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Fucking The Pyrokinetic

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Sarah Lawrence Graduate Writing Thesis

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Moths

You were a friendless child capturing moths in glass jars, telling them the names of kids at your school under your breath, with your mother teaching you to swallow the insects whole, teaching you that the quivering they made in your belly would create a song in your lungs, a fluttering that in your teenage years would seduce swollen-eyed girls like yourself and cut into the hearts of people whose skin seemed impenetrable, so then more moths were swallowed, and you learned how they found their way below your flesh and scratched under the surface, and you learned to love to sing until the first girl you invited into your bed kissed you, and a moth sneaked into her throat, choking her, forcing coughs and clawing at her neck, and when she left she could breathe and she swore it was fine, but her chest was still beating with the moth's wings, so when she closed the door behind her, you smoked them all out, cigarette after cigarette, vodka and vomiting, dry heaving until they fled your body, and you were purged, and you swore you'd learn to live with that itch burning inside your skin, that emptiness aching in your stomach and lungs.

Seashell

In one month I will cast myself into the sea. There is an ocean growing inside me, and it pours out at night. Out of my eyes like tears, yes, but out of my ears, my nose, my mouth as well. Some nights my ocean swells and it leaks from my pores. Melissa tastes salt water when she kisses my neck in the dark. She says, “Erica, I’m worried. What is the matter?” I don’t want to concern her. I whisper that I am warm, too hot, I am sweating, I have been eating too much sodium lately. She can feel the chill of me like a breeze when she wraps her arms around me though. Of this I am sure.

I visit my doctor in the morning and she still doesn't know what to do. She takes samples of my blood and it comes out clear. It’s foamy like a wave. We meet every few weeks, have been for years. She has my samples lined up along her shelves. I sit in her office, staring at the vials in front of her books. They are dark, almost black, at the farthest left. Their color filters out, making red, pink, until they turn green to the right. My doctor shakes the greenest one and says that I don't have much time. “I see maybe a half a year, maybe a bit less.” She kneels in front of my chair to take my hand, flips it over to run a finger across my palm. Her nails tread across my flesh, making ripples all the way up my wrist and forearm. She flips my hand again and kisses my knuckles. I don’t know how to react. Her lipstick washes away in my flesh. She says, “I’m so sorry. I don't know what to do.” She says, “Come back in a few weeks, please. Maybe I can help then.”

I return to Melissa’s home, more damp than ever. I can feel the bubbles of fish in my stomach when I tell her. “An ocean?” she asks. Yes, an ocean. It's growing. It's like I'm made of ice and I'm melting. We are sitting across from one another on top of the

blankets of her bed. When I stand up, I will leave a puddle where her foot will rest later tonight. See, I say, holding out my arm as if to hold her hand. I flick a finger across my skin and splash water on her face. It drips down her lip.

“Maybe,” she says, “I can keep you in the tub. Or I can fill all my empty beer bottles with you. I can keep you forever.”

That's sweet, I tell her, but I can't.

I don't say so, but I fear her anger. Getting mad at me for changing this way. She could lash out and drink me. Laugh as she pisses me out the next day and flushes me down the toilet.

I tell her that I can't see her anymore. I'm sorry, I can't leave this burden on you. You're too sweet, too kind, but how can you bottle this much salt water?

I leave her then, apologizing for the wet trail of myself as I walk out the door.

I begin to spend my time walking the streets in the rain. I sit in the bleachers at the county pool watching college students do laps. I drink two gallons of water a day to sustain myself.

There has always been an ocean in me. It's deep. If you fall all the way in, I'm sure you couldn't get out. Fish bobble up to the surface, and predators wait down in the depths.

My one month is up. I take a long walk down to the beach.

I call my father and take my time as my feet sink and mix into the sand. For one long second, I listen to his breathing on the other end, long and raspy. It sounds like a beached whale's cry.

When we talk, our voices trail off at the end of our sentences. My father gulps and exhales in a slow, tragic kind of way. He asks me about Melissa between gasps of breath. We don't talk about his divorce. I tell him about my brother's new adventure overseas and he coughs in excitement. He tells me how beautiful his nurses are.

The tide is rising as I talk to him. Seagulls call out and fight over fish in the slosh. My ocean is seeping out of me. I'm dripping into the receiver of the phone. Drip, drip, drip. If my father can hear it, he doesn't say anything.

I remember once he told me, "You will find a nice boy soon. Your ocean will calm and smooth over like glass and all will be well." Of course I got angry. I said, You know, maybe it's good that I am dissolving into my ocean. Maybe lots of people have done this before and that's why the Atlantic is so damn big. Each wave is another sad girl like me. Can you imagine swimming across that many people?

I listen to the sound of his snores now, his breath, his sobs, his *I don't know what* again at full volume pressed to my ear.

For a minute, neither of us say anything. Then he says that he can hear the ocean on my side of the phone. "It sounds so beautiful, I wish I could see."

The tide is kissing at my toes in the sand. My father and I are listening to each other's breathing through the phone.

I take one cautious step into the water and press the phone tighter to my ear.

I want to really hear what my father is saying in his exhale. On the other end, the cave of his throat sounds empty, but I know otherwise.

If I concentrate hard enough, I might be able to hear.

Fucking the Pyrokinetic

Fire 1

Fucking the pyrokinetic, my body burns. I am sweat boiling over, charcoal and anger glowing red. He leaves black swirls of fingerprints wherever he places his hands. The bedframe melts beneath us.

We are making our own light. He slows down and I am all the candles the bedroom will ever need. I am being seared inside out, singeing my muscles to the bone. I only feel the warmth glowing outward. The pain left long ago as my nerves crisped away. The smoke isn't even suffocating, but making me hungry, the smell of me cooking like a barbecue.

The air crackles as he moans. He fucks me to ashes.

Earth 1

I pretend to sleep outside, naked in my family's backyard tent, waiting for my terramancer's car to pass with his high beams clicked on. It illuminates the fields and vineyards beyond the house. Silhouettes of deer become fixated through the tarp, their excitement and fear paralyzing their twitchy legs in the grass. I can only whisper to them, run, and maybe they hear me. The lights car engine shut off, and I hear the deer rustling away, breaking branches as they cross the threshold into the woods.

My terramancer turns a flashlight to the tent I wait in. My breath slows. He'll be inside in just a few seconds. I practice being forceful, asking, demanding, he wear the damn condom. But he's too kind, I know he will.

Water 1

Walking into the tide, my mermaid awaits just forty yards out. She holds onto the buoy in the dark, the red light blinking to show her gleaming face. The water here is not the water of paradise or postcards. The water here is black, closer to oil than sea foam this late at night. My mermaid's scales share this color, but glimmer underwater when she allows me a taste.

Thirty yards out, she bites her lips, her nails grip the buoy. Twenty yards, she lets go and swims to me. She swims faster, obviously. The saltwater between us cleanses my palate before her lips refresh my taste buds. You might describe her taste as light, cool enough that maybe you could see your breath in the air if she wasn't pulling you underwater.

I love gripping her seaweed strung hair between my thighs. Her lips are still excited in my vulva, her tongue still finding new ways to make me lose my breath as I tongue her. It's still fun, this descent into the dark water, but I will soon grow tired of it. I'm no longer questioning whether or not I'll be able to hold my breath because I know she will breathe for both of us, kiss the air into me. I'm no longer curious of what her scales will feel like when her long tail pulls my hips into hers, not curious of whether or not I will be able to find her pussy, if she has a pussy or not being a mermaid. I've learned her body enough to find my way around her skin by taste and touch.

Kindling 1

I see the pyrokinetic winking at all the smokers outside. Tonight is the night I take him home. Wink and their cigarettes light up in little sparks. Down the line of them leaning against the window of the bar. Wink wink wink. Puff puff puff. There are thanks

all around. Their breath blurs into the fog strolling through the town. I insert myself into the line, right at the end.

This is how we meet, lighting my cigarette and my own wink back to him. “My hero.”

“Fuck being a hero,” he says. “I just want to set shit on fire.”

Fire 2

After we fuck, I burn out. I fade away to cinders.

The room refills with black and my body is a pile of soot that he sculpts back together. I can't quite hear his thoughts. They're static, or maybe it's just me. Cupping bits of me in his dirty palms, he gathers me all in one place. I could be placed in an urn. I could be spread out to sea.

Earth 2

The terramancer uses the smoothest earth to lay in and explore my body with. “I'll trace you like a map,” he says and slides his fingers along the tendons of my neck. It's goofy enough that I nearly laugh, but I want to try to be serious. That's the way this is supposed to be.

We still don't know what we're doing. We watched hours of porn together in preparation, but he's scared. He's afraid he'll twitch and crush me under a boulder. He's afraid he'll bury us both if he thrusts too hard.

We take it slow, undressing with soft hands, soft kisses. I pretend to like this.

Water 2

I know how this goes already.

My mermaid will grip me from behind, her right hand tight around my left breast. Her teeth will graze down my spine in slow circles. She will grip her tail around the length of my leg and across my hips. She will spread my vulva with two fingers, and she will flick my clit with her fins. I will scream. I will come three times and her lips will leave two red spots on my throat. She will carry me to shore, and she will sprawl across the sand. We'll lay there, naked, drying, and when the sun reaches back over the ocean, she will yawn, and she will escape back to her home somewhere in that dark.

But this is not what happens.

What happens is that when we first embrace, she kisses me in the water and pulls me tight with her whole arm, her whole tail, so tight I can feel the grip of her muscles under the skin and scales. What happens is that she says she loves me this is the first time I've heard that from anyone and I don't realize the color has drained from my face until I see the blush fading from hers. What happens is that we kiss more, but it doesn't feel the same, and we don't fuck, and we're both thankful for that, and when she deposits me back on shore, she retreats back into the black water, and I'm still thankful that I didn't have to be the one to break it off with her.

Kindling 2

At a party, friends gather all the leaves in the backyard. Pile them all up until they're taller than anyone there. Drunk kids throw in sticks and lighter fluid to help.

We can hear his breath, we're all so quiet. He holds my hand as he focuses on the leaves. The air begins to tremble. His fingers tighten deeper into mine and I wonder if he can feel my lips curl up at the edges, even though he is looking away.

At ignition, curls of flame grin from the leaves. Everyone in the backyard cheers. They take shots of whiskey.

His hand loosens. The smoke from the pile drift into us in the wind and we let it fill us up until we laugh and choke in each other's faces. He takes me home, barely speaking.

The pyrokinetic doesn't ever speak of his mother who died of lung cancer, or the burns he suffered in adolescence, or his childhood home gone up in flames. All common knowledge, a sad origin story to our sad and sexy fire-boy that he doesn't like to talk about.

Fire 3

It's actually kind of cold in my little ash pile. The heat has left us. The breeze from the window spreads my ashes out. But the pyrokinetic is considerate, closing the window. He makes sure each black speck of me is in the pile before sitting and meditating at my side.

It isn't heat, but electricity causing my ashes to stand on end and burst. I am weaving my nerves, my flesh back together in pace with his calm breath and warmth he is pushing through me. Ashes compress to bone, layering muscle and skin, and even with this small lighting of my new body, I feel no heat. This fire is cool as winter as my body crawls out of the darkness.

I have goosebumps, naked in front of my tired fireboy. When I exhale, it's cold enough to see my breath. This must be how newborn phoenixes feel. I've never felt quite like this.

I am still standing, excited and giddy in front of the pyrokinetic, ready to burn up again, but he is not looking up at me. He is staring at the last remnants of the ash I came from, the black powder stuck to my toes.

Then, he asks me to leave. "Please leave," he says, please, a word I was not sure could come from him. I open my mouth to ask what's wrong, but he cuts me off. "No, no, just leave," he says again.

He doesn't look at me the whole time I gather my clothes. Even without the window open, I can feel the chill in the room pulling itself across my skin.

I hesitate, wonder if I should reach out to him, if that's what you're supposed to do in a situation like this, but he answers that for me.

"Please," he says, "please, just go."

I step away shaking. I pause in the doorway, the hall bringing light into the room. He doesn't look at me going, but says "I'm sorry." I close the door behind me, watching as he blows the last of my soot from his stained palm.

