man Jeremy.”

“Mostly out west.” Fuck neon. Why did it have to be so aggressive, screaming in your eyes like it wanted to squeeze your skull splat? She squinted away from the lights, away from the man glancing at her sidelong from the soundboard, and recomposed herself for Jeremy. “Made it to New Orleans, saw the Grand Canyon and the Painted Desert, didn’t gamble my vast inherited fortune away in Los Vegas, found the best wings in the southwest.”

“Knock that off the bucket list.”

“You get around,” observed the stranger.

“She’s insane!” Jeremy agreed. “Four years ago, Marsh here used to show up almost every night. And there was that chick who came with you, what was her name? Wore that kimono dressing gown thing?”

“Tania,” said Gwen.

“Tania! Right! What’s she been up to?”

“I was actually hoping you’d help me figure that out. Doesn’t she still stop in?”

“Not unless she keeps showing up on my nights off.” To his co-worker: “Anyone show up here in a flowery dressing gown when I’m not here?”

The new guy shrugged.

Gwen flopped onto a bar stool, dropping her duffels as she held back another wince.

“Dammit. I was hoping I could crash with her.”

“I’ve got an open couch if you need a place to stay.”

“Thanks, Jer, but I don’t want to put you and ... Quince, was it? out.”

“Nah, it’s totally cool, it wouldn’t be a—” but he’d noticed it, despite **DISASTER**’s crappy lighting, and his mouth gaped open. “Holy shit, Marsh. What happened to your face?”

The self-conscious pass of fingers over cheeks, brushing away the fleeting shame. “I got into this argument with a feral goat. You kind of had to be there.”

Doubt floated across Jeremy’s face for a flicker of an instant, but he rolled his eyes. “That is always your excuse for everything.”

“Yeah, well, it hasn’t gotten me killed yet.” Gwen ignored the shadows dripping from the ceiling, steeled to brush it off as a spider if she flinched.

“What’re you doing back in town?”

“Can’t a girl stop in to visit old friends?”

“A little out of the way from Los Vegas, isn’t it?” muttered the stranger at the soundboard, earning him one brief Gwen-glare.

Jeremy settled the crate of empty bottles against his hip. “Yeah, but that’s her whole shtick, dude. Marsh’s like, the lone wanderer, wandering the wastes of the continental U S of A. Though I thought you didn’t go back over the same ground twice?”

“Shticks get boring after a while if you don’t mix things up.” Her eyes roamed over the club, taking in changes she hadn’t noticed at first: someone had punched a hole in the wall by the bathrooms. “Anyways, I’m on my way to Canada. Next stop, Quebec.”

“Parlez-vous français? Stay for the show! I’m going to bring the band a round of Jaeger, and you can tell me about New Orleans. I always wanted to get down for Mardi Gras” He hurried around the bar and disappeared into the gloom behind the stage, whistling off-key.

The man at the soundboard swore as one of the dials snapped off.

Gwen's head sank onto the bar, and she considered taking advantage of Jeremy's absence to run out the door and pretend she'd never made the horrible mistake of coming back to this dive, but her head hurt so much and it almost felt good to press the side of her face against the wooden counter, forearms shadowing her eyes. She tried not to think about where she was or where she'd been or the invisible drill trying to bore a hole through her skull. She cracked an eyelid and looked over to see the man she didn't know scowling at the soundboard. "You're new," she told him.

"I've been working here for over two years."

"You weren't here before."

He glanced up at her, irritated, and Gwen smiled to herself. It didn't last, a stab of pain morphing it into a cringe, and nausea stirred in the pit of her stomach.

"That's not how it works."

"Look, this is a bit of an exception for me. I don't usually make return visits. What's your name, anyways?"

"Chris."

Well then. Gwen filed him away under the category of 'Hallucinatory Monsters' and pretended he didn't exist after that.

When she pulled Putter's pills out of her pocket and unscrewed the lid, Chris-who-wasn't-Chris-because-there-was-another-Chris-and-*shut-up-we're-not-discussing-that* said,

"What are you—? Are those drugs?"

"Chill, it's just ecstasy."

"What? You can't—"

“Jeremy’s cool with it, promise.”

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave, if you’re not even going to try to be subtle—” he made as if to stand up.

Gwen wished she could laugh, but if she started, sobs would just burble out instead.

“Dude, *fuck this headache*, I was joking. It’s just Ibuprofen. I have a killer migraine right now. Just worry about your sound stuff, I’m not going to cause any problems.” *back against the wall, skill cracks against the wall, hit and hit and hit again—*

you couldn’t have killed him—must have—but the blood didn’t go past your boots.

The-man-we-are-pretending-is-not-Chris did not look remotely reassured. “Why on earth would you come here then?”

“What?”

“You’re at a club. With live music. With a migraine. That’s the worst idea. What the hell is wrong with you?”

oh, the things you could say, but she didn’t.

Maybe the noise would drown out the hurt. Or maybe not, but whatever. She wouldn’t look up, head bent over the bar, but she felt it hanging over her, the wriggling, writhing mass, the shadow-hands not-hands feeling over one another, spreading out from some dripping core, groping for her blind, just over her shoulder, just behind her back, but *it’s not there, it’s not real, i’m not crazy because you’re only crazy if you believe it.*

A hand on her shoulder and she went rigid, but it was only Jeremy, the crate of beer he’d carried out of the storeroom sitting on the counter next to her head. Concern creased his forehead, but she hurt too much to hate him for it. “You okay, Marsh? You don’t look so good.”

“I’ve got this—this headache. I feel like I’m going to die.” *break apart, breaking outward.*

“You want a drink? I got this great drink that should help, best hangover cure you’ve ever had.”

“God yes.” Frayed-wire nerves.

clnk “Don’t ask what’s in it, don’t take a sniff, just down it in one go. I’ve got a lime to chase it.”

She grabbed the glass and tipped it back, liquid burning the back of her mouth, her throat, before hitting her belly on warm. For a moment numbness spread out, driving back the head-pain. She breathed. “Thanks, Jer.”

“Don’t mention it. On the house for the great Gwen Marsh.”

then why weren’t your hands stained, too? boots, socks, and the pool, that dark pool with things inside, but no body—

forgetforgetforgetforgetforgetforgetforgetforgetforgetforgetforgetforgetforgetforgetforgetforget
—and things in the pool, white things, but no body—

“I’m not crazy,” she whispered against the wood as numbed misery pulled her down.

There were people at door and sound rising. Had the band already finished setting up? She’d missed the bouncers coming in, and someone was behind the bar with Jeremy now. Voices voices: I want this drink, Did you find them on Spotify? He was looking great last I saw him, They were fucking pissed, Can you see the stain? And arms jostling her to get at the bar (go hide in some dark corner where they won’t notice, won’t touch, but the thought of moving hurts).

“Did you see this article? It’s crazy.”

Some guy showing his girlfriend something on his phone.

“This guy got pulped out in Texas.”

“Ew! Is that the link everyone keeps sharing? I do *not* need to see the pictures, no thank you.”

Gwen stumbled off the stool and away *just hearing things just like you always hear things—not real—it isn’t real*. Where were her bags? She needed them, needed to grab them and ditch this place, but where were they? She couldn’t think straight, couldn’t see straight, all dark and hands reaching—

The lights came on. A voice spoke, loud and bright and demanding attention. It pulsed. Every over-driven guitar chords, every reverberating bass strum, and the screaming electric voice building on head-pressure straining to break through her skull. Vertigo hit hard. Twisting, flickering images, purple lighting the stage, and dim forms in darkness bobbing—a face over her face—Chris-who-wasn’t-Chris’s face—disturbed. “S-Sorry, excuse me, I n-need to—I h-have to get out of here,” and she fled, steps faltering, the world whirling around her, scenes and sounds mixed up together in some nonsensical image-babble, constricting her head—*her aching head*—until it felt ready to burst. She came to a dark place where the music dampened, closed her eyes bent double and breathed, leaning against the wall, *just breathed*, wait and let the migraine grind down to something almost bearable, something she can live through, and her breath came out in sobs.

A trickle down the spine, an itch: she looked up: there was a shadow among the shadows, deeperdarker shade-in-the-shade. Gwen stood very still, pupil widening—she’d seen that cold space before, waiting, seen it rushingracing towards her through the dark, and now it was still.