Your Mother Would Love This

These are my toys. Colorful, right? Go ahead, you can touch them. Play with them, but not too much right now. That'll be for later. Some of them even can change shapes, kind of like Transformers™. For now, light play is good, something not so serious before you get really started. For now, just see how they work. Bend the bendable ones, but don't break the harder plastic ones. Be really careful with the glass one on the pedestal there. I wouldn't normally say this, but you can play with that one if you're careful. I'll leave you alone with all this in a few minutes, but I have to explain a bit more to you first. Anticipation and excitement, right?

If you open this drawer, you'll find the lube. First, we have the Sliquid™ Sassy water based lube. It's like any old astroglide, but it's thicker, so I like it a bit better. A bit more mucus-like. But I have astroglide if you're not as adventurous. Next, we have the Good Clean Love™ Almost Naked organic lubricant, an aloe-based lubricant that's scented with organic flavors. It feels so vegan. It's designed for even the most sensitive skin types, which mine tends to get after a long stretch of loneliness.

Anyways, aphrodisiacs: We have oysters in the fridge, but those may or may not actually get you hot. So instead, or rather, on top of the oysters, we also have coffee, chili peppers, chocolate, bananas, avocados, honey, and a drug called amyl nitrate that's especially titillating if you're into anal play. Here, try it. The amyl nitrate. Not anal play. Not yet at least. Though, let's not take anything off the table. Anyway, the amyl nitrate: As an inhalant, it'll expand your blood vessels, which is great if you'd like to try my Ultimate 10 Lapping Tongue Cunnilingus Machine, which obviously would be more fun for a rimjob. That's what this one is for. But I have a spare in case I didn't want to

immediately clean that one after any specific rimjob toy session and want to give it another go a day later, and that does happen pretty often. They're both clean now, so you won't have to worry about bacteria, E Coli, salmonella, et cetera.

Does this all sound exciting, Son? Don't worry. This is all for us to share. I know you've never masturbated before. You keep saying that again and again, Son, but I started masturbating with this specific pink fleshlight by the time I was 11. Not to mention the years of pleasures and pains and discoveries before that. You'll have variety and support for everything you want to do, so feel free to ask anything as your desires arise. I just want to get you off to a good start while you're still young.

Anyways, Son, in the closet, we have the leather. The leather stays on the hangers, and darn it, make sure you hang them back up when you're done, Son. Here are my assless chaps, chains and leather cuffs, the lightly cherry flavored gag, the bitter lemon tart gag, the different collars and nipple clamps (with *or* without spikes for both), and my personal favorite: Aslan™ Jaguar sex harness. I like to pair that with the Marvel's Avengers Thor™ electric stimulation vibrating dildo. Figured you might like the comic book one better than any other, that's why I got it. Remember when we went to go see *The Avengers* in theaters? Wasn't that great, just the two of us?

Sorry for getting off topic. I've just missed you the past few months.

The sex dolls are in a room behind the fake wall under the leather in the closet. In order to use the the Aslan Jaguar harness and the Thor vibrating dildo properly, you'll have to rig them up to one of the sex dolls. Jasmine wears the harness best, but she's not my favorite. She's too moody afterwards, and she sort of looks like your mom, and that kind of gets me depressed. You're free to use her as much as you want whenever you

want though, Son. Also free to use are Jacob, Dante, Natalia Pierce, Matthew, Erin, Aaron, and Ralph. Just don't touch Benedict. He's very aggressive and can sometimes be too harsh, and I tend to think I deserve that kind of pain, so I kind of like to keep him to myself.

Finally, Son, I have this autoerotic sex machine that I've rigged up so that you can interchange the dildos, and it's even compatible with--

You seem bored. What's wrong? Do you not like this? Is this too much all at once?

I just wanted to show you what we have here for you. The sex dungeon is your oyster! I have so much to offer you, so much more. I want you to see it all, and it's okay to be overwhelmed, I promise. I often feel overwhelmed, and then I climax and all feels right again. I want you to have everything, and the truth is you won't see that if you choose to stay with your mother during the custody hearings.

And don't let your mother or Frank Marsten or Earl Richards or Fiona Beatman or anyone else your mother left me for tell you any lies about me. Or Jake Gyllenhaal, that gorgeous, but sinister man who made a cuckold out of me. Don't trust any of them. I love you and your siblings and I still love her. The only reason I ever even signed the divorce papers is because I set up the autoerotic sex machine in the secret room of the dungeon and got tied up in the chains and couldn't get out. It kept banging me for hours and hours, and it was great, I came so hard over and over again. But I couldn't even yell for help because I was also using the bitter lemon tart gag, which, don't get me wrong, was super hot. Your mother only ever found me because she heard the mechanical noise through the

secret wall. I was semicomatose from the orgasms for a week, that's when your mother got me to sign those stupid divorce papers.

And it came as such a surprise. She loved all of these things as much as I did. You should have seen me and her in the orgy of the sex dolls. It was a sight to behold. Her vulva could have brought those dolls to life just like Pinocchio, or at least like his nose.

My lawyer says that maybe we can contest the signing of the papers though. I wasn't in a proper state of mind and whatnot and couldn't really consent to the signing. But we'd have to replicate the fugue state. I guess what I'm trying to say is that if you see me in the next few weeks, don't be surprised if I'm barely responsive. I am kind of excited for it, in a professional, but exhilarating way.

And just to be clear, *I* am not going to fuck you or anything. Sorry, I know I have to put a dollar in the swear jar. But I'm really not showing you all of this to say, I am going to watch you while you do this, Or one day I'm going to *accidentally* walk in on you in one of these rooms and we see what happens, Or *even*, hey there, Son, my own flesh and blood, do you want to bang? I'm not trying to say that. I do not want to have sex with my child. That's gross. I've brought all your brothers and sisters in here too, and I've not sexed up a single child in my entire life. I just want to make that clear.

A Girl Grows in Fall

The girl began growing from the soil in early autumn. She was scared buried under it. She held her eyes closed under the surface as she listened to muffled sounds through her pot. Footsteps. Whispers through the dark and dirt. They were familiar, residual from a time before.

After a month, her smooth beige scalp poked out the earth. Hair grew like a soft, fuzzy cactus. Her face was still wrinkled with veiny roots extending to the edges of the ceramic. Cold rinsed over her when the footsteps came extra close and she shuddered in anticipation from the sound.

When her eyes and ears finally inched their way to the surface, eyes were watching her. She blinked a dozen times in rapid succession, adjusting to the newness of light.

Hi, he said, not waiting for her to acknowledge him. Hi, I'm Mike. I'm the guy who will be taking care of you. Who has been taking care of you.

She looked at him from the floor to examine the length of his body extended out over his bed. He had thick glasses, freckles and curly black hair and he smiled at her with big straight teeth. If she could have, she would have crawled back under the soil. She looked down at the ground to avoid his teeth.

It's okay, he said and rubbed his palm along the crown of her head until his fingers felt the dirt. I can understand you're scared. Really. I've heard the reason babies cry at birth is from the sheer horror of being out of the womb. I figure this is the same thing. Do you understand what I'm saying?

His eyes shook a little as they looked at her. They looked like he wanted something from her. They filled until they looked heavy and he turned away.

It's okay. I'm here to take care of you. I want to do my best. Stay still, Mike said and poured water from a cup nearby into the dirt. He nudged her scalp with a flat palm as she watched the water close in on her.

Mike fell asleep facing away, but the girl did not sleep. She was anxious in the newness of the room. She needed to ground herself in the sights and sounds around her. A trail of soil led from a bag that leaned against the wall. Six pieces of crumpled paper were scattered next to one of the legs of the bed. The smell of starch and cheese was stagnant in the air. Pages of drawings and scribbled notes layered Mike's floor. A mechanical hum came from somewhere behind her, but she couldn't quite tell from where.

She remembered this. Not the place, but the feeling of cold. She remembered the slow warmth of bed. The softness of skin. She remembered her body before all of this. Her body was waiting for her, already fully grown, but lost somewhere in the roots. She would be tall when she finally pulled herself from her them. The memories were fuzzy, incomplete, and fading away as her new world took hold of her.

Looking out into the morning light, the girl peeked through the window before Mike woke up. A boy dressed in one of the windows across a courtyard. He looked tiny, almost caged into the steel frame of the windows across the building. He had long hair that sprayed mist into the air as he shook it dry. The girl imagined raindrops sprinkling

her nose and cheeks like freckles. The boy quickly turned away, walking out of her view. His hair gave a feeling of light and warmth in the reflected sun.

Mike woke up and poured water over the girl, chilling her. Had he seen her looking out into the rest of the world? Good morning, he said, but his smile looked strained. He dressed for class with slow motions. He lingered at the door and stared toward her and the window with shaking eyes. He left then, his shoes shuffling and squeaking down the hall when the door closed behind him.

The girl mapped out the room in her head. It was small, barely enough space for the boy in the room, let alone the new growing girl. Clothes littered the linoleum tiles and some trash speckled the spaces in between. The walls were bare except for the small bumps that gave it texture. Two cacti sat upon the windowsill, much smaller than the girl in her human sized pot. Family portraits stared at her from the corner of Mike's desk. The window gave her a good view of the brick building they lived in. It curved around a small courtyard, and she could hear the laughter of students coming from below.

Mike pulled her up onto his bed, pot and all. He asked if she was comfortable and opened a collection of stories to the middle. She followed his finger under the words as he read aloud. She was a quick learner, reading coming naturally as she listened and followed along. She remembered the words though they felt almost foreign. She mouthed the broken syllables with her lips, which were still forming under the soil.

The girl found watching the quick glimpses of people through the window strangely beautiful. She looked for their tiny stories.

A boy nibbling on the ear of another boy, their exhausted eyes glazing right over the top of one another, lips opening wider. A woman tilted over the edge of her windowsill, grinning to the ground before fear pulled her back into her room. Three girls in shadow breathing smoke out into the fresh air in turns, a little flame illuminating their faces and smiles.

Did they ever see the girl in her little pot? What story would they see in her little cage?

A sad boy retreating into his bed nightly and shivering under the covers. The girl he grows in his room looking for a glimpse of the real world in the dark.

Mike offered her microwave pasta that smelled like the plastic bowl it came in. He brought it to her mouth like he was feeding a child. He simulated chewing, moving his mouth open and closed, and holding the lukewarm noodles to her lips. She sniffed it and curled her head away. Her eyes turned to the different sized pots under Mike's bed, one smaller than the one she was in now. Looking at the smallest pot, she thought of the hermit crabs from a book that Mike had read to her. The others were bigger, rising in size like steps in preparation for her growth.

You know, you have to eat sometime, Mike said. You'll starve. Please. Do you understand me? She did. She understood everything he said by this point, but didn't acknowledge it. She turned her head to the window. I suppose, Mike said, you might not have a stomach.

The courtyard outside was illuminated with artificial light, nothing like the sun. The nights were beginning to get colder, and soon, the drapes would be drawn so light could not enter the room.

Eat, Mike said, You have to.

The girl forced the pasta down, unsure of where in herself it was going.

The girl passed hours examining the wall in front of her and the ceiling above. She could do little else when no one was home in their windows to watch. Little bumps of paint intrigued her, and she memorized their positions like a map of the stars. Her shoulders peeked out from the soil, but her arms were still buried, tethered to the roots below.

Mike stared from across the room before he averted his eyes back into his book. His time in the room increased, but his voice became more absent. She noticed him only in flashes of creeping water, rushed readings of books, or in the long stretch of his snores as he slept. She watched him shake under the blankets, in the night and into the days when he decided not to go to class. He sometimes watched her from the gap between the covers and pillow, hiding when she noticed.

The girl listened to the footsteps of people walking by the door. Their voices were loud and high pitched, but she focused on the squeak their feet made as the rubber of their shoes pushed off the smooth floor. She tried creating more stories for them.

Once upon a time, a young girl strolled away from her home and into the forest.

She did not continue beyond that. She did not know what would come afterward.

The first snows fell early. The girl had grown enough that the curve of her hips stretched from the soil. Mike gave her a few skirts that draped off her torso like a blanket and a sweater to keep her from freezing.

See? Mike had said. Now you'll be nice and warm and cozy. It's freezing out there. He gave her what he could, and looked away whenever she wanted to change.

She reached out to the cold windowsill in the room with newly grown arms. She opened the drapes to see the frostbitten glass. Snow reflected sunlight in all directions. She clawed with long fingernails to move around and explore the room from new angles. Her pot scraped along the linoleum, ringing through the dorm. The girl flipped through Mike's books, reading fairy tales about mermaids and imps and bloodthirsty wolves. She climbed up onto the windowsill after the stories, balancing her pot carefully to look down on the people in thick coats marching through the cotton-like frost. The girl spent hours staring outside. She concentrated on the sounds on the other side of the door, dreaming of what was just on the other side of that inch of wood separating her and everything she'd read about in her books.

Mike began to stare out the window more, gazing right over the top of whatever he was reading. He stopped eating as the room became colder. He went to class less and less and spent days huddled in a ball under his blankets. He left only to go to class, and then he never left at all.

The girl saw this, but did nothing until her soil began to dry. Until her stomach finally poked out of the soil and ached in hunger. Mike looked withered from where her

pot rested on the floor. He looked frail. It seemed sudden, but perhaps she hadn't been paying enough attention.

Two and a half months and she'd said nothing to him. What could she say now? She reached out to him, pulled at him to try to make him look. When he crept from beneath his covers, he looked at her with anguish. His face was scrunched in on itself, and he looked far away even though he was within arm's reach. He slid under his blankets and didn't speak for the rest of the night. Her eyes glazed over as she looked to the window.

She had wanted to leave since she first understood the idea of leaving. Could she do it still, knowing her provider was withering like this? She felt guilty for never wanting to see him again, but still the feeling persisted.

She was patient in deciding. Her hips and legs rose from the soil millimeters at a time. She found a skirt that Mike bought for her, months prior and wore it. She sat in the darkness away from the window, reading and reading, only allowing herself to get distracted in the voices and laughs outside her small world. She rarely ventured over to the window anymore. Every morning, she nudged Mike under his blanket, but he did not move. Some days, he groaned a long and hollow noise that faded into the cave of his throat. She began to water herself and ate what little food Mike kept in the fridge on the other side of the room.

The morning light was distorted through the frost. Winter grew icicles outside the window. She watched across the courtyard for the people and their stories. Most rooms remained dark and empty. She leaned to the window until she saw a young boy she had

seen only once or twice before. He still looked tiny in his steel framed window, but there was something different from when she'd noticed him before. His blond hair looked warm, steaming and melting the ice against his window. Through the frost, he seemed slightly smaller, and when the girl looked harder, his figure became feminine. The girl wiped away the ice, sure it was a trick of the light, but the figure across the courtyard maintained her shape. They seemed to watch each other, wanting to say something through the air. She thought she caught a smile as the figure took steps back to their own room, and the girl became aware again of Mike's heavy breath thickening the space around her.

She grew to be taller than Mike. He snored from his pile on the bed. It had just begun to get dark outside. She could no longer stay.

The girl prepared to leave, standing in the exact center of the room. She wrote a short letter to Mike, and folded it into the collection of fairy tales they first read together. She left the book at his bedside. Her skirt draped down to her ankles in the pot. She held her favorite book tight against her chest. She held her breath.

With one tug, she ripped her foot out of the soil and yelped like a puppy. Then, she shut her eyes tight and bit her lip before tearing the other one from the roots. She paused, needles of pain prickling at her soles. The girl exhaled slow then inhaled deep before tiptoeing to the cold ground, each step making a chill crawl up her back like spider legs.

Mike's body struggled under his covers, and she still did not know why. The hollow sound rang from his throat. It didn't sound like a cry, but something like it. She couldn't make herself leave yet.

So she lay in bed next to him. She pulled at his arms and back, but he did not move. She tucked her knees under his and faced the wall with him. Mike's snores drifted to quiet as she shared her warmth. She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. What could she even try to say now? She instead embraced him further, hoping he would understand. She could hear his skin cracking when she pulled him close though. She looked closer, and under the blankets she saw his body breaking apart, chipping away at the joints. Her breath heaved at the sight, eyes gaping in shock.

She grabbed a glass of water and poured it over Mike. His entirety shivered at the chill, but the cracks in him drank every bit of it. The girl repeated this, again and again until his broken skin was filled and droplets of water rested on his flesh.

Water leaked from his eyes. His breath quivered and pulled at the air.

The girl brushed her fingers across his arm, whispering *Shh, shh, shh*.

He moved for the first time and pulled away. You should go, he said, if you want to. His eyes were closed. He looked like he was already sleeping.

The girl hesitated for a moment and stepped off the bed. She grabbed another cup of water and left it on his desk beside him. His blanket rose and fell with his hushed breathing. She imagined him waking and the only noise in the room to be the low hum of the fridge, almost too loud without the companionship of the her rhythmic breathing.

The room was dark and the last bits of light were burning up outside. There was nothing here but cold and the broken sounds of Mike. Nothing left for her. Nothing more

she could do. She would direct someone to the room after she left, someone who would help. She'd leave the door open and someone would find her former home and former friend decaying in her wake.

The girl wiggled her toes and stared at them for the first time. Wet soil still clung to them all the way up her ankles. She made a trail from Mike's bed to the door, footprints to be followed. She turned the doorknob, took steps into the artificial light of the hall, and the trail followed her still.

The Library

Their phone flashlights peeked through the boards covering the entrance that once held an oak door, and six drunk hands pried wood and nails from their resting places, unsure muscles pulling and straining after years of rest and lack of use. Dust clouded the lights shining into the dark. A rat screeched and scrambled into nearby debris. Brandon sneezed and giggled and sneezed twice more and everyone climbed through the open spaces their hands had made in the sealed entrance of the library.

It still smelled like burning, even after so long. Water dripped from the holes in the roof. Shari led the other five through the torched shelves, blackened paperbacks and loose pages littering the path. Moonlight created an oasis in the dark where everyone gathered and paused to gaze through the tear in the ceiling. Thin clouds veiled the stars and moon as they passed over the earth. Shari was the first to look away. She pushed the books from a shelf and onto the floor and unzipped her oversized purse.

“Good a place as any to take shots, right?”

“God, our bodies are not going to be happy with us tomorrow.”

“At our age, are our bodies ever going to be happy with us again?”

Six little glasses lined the shelf. Johnny Walker Blue Label spilled over the lips of them as Andrew poured. Always the partyboy, he also brought coke, just in case the desire arose during their brief reunion. He passed the shots around and waited for someone to toast.

Everyone was silent for a moment until Gabby couldn't wait any longer. She threw the whiskey to the back of her throat, then held her glass out to Andrew. “Another

please,” she said. “I want tonight to get weird, even by our standards.” Everyone laughed, downed their drinks and waited for Andrew to refill them. Then they drank again.

“Fuck, hell, I’m not used to this anymore,” Brandon said. “Doesn’t anyone have a chaser or something?”

“You’re not about to water this down, Brandon.”

“You used to love this.”

“I remember a very specific night where just the two of us finished two bottles of Maker’s Mark, though I don’t remember much else.”

“Fine, fine,” Brandon said. “Two shots in a row just might be a bit much for me tonight.” Becky laughed at him and held her glass to Andrew. She downed her third shot in ten minutes and batted her eyelashes at the boys. Brandon blushed and turned away, “Besides, I want to see the spot where we did it while I still have some coherence left in me.”

“I can second that,” Lana said. “I want to see our little pentagram in the woodwork and I want to stare at her ashes and I want to spit on the spot where her body burned.”

Becky crossed her arms. “I’m all for desecrating her grave and shit, but I think I’m gonna hold off for a bit.”

“I understand,” Lana said. “Really, we should all take our time with it. I want to see now though. Ready to go see, Brandon?”

He nodded his head, and the two disappeared into the shadows together.

Four shots would be rather aggressive, three was pushing it. Becky looked back to the moon and the specks of dust that fluttered through the beams of light. “Sorry, y’all. I didn’t mean to be all pushy and shit with the drinking.”

Andrew put an uneasy arm on her shoulder. He remembered a time when he loved her, a time when he really fucking loved her and wanted nothing more than to get high in bed with her every single night. Fuck classes and fuck real world obligations. This was before they knew the others, and before his mother was found bloodied in her bathtub. Before child support for two children with two different women and three attempts at sobriety and before a girl with a snake tattooed on her wrist said she could fix the weakness in him. Andrew loved Becky for her aggression and he wasn’t sure if she ever knew. He pulled his hand away from her shoulder. “It’s a weird night. Coming back after 15 years. I think we could use a little push, don’t you think?”

Shari pulled a pack of Marlboro Lights from her purse. “Would anyone else like one?”

“I’m good.”

“Trying to quit, you know?”

“I’d honestly love one,” Andrew said. “But I don’t think we’re allowed to smoke in the library.”

“Asshole,” Shari said and held the pack to him. He took one and moved closer to her. They lit them from the same light, cigarettes kissing in the flame.

“You used to work here, didn’t you, Shari?”

“Yeah, sat behind the desk over there every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday between my morning classes and night ones.” She turned on her phone light again and

began walking, hoping she could intrigue the others enough to follow her and listen. She missed her audiences, and even if they all originally bonded by planning a ritualistic killing, she still loved all of them.

“I used to work here. I was the one who snuck all of you in that night. Hell, I still have the key. No one came looking for staff keys or anything once the library burned down.”

“I remember,” Gabby said. “I was on the student senate and in lieu of all the shit we wrought, we even tried arguing for finals to be cancelled.”

“Fuck, are you kidding me?” Andrew said. “I barely passed my classes that semester. Though to be fair, once Dea was dead, I could finally study again.”

“Same.”

“Same.”

“Same.”

They walked behind the desk, led by Shari and her light, though no one took their phones out to brighten the place. “Here is where I met all of you before I met all of you. Taking out books. Asking for help with the stupid printers. Waking me up with a loud cough when I fell asleep on my shift.”

“To be fair,” Gabby said, “you slept a lot. And I only did that like twice.”

“Once before and once after we became friends. You were a lot ruder before we started plotting to kill Dea.”

“I was. I know.”

“It’s okay, cutie,” Shari said and pulled Gabby into a loose headlock. “But I think we got over our assholery to unite and stop evil.”

“Nope, no asshole behavior coming from the girl with her arm around my throat.”

Shari let go and slumped to the floor, her ass creating a cloud of ash around her on impact. Andrew coughed and Gabby laughed and Becky joined her on the floor.

“Alright, another round of shots?”

“Then we go see the spot where the witch burned.”

“Good.”

“Agreed.”

“Andrew, don’t bother with the glasses. Just pass the bottle around until we’ve had our fill.”

“Something tells me we’ll finish the bottle before that happens.”

“That’s why we have more than one bottle.”

###

Shattered glass glimmered under the moonlight on the floor. It cracked under Lana and Brandon’s feet as they made their way across the room, wide panes spider webbing at the touch of their heels, nervous steps making tiny slivers slip under their soles. Crows beat their wings at the newness of human sound, and they cawed out into the night.

“Fucking crows,” Lana said, holding Brandon’s hand as he stepped over a toppled shelf to follow her. “I hate crows. Little flying shadows. You know they remember the faces of those who have scorned them? They harass people, for years after the fact, and they even tell their friends.”

The voices of the others echoed toward them and the ever approaching grave of Dea Satori. “Is that true?” Brandon asked, slowing down to see if Lana would slow with him. “About the crows?”

“It might be ravens,” she replied. “It might be both. I tend not to trust birds in general.” Birds. Cats. Snakes. Girls with snake tattoos. Girls. Boys.

“I can understand that. Dea’s familiar was a crow if I remember right.”

“Yeah, but I set that thing on fire just like her.” She hurried in her step, forcing Brandon to quicken his pace as well. Loose shreds of paper fluttered in their gait and the sound of crackling glass sang into the wood and ash. “Her and her cat and everything she owned.”