(*IEt mE OuT!*) said the head-voice that wasn’t hers, and the shadows shuddering.

“No.” She stumbled back. “Leave me alone!” She spun and ran, pushing through the faceless throng, pushing past the doors and up the steps out to the street. It was cool beneath the streetlamps. Something brushed past her shoulder, sent her stumbling, and she pressed on.

A voice called out behind her: “Marsh!” but she couldn’t turn, disoriented.

Gwen stumbled through the night. Whatever her destination, she needed to be there, now, had to be away and nowhere, but somewhere please close sane and safe. Run, run, run away, keep the hungry hands at bay—don’t get tired, legs don’t you dare get sore, but Guinevere can’t keep going no more. A bus stop swam up out of the depths of the night, and she ducked into the sheltered benches to crouch there, breathing.

The bus that finally pulled up was empty but for a man asleep in the last seat. Her skull thrummed and throbbed, but she slid across the plastic and pressed her clammy brow against the back of the seat in front of her. Another pill? She felt for the bottle before letting her hand drop.

(close your eyes and forget, girl)

Inside the seat, between the plastic and the stuffing, something moved against her forehead. The seatback bulged, wiggled and bumped, and a rip appeared in the material. Tiny hands reached out to tear it wider, twig hands that stretched on twig arms without end, and the wider the hole the more hands—the longer—ripping and tearing and widening and reaching and Gwen jerked back hands groping for her, small hands—legion hands—and she scrambled up from the seat as they rose up over it, giant hands—grasping hands—shadow and smoke, and when the bus squealed to a stop she darted out the doors. The hands behind her ran into the glass with a hungry staring face pressed against the panes as the bus took it farfar away.

Blood beating against the skull.

Gwen lurched away side-clutching and fled down the street on feet not-knowing where they carried her. She blinked and cracks yawned beneath her, blinked again and they were gone. “Watch it!” as her shoulder brushed a stranger’s and music spilling from doorframes. *why won’t you make them go away?* but Putter’s drugs gave no answer as the street spiraled away from her. Laughter ricochets and she stumbles turn and turn and turn again: time rolls away from her.

Her fingers dug into her pockets, searching frantic, but the bottle slipped from her grip and rolled away, bouncing off lose over asphalt.

Vertigo rolled in on her, rolled over her, and her sense of direction slipped, depth perception telescoping into the beyond.

There was an old brick wall. A ladder climbed its side, more rust than metal, with vines would all around it thick enough to make a ladder of their own. In the yellow light, Gwen saw mist creep over it, slink down over the lip, disperse, dissolve into darkness.

Clattering behind her and she jerked around, staring out into the empty street. Stumbling back into the wall, she listened, made difficult by the headache’s fizzling static, beyond that wind whispering along the ground and the distant flare of traffic. Her green gaze flickered over to the shadows cast by the streetlights. Did they move, shift, and twist, shuddering hands stretching out?

A man stood in the lamplight, all shadowed. Gwen felt his waiting. She wrapped her fingers around the lowest rung of the ladder. When she reached the top, she swung one leg over the verge so that she had a knee on either side of the coping, balanced and steadied by the weight of her thighs, perched there in the chill fog. The street looked different from that height: farther off, as though she’d climbed twice, thrice as far, and the mist thicker so that buildings wavered and morphed, bulging, shrinking, disappearing into vapor. She peered down the Other side of the

Wall, but dense fog obscured everything past arm's reach. The air tasted strange, damp with mold and earth and quick water, moving in gentle caresses as though examining a curiosity.

“Ahhhh,” for the mist cooled her mind and dulled sweet the heavy ache.

She felt the nothing move behind her.

And then

Gwen

slipped.

Pig Story

“Pigs will eat anything.”

That’s what Brian said the rainy afternoon the three cousins spent in Grandmother’s kitchen, listening to the downpour drumming against the old farmhouse. He grilled them tuna fish sandwiches while Maddie rearranged the magnets on the fridge. The Girl watched Grandmother out the kitchen window, wading through the muck in high rubber boots, swatting raindrops with her fire poker.

And Maddie said, “They’ll even eat dead people.”

“Says who?” asked Brian.

Maddie said, “Jake Blod at school. He has a book about murderers, and murderers feed the corpses of the people they kill to pigs so that the pigs gobble them up until there’s nothing left. They never get caught.”

“How would anyone know that people get fed to pigs if the murderers weren’t caught, dummy?”

The rain poured down, steady and stifling, and the Girl watched Grandmother. Lightning flashed, and they waited for the thunder to follow, but it only continued to rain.

And after the three cousins had eaten their sandwiches, the rain went on. Maddie hopped off of her chair. “I want to play the piano!”

The Girl had been living in Grandmother’s house for some time by then, but she hadn’t heard about the piano before. She followed her cousins up the stairs and down the hall to a door

that had always been shut. Maddie pushed inside. The room was full of cardboard boxes, and everything was covered in dust.

Everything except the boxes.

The piano was out of tune. Maddie pounded discordant notes out of the upper front board, jerky renditions of scales and Chopsticks and Mary Had a Little Lamb, and Brian stepped past the Girl. He reached inside one of the open boxes and pulled out a thin plastic case. Pressed flowers had been pinned inside.

“What is this stuff?” asked Brian.

tnk tnk from the piano.

The Girl walked up to her older cousin and stared down into the box. She brushed her thumb along the spines of books, smearing dust off to read the titles she’d struggled to read before, though never here, and no, not for a forever time.

“I don’t know,” she lied.

Maddie transitioned to She’ll Be Coming ‘Round the Mountain.

Brian and the Girl pored over the open boxes, lifting objects out one after another, setting them back again, old books and notebooks and odd objects the Girl had caught glimpses of in a room she wasn’t allowed in, a room in the house she’d lived in before she’d moved to Grandmother’s house: a small bird’s skull, a busted watch without any hands, a long black thorn, a flask. Brian liked flipping through the notebooks, for they were filled with peculiar drawings, and the handwriting was too cramped to read. It had been months since the Girl had seen that handwriting. She stared at the incomprehensible words.

A heavy parchment envelope fell into a crack between the boxes.

Maddie broke off another song mid-stream. She began Scarborough Fair, though she only knew the right-hand part, and not well, so that her fingers stumbled over the crooked keys.

Brian said, "I wonder where all this came from."

The Girl said nothing.

She had missed the pig that morning because of the rain.

Chapter Six: Part One of Two

stillstill the dust and the night surrounding
hollow cries in the dark and the wind-song wafting
broken sounds drifting through thick fog
scattered thought pulling itself back together again
around the place that broke the fall

the girl-body lying dazed

green-veined Wall disappears into fog farfar overhead
half-shadows grey beyond the mist and wood-creak

she is a slight—half-starved—thing

eyelids lilac-yellow

she is a stirring—moaning—thing

and she lies beside the Wall—unhurt

there is stone under her back, and it is cracked

still

One long gasp.

Eyes fly open, body jerks up—girl stares round disoriented. Shifting mist and shifting shades—a fog-licked doorframe? No, a tree trunk, roots snaking over slate, boughs rustling in the mist: dewy grass breaking up through cracked stone: blue, spindly mushrooms clustered around the base of tree trunks and in the right-angle of the Wall—

where am i?

Scrambles to her feet: turns one way: another: in circles: and then falling back against the Wall: panting.

where am i?

Wind tugs at the vines hanging down the brick (wind brushing leaves against her collarbone). She looks up: it isn't there: no ladder climbing into gloom. It's on the Other side, back where Nothing stood waiting for her in the lamplight.

this is a thought place, she thinks. this is a dream place, a head place, a not-real place, where bodies fall and don't break.

Gwen decided: *i am dreaming.*

But ha!

Her head didn't hurt.

She prodded her hairline—didn't hurt; clutched her knees and breathed, and it didn't hurt— (had to be a dream because world-edges gone mist-fuzzy) —scraped the back of her hand across her forehead, mixing mist-damp and sweat; wet breath in her lungs.

a dream

dream

ream

shushhush the wind and the willow whips swaying, a great gust blowing to part the vapor and reveal the Drop—the Fall—scant yards in front of her, and beyond it: Gwen stared pupils dilating out over the dreamscape opening in that sudden void, a cityscape dreamworld that *has to be a dream* because she was Guinevere Marsh and hadn't she seen them all? but she'd never seen anything like that no she hadn't.

Vertigo slammed into her, but damn it felt good to be dizzy, giddy with laughter because her head didn't hurt! Sucking in wet air not-hurting, she wasn't dying anymore—she was light and spinning because oh! how weightless, but the laughter knocked her off balance and she fell to her knees, hands jumping up to cover her mouth, laughter bubbling out through helpless fingers.

“Oh God oh fuck where am I?”

Crouching on the edge of the precipice: below her: sunk in mist: a city that wasn't real.

Pinprick lights glimmering distorted through the distance and shifting fog.

Old city: buildings burnt yellow, copper, sooty black crooked brick, stone buildings falling inwards. Labyrinth—and trees. Moss-hoary trunks rising up through cracked cobblestone, great canopies stretching out like pavilions rippling in the breeze. Groves of saplings, groves of ancients, and some solitary alone, breaking up through the tiled skyline. She couldn't tell where the forest ended and the city began.

Dead city, sunk in twilight.

Sound didn't rise up from it; just the moans and susurrations of the wind. No motion is betrayed; just the flicker of remote lights burning through the swirl of mist. Vertigo swells in, threatening to tip her forward over the brink, and she crawls back.

Gwen whispered: "It's a dream."

Hallucination; disorientation; world-shattering unreality: all but a dreaming.

(abdomen gone taut with unease)

Cranes her head back to stare upupup at the Wall impossibly looming, leaning over her, crowned in ivy and cloud. Where was the ladder? *not real go back* to where the shadows pooled in lamplight and not-men-nothings waited with their migraines and the desolation of being.

(shivers in her bones)

So dream a little longer, Marsh.

Words vibrated on the night-air: *turn your coat inside-out*: and whether they were in her head or floating out of it, she couldn't say. She hugged her knees closer, gaze roaming the shifting wood. Perhaps the trees, with their knob-like protuberances and crooked frames, were doorframes, though where would such entrances lead? Owls' nests and foxes' dens, or secrets.

And then: a voice:

"~the elfin knight stands on yon hill~"

"~blaw, blaw, blaw winds, blaw~"

Oscillating between the willow weed. Gwen lifted her head and turned back towards the precipice. It warbled up over the edge: some lost child, song as sweet as summer rain. The lights out in the city flickered, and the wind blew cold against her bruised face.

"~blawing his horn loud and shrill~"

Slow, cautious, Gwen crawled back to the edge. She peered down over it, the wind that crested the lip blowing the lilac fringe off her forehead as it hissed past her ears. Dirt crumbled under her boots, plummeted, swallowed up.

"~and the wind has blawn my plaid awa~"

“Hello?” she shouted, the wind tugging the word from her lips. “Hey, hello!”

The wind moaned over the lip and she scrambled back. Someone? Some child? Lost and lonely? but no no no

just a dream

just wait you'll wake up

Can't sleep forever, dear.

An irregularity caught at the corner of her eye: there, that stretch of broken cliff-face that had gone previously unnoticed. There were steps, the beginnings of a path, disappearing, leading down. For a moment, Gwen hesitated. She glanced back towards the Wall, but she couldn't climb over it, and anyways—

just a dream

“~if I had yon horn in my kist~”

“~blaw, blaw, blaw winds, blaw~”

“~and the bonny laddie here that I luve best~”

Slip on the damp stone and the weeds struggling up through the bedrock; the path wanders, twists, empty air on one side, now the other. Can't see the ledge above nor the city below, shadow-images like memory flickering through the fog, laughter and figures pulled apart by the breeze. Gwen picked her way down until—

—**pop!** and she tripped off the path into a grove of ancient hardwoods, the bowls of the trees luminous with moss and fog gathered in the hollows. “Alright,” she said, turning on the spot to find the cliff behind her, but the path had disappeared, forest surrounding her on all sides, rotten benches and corrugated lampposts tangled in the fern-thick undergrowth. Blink of

confusion. “Alright. Okay. It’s a—”

snap

“Hello? Who’s there?”

Still turning when the melody pricked her ears:

“~an ye maun wash it in yonder well~”

“~blaw, blaw, blaw winds, blaw~”

“~where the dew never wat, nor the rain ever fell~”

Off in the thicket, something moved: a pale shade passing through the gloom. “Wait!” Gwen cried, tripping after it. Acorns cracked underfoot, boots catching on fallen branches and broken cobblestones, and, “Please, wait up!”

—**pop!** she stumbled out of the wood onto a fog damp street.

“What the—?”

Glance over your shoulder: squint through the mist: and find the grove now several yards behind you: speeding faster: speeding farther away street lengthening.

“Okay,” breathed Gwen, pulse pounding behind her ears.

you’re only crazy if

But she didn’t believe (really, she didn’t), and she padded off wary into the labyrinth, shadow stretched huge behind her. Up close, the buildings weren’t even right, flat as though they were just plywood fronts, stage props painted by someone tripping on acid, lines bent at odd angles and doors slouched to the side. A curtain twitched. “Is anyone out here? Hello!” voice echoing *‘ello ‘ello ‘ello* and—

bzzt

The light changed: narrow streets: buildings close to block out the sky. Green shadows pooled out from under the boughs of gnarled trees, whispering green shadows, dappled and deep, trunks and branches breaking out of crumbling walls. Gwen took a deep breath and slipped on—
 —over cobblestones worn round and smooth—
 —passing from dream to dream.

(turn your coat inside-out; you're lost)

She stepped over shallow pools of water, images like dissolving photographs floating oil-slick on their surfaces, and an impossible image arrested her, so that she fell: she saw herself. A smaller version of herself, staring as she is staring, standing where she is kneeling, clutching a book in her hands: it is an old book, cloth cover frayed, and the gold-leaf title chipped away yet still legible (if only her child-hands weren't obscuring it). The Girl is small for eleven. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail. A nurse passes behind her, checking a clipboard. Bubbles rise from the images, bulge, and pop: sounds escaping: Mother's Loud Voice echoing down the half-forgotten hallway, doctors and nurses trying to calm Mother down. Machines beep. The Girl stands in the doorway of a room and stares at the open window beyond that clinical space. Outside pulls the pale blue curtains into it, out of the room; they strain to escape.

The bed is empty, and the Girl clutches her book.

(remember!)

Gwen tilted—falling—the water-image rushing up to meet her, but *no no just a dream* shaking her head. She pulled herself from the memory, breathing heavy, and looked around: curving alley walls doorless and windowless close on either side—close enough to touch. The lane twisted away behind her, impossible to tell how far it went on in the mist, but ahead a

greater space seemed to open up. She made for it, one hand dragging along the wall, and light echoed back to her in waves.

“~an ye maun dry it upon a thorn~”

“~blaw, blaw, blaw winds, blaw~”

“~that never budded sin Adam was born~”

Then she saw it: she reached the alley’s end, and there across a midnight field a child-sized glow floating off down the street opposite. Gwen started, and lifted her foot to follow, but—what was that? A breath close to her ear, hot and jagged. She jerked around, but the trees were close and empty at her back, and when she turned back towards the singer, child and street had disappeared, just a fogbank rolling over the graveyard. “No!” she cried, and ran out to chase the vanished street, when—

bzzt

The light changed: streets silent but for the echo of her feet slapping against stone, blood pounding in her ears: slow, steady, and stop to lean against a wall and catch your breath. She stood in some square, the fountain in its midst silent, terra cotta roof tiles red in the half-light. The mist hung in patches, and out of these vaporous shadows crawled a stunted, ragged thing. Gwen started back, but ebon eyes stared up at her, pale bones jutting out of the wasted face, and it twitched.

“Raven ate the old bones—”

—in a voice of sighing—

“—iron burns the coldest in the flesh. Honor the dead and spare a penny?”

“You’re not real,” said Gwen.

The thing scowled, “No more than you,” and scurried off.

Gwen sank back against the wall. Rubbed her eyes *pinch yourself and you'll wake up*.
She rolled back her sleeve, and fingers hovered over the mottled skin, hesitating.