“Except her books.”

“Because we aren’t the kind of savages who burn books.”

“Just the kind of savages who burn old friends.”

And then they were there. Just like they left it, minus the reek of blistering flesh and the dying curses of their classmate. The fire scorched the marble ground in a perfect circle and star, but no ashes remained from the deceased.

“She watched me as we lit her up, you know?” Brandon said. “She glared at me the whole time, direct eye contact, even as her eyelids peeled and the fire began to spread to the walls and shelves.” He could still see her, light all around, the heat pushing him further away until the six of them had to flee the burning building. “I wonder if she chose me to look at with her dying gaze because she knew it would haunt me the most.”

“Well,” Lana said and wrapped an arm around her friend, “we all knew you were the most scared out of all of us, and not for bad reason. But you’re still a little scaredy

cat, aren't you?" She laughed and Brandon crossed his arms and traced the lines of the pentagram on the ground with his eyes. Who wouldn't still be scared? Mind and soul ripped from his old body and placed into this new and strange bag of meat, sliding into life as a new person while his family mourned him. And he still didn't know what happened to the soul of the original Brandon Marquéz, the poor bastard. "I'm just joking, you know. And besides, she was staring at me when she was dying. No blinking. Just a red-eyed glare until her eyes cooked out of her fucking skull."

"That's wrong," a voice shouted from behind them, and both their hearts skipped a beat in fear that it was Dea. Clamoring footsteps kicked the glass from their path though, their four drunk friends arm in arm running and nearly tripping to make it to the grave. Gabby shouted again, "That isn't right. She wasn't looking at you. Or you. She was looking right at me."

Andrew carried her weight with her arm slung around his shoulders and laughed. "That fucker," he set Gabby down on a small pile of books while Shari and Becky planted their asses at the bottom of a dismantled bookshelf to the side. "I bet she cast a spell in her dying breath to make us all think she was looking at us."

"I remember it too," Shari said. "She even hissed at me, grit her teeth as if she would get free and fucking eat me."

"What a psycho witch."

"I'll say. But perhaps 'witch' wouldn't be the term to use."

The girls on the ground held out their glasses to Andrew. "More, Mr. Bartender. More, more, more."

"Can I offer y'all a drink too?" he asked to Brandon and Lana.

They smiled and nodded their heads. Liquor poured onto their already sticky fingers as it filled their glasses. It burnt on the way down their throats, but each drink lessened in its heat. All of them grinned, wicked and toothy and daring, before Becky spit her aftertaste onto the pentagram, everyone following in turn.

“I hope I get drink enough tonight that I vomit on her grave,” Becky said, unable to control her devilish smile now. Her dimples deepened as her teeth grit together, smiling harder and curling her fingers into a fist that she tried to hide from her friends. She was sure they all remembered her anger and fury. It’s what got them inspired to kill Dea in the first place. And she was sure that Dea wanted to look at her as she burned. Sure that their hatred could have set the place ablaze even with the lighter or the ropes tying her down or the spell they used on the pentagrammed circle to trap her there. How disappointing, that she was looking at all of them. Becky wanted Dea to look at her twisted smile then, and she wanted her to see her twisted smile now, foot still tapping, still breathing with her five friends, fifteen years later.

###

Words began to slur. Bottles continued passed through hands around the circle. Heads rested on neighbors shoulders. Everyone ended up on the floor in a pile, talks of the past only quieting for another drink. Becky laid her head in Brandon’s lap and shivered against a breeze weaving its way through the decaying building. She wondered what other life had taken over this library. Raccoons or skunks or sparrows or possums or nests of bugs. What had made a home from the destruction they caused? What will no longer have a home once the demolition crew comes in the morning? A mouse crept between the feet of her friends in the circle, though no one else noticed, and Becky didn’t

want to alarm the more fearful in the group. It licked at the few drops of spilled whiskey, and its tiny head recoiled at the taste.

Becky continued to watch as light snores began to rumble from Gabby's nostrils and as Shari began to reach her fingers toward the mouse. She smiled at the rodent sniffing Shari's open palm. What a naive little thing. Welcomed by warmth, it climbed into her hand and squeaked in new fondness for large creatures. It scurried up her arm and shoulders and down into her other palm as if she were juggling the mouse. Becky and Shari made eye contact and smiled at the strangeness. Its black eyes searched for that same contact, but could not find it in them. Then Shari crushed the mouse in her fist, its pitiful scream ending before all its breath could escape its throat.

The screech woke the others, and the girls could not hide their grins before their friends saw. Black blood leaked between Shari's fingers and dripped to the floor where the mouse had just drank.

"Sorry for waking everyone," she said. "Just a tiny little rodent problem that I needed to take care of before we all passed out for the night."

"A rodent problem? You just crushed a mouse to death in your fingers." Andrew stood, shocked and flustered in his breath. "What the fuck, Shari? Becky?"

"It was crawling around, Andrew. Relax, man. Haven't you ever had pests?" Becky said and rose to her feet to try and comfort him.

"I saw the whole thing." He stepped out of her reach and the others stood to chase him should he run into the dark. "You reached for it, played with it before you killed it."

"It's a mouse, man."

"How many of you have killed animals by crushing them in your bare hands?"

Me.

Me.

Me.

Me.

Me.

No one said anything for a moment. “That was supposed to be a hyperbolic and rhetorical question, guys,” Andrew said, and he remembered something from years ago. Little white mice feet tickling his leg as he sat paralyzed in a dorm room with six other college kids. Pretend laughter and shaking wet eyes and the tiny mammalian howls of the dying. *Watch this*, she used to say, and everyone would laugh along because something inside them told them they needed to. Communicating with student prisoners and eventual friends by transmitting the fear in their eyes. Andrew remembered it, that smile, the not-so-subtle manipulation of nature. “What happened to Dea’s books that we stole after we killed her?”

We stole them and learned the spells.

We manipulated the world around us with the magic we learned these past several years.

We righted wrongs. We corrupted and destroyed power structures.

We helped whenever we thought we could.

We helped ourselves, justifying it by the atrocities we endured to gain this knowledge.

“We burned them,” Brandon lied. “I took the last of them and burned them after finals that year.” The girls began muttering under their breath. A memory loss spell. A

trapping charm. A killing curse, if the need arose. “You’ve been drinking, Andrew. It’s okay. Getting triggered by this place and old memories and dammit, Shari, it was kind of creepy that you killed that mouse with your bare hands.”

She dropped the rodent to the floor, dry blood flaking from her opened palm. Andrew looked at the corpse, its stillness amongst the piles of dust and debris they had moved aside so they could rest in the library for the night. Slivers of ribs peaked through soft gray fur, meat spilled and ripe for a scavenger’s picking.

The soles of his shoes were already melted to the ground by the time Andrew decided that he should run. He could already smell the sparks flickering in his jacket. In another few moments, he would be pinned to the ground by unseen hands, ethereal fingers rearranging his mind or set on fire so they wouldn’t have to deal with the brain pudding they left in their wake.

So Andrew did what he did to escape from Dea all those years ago. He gathered his spit and phlegm in his throat, took aim at the chanting words of Becky’s lips, and spat right into her mouth.

“Ew, Becky, that’s gross.”

It was just enough to distract all five of them from their incantations. He slipped out of his loose-fitting shoes and ran down an aisle of charred shelves. Green boogers dripped from Becky’s lip as she screamed for everyone to chase. Gabby tripped over the shoes still melted to the floor and Brandon and Lana and Shari tripped over her. When everyone had finally regained their footing and the charge had begun, Andrew had tipped a bookshelf over their heads, the few stray hardcovers fluttering against them like frightened birds searching for a route to the sky.

###

Becky and Lana would cover the main entrance while Brandon and Gabby searched for him. Shari's job was to create sealant and trap spells over any other possible exits she could find. If anyone found Andrew, they should scream and scream and stay loud until the others joined the hunt. If a group found him, they should bind him and silence him. He was, *is*, their friend, and he doesn't need to die. He just needs to understand, they all thought, and they were sure the others believed it more than they did.

Shari lifted shards of broken glass, pink smoke reassembling it at her words to block the way out to the roof. She could not repair it entirely, fractured web extending outward from its initial destruction by flame. But if it were to be broken again, it would be loud and sharp enough to summon everyone to the obvious whiteboy culprit.

At a boarded door she left a binding charm. Ropes to materialize from the floorboards, constricting him, choking him to near unconsciousness.

She spoke a silencing curse into a doorknob, a spell to steal the voice of whoever touched it next, something to quiet the truth of a snitch who could tell the world of their secrets.

Shari wondered what the others created for their friend. What horrors they knew the potentials for. The worst she remembered was actually a truth spell. Dea, who sat down with her in the dark of a bedroom to pull secrets from her heart. *What do you love most in the world? What are you afraid of? Why do you hate someone who loves you so? Who wants nothing but love for you?*

She thought of the isolation that followed after she spoke to Dea each week, the secrets she told to her about Lana and Andrew and Brandon and Gabby and Becky.

She lifted wooden boards to seal emergency exits and thought of what they would do to Andrew when they found him. She telekinetically hammered nails and pulled to check their security. What would the first person to find him do to him first?

Lana would dig around his skull, erase any memory of the night that she found problematic. Gabby would try to talk to him, calm him down, but keep him there for someone else to make the final call. Becky would scramble his mind, leave him comatose for the bulldozers coming in the morning. Brandon might kill him, set him on fire and claim it was self-defense, all for breaking his heart after graduation, as he so often drunkenly joked about.

And what would she do? When Shari came across his frightened and adrenalized face, what horror would she bestow upon her friend to silence him into their will?

She didn't have time to answer her own question before she saw his brown eyes glistening in frightened tears as he pulled at the wooden boards she secured to a nearby exit. His hands bled as the wood splintered away and pierced his palms. His teeth ground together with his pull, everything in him scrambling for an escape. Maybe he chose Shari as the one who would hesitate to act when she saw him desperate for escape. Maybe he knew exactly what fears still wait latent in her, and knew she could understand this kind of fear. Or maybe he hadn't even seen her before trying to dig his way into the moonlight outside.

Brandon called out from another floor. "Anyone have any luck yet?"

"Nothing so far."

"I found some of his blood on this unopened door that he tried to break through."

"He hasn't shown up at the main entrance."

“Nope. Sorry everyone,” Shari shouted to the other voices, but continued to watch Andrew. One board fell to his side, then the other. She smiled at him as he climbed through the heavy door, and he didn’t smile back. She thought about watching his sprint to the main campus, she thought about following him, she thought about telling the whole truth with him, all the horrible things she and her friends had done.

“Alright everyone, let’s regroup at the main entrance and restrategy,” Brandon’s voice echoed through the shelves and debris and forgotten books. No animals ran or moved or even made noise at the invasion of his sound. The door to the outside swung lightly against a light breeze, and streetlamps carried yellow light through the opening. “Come on guys,” he shouted even louder, “we can’t let him escape.” Everything was quiet, Lana and Gabby and Becky and Shari and the birds and rodents and the walls and the windows and even Dea’s limboed soul, expecting and waiting for someone else to call back to him.

*What's Left When We've Left Our Bodies Behind***Chapter 1****Inheritance**

The woods of the village of Forest Hills are a graveyard. Each trunk is a tombstone. Trees sprout from skulls like flowers and the roots twist into the bones of the corpses. The soil is cool and fertile all year round. Children climb the trees, hang swings from their branches, carve lovers' names into the bark. No one knows when lean against their dead mother, resting after a long day's work. No one would think they were hanging a hammock between their great-aunt and uncle in their backyard. No one questions the grid of trees, the rows and pillars divided only by long standing homes up and down the hills. The bodies stay a secret, the truth hidden beneath the bark.

This is what Roland inherited from his grandfather when the old man left his body behind. People died and he would fill their bodies with fertilizer and formaldehyde like his grandfather before. The forest would spread, ghosts would silk across the roots and into the homes of the townsfolk.

He inherited the trees, the spirits of the wood, the funeral home, the burden of secrets. He had inherited things before though. Love letters in a locked treasure chest from his mother, none of which were from his father. A car from his father that spilled unused condoms from the glove compartment when he opened it. Forty thousand dollars from his grandmother to attend college once he graduated high school. This entire town, the empty graveyard, the future corpses, the goddamned souls of every person in this place.

Sleep

The morning after she died, Adrianna simply woke up and dressed for school. She felt dazed all through her classes like part of her was elsewhere, the ends of her limbs tingling and slow to move. The world felt far away as she navigated the quiet halls of rushing students. Sounds felt distant, muffled in invisible clouds surrounding her head.

She returned home and found her own body still spread across her sheets. A few of her pills dotted the bedroom floor. Whiskey and vomit stained the rug from when she could not keep the poisons down. Her razor blade rested at the end of her sliced arms, at the edge of the red pond she lay in.

The sight made Adrianna dry heave, but nothing existed now in her stomach as a ghost. She turned the corner into her bathroom and spit air into the bowl of her toilet. Leaning against the porcelain, she noticed the new translucency to her hands. They looked like frosted glass in winter. Holding them close to her eyes, she could see each blurry detail of her bathroom through her own flesh.

She didn't even believe in ghosts. But here she was, ethereal flesh, undefined borders of her body, alone in this bathroom with her corpse in the next room.

It was supposed to be easier. A few drinks and a few pills for courage. Cori would be there to die with her, both not feeling a thing but each other's ecstasy. And they'd be washed down the river to be lost in a lake over the horizon. It would look like they had just run away. She even made sure to leave a note on her pillow.

Cori said she didn't want to die like this though. They had been drunk and stoned and teetering at the edge of the river and they were so close. Adrianna had been farther gone, ready to jump, laughing even, but Cori walked her home. She became a crutch for Adrianna as they trudged back through the forest and back through her door. They

walked up the stairs together as one awkward body on the verge of collapse. Cori tucked her into bed, kissed her goodnight.

But Adrianna woke up alone, whiskey flirting with grief in her belly. She could not remember where she was. She believed Cori had left this world without her, so she hurried in her drunken confusion and longing. She did not feel pain when her forearms were severed at the threads, light as a tickle, lover's fingers sliding down the veins until she fell asleep.

Haircut

He laid the tools out the same as always. Turned on the humming overhead lamp, inhaled its green tinted light. Roland unfurled the clamps and knives, the needles and tubes, the scissors and metal hooks and the rest of the tools from their wraps. The formaldehyde pump and blood vats were functional and unbroken from last week, the last body he worked on. The walls lingered with an old smell like a retirement home, old bodies decorating this table far too often.

Roland learned long ago to think of everyone as a future tree, a soon-to-be emptied vessel to be prettied up on his table. Cori's young skin unzipped at the end of his scalpel the same as everyone else though, turned the same pink when pumped full of formaldehyde. He dressed her up then. He tucked her dick into the pants of the suit. He wrapped the button up shirt, cut through the back around her. He did the same with the jacket.

She was beginning to look more like the boy she hated and killed in herself last summer. The boyhood she left behind, Anthony, as she grew out her hair. Cori laid there and took it though, and her long hair rested on the metal table with a few strands dangling

over the edge. Her shampoo found its way through the air, through the smell of the old death, the smell of her body just beginning to decompose. The scent of her hair's lavender made Roland aware of his own slowing breath.

He took a step back and tried to smile. He had seen her just two days before, seen her smiling at school. And then he was pulled from English class to begin the arrangements. The pangs of guilt and grief came as he watched her still body, echoing from when they first cut at him when Cori's mother called to tell him to pick up the corpse. He took the photograph Mrs. DeJesus gave him out from his pocket, a face shot of a male celebrity with hair cut short, and he grasped scissors in his other hand.

"You know," he said, "you could still wake up, just give me a blink or two and I wouldn't have to cut off all your pretty locks." He took a strand off the left side of her head then, he pulled it tight, and clipped it close to her scalp. She didn't move, and he did it again, snip, snip, snip, breathing in and out with the shearing sound of the scissors.

"I don't really have choice, it's your mother," he tried to explain. "You're a minor, she gets to decide how to present you even if you don't want it. Even if I don't want to do it," and he still could not be sure if she'd forgive him.

Threads of her began to dust his shoes. He trimmed the last of the long hair from her skull. He brushed the back of his gloved fingers across her cheek. The smell of lavender fell from the air, and light rot replaced it.

Burial

Adrianna was dead and her father would be home from a business trip the next day. She imagined him walking in the front door, dropping his coat, hat, and bag onto the welcome mat in one cohesive heap. For one long second, he would not notice the rotting

smell or the whiskey missing from his liquor cabinet. Then, it would hit him all at once. The stench of death breathing out of the walls. The unlocked door. The lack of a response from his return. His face would turn red as he sprinted up the stairs to Adrianna's room. Then, he would stare at the limp body laid out upon her bed, pink blanket covering only one of her legs.

Her father's shoulders would drop, and his eyes would dart across each section of her bloody corpse spread across the mattress as if looking for some isolated part of her that was still living. His shaking hand would pull the razor from her stiff palm and his fingers would interlace into hers. His gaze would stay paralyzed over the gray eyes of his daughter, the rest of him trying not to shake as he stroked her curly hair.

No, Adrianna said. Her single word came out in a whisper, almost too quiet for even herself to hear. She was still in her bathroom, still replaying the night for all she could remember, but she needed to get up and hide her body. She took careful steps back across the rug of the hallway, steadying her hand against the walls. Her teeth clenched as she entered her room again. The smell cut at her nostrils. She glared at her own cold face, the limp hands, and swatted at the two flies that rested upon her cheek.

She held her breath as she dug her hands under the arms of her corpse, not yet knowing how heavy her small frame could feel when she pulled upon it. Adrianna heaved and jerked at her body, pushing against the bed with her leg until her remains were stripped from the cocoon of blood they rested in. Dragging herself across the floor was easier, the red crust no longer holding her to the sheets. She was careful descending the steps, sliding smoothly across the carpet, and then over the tiles of the kitchen.

She pushed against the aluminum back door, the flesh of her legs raised over the threshold. Outside, dry leaves clung to the last wet spots along her torso and wrists. A small opening led under the wooden frame of her home. Through it was a thick darkness, thin pillars of light cutting against the tear in the foundation. Ghost self fitting through first, Adrianna hauled her corpse into the hole, letting the carcass collapse upon her breast after the strong heave. Resting upon her, she could still smell the light perfume from the night before, lavender. Her two sets of eyes met and she wondered what her corpse could see in her ghost self.

There was quiet then, except for the breathing of autumn leaves falling into one another in the dying sunlight.

Adrianna pushed the body off her, and a cloud of chalky dirt consumed the emptiness under the house. She crawled out from the darkness in slow reaches of her knees and hands. Just outside, the sky burnt orange as the sun set behind the leaf-plucked arms of the trees. She climbed back into her home, brushing dust from her glassy clothes.

Adrianna cleaned her house in two hours, filling three black trash bags with scattered pills and worn-out cloths soaked with blood. She filled the empty whiskey bottle with flat cola and replaced it in her father's cabinet, otherwise undisturbed since his divorce and sobriety. She hid away as much as she could before collapsing on her living room couch once the moon had climbed above the trees and the town.

She did not wake in the morning when her father walked in the door. Her eyelids clung to each other, closed in trembling nightmares as the man hooked his arms under his tiny daughter, his hands seeping into her fragile form, then returning to corporeality. He did not notice the sudden paleness, the hushed glass transparency in her flesh or the new

ease in lifting her as he walked up the stairs. He did not notice the lingering smell of rotting, and did not look at his liquor that had gone untouched for years prior. He laid her down and did not notice the faint stains of blood on her floor and bed in the dark. He pulled the warmth of the blanket over her chest and arms. He kissed her shaking forehead, pausing to hold his hand over the silk of her hair. At his touch, her lips pursed with fear and questions. She continued to shudder through the morning, and he did not wake her for school once the sun had risen.

Wake

Daffodils and tulips littered the body. White and purple petals flushed from the casket as classmates and teachers and relatives walked through the procession of flowers to Cori to call her “Anthony.” The photographs that decorated the funeral home were those from before the transition. Middle school football practice with the rest of the team. Dancing with Angela Murphy for the first time at the winter ball.

Roland looked, but he knew he would not find himself hidden in the background of any picture. He didn’t know her then, only became close as her hair grew and she left the football team. Mrs. DeJesus chose everything anyway, from the flowers Cori hated to the songs she never heard and which were never popular to begin with. He took note of the friends in the photographs, the ones who weren’t here. Angela, Robert, Jared. He still hadn’t heard from Adrianna and Roland exhaled until he thought all the air in him had left his body.

He wanted to light a cigarette from the pack his grandfather left behind, his second ever. He wanted to do it right in the middle of the parlor, flicking the ashes into the casket. The pack rested in his breast pocket, waiting.

Roland glared at the pictures and the line to the casket marched behind him. Cori cooked a marshmallow over a fire, the puff of it catching as kids laughed at a summer camp from years ago. A pile of kids criss-crossed in a pile as they fell asleep in a living room. Cori posed dressed as Spiderman on a halloween, so tiny at just 6 years old.

The velvet of the funeral home walls fluttered with the movement of so many people, everyone coming out for the teen suicide. Roland watched Mrs. DeJesus. She stood off to the side of the parlor, tissues just within reach. She hugged everyone after they kneeled at the body and she closed her eyes tight.

Sometimes she left her eyes open though, and peered around the room. Roland and she caught glances at each other, quick jabs of the eyes, and they returned to the pictures and hugging guests.

Roland shuffled weight in his feet and floated between the door and pictures again and again over the hours of the wake. In his jacket pocket he felt the photograph he used to model the cut of Cori's hair. He did not speak to anyone as people left the wake, even when they patted his shoulder or pushed into him for a hug. The crowd slid away until Roland and Mrs. DeJesus stood alone at opposite ends of the home. There was a light breeze at the door and it moved through the bare trees as Roland stared into the forest outside.

He fingered the photo in his jacket. He hoped Mrs. DeJesus was watching him as he took it out and lit a match under the little white square. The trail of smoke rooted upward and branched out along the parlor ceiling. He begged her to watch him light a cigarette from the burning photograph. The picture floated out the door on the flames and wind.

He took two drags, then felt stupid and impotent and brushed the cherry off the tip onto the velvet wall. He hoped that she didn't watch that.

The little smell of ash found its way into the smell of the pollen and flowers. A bee buzzed in through the crack in the doors. He watched the yellow fuzz hum through the parlor, past Mrs. DeJesus and Cori, and bury itself into the moist petals waiting for it. Roland imagined its breath, euphoric enough to faint after the dry autumn and ground bare of blossoms, and he felt his fingers loosening from a fist he didn't know he had made long before.

Wood

Adrianna kept her bedroom light on into the night. She flattened the sheets across her bed, and triple checked to make sure the doors were unlocked for Cori to slip into the house. Her father slept in front of the television downstairs. A light smell of death from her corpse lingered in the air but she knew from Roland that it would dissipate if she followed the proper steps. She called Cori but received no answer. She called again and again until the whiskeyed and crying voice of Mrs. DeJesus answered her daughter's phone. Adrianna hung up, and she knew.

She waited in the night and into the beginnings of morning for a ghost like her, but knew to expect nothing.

Whispers eventually sneaked into the room from the woods though, voices calling her in seductive melody. Alone, she listened, the forest pulling at her, a string tied to her ribs. Finally, it tugged her from her sheets and bed. It sent her over the balcony in early sunlight, barefoot and numb to the cold trees. The smell was a cool fog, a light perfume

like her own. The wetness swallowed her, that smell of flowers far away in the depth of forest echoing in reverse to escort her to a new home.

The trees became black pillars obscured by the gray light given off by the fog. She didn't know why she kept walking into it. She only knew the whispers were calling to her.

The sound of the ocean rolled out of the fog like the folds of a seashell. The damp bark gave the mist its staticky quality. She floated, but she could have been swimming. She could have been dreaming.