Memories like smoke.

Shadow-man-empty-space blitzing through the mind's eye.

No. Not yet—she could dream a little longer.

“~my father he askd me an acre o land~”

“~blaw, blaw, blaw winds, blaw~”

“~between the saut sea and the strand~”

Nothing stirred in the night-streets, and yet—

And yet.

She could see, hanging over the rooftops, a distant glow.

“~and the wind has blawn my plaid awa~”

Gwen pushed herself away from the wall and made for the light. The voice lead the way, twisting and turning with the streets, never nearer, but floating farther and farther ahead. She started to jog, but the singer picked up pace as well, and before she'd reached the last circle of buildings, it'd vanished again, swallowed up by the mist.

The light glowed bright and silver, a steady glimmering cutting through the fog, and the buildings cast black shadows. She stepped out from the last circle of cobbled streets and the city opened up before her, a clearing where an enormous black tree spread its rustling canopy out for a football field's length in diameter, over-shading the surrounding streets beneath its great bulk.

Gwen stopped, staring—white fruit weighed down the branches, lovely and luminous.

“~when ye've dune, and finishd your wark~”

“~blaw, blaw, blaw winds, blaw~”

“~ye’ll come to me, luve, and get your sark~”

She stepped into the shadow of the tree. Roots sank and scooted sideways to make way for her, silver and emerald veins running through the black, but the voice had gone silent.

“Hello? Where are you? Are you lost?” She pushed through the thick mulch, the path opening up before her as the roots snaked to either side, and one great root wound over to her and knelt to let her climb up: she hesitated, then did so, and it carried her high into the branches. The canopy whispered, and she hung among the pale fruit with her gaze cast back to the ground, searching.

There. Far off, near the trunk, it moved, bright against the darkness. Gwen heard the voice floating back to her, but she couldn’t make out the words. “Please! Wait! I—I just wanted to talk to you! To help!” The figure climbed over the roots, beetle-small against the trunk, and the roots didn’t move out of the way for it, instead scooting denser to block the path: climbing, inching ever closer to the wide bowl of the tree, where the roots met the trunk, all tangled together overlapping, crevasses and caves formed in the bark. Fruit bobbing against her forehead, and she pushed it away. “Please!” Gwen tried to scramble down the root, but the slope became too steep and the root rose higher and she reached out into air and was falling. Roots shot out of her way so that “Oof!” she plowed down into thick mulch unhurt, decaying leaves clinging to her hair, her jacket. “Please, wait!” The leaves rustled angrily overhead, dead leaves blown up into her face, and she ran towards the trunk and that distant bright figure, but the roots rushed in to block her path, knotting together into a barrier thick with thorns.

She grabbed one ridge of bark, another, pulled, and fell back, palm sliced bloody.

Lying on her back in the gloom, she watched the figure up above her reach the black trunk. It crouched, bent down, crawling on all fours, the impenetrable darkness of a knot in the wood swallowing it up before Gwen could stand.

Gwen shivered, stepping back. "It's only a dream."

Voices

guttering

under the fog.

clunk

White explosion behind the eyes and legs collapsing, limbs hitting the ground and

Pig Story

When the Girl asked Grandmother why she had to set a bowl of milk out every night, Grandmother scowled. “Because of the fairies!” Grandmother did lots of things because of the fairies. The Girl would ask: “Why do you go into the garden at night?” “Why do you throw salt over your shoulder when you spill it?” “Why do I have to wear my coat inside-out?” “Why do you bury quartz in the back yard?” “Why can’t I go over to Brian and Maddie’s today?” “Why do you carry that fire-poker everywhere?”

Grandmother would shake the heavy rod at that question. It was a black thing and stabby and old. Sometimes she swung it so fast that the Girl was afraid it would smack her. “Because of the fairies! Iron is poison to them, Girl. They hate it.” She gave the Girl a rusted railroad spike and told her to keep it in her pocket.

Chapter Six: Part Two of Two

“What is it?”

“How should I know?”

“It’s one of *them*, it is, see how it’s dressed? Fell through a crack.”

“No, they’re supposed to be bigger.”

“How would you know, you old tart? You’ve never seen one. Look at those funny clothes, it’s one of *them*.”

“Well, you’re a fool!”

“And you’re ugly!”

Gwen blinked, and white spots kaleidoscoped across her field of vision.

She pushed herself up, groggy, and peered around. A pair of beady eyes set above a high, jutting nose loomed above her, gaunt cheeks coarse with patchy beard. “We knew them once,” the greasy mouth whispered, ratty incisors flashing between the words. “Walked with them. Do you remember?”

“What?” said Gwen.

The mouth gave a cry, the face leapt back! “It’s alive!” Gwen rubbed the back of her head. She’d been dragged away from the tree, away from the singer, the lost little girl—*fuck*. Streets crumbling and fog-thick surrounding, and two figures struggling across the broken stones, cursing and spitting.

“Walda! Stev! Not dead, not dead, it’s alive!”

Gwen blinked, trying to clear her vision.

“Get off, you little shit, get off! I want to see it!”

“I wanted to see it first!”

Bickers and bumps and snarls, and then hands groping her—pushing her—pinching her—hauling her upright until she faced not one, but three pairs of suspicious eyes staring out of hollow faces, one with angry red ears, another perfectly moon-round. Three faces, nearly identical, lumpy bodies sheathed in unraveling sacks, bottlecaps and birds’ beaks strung around their necks. Gwen wrenched against the meaty hands, but they only grasped her tighter.

“What is it?” hissed round-face, baring peg teeth.

“I’m a—a Gwen,” said Gwen.

“Never heard a one,” spat red-ears.

“Aha, not one of *them!*” crowed round-face.

“Is it cruel?” asked big-nose, cowering behind the others. “It is fierce? Is it hungry?”

“What? No, I’m—” *clinically insane*. “Go away!”

you’re only crazy if you believe it’s real

The trio scurried back, letting her sag to the ground as they huddled in conference, beady glares thrown her way and whispering whispering.

bzzt

and the mist closed in thick around her. Where the hell was she? She was—She’d been— at the bar. And Jeremy? His face swarm towards her out of the fog, frozen in the moment of recognition and shock. Yes, she’d gone to **DISASTER**, and maybe she’d never really left, except the City had turned into another city, had flipped into something foreign and strange, and she’d left her duffels behind, forgotten, snapshots blitzing through the vapor.

The face evaporated.

Voices hissing off in the swirling fog

close

or distant

who knew?

“Screw this,” through clenched teeth, and she surged to her feet once more.

“Eh, eh, is it lost?”

Was she lost? Teetering: “What’s it matter?”

Three pairs of black eyes blinking, and the mouth twitched up, twitched down. Red-ears hopped closer. “Is it alone?”

The buildings leaned over her, threatening to spill their roof tiles on her head as they eavesdropped. She shook her head, trying to shake out the white noise, and took one stumbling step away.

“Does it—want some—cake?”

“Uhhh, no thanks. It’s not really in the mood for cake right now.”

Where’d she been going? Red-ears risked another hop, and round-face clung to its shoulder. “What about a cookie?”

“Naw, I’m good.”

“Pie? Chocolate? Cinnamon buns?”

Which way was **DISASTER**? And the Wall? There’d been a Wall, but she’d need to find a ladder first, and then she could get her bags. And a voice—yes, there’d been a voice singing under the tree, but all that had been left behind with the bags. “You know, I think I’m starting to get my bearings. I totally recognize that—that,” and she gestured towards some semi-visible shadows lost in mist. She’d been padding through this maze for hours. Days? Minutes? Time

unspools oddly in dreams, doesn't it? "If it's all the same to you, I'm gonna just let you get back to—whatever you were doing." She started down the street, stumbling so that she nearly pitched forward into a tangle of brambles pushing up through the pavement.

"Ack, leave it, Stev, leave it!" shrieked round-face, yanking red-ears back.

Stev shook round-face off. "Does it lie, though? Is it a liar? I never heard a no 'Gwen' before."

"Ask it then!"

"Oy! Is it a liar?"

"No, it's the most honest Gwen you're likely to meet!"

Stev's face scrunched up, ears redder. "Does it have business with the Lady, hmm?"