The mist wove itself into a figure, then another, then ten, and Adrianna smiled to breathe them in. The ghosts floated into her like she did into their fog. Their embrace chilled her stunted and shuddering limbs, and she waited for them to pull her into hell.

Would welcoming that cold to bring her under warrant a second suicide? She thought of the trees in the seventh circle, a harpy consuming her branches when she sprouted from the soil down there. She dreamt of an old man walking through the woods of her fellow suicides, breaking off the bark of her ribcage, her teeth baring, soul screaming out of the scar and begging for a second death.

She awoke shivering and alone, red-orange leaves blanketing her as they stuttered from the trees falling into autumn slumber around her. She blinked back to her life, as close to life as she could get, watching Roland at the edge of the forest as he shoveled the last few throws of dirt into a hole. He walked away and did not see Adrianna still consumed in her bundle of leaves. The trudge of his feet fell away from her and she did not move to ask him anything.

It was still dim, but violet light began to break into the sky.

Burial

The night after the wake and before the funeral, Roland broke into Cori's home. He stole a dress and some jewelry. He pocketed her perfume as he slunk through the house. He found his way through the dark to the broken snores in the living room.

The gray glow of a TV expanded the rooms where the light found its way in. The pulse of Mrs. Dejesus's chest struggled in front of it as she slept with a bottle of bourbon in her hand. The liquored air made Roland's hair stand on end, and his hand chewed at Cori's dress's fabric.

He lingered for a moment, shifting his weight from left to right and back, but ultimately did nothing. He left to walk through the woods back to his home and Cori's body.

This time he dressed her the way she would have wanted, a green dress fit for the spring and earrings to make her glow. He placed a chestnut in her mouth and sewed her lips together with invisible thread. He carried her, rigor mortis gone and she looked relaxed to him, her head resting on his chest. "I must look like a hero," he said and tried to smile as he walked to the end of the forest.

She rested against a tree as Roland began to dig the next grave near the newest sproutling of another tree. The motions of the shovel were dreamy, almost a sleepwalk. He placed Cori inside the hole when he was done, curled as if she were cuddling a lover, and he began to blanket her with the moist earth.

The chestnut rested on the tongue of her sewn mouth, and her body awaited rain for it to take root through her.

Brook

Adrianna listened to the steady notes of bubbles sifting sands over the stones. She leaned against a chestnut tree, fingernails tickling the grooves in the bark. Fog rested on the soil and consumed her feet, but it did not rise to form figures like it had done the night before.

She didn't know why she had become a ghost after her death. She didn't know why Cori had not. The stream of water in front of her was deceiving, calm on the surface, but angry underneath. It had been supposed to take them both away.

She walked forward to dip her feet. She drifted into the blurring water and felt herself cooling as it bled through her. She sat on the rocks at the bottom, immersed and full of cold. The river gushed through her. It did not carry her like she wished it would.

If ghosts could die, Adrianna thought, she'd do it all over again.

Boredom sank into her in the water and she climbed out. A figure waited on the bank, blurred by the fog and resting against a shaded trunk. He looked like Roland at first, the broad shoulders, the sad eyes. She had wanted to see him since she and Cori died, but not like this.

"I'm sorry," he said, rasping. "How'd you die?"

The voice was familiar, like Roland's, but struggling. His grandfather's. But the old man was dead. Buried a few months back. She thought for a moment, the chill of the river leaving her as his body loomed and became clearer, defined by the harsh grooves of his cheeks, the years of exhaustion blooming in the bruises below his eyes.

"Deaths like yours, these suicides," he said as his ghostly frame wavered against her grief, "they don't get easier." His feet shifted, weight back and forth, maybe wishing he could come to comfort her. She looked away from him, his eyes trying to reach her.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. Adrianna felt her figure fade lightly, her solid form breaking as he looked at her still.

Funeral

The bee’s noise still hung in the air through the funeral. It was lost and buried in the flowers from the day before, and it illuminated the parlor with its staticky hum. It gave voice to the stiff throats of the mourning. It hung between the stuttered words of the unsure priest, unsure of how to speak of such a young suicide, and even he knew the truth.

People watched the closed casket as words they would forget in a few hours dragged through their ears. Roland was the only one who knew the body was gone and buried and replaced to sandbags to replicate the weight. He took inventory of everyone there, looking for Adrianna, who was missing still.

It was Cori’s three uncles and grandfather who carried the casket to the depression of dirt in the cemetery, dust gathering on their shoes as they led the procession. They were the ones to lower it, one knot of rope at a time. Mrs. Dejesus dropped a handful of soil over the cedar in the hole as the priest spoke his final words. Everyone left to return to the funeral home for the reception. Roland stayed and shoveled. The dirt clouded in the dry air, bringing up the full smell of the wooden casket and its own burnt taste in Roland’s nostrils.

He returned to the home when he was done and the sun was retreating into the horizon above the trees in a burning halo. The voices inside were laughing, a few classmates, older ones of relatives come from afar to feign sadness for a nephew they didn’t know to be a niece. He stayed outside and couldn’t imagine entering to laugh with

them. So he listened to the sound and inhaled the cold scent of the dinner that had eclipsed the flowers and the bee.

He heard them discuss how cute Anthony had been as a child. How hard he hit in football when he used to play. He was a lonely child, he wrote too much poetry, he was caught too often staring into the woods that divided the school in its long shadows. “To him,” they said, “to him,” and Roland heard their bottles clink.

He took out his third cigarette and lit it to cut into the sounds and smells haunting the front porch where he stood. The door opened then, and the sound swelled back against him in the light escaping from inside. Mrs. DeJesus stepped into the space opposite Roland and the light fell back into the place where she had come. She began to light her own cigarette. He held his, and didn’t know why he was beginning to burn up as he watched her smoke trail into the air and die in the darkness.

She didn’t speak or make a sound, but stumbled against the pillar where she stood. She spat whiskey-tinged saliva from her teeth, then upended her flask to her lips, a few tears spilling into her wrinkled cheeks.

Roland was quick enough to catch her before she tripped from the patio. It was instinct, he told himself, and now he was committed against his anger. He heaved her arm over his shoulder and neck, grounding himself and her body against him. He took careful steps into the dark of the woods toward Mrs. DeJesus’s home, her head buried in his shoulder, her tears dampening his shirt where they landed.

Sunday

Adrianna and Roland slept, still but tense in their dreams that stretched into the morning. They dreamt of the town, the kids and teachers, road workers and commuters, all shuffling between dry leaves and never stopping. They dreamt of one another alone.

The two of them folded into their lonely bodies, and for reasons they could not articulate when they awoke, they dreamt of a city claustrophobic with people. Cardiac traffic of human bodies. Bodies hanging out of windows and bodies crowding the concrete rooftops. Their dream followed Cori's hand, fingers clinging to another palm, slipping in sweat as the city heaved.

When they awoke, the rooms they occupied expanded around them. The space between the walls lurched. Their covers weighed more. The dry air scratched against their nostrils as they tried to breathe. They ate cereal in midafternoon, staring out the window, almost angry at the sunlight and swaying trees and the way the world had not stilled. Searching into the shaded forest, they thought of what the other could possibly doing the day after the funeral, guilt congealing in their veins. They waited for rain that did not come.

School

She didn't pay attention in class. Her hands did not shake. Her flesh did not fade under the light as she sat in math. No one questioned or even noticed a change in her appearance after her death. Teachers passed their eyes over the top of her head. Girls giggled and kissed boyfriends against lockers. Miranda White even bumped into Adrianna's solid body in the hall and she did not hesitate to notice a difference if there was one. The final bell rang and the rushed shuffle of bodies around her did not stop as their school day closed.

If she could concentrate, she would not lose form and she could go on pretending to live as if all she lost was Cori. Adrianna couldn't help but smile a little in the crowd, sure that her secret was to stay that way. Her tiny joy was polluted with guilt for it, but it still did not leave her.

She still needed to talk to Roland though, and soon.

She found her way to the hill and steel bleachers overlooking the football field. Shoulder-padded bodies began to dot the orange grass for practice, the playoff game approaching this weekend. Roland the linebacker was the first to the lineup, positioning himself at the head of the pack for warm-ups. He was the only one she wanted to see or talk to, but she still had to wait. Ben the quarterback, Jason the right guard, Aaron the receiver, and Wesley the center all flanked him as they began their jumping jacks in unison.

Adrianna tapped her fingers against the metal bench, and found her fingers unintentionally passing through the material. She focused and found her corporeality again, looking into the long shadows cast by the Forest Hills' Bees football team.

These were the people that had killed her and Cori. She wasn't sure what she would do if she could not die again.

Shower

Roland let the shower rinse the sweat and blood and frustration from his first day back at practice. He lingered in the steam and listened to the sound of his team closing their lockers, laughing about their day, excited for this week's coming playoff game. He inhaled and exhaled the warmth of the water.

The metal clang of the lockers signaled the team's departure. Roland turned the dial to stop the shower, grabbed his towel to dry off, and walked to place himself on the empty bench. It was a good practice, but he was glad to be alone again.

He had seen Adrianna sitting in her spot on the bleachers for the whole practice. She had watched the team work, never moving, not even as the team left the dry grass and creaking goalposts to descend to the locker rooms. Adrianna and he still had not spoken about Cori or what it would be like for them together in the aftermath of her death.

He hoped she would find him at home, tainted place as it was now in Cori's absence.

Bedding

Adrianna stared at the empty space next to Roland in his bed. The space she had occupied so many times before, still empty, but unwelcoming now. How easy it would be to join him under the covers, tuck her knees into his, hook her arms under his shoulders.

His chest rose under the blankets in silent breath. Rasps of leaves in light wind sounded through his open window. Water trickled beyond the trees. The ghosts again called to Adrianna in the woods.

Train

Cori was trying to remember relevant jokes as the train to the land of the dead sped in its descent. *Dead, ghosts, souls*, she thought, *down, down, down, got it.*

"Why did the ghost want there to be elevators in hell?" she asked her father sitting next to her. The other souls on the train were not speaking. They stared out their respective windows and ignored the only two who had chosen to speak.

“Again, we’re not going to hell,” he said. “But I don’t know, why did the ghost want there to be elevators?”

“To lift his spirits,” Cori gleamed up at him, pantomiming the drum and snare after her joke, “*ba-dum-tiss.*”

He giggled and scratched his stubble with gray fingernails. He looked over her head to the window and her gaze followed his.

Cori watched as they descended into the pit of a closing spiral, a la Dante. The train accelerated around the downward curve of the tracks. The back end of it could be seen across the chasm over the looming light of the land of the dead. Above was where the dark glowed down on them. Like the sun and sea switched overnight, Cori thought. She thought the reversal beautiful.

“Okay, I have another one,” she said.

“Okay,” her father said. “Hit me.”

“What did the cat say to the grim reaper when he came to take her soul?”

Chapter 2

Laughter

Cori's father told her not to be scared when they finally arrived in the land of the dead. "No real reason to be," he laughed. "But your first look at a demon will stay with you, so try not to let it show," he said, and Cori did not know what to believe as they approached their train's destination. "You'll see skeletons walking in the streets and in the crowd. Ghouls will trail behind and haunt your path, looking for any remains of life. There will be deities looking down from their perches in the tallest buildings where we will be unwelcome. There will be demons who want little from you, nail clippings, your scent, whatever money you're carrying, and there are demons will who want your meat, your bones, whatever they can take."

Cori expected fire and heat and biblical hell. But it was cold enough to see her breath when her father guided her to the streets. She even laughed. She was breathing in the land of the dead, a place she imagined she would not or *could* not breathe. She expected monsters, but she found people. The crowd in the streets rose and fell as if all the dead were inhaling and exhaling in unison.

The people laughed. Some people were trying to sell something, though it mostly seemed like desperation for connection. There were alleyways where people braided each others' hair, cul-de-sacs where crowds of children kicked rubber balls, street corners where old men played mahjong or chess or taught each other how to play new games. Women sold weathered romance novels for just a few Obol coins. Teenagers passed a single cigarette around a circle and pointed at all the weirdos surrounding them. There

were dark bars filled with four languages and even more accents and laughter that drowned out the thick sounds of the people outside.

The streets clamored with the traffic of human bodies and anxieties. From what Cori understood, the entire history of humanity crowded these streets together. The armies of Genghis Khan. Pharaohs' servants and the pharaohs themselves. Knights and serfs and lords and the kings who ruled them. Poor kids like her and CEOs of multibillion dollar industries all brought to the same fate, the same decayed but lively city of the dead.

Cori imagined she would see Mahatma Gandhi or Frida Kahlo or Frederick Douglass or one of the popes or Dalai Llamas. She would walk over to these legends of history, confident as the time her football coach saw her and Roland drop their pants to moon a visiting volleyball team and got suspended for three days. She would say something snarky or she'd make an ass of herself. They'd laugh and laugh until suddenly she would be best friends with Zelda Fitzgerald or Georgia O'Keefe or Anne Sexton.

Cemetery

Mr. Hill could hear the mumbled lyrics from Adrianna's record player upstairs. It sounded too melancholic for him. Bon Iver. Death Cab for Cutie. Lyrics about addiction and depression and death. She probably shouldn't be listening to that, he thought, not in the wake of her girlfriend's suicide. He didn't want to disturb her, to tell her to shut her music off, but he worried.

He walked through the living room and kitchen and listened to the music, the light ruffle of paper from a book as she turned the pages, her light footsteps as she paced across her rug. He was searching for a dead animal that might be rotting behind the fridge or in a cupboard or under the floorboards. A thin rotting smell carried through the rooms

on the ground floor. He emptied and washed the drawers, each time preparing for an eruption of flies and maggots, the sight of a tiny ribcage picked clean.

Mr. Hill settled in a chair and inhaled in concentration. The fridge hummed as he closed his eyes. Adrianna could be heard lightly sobbing into her pillow, and he didn't want to interrupt. The smell persisted, but was cut by lemon soap in the air that gave him a headache.

With his eyes closed, he followed the rot to the back door and outside. His feet shuffled through the leaves to a small opening that led under the house. He gripped the wooden frame as he kneeled. His old knees ached after the long day of searching. He sniffed at the decay. He looked into the dark. Adrianna's music sounded clearer through her open window.

Obols

"So how did you become the grim reaper, Dad?" Cori asked her father as they caught their breath in an alley. They almost needed to shout to hear each other over the drum of the footsteps and blur of voices in the street.

"A grim reaper. I'm one of many reapers who guide the souls here. It's my job, same as when I sold cars back in Forest Hills," he answered.

"You'll always be *the* grim reaper to me, Pops," Cori smiled as her father turned his head in a smirk.

"We'll need to find you a job too," Mr. DeJesus said. "Not much to buy here, but a place to sleep that isn't the streets will do you good."

"Most people sleep in the streets?"

“Most people don’t sleep. Most people don’t have the luxury of a job like me, but we’ll find you one. Boredom will figuratively kill you here.”

Cori scratched at the denim of her jeans, and pulled at the limp sweater draped over her shoulders, the only clothes she took with her from the land of the living. She looked into the heaving crowd and ran fingers through her hair. In an alley across from her, a woman kissed a child’s freshly braided hair. “But we can buy things if we make the money, right?”

“I suppose so,” her father said. “But there aren’t too many jobs that pay more than a few Obols a day.”

Cori imagined a new haircut. Clothes more befitting a lady like herself. If it ever warmed up in the land of the dead, she could even wear a dress. “I can save up,” she said.

Translucency

“Any new cuts, bruises, or other instances of self-harm?”

Roland stayed quiet for a moment and looked away. Cool air from outside spilled into his living room. His social worker and therapist sipped at the coffee he prepared for them and scribbled a little into their legal pads. Ms. Bell blew on the steam from her cup. Mr. Davis’s pen scratched louder as the ink slowly ran out, and he stopped to shake it and to lick the tip before writing more.

“No, not since last time,” Roland finally replied.

“We know a boy in your school killed himself a few weeks ago. I’m assuming you prepared the body? Was this the first classmate you’ve exhumed?”

“Yes. And yes.”

“And you’re feeling—“

“Fine. Money is fine too. Football just ended, we lost in the playoffs, and basketball is starting now. First quarter report cards came back with decent grades: *As* and *Bs*, if you want to see for yourself. Anything else?” Roland stopped his leg from shaking under the coffee table. He wove his fingers together. He waited for Page and Davis to stop writing and looked through the window. Full-cheeked squirrels chased each other up trees, and dead leaves trembled from the branches to the ground.

Three knocks sounded from the front door. Page and Davis smirked. “A friend?”

Roland stood, grateful for a brief escape. “Someone probably just died.” Three more knocks pounded through the room. “Have to stay in business, you know?” He left them. He tried to listen their whispers but heard nothing intelligible before he turned the corner.

The knocks continued, louder, more frantic as he approached the door. He thought it might be funny to leave this person, whoever it was out there for a minute. The dead person couldn’t get more dead after all.

He turned the doorknob. Cold filled the foyer where he stood. Adrianna held one arm in the other, pale and shaking in his doorway. “What’s wrong? What happened?” he asked.

“I don’t know if this makes sense, if it could ever make sense, but I don’t know who else to ask for help,” she said. Her eyes brimmed with tears.

“What’s wrong?” Roland asked again, extending an arm out to her, then retracting it before it reached her. He felt unwelcome. The two still had not spoken since Cori’s death. He felt guilty and sick and small this close to her, even if she looked the same.

“My dad. He found my body. My corpse. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

A glimpse of translucency flashed over her. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t caught it at school. She was dead. Shit, he thought. Oh my god.

“Come in,” Roland said, opening the door further. “I can help.”

He would need to figure out what to tell her father. What to tell *her* about being dead. How long had she been dead? Who else knew? He needed to get rid of his therapist and his social worker. He needed to be ready to prepare Adrianna’s body. Unless the police already had it, and then he would have no idea what to do.

He guided Adrianna through the hallway she had walked through so many times before. They entered his office and he pulled a chair out for her to sit. “Don’t worry,” he said, but he knew she should be scared. “I need to think about what to do.” Roland hesitated in the doorway, wanting to say more. “I need to talk to my social workers. Get rid of them. Then I need to think about what to do. What we’re going to do,” he said, and turned to the corner, leaving Adrianna alone.

Departure

“How am I supposed to stay away from demons if the only job we found for me is working for a demon?” Cori asked, half a giggle in her voice. They stood in the entrance of an apartment building. The crowd shuffled outside and did not move to enter the open space of the hallway. A doorman stood with them in the foyer who would need to invite Cori in. A spell prevented almost all from entering, it was explained. To keep everyone unwanted out.

The march of the souls outside trembled in the tiles under Cori’s feet.

“I don’t know. Be careful. Keep your head down. Don’t start trouble.” Mr. DeJesus turned to the door and began to walk away. She knew he had to go back to his job as a reaper, but she unsure if he would be able to find her again when he returned. He would return, right?

“Sure thing, Dad. Enjoy the land of the living,” Cori grinned after her father and waived with her whole arm extended. “Say hi to Mom. I probably won’t have my soul drained or get violently maimed or be maliciously devoured or anything.”

“Oh, and try not to joke so much.”

Taste

The first sip almost tasted like the whiskey he’d put away so long ago and swore he would never return to. Mr. Hill hadn’t thought to smell it when he reopened the bottle, didn’t question it when the cap was unsealed. He poured the drink into a glass over three ice cubes and sat at the kitchen table. He even hesitated to bring the glass to his dry lips. But his daughter’s corpse continued its slow decay in his living room, and he knew there was no coming back from seeing that, and he knew that whiskey would stop his shaking hands if he could swallow that familiar burn. The first sip almost tasted like the whiskey, but the sugar of the stale cola soon settled on his tongue. His daughter must have gotten drunk on his old whiskey, replaced it, and thought he’d never go back for a taste. He couldn’t stop himself from cracking up at the surprise. Adrianna and Roland found him laughing in the kitchen, head curled back in his chair, a few tears wetting his dry cheeks.

Train

Mr. DeJesus bit at his torn nails and cuticles as he rode the train back to the land of the living. Other reapers sat in silence, looked out their windows, slept, and read books

as the train climbed back toward life. Once stopped there, each reaper would take separate trains or planes or cars to retrieve the souls they were sent there for.

Mr. Dejesus bit and tore some skin from his thumb and swallowed it. He messed up last time he was home. Two souls, he was supposed to take. His daughter, his demon employer told him, and her girlfriend too. Returning with half the souls bountied, his demon employer threatened him.

Well they can't kill me again, he thought. But he didn't want to imagine what they could do to him. No matter though. There's no chance in hell that my son will be staying with that Adrianna girl, he thought. Daughter. Whatever. They'll never find each other in the land of the dead and all its chaos.

The train screeched as it slowed on the tracks until its stop. Orange leaves glimmered in dew outside the window. People who were still alive kicked through piles of them on the ground. Mr. Dejesus bit more from his hand. He knew he would have bled if he were alive. He put gloves over as his sore fingers as he walked outside and to his next train.

Paint

Adrianna mentally excused herself from the conversation as Roland and her father spoke. She still sat with them in the kitchen, but looked around the room. She wasn't really a part of the conversation anyway, even if it was about her. She tried not to be angry about this. She imagined Cori holding her hand through this, whispering jokes to distract her, rubbing callused fingers along her knuckles.

Roland explained the finer details to her father, things she'd already figured out. Some people die and go off to the afterlife, some stay behind. She could obviously still

pass at being alive. No one can know about this. No one, not anyone, not even Adrianna's mother. They could still do a funeral, but it would be secret, tonight. Then life would continue as if Adrianna had never died. It'll all be okay, right?

Mr. Hill nodded his head in understanding. He slid a finger around the lip of the glass in his hand. He winced at the taste, and Adrianna remembered why. It was the cola she replaced the whiskey with on the night she committed suicide.

He turned to her. "Did you drink my whiskey?" His glass of cola and melting ice still sat in his palms. He was almost laughing, but his eyes were shaking.

"Yeah," she said. "It was me. Me and Cori. Sorry, Roland. You weren't invited." She smiled at the boys across from her. They tried to smile back. "Sorry, Dad." She didn't want to give the details. It was dim in the room, and the light through the window made them look smaller than they were.

"Sorry, it's just ironic. Wanting a drink after something like this, only to be unintentionally foiled by my daughter. Or is it irony? I can't remember definitions now." Her father looked at the two teenagers in the room. His face twisted with emotions he couldn't understand, or that she couldn't quite decipher. She saw guilt for trying to be humorous, even if she had done it just moments before. She saw anger and desperation. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm not quite sure what is happening right now. I didn't mean to scare you if I did. I'm sorry."

Their voices left the room, no one sure what to say. Outside the window, the last of the red leaves in the branches rested on the dry red dirt of the forest. The tree bark was even gleaming red by the light of the setting sun. Leaves rasped along the ground in the breeze and flickered between bright coral and dark crimson.

That much red looked familiar for the wrong reasons, but gorgeous nonetheless.

Adrianna remembered Cori becoming entranced when she looked at the brilliance of colors like this. She remembered how Cori loved to paint an entire canvas one solid shade before truly beginning her art, just to know the mood underneath. Rouge, hidden behind a portrait of a friend or family member or love. She remembered her love's hands dyed red, her jeans freckled, washing her hair under the faucet until the water no longer flushed pink.

She turned away from the window, her father, Roland, and looked down at her wrists. She thought the color of blood should never look so beautiful.

Chapter 3

Funeral

Roland waited with the body outside his house. Adrianna and Mr. Hill would be arriving soon. A porch lamp lit the stairs, but it did not reach the dark of the trees. A thin rain had begun, light enough that he did not notice it until small drops speckled his skin. He sat on the steps and tried to whistle with his dry lips. He could see his breath for the first time this year in the chill. He brought an imaginary cigarette to his mouth and pretended to smoke with every cold filled exhale. He remembered pretending like this as he waited for the school bus when he was young, before he knew what lung cancer really entailed, before his parents died, and long before he came to Forest Hills to join his grandfather.