That sounded like a thing. "Sure?"

"That ain't the way to her Court."

Gwen's steps faltered: breath rasped heavy in her lungs: heart beating doubletime: (her head didn't hurt!). But—

but—

none of it was real.

Her medication was off. Maybe that clerk at the pharmacy had screwed up her prescription, had handed her something that made her hallucinate herself right off the face of planet Earth. Hello, goodbye, make sure to visit again! No, thank you. She'd just—she'd get back to **DISASTER**. Yes yes yes she'd grab her bags and hightail it to Canada or—or she'd call fucking Putter—no—she'd find some other quack to set things right, fix it, and until then she just needed to remember, needed to focus on the fact that none of it was real—couldn't possibly be real—and it'd be alright: she'd be alright.

won't do it won't call only saying it

but *shh shh* hushed the rest of her (and the voice that wasn't hers was silent)

you're only crazy if you believe

Insanity wasn't hereditary. She was her own person: *guinevere i'm guinevere*. The past would not repeat itself ad infinitum.

Gwen glanced back at the stunted figments glaring at her out of the fog. Such twisted features, such angry glares. *don't look* whispered a thought, but *no—they're just shadows and smoke*. Twisted figures for a twisted world, reflections in the warped mirror of her mind.

"Walda, m'dear, the Gwen should come with us."

"Stev, my love, I agree."

"I remember the milk man," wailed big-nose out in the fog. "I remember dandelions in the yard. I remember—!"

"Shut up!" hissed the other two.

Stub fingers grabbed her hands and the hem of her jacket, dirty fingers dragged her off into the dark, and her legs went along with it and if she tripped they must have caught her and if she fell she did not feel it and where she went she did not know.

The mist embraced her, gentle and kind, and the mind, and the mind, and the mind

drip drip Gwen lay beneath the drainpipe. The droplets hit the same point (the point they always hit) three inches in front of her, wetting the dirt in a widening circle **drip drip**. It was dark, the light from the alley's mouth faint and dirty yellow from where Gwen lay in the innermost recess. Food passed into her hands, but she didn't eat it and it was soon snatched back

from her and gobbled up. “It’s one of them,” Stev and Walda whispered to one another, big-nose moaning above them. He cried for them to take her away. “Bad luck! It’ll call them down on us!” “Shut up, Grump!” Time slipped away from Gwen, because time works funny in dreams (haven’t we already gone over this?). She dreamed with eyes blinking open, inert beneath the drainpipe, and she wondered whether she’d dreamed a monster and a man.

But no, there was blood dried to the bottom of her boots.

And then the dream shifted, but the scenery stayed the same.

where am I?

Her gaze flickered left and right: shadows hunched against the fog between close walls. Her gaze flickered up and what she’d taken for open sky was actually bricks arched overhead to keep out the mist; the grate at the end of the alley was open. It was always open. A tree grew through the wrought iron, delicate metal stuck in the branches and bark, holding the gate fast in its place.

She squeezed her fingers and felt dirt push under her fingernails. She pushed up, and grubby hands pushed her back down.

“Hsst!” That was Walda, scowling harder than ever. “Hsst, stay put, stay still, my dear, my honey! No need to rush away, they’ll be here soon enough. No need to hurry, hsst!”

drip drip drops falling.

But Gwen lost focus and slipped.

squeak!

crrncch

He'd climbed down from his nest above the drainpipe. The one they'd called Grump, Gwen, curled up on her side, saw crouched down the alley, the noises he was making muffled by his turned back. "... *I remember I remember I remember ...*" mumbled over and under those other noises—the sound of raw meat ripping, bones cracking. Gwen squeezed her eyes shut.

Stev had vanished a while ago, and Walda had followed after; now it was just Grump, crouching down the alley munching on some broken body. Gwen hugged her knees to her chest.

"I remember." Grump's breath jumped on the verge of hysteria. "I remember—what was it? Oh oh oh what was it called? Breakfast. Yes, that's it! Breakfast in the kih—in the kih—in the kitchen! Eggs and toast. Yes yes I remember. Good old Grump remembers." His voice faded back, sunk lower. When Gwen next opened her eyes, he crouched only a couple feet away, staring at the dirt, mouth stained red. A long tail like a worm dangled from his fist. "Lost!"

Grump scurried up the fire escape.

"... *I remember I remember I remember ...*"

drip drip

She sat in the dirt beneath the drainpipe and watched the world tilting. The gremlins bickered out in the yellow light beyond the ruined grate, bitching and cursing, spitting in one another's faces. Or was it just two mangy dogs snarling in the street?

"Your fault!"

“If you weren’t—!”

“If you hadn’t—!”

Grump’s voice floated down from the drainpipe: “You were never one for morning.”

“I was, too, once,” Gwen replied. Memories pooled in the puddle at her feet **drip drip**.

“He always worked early in the little office that overlooked the front yard. I’d try to sneak in while he was working, but he always heard me. He’d be bent over those papers, always scattered, never neat, and I’d watch the sunlight on his head, but he’d always look over his shoulder just before I stepped inside. He always knew I was there.”

“Useless!” Walda was suddenly in front of her. “Waste! Not even a penny, not even a marrow-sucked shinbone!”

“What?”

Walda’s foot lashed out at her, and she cringed back. “Rubbish! Trash! Worthless!” a kick accompanying each word.

Stev was there, hopping circles around Walda so that some of her kicks landed on him, singing: “*My Lady wants a present, yes, a gift to shame all others—and he who brings the brightest gift wins honor as her lover—a night, a moon, a year, an age, before she loves another—my Lady wants a present bright, a fine young thing to smother. Bring her to the court, Walda, m’dear. They’ll buy anything might please the lady.*”

“No no,” said Gwen. “No, thank you. I’d rather you didn’t.”

drip drip. Grump moaned overhead.

“Shut it,” hissed Walda. “What was that, eh, Stev? That a plan?”

Stev stopped hopping, ducking to face Walda with a sly twist of lips. “Low folk won’t buy it, eh? Won’t trade goods with the likes of us? High ones spit on us, slam our fingers in the

door. We're rotten, and they're rotten, and so's the world!"

"Bah!" Walda waved him off.

Stev pawed at her. "But what's the Lady care, eh? Fallen already, hasn't she? To the likes of her, talking to the High ones ain't no different from talking to the likes of us! And I know the way, I do I do I do. Didn't I say I did? We'll take the Gwen to the Court, and the sweet Lady Morana will line our pockets with gold and scrumptious bites!"

"Know what they do there," Walda muttered.

Stev snarled.

"Boiled and beat!" Grump's groans echoed from his drainpipe. "Bloodied red meat! Stripped and stretched and ooooooo!"

"Spit on us, do they?" Walda went on. "She'll stick us on a spit, alright, and roast us slow. Only scrumptious bites will be your bones, Stev, blackened and bubbling."

Grump sobbed overhead while Stev slunk away.

gold thought Gwen, dreaming beneath the drainpipe. She frowned, struggling to pull her thoughts together: *gold?* "You want money?" Walda blinked at her. "I've got—let's see—" sitting up to dig through her pockets. "A nickel. Nice, right? Shiny? And, uh—yeah, this half-off subway stub, all yours! Good deal. This address—you don't want this, this is junk. There's gotta be more" She felt her cellphone in her jacket and thought that might be left alone.

Walda scooped up the nickel, turned it over, and bit it.

Images swirled in the pool **drip drip** and Gwen couldn't wouldn't look.

"Scat," said Walda, sniffing the subway stub. Gwen clambered to her feet. "Move it. Get out! Useless, worthless, waste of space" She bit the nickel again, but Stev was nosing over, grubby hands stretched out, and she slapped his hands away. Stev leapt forward, yanking the

nickel away, and as the pair fell to wrestling, cursing and scratching, Gwen darted past them. She tripped, but they weren't paying attention, rolling down the alley biting and kicking and screeching, and she pushed herself back up, running now, past the ruined gate, the fog closing in behind her swallowing their wails up whole.

drip drip

Tired, so tired, bone-weary and sad.

Walk through the mist arm-in-arm with the mad.

bzzt

One small clipped bird hopping through the ruins. Gwen walked, and she walked, and she walked. Walls broke apart into flocks of bright-winged butterflies, sunlight breaking through the mist in yellow spotlights. Deer watched her from the thickets, and lizard-eyes blinked out of doorframes. She found the raccoon rummaging in the trash, the heaped garbage spilling into an impenetrable swamp.

“Please help me. I'm lost.”

“Who gives a shit?” said the raccoon, nosing through the refuse. “I've got things to dig through, garbage to knocking over. You think I have time to solve all your problems for you?” Sharp fangs worried a rotting apple.

“I just need some directions. It'd take, like, a second. I'm trying to find my way back to this club—I left my bags there—but see, I can't wake up.” She checked her phone: no signal.

“I'd call a cab, but I'm not getting any reception.”

“Christ, I must look like a fucking tour guide.”

“You look like a raccoon.”

“Exactly. Go stick your nose in someone else’s trashcan. I’m busy.”

Gwen scowled. “Aren’t cute woodland creatures supposed to help innocent maidens or some shit like that?”

“First, I don’t know what kind of forests you’ve been hanging out in, but glittering fairyland this is not.” The raccoon scarfed down the last of the apple core and climbed back into the over-flow of junk and skunk-reek. “Second, you don’t exactly fit the bill of ‘innocent maiden.’”

“You’re also not supposed to be so judgey,” Gwen mumbled.

“What can I say? I’m a modern raccoon.” It sighed. “Alright, okay, you say you’re looking for a way back to wherever you came from? Try over there.” Gwen glanced in the direction the raccoon’s nose pointed and saw a thick knotted rope like she’d seen in gym classes on television disappearing into the fog farfar overhead. It swayed gently, not attached to anything, dangling above the swamp.

“You—You’re sure that’s the way?”

“No. Now leave me alone.” The raccoon crawled into a fallen trashcan, its striped tail the last to vanish into the darkness. Gwen crouched to peer inside the can, but all she saw inside was an earthen tunnel snaking off into the earth, roots like fine hair lining the dirt roof.

“Well,” sighed Gwen. “Guess I’d better give it a shot.”

She waded through the muck, grabbed hold of the rope, and climbed. The mud rubbed off her boots the higher she ascended, but the black stains remained undissolved, pitch against the worn dark leather.

Psychiatric Progress Notes

| | | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| Patient Name | Guinevere L Marsh | Provider Name | Henry R. Putter |
| Social Security | --- - - - - | Date of Exam | July 3, 20-- |
| Date of Birth | Nov 5, 19-- | Time of Exam | 1:00 pm |
| Medical Records No. | 0004109 | | |

...

Identification 23-year-old white female living in Lucky Dime Trailer Park. 5"5', hazel-green eyes, hair dyed purple. Arrived alone.

Chief Complaint Ms. Marsh suffers from auditory, tactile, and visual hallucinations, and regularly experiences disorienting illusions.

Notes Patient still refuses to discuss vehicular accident; progress elsewhere.

 Patient arrived at appointment late and visibly amused, frequently smiling to herself. Almost friendly when I greeted her. When I inquired into this development, patient stated: "Oh, my mother called today."

Patient has not previously mentioned any family: assumed estranged.

When asked how she felt about this, patient replied: "It's fucking hilarious." Pressed on why: "Well, she must have gone through a lot of trouble to actually get my number. I never gave it to her. My bet's on Brian, he's sentimental enough. Maddie would've just told her to fuck off and I'm sure Gram doesn't remember it.

"My mom? My mom's great. Best mother award material. You getting this down? Sure, growing up she was fine, besides the constant fighting. Over what? She didn't like my dad's job. I don't know what he did, he did research, he helped people, I don't know. I don't want to talk about it.

"Are you kidding? Of course I didn't talk to her.

"Look, it's just not going to happen. The summer she shunted me off on my grandmother, she came to visit once, for a week, and then she had to hurry back to her new life in California. Gram was actually lucid enough to try to go through the boxes, but mom kept putting it off, saying she had to do all this stuff, take me shopping for new school clothes and visit her parents in Jersey, shit like that, instead. She'd already left it there for months, I guess it didn't make much difference if she left it there for a few more years. It doesn't matter.

“Can I leave yet?”

Current Meds [*mumble mumble vague anti-psychotic mumble mumble*]

Medical History ER visit for broken arm after falling out of a tree at patient’s
grandmother’s house when she was thirteen.

Allergies N/A

Henry Putter

Chapter Seven

It was white.

“Junkie,” the streetwalkers spat when the woman with lilac hair passed them, and, “Looking for a job, sweetheart?” “Might want to clean up a bit first.” Laughter pounding splinters through the headache, and *ooo*’s of sympathy. “I know a couple of Johns who would go for *that*.” “You’ve got some fucked up clientele, Cheryl.”

Breath fogged, and Gwen hugged her jacket closer. A car pulled up behind her, low voices spilling out of an open window, and stilettos clic-claking against the asphalt: **crack** the door slamming shut: hot hit of exhaust in her face: wide-set red eyes glaring away from her as the Cadillac peeled around a corner, red lights leaving neon tracks through the black.

Stars or streetlights? bright dots spritzing through her vision.

She shivered off the night-sighs fluttering like deer flies around her ears, that throb behind her eyes swelling with every blood-pulse heartbeat. Man-voices hooted through the darkness, distant wolf-whistles piercing, and she clapped her hands over her ears and staggered. Squint: block it out: LIQUOR STORE glow crackling embers into night. Go on: go on: before the head splits open: grey matter plops onto pavement: abominations pulled together out of the slop: go on.

Left shoulder blade: itch. Cold down her back.

She fell against a chainlink fence and ran her hands over her face, slid a hand into her jacket pocket, pulled out the bottle, hands shaking too much to unscrew the lid. She dropped it. It

bounced, the sharp striking sound stunning her into stillness for one heartbeat—two—before she lunged out, scooping it up, cradling it snug against her gut.

It was white, and it was cold. Palms stinging from rope burn, legs gone numb. Colors ran serpentine over the night. Had she really gripped hemp between her thighs, pushed the manhole cover aside and crawled out of the fog into the middle of the street? An echo persisted, a van laying on its horn as it swerved around her, rocking on its axels. She'd made it to the sidewalk just in time to vomit into a subway grate, and the taste still stuck in the back of her throat.

Her black boots cracked through frost. "I had a good system," she said. "It was called: none of it ever happened." Ah, but Gwen, there's bruises and breaks and blood on your boots, you're skun up and scraped and there's blood on your boots.

She pulled her phone out: no messages. She hit CALL, and it went straight to answering machine. "Hey. It's me again. Look, I just—I wanted to—I mean, to say—" She hung up and shoved the phone back into her pocket, fingers brushing against crumpled paper.

Whatever. It didn't matter. All but a dre—but no, she'd woken up.

It was white and industrial and lost in a sea of parking garages, and it repulsed her even as the cold sterility drew her past the EMTs and ambulances toward the wide-open doors of the ER. She hesitated at the glass. In there, fish in blue-scrubs reigned, and a couple in the waiting chairs held a wash cloth to the head of a dark-haired girl. Her shoulder itched. Out in the ambulance bay, first responders rolled a gurney down a ramp and past Gwen as though she were another support post. She caught a glimpse of neck brace and fluid bag, a face more battered than hers,

and the sheen of the fluid bag hung in the air behind it, an aftertaste of light. A man in handcuffs screamed at a police officer, blood washing down one side of his face. She stepped inside.

White light, voices, all that blinking and burning anti-septic stink: she hurt, and the snakes of color playing above her were brighter against all that pale. She turned in a circle, following the floating spots, and a janitor gave her an odd look. A rope of people wound past the waiting chairs, and she followed it, ignoring the “There’s a line here!” and the uneasy shifting stares, ignoring the big eyes of that sweating girl in the chairs, until she drew up in front of the nurses’ station. “I need a doctor,” she told the woman behind the counter.

The nurse quickly brushed a comforting-concerned smile over the initial alarm *i know what you think of me crazy bitch nut-case keep her away from the children* and handed a form to her. “Just need you to fill this out, honey, so we can get you all sorted.”

Gwen took the paper and stared at the black marks scratched across it: the ink bled into eyes that weren’t eyes behind her and the form fluttered away, settling leaf-like against the tile as the words spider-crawled away. “No.

“You don’t understand.

“I’m opening up (*breaking apart*)

“I need—egh—just get me a doctor, okay?

“My—it’s my head.

“It’s wrong in my fucking head and it hurts *so damn much*.

“Do you think they’ll cut me open? I wouldn’t like it very much, but it’s gotta gotta stop

“please?

“pleasemakeitstop *needs to stop* I—I—I—” stuttering off.

Breathe, Marsh. Just breathe.

You've been here before and you'll be here again and again and again and a—

“Why don't you,” hand on her shoulder and legion-hands dripping behind the worriedconcerned*fuckyou* eyes, “sit down?”

“DON'T TOUCH ME!”

“Call psyche.”

Behind her: she turns and still behind her: lurking speck in the corner of her eye no matter how she cranes her neck to see: just over her: there: emptiness: shade: hungry thing reaching always reaching: elongating stretching black and *not there not there notthere*. The faces weren't faces. They hemmed her in, a sea of eyeless noseless tongueless ovals peachy brown and black bent over her—nothing where the holes should be—emotionless blank—and the words melted into white noise drowned out by the migraine rippedripping through her skull.

“Let me out!” and she burst from the throng, slamming out the doors into the cool night away from the white light and the shadows stretching grasping clasping for her trail. She stumbled away from the ambulances and the faces turning to follow, ran until the shouts behind her faded, slowed, sobbed. “I'm not crazy, my head j-just hurts and I need—I need—”

“What you need ain't here,” and a large hand wrapped around her wrist and dragged her away.

Formless patterns and shades flickered beyond the taxi window. Streetlamp glow blinking in and out of view, smeared lights from passing buildings, and the landscape revolving around a solitary post as the car rounds a corner, turning down a side street. “What do you want?” she said.

“Don’t want nothing.”

“That’s a new one.”

The man stared out the window. She watched him out the corner of her eye. His face was just a face, whiskered and shadowed, and he wore the scrubs of a hospital janitor, stained at the pits. “No point. All you need to know is that I see people like you, I take them where they need to go.”

“The docks to dump the bodies?”

“A place. For people like you.”

For people like her?

Putter’s office, the great man himself sitting behind his desk so secure in his professionalism. *“Have you considered talking with people who share your experiences? I have a couple clients whose cases were very similar to yours, who are in recovery and live completely normal lives now. I could put you in contact with one of them if you’d like.”*

People like her. As if such a thing existed. As if everyone weren’t exactly like her, turning a blind eye to all the uncomfortable truths of life. No, Putter. She didn’t want to meet anyone like her.

Imagine the street where the alchemist lives, brownstone squeezed between brownstones, subway stop down at the intersection, apartment complex on the corner side-by-side with the parking lot \$9/hour \$12/two. Imagine that it’s night, that the potholes and cracks in the sidewalk

are ink spilled across the concrete. Caged trees bloom green bleed yellow, brown-yellow leaves scattered **crunch** across the steps, across the doormat, and wrought iron railings autumn-cold curling up to the door. The witch's house has long windows like sad eyes. Ivy sank its roots into the foundation and climbed up one side of the door, forked out above the second-floor windows, will spread out farther, towards the third floor, towards the roof.

Through the dark and distraction, Gwen couldn't see much beyond the starved ghost-figures of trees and the old-fashioned sign hung above the stoop. It read *Beckell's Teo & Herls* in chipped black paint. Where had—? She reached into her pocket and touched crumpled paper: she had to squint to read it in the lamplight, the handwriting nearly illegible in the half-dark: *Beckett's Tea & Herbs*, and an address. She glanced back at the street sign, then up at the house number: this address.

“Oh, no, you've got to be shitting me.”

“Right,” muttered the man, hauling her up shallow steps scooped out with age. Her boot caught on the lip, and suddenly she found herself staring at shadow-fingers pressed against the window-panes, scritchscratching against the glass.

“Jesus!” pulling back, but the shadow-hands were only leaves, dark leaves and leaf-shadows behind, and the man held on. “Let go of me!”

The man just pounded his fist against the door. “Thad! Get your ass out here! I have a shift to get back to!”

A bold-lettered plaque blocked her view of the interior: **CLOSED**.

“Thaddeus, you asshole!”

let me out

Gwen's feet slid out from under her, vision fizzling into the black, when the door opened and a warm green scent wafted out. She sank lower, such weight pulling her under, such heaviness dragging her down, and the sound of waves.

"... the legs, I've got her arms ..."

"... dammit, Thad, are you even ..."

"... steady, there, you're going to knock her head! ..."

"... phew! heavier than she ..."

"... what's she muttering ..."

"... pain in the ..."

"... it'll be ..."

Waves crashed, and the roar, tide tugging her out far out to sea, shore vanishing, land dissolving, waves screaming and smashing smashed crashed: static.

Note Inked on Cured Rabbit Hide, Brindled Fur Still Attached

Thad.

Don't leave the shop. Will be away longer than expected. Not more than three months. If stock runs low, contact Zigs. Don't leave the shop.

--S.B.

Pig Story

One day, the Girl decided to follow Mr. Rimkus's pig into the forest.

It was spring, and her mother had come to visit, but had not yet taken the Girl away. The ground was muddy and the grass was yellow with shiny brown marks where the Girl and her cousins had slipped and torn it. Grandmother was very busy in the garden. She was turning last year's dead vegetables into the ground so that they would feed the new seeds she would soon plant. As the Girl walked past in her rubber boots and her green jacket, Grandmother said, "Turn your coat inside-out!" The Girl minded the advice and left it that way because there was no one in the woods to see her and call her names, so she didn't care, even if it was uncomfortable.

She found the pig at the stream. It was very large and very white. "Hello," she told the pig.

It snorted.

She crouched in the green ferns and watched its snout snuffle along the mulch, sniffing sniffing. And then it trotted deeper into the wood, tramping over the green shoots poking up through the mulch.

The Girl followed the pig deeper into the trees.

As they went the forest changed. The trunks grew closer together and there were boulders five times as big as the Girl lying all covered in moss and bird nests. The wood became colder, less sunlight filtering down through the thickening branches, and the Girl trailed after her porcine guide into hollows and out of them, along swift snow-melt streams and through blackberry

brambles, never losing sight of the great white shape trundling through the undergrowth. The pig seemed to glow ahead of her in the eternal twilight under trees, a beacon in the shadows.

But not all of the snow had melted in the deep parts of the wood. She saw the icy patches of veneer in the shaded hillsides, pocked from rain and skittering paws, dirty snow barely two inches thick, all packed down dense and grey. More drifts lay congregated in the divots the farther out she roamed, deeper drifts, and then one off-white mound rose right in front of her.

She took one step, another, and then her foot broke through the crust and sank down, making her yelp as the cold-wet filled her boot and ran down to her foot, snow-melt soaking through her socks and chilling the little toes beneath. She stumbled back out of the snowbank. Could she go around it? But trees had fallen in some winter storm, and the hill on one side was too steep, all overgrown with prickly briars. She could no longer see the pig ahead of her, not even a glimpse of its curly tail.

It was not the last time she would follow the pig.

Chapter Eight

Gwen felt heaviness, and breathed in. The smell was animal, dry and itchy against her nose, but beyond that was an earth-scent aromatic with crushed herbal traces, cool with the green of growing things. She curled in on herself: *where am i?* and those heady scents pressed up against her migraine, soothed the aching head-pain to leave her limp and foggy (*there's a city in the mist*).

Shiftings and shushings and silence. She opened her eyes, and the world was green. Blinked, and it came into focus. There were plants on the shelves and in pots on the floor, emerald climbers hanging from the ceiling alongside yellow-green fronds drying in twine, splashes of color in the petals and berries filling jars. She pushed herself upright, and the wool blanket slid off her shoulders to pool in her lap. Sunlight slanted in through the windows at the front of the shop, filtered through leaves to the hardwood floor, dappled shadows tinged emerald. There, right in front of her, a coffee table with a Bunsen burner for centerpiece, loose tea leaves scattered across it. At either end of it, encircled by overburdened shelves, the lumpy forms of two frayed armchairs. She drew her legs up, off the farther cushion of the loveseat, poised for some action.

The green nearly concealed the man perched cross-legged in one the farther armchair; he slouched over a steaming mug and watched her, dwarfed by a green army jacket, his light hair sleep-spiked.

“Hey,” said the man, taking a meditative sip from his mug

“Wait—who—what—?”

“I always thought, you know, it was my job to ask the questions. This being my place and all.” Another sip. “Why don’t we start with: why are you here?”

“I don’t—wait, that—the sign, and—”

“I already checked you for the obvious. It’s cool, we’re all legit here, very professional. You haven’t grown any extra appendages,” tapped pointer finger against the mug, “aren’t uncontrollably dancing, singing, fluting, etcetera,” tapped middle, “no spontaneous combustion of nearby objects,” ring, “aren’t talking in riddles or proverbs,” pinkie, “plenty of marks, but none consistent with bite and/or scratch wounds,” index of next hand, “not in a trance, far as I can tell,” middle, “no smell indicating early signs of decay,” ring, “have not become magnetized,” pinkie, “and have exhibited no interest in jumping off the roof to see if you can fly. So why are you here? Braddock usually only brings me the obvious ones.” The mug rose again.

Gwen blinked. “What.”

“What, exactly, is wrong with you?”

Her gaze flickered back over the shelves, the bins and jars and packets, the counter with herbs crawling up over the register, the dirt scattered across the floor. “This is that shop. Bennet’s tea and hippie crap.”

His eyes ran up to the ceiling. “Well—*close*.”

“That guy—shit, I was at the hospital—he brought me here?”

The man’s mouth twisted. “Around four in the morning. Thanks for that.”

Jumbled images, memories tumbling together, and she couldn’t sort the night-walking from the dream *had to have been a dream* don’t think about it. “But this is a—it’s a fucking a novelty shop.” She pushed the blanket off her legs.

He scowled over his mug at her, brown eyes bloodshot behind his glasses. “*Tea* is not a *novelty*.”

“I should go.” She pushed off the couch, but *woah* her hand shot out to catch her against an armchair, blood pounding through too-narrow brain-veins and vision exploding into fizzles and sparks. “Wha—f-fu ...” Pounding fist against forehead, beating back that promise to crack and black the skin. “... n-n-need to g-go ...”

What? Where was he? Not in the chair, no—ah! right in front of her! Only a couple inches taller, bearing down with those wild bloodshot eyes, staggering her back against the loveseat. “Who was it? Who sent you? Imogen? Ziggs? I don’t have what they want. You tell whoever it was, I’m not interested. Stay away,” and his finger jabbed into her collarbone, “unless you’re sure you want to learn exactly what you’re dealing with.” She opened her mouth, but no words came out. “Is that what they want? To pinch and press and poke to find out what happens when I snap? Huh? I wouldn’t recommend that game! Who sent you?” And then he jerked back, uncertainty clouding behind his glasses. “You from the Court? Look, I already gave them my answer! Your Lady can send all the promises and death threats she wants, but my answer hasn’t changed! You got that? I don’t work for dead queens!” and he spun away, shakily reaching out for his mug.

what the fuck

Gwen shook her head, struggling to string up the words with all that horrible ache tearing at her. “No one—*tss*—no one *sent* me. Some weirdo gave me this.” Where was the paper? She dug through her pockets, and there it was, shoved it towards him. “But what—*whatever* this is? Not interested.” If she just had a moment to pull herself together, if she could just breathe, she could walk through those shelves and out the door. Her knees shook.

just—just one second—just one minute, marsh

“Let me see that.” He snatched the paper from her. His eyes narrowed. “This is Rachel’s handwriting.”

Leaves stirred, and he pushed his glasses up his nose, reading the note again.

Finally, “Sit down.”

“G-give me a minute, I’m leaving—”

“Sit,” and he pushed her back onto the loveseat. The world went white for a moment, and when it slipped back into focus, she inhaled steam.

“Word of advice,” said the man. “After a rough night out, make yourself a pot of tea. Or three.” He wrapped her hands around the warm mug and stepped back to pull another off a shelf.

The dark liquid looked like tea. It smelled like tea. When she brought it to her lips, it even tasted like tea. The bitterness was rainy afternoons looking out over the garden with Gram, sitting by the kitchen window chatting about grace and grades and goblins. She shuddered and drank deeper. Past the shelves and out beyond the windows, she could just make out a smear of overcast sky above a parking lot.

“Mundane, exotic, herbal, recreation.” When had he had returned to his armchair, his legs hooked over one arm? He balanced his mug on his knees and rolled a cigarette. “If it’s tea, we’ve got it.” Lit it and breathed deep. “Probably. I’m not an expert.”

Gwen rolled the mug between her palms. It reminded her of the box of Twinings English Breakfast Gram kept next to the sugar, though if there was any caffeine in this, it was only making her drowsier. She brought it to her lips, tipped it back, tipped it farther. Warmth diffused through muscle, bone, and nerves, and the migraine drew away from it, retreating a breath beyond her reach.

Gwen giggled, and sank deeper into the green world.

“She told me you could help. I mean, she said someone here could.”

“Hmm?”

In the whorls of the plaster ceiling, a garden grew, and water flowed. Remember pinching dusty sherry from Gram’s neglected liquor cabinet? Remember stealing away with it, meeting Brian and that girlfriend of his out in the wood, passing the bottle between the three, feet dangling over creek-water? Remember Alex offering a helping hand into his truck, that large palm at the small of your back? Remember watching the sun rise over scrub from that trailer bedroom, Alex murmuring dreams in the semi-dark? Remember waiting in that tire swing when the world hung huge around you, the house behind it blurred by lost time: remember spinning there one lonely afternoon, waiting for him to come home?

(remember!)

Gwen said, “I’m screwed.” She drank to the dregs. Her arm slipped off the loveseat and the mug rolled from fingers, disappearing under the coffee table, sensation rolling away with it. Her heart beat light as dragonfly-wings beneath her collarbone. Oh, Guinevere, you’re drifting away.

Her host’s head had lolled limp to the side, eyes half-lidded, when the walls shook to a dull **thmp** that pounded the ceiling. He jerked upright so fast he fell out of his chair, barely landing before he was scrambling for a door she hadn’t noticed in the back behind the register, a string of “shitshitshit” trailing after him. Gwen craned her head around to watch him disappear beyond the door up a staircase, vanishing into the billow of sparking smoke that coughed down from the second floor. Her gaze slowly followed the clamor that made its way across the ceiling, the thudding, stumbling bumps, and then the thin wails of distress.

A book bound in leather lay on the coffee table. She nudged it to get a better look at the cover: *Tales of Wandering*. Beneath the curling title, a fox stared out of a blackberry thicket, and above the words, a bearded man in a pointed hat sat in the branches of a tree that covered the world. The branches of the tree wound serpentine spirals, and the fox blinked.

She dug the bottle of pills out of her jacket pocket. She fought to get the cap off, twisting and pulling, and when it finally popped apart, it threw tablets across the rug and coffee table in a clattering shower. “Why?” she moaned.

She slid off the loveseat.

With head and shoulders under the coffee table, she strained to reach a pill that had bounced next to one of the potted plants; finally, nudged into reach! But Gwen frowned: the shape was all wrong, the letters off, and as she scrambled to collect the rest of them, a choking dread rose through the brain-fog, dulled by the warmth still rolling in her belly. All the same, all wrong. She snatched the empty bottle up off the floor and read IBUPROFEN bold along the side. The haze thickened with the smoke filtering down through cracks in the ceiling, dissipating throughout the room.

Gwen’s breath quickened and she sat back, stunned: *dropped putter’s pills when you left*
DISASTER.

The bell over the front door chimed and someone walked into the shop.

Invitation Inked in Silver Calligraphy on Matte Black Parchment

The Lady Morana's Theatre of Mischief, Mayhem, and Morbidity

Cordially invites Messrs. ELLIOT PROKOSH, Academic

And his Associate

To View a Selection of Traditional Mugen Noh

To be Produced this New Year's Eve

A Box will be Set Aside for MR. PROKOSH and Associate

Guests are Encouraged to Bring their own Sidearms

As Such will not be Provided by the Theatre

To be continued