A flashlight shimmered toward him, and he rose to pick up the corpse of his approaching friend. It was wrapped in a pale blue cloth that draped from its solid but fragile frame. It was doused in perfumes, but the smell of decay pricked through the herbs and oils and flowers.

When the two were close enough to him, Roland presented the body to Mr. Hill but watched Adrianna the whole time. Her face was blank. She didn't seem to be forcing back grief or anguish. She seemed distant or disassociating though, barely there for her own funeral.

Mr. Hill hesitated, unsure of what to do with the body held out to him. "You should carry her," Roland said. "Be the pallbearer."

The teenagers watched the grieving parent as he hesitated and shook in the dim light and quiet rain. Roland suddenly thought it a mistake to offer the body in this way.

“If it’s too much, I understand. This is different than anything even I’ve ever done with funerals. There isn’t quite a set tradition with this kind of burial.”

“No. I should do it,” he said. “I can do it. I’ll do it.” He took the body then, and the draping cloth clung to his body in the breeze.

Adrianna moved closer to her father. She held his arm and rested her head against his shoulder. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m so sorry. I am so sorry,” she repeated, and the light gloss of rain on his coat wet her cheek.

As Roland grabbed his shovel and began to lead the two to the forest and her burial site, he could hear Adrianna saying it again and again, “I’m sorry, I am so sorry.” It was quieter now, and when he looked behind him, she was gripping her father’s arm even tighter.

They reached the edge of the forest, and Roland instructed Mr. Hill to lay the body down gently. Adrianna let go of her father and stepped away to lean against a tree trunk. “Now would be the time to pray, I suppose. I have to dig the grave now,” he said. “Grieving is good, try to remember that. Don’t swallow whatever you’re feeling,” and as he said it, he wasn’t sure who exactly he was speaking to.

Funeral

Mr. Hill didn’t pray or stand to watch the kid from the funeral home dig his daughter’s grave. He had just carried a body through the dark, had to endure the smell of rot for hours before that in his own home, and he wasn’t sure if the image of decay he pulled from under his foundation would ever leave his mind. If only for a moment, he needed to escape the rustling sound of dirt thrown from the hole as it grew deeper.

A small cliff overlooking an alcove of the lake welcomed him just thirty yards past the edge of the trees. He could see where brook in the woods flowed into this lake further to the side. He had never walked this far into the forest, never had the intention or desire to explore beyond the three or four roads in the broke little town. But the dark waters rumbled calmly below him, and he could only see the waves from tiny glints of light by the halved moon above.

He inhaled the cold salt in the air and held it, then exhaled until it felt like all the air in his body had left him. The long day was nearly done. His shoulders loosened, and his eyes closed as he listened.

Funeral

Adrianna watched her father overlooking the lake and thought about how she had wanted to drown in those waters just a few weeks before. How she still did. She watched Roland throw dirt from his hole and shrink further into it. A sheet of fog gathered in the grass. The fabric around her corpse nearby darkened under the trickle of the misty rain and damp wrinkles clung to the body.

She would soon have a conversation with her father. He will ask why she did it, how long had she been dead, how he could have prevented it. She hoped he wouldn't ask how she did it. Regardless, she will not know how to answer. He will question his parenthood. He will suffer alone and never tell anyone, and Adrianna will never know how to make it any better. She'll say it's okay, they're together still, still a family. But her words will not make a difference.

Or, he will listen to her quiet, wait for her own understanding and willingness to talk.

She stepped over to the grave, sat down, and dangled her feet into the pit.

“Careful,” Roland said. “I don’t want to hit you with the shovel or any of the dirt.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said and smiled at him. She kicked her heels against the wall of dirt. “You don’t really get concerned with things hitting you when those things can pass right through you.” He smiled back at her.

After a few more tosses from the grave, he lifted himself up. Adrianna’s father returned. The three stood before the empty pit for a moment. Adrianna did not want to stay for what came next, and she was sure no one else wanted to either. How the hell did Roland bury do this so often? How the hell did he bury Cori?

“Let’s begin,” Roland said. He carried the body over like a sleeping child. He placed it near the edge. He stepped into the ground, and pulled it into the grave. It seemed so gentle. When he emerged, he instructed her father to sprinkle a handful of dirt over the body and told Adrianna she could do the same if she wanted.

The two took a fistful moist earth from the pile, then let it fall into the hole beneath them. Then Roland started to shovel dirt back in.

They watched, and Adrianna was unsure if she should pray. Her father’s eyes were closed. He wasn’t a holy man in any way, but things could have changed since he found his little girl’s decaying cadaver.

“What now?” Adrianna asked. She wasn’t sure who would answer though.

Roland brushed his hands together and a cloud of dirt fell from them. “We mourn,” he said. He didn’t look at her as he answered. “We remember, but we move on

and continue living. We try to learn and understand this the best we can. We stay close and be there for each other.” He continued the burial. The grave was nearly full.

“That isn’t what I meant,” she said.

“I know,” he said. “But I didn’t know how to answer the question you were asking. I’m sorry, I just don’t know.” The hole finally filled, and he sighed.

Beyond the trees and the clouds, the sun was beginning to rise. The rain thinned more under the dim light. Adrianna’s father yawned, then Adrianna, then Roland. “I always hate how contagious yawns become,” she said. “It’s like someone else’s body is reminding your body how freaking exhausted it is.” The others nodded their tired heads.

Roland rested the shovels over his shoulders and looked at the ground.

Adrianna’s father breathed into his hands to warm them.

“Let’s go home, Dad. Thanks for tonight, Roland.” Adrianna took a step into the woods. “And for everything else, I guess. I’ll see you in school.”

Chapter 4

Home

Mr. DeJesus pulled his hat down to shade his eyes from the rising sun. The sidewalks of his old hometown were nearly empty. Squirrels climbed trees along the roadside, and pigeons pecked at people's lawns. Old neighbors strolled from their homes to retrieve their morning papers. They stared at Mr. DeJesus, thinking perhaps that he looked familiar, but no, no, he was dead. He couldn't be back here. It was just someone who looked like him, someone who walked like him.

He didn't need to walk the streets in ghostly invisibility to reap the soul he had returned for. He liked being noticed, remembered for a moment. Maybe Martha Olzmann would go back inside to tell her husband she thought she'd seen a ghost. Maybe Mike Bell would spend the rest of the weekend reminiscing about his old friend he thought he recognized in a passing stranger. Someone once told him that you are only truly dead when your name is spoken the last time amongst your friends.

He passed his house, his former house, and paused at the end of his walkway. His wife was sleeping inside. Alone. He wished he could take her with him. Leave this Adrianna girl alone here, a soul between worlds. Maybe him and his wife and Anthony-Cori- could be happy in the land of the dead. Until some demon discovered what he was doing, hunted him down, and devoured the souls of him and his loving family.

He walked on, kicking leaves from his path as they floated in the breeze. More houses, more neighbors, more pervasive and confused looks passed by his gaze as he walked.

The graveyard welcomed him in its sudden loneliness, the pristine stone of his daughter's grave next to his own. An empty space waited for his wife. He held his hand over the tombstones, ran his palm along the hard edges that would soften over the coming years of rain and wind and snow. His body slowly faded in color, becoming invisible in the glimmering sun. He wouldn't want someone to disturb him as he lingered there for the day.

He sat in the grass, and cold dew dampened his pants as he leaned against his grave. His eyes closed. He would retrieve Adrianna later that night, but for now he needed to rest after his long journey.

Stains

What would a demon look like? And how would it frighten a girl like her? What should she expect as she approached the apartment of her demon employer, up nine flights of stairs, past unmarked doors and uncertain smells? Should she be prepared for a monster made of shadows and smoke? Should she be ready for the sight of gargantuan scaled abominations? Red-skinned or twin-horned men in black suits? Or perhaps something more subtle? Yellow eyes. Pointed fingernails or needly teeth.

His name was Henric. Henric, the lesser demon who would be waiting for Cori at the end of a green wallpapered hallway on the tenth floor of this highrise. There was no elevator to him. Just cement stairs and a rusted handrail reaching high into the brick infrastructure.

She walked up step by step, taking breaks on the fifth and eighth floors. She was out of breath by the tenth. Her legs and ass ached from the climb. Her gray shirt darkened from sweat. Maybe she could say the wetness was from the rain. Maybe Henric and other

demons wouldn't have noses. Maybe they wouldn't be able to smell the perspiration or the reek of the two weeks she had not bathed.

He was inhaling at a cigarette, and exhaling at the ceiling where swirled stains accumulated from the smoke. He looked more or less like any other boy from far away. A teenager. Someone who she would pity the littlest bit if she were to see him smoking on the corner next to her school.

A worn t-shirt hung limply from his thin shoulders, a bit too big for him. His jeans were tighter and darker, and he wasn't wearing shoes. She walked toward him repeating to herself that she had nothing to be afraid of. Her father said so. And if she did get scared, she'd try not to let it show. What was there to be afraid of in a teenage boy?

A lot, Cori thought, answering her own query. There is a lot to be afraid of in a hormonal and bigoted teenage boy. She tried not to think of hidden bruises on her ribs or asking for advice on make-up from Adrianna over the phone.

He looked just like a teenager, even his slicked dark hair with frayed bangs. Until Cori got close enough to see his dead eye. One glassy eye stared at her. It was devoid of color, but she knew it was staring right at her. The other eye looked reflective, but moving. She looked closer and saw a train platform in the eye, men and women rushing to their seats, conductors waving to each other for clearance in spinning snowfall.

"Welcome to the land of the dead," he said and extended his hand.

Cori stood out of his reach for a moment and stared at his hand. *Rude little child*, her mother would have snapped at her. *Don't stare like that*.

He continued, "Your dad probably told you about me, but I want to introduce myself anyway. My name is Henric."

She finally grasped his hand and shook. His one eye continued to move and change. The train sped off, orange leaves carried behind by its quick departure, and old men gripped their coats tighter. She smiled her best polite smile. “Nice to meet you,” she said.

“Likewise,” he said. “I’m sorry for this quick transition right after your passing, but it’ll be better than sleeping in the streets and in the cold or in the rain or around all that chaos. Come in, I have a lot to show you.”

His cigarette neared its end and he stamped it out in his forearm. It gave a quick hiss against his skin. It was a noise and smell she remembered from Adrianna’s few months of smoking and hiding it from her parents, Cori kissing her burn-pocked body.

Henric opened the door behind him and walked in, leaving it agape for her to follow.

This is what my eternity is going to look like, she thought. Decrepit apartment building, ten stories up from the clamor of every other soul to ever grace the earth. No cellphones, no fancy meals, no luxuries. She could pick up smoking without the fear of dying apparently. She didn’t have to worry about what her next meal would be, like in the aftermath of her father’s death.

Better than that shithole, Forest Hills. Better than the kids there barely existing in their pathetic town and pathetic lives. It would have to be. She didn’t want to escape so badly that she wanted to die.

Morning

Adrianna woke feeling light. Threads of light peaked through the glass of her window. It took her a moment to realize she was floating above her bed, blanket hanging from her tired body. She hung in the air still trying to blink the sleep from her eyes.

Her father was raking leaves in the yard.

She imagined Roland reading a book by the embers of his fireplace.

If she were alive, Cori would still be sleeping in the dark of her curtained room.

It should be a day of rest, Adrianna thought. Recovery. It was a Sunday. There would be plenty of time to talk it through with her father or Roland another day.

Adrianna closed her eyes and allowed her body to return to the comfort of her bed. She listened to the quiet rustle of leaves, her father's gentle sighs as he took momentary breaks. She turned her head to hide from the morning, but it had become too bright for her to fall asleep again.

She rose from the covers, dressed herself in plaid pajamas, and avoided the mirror for fear of the sight of her distraught hair.

Adrianna found her way downstairs as her father stepped in the door from their yard. She stood barefoot in the kitchen door while he pulled his hat from his dark hair. She waited for him to turn to her, look her in the eye, ask her to sit down, but he stepped to the fridge and opened it.

"Would you like some breakfast?" he asked, leaning over to look into the cold. "Looks like we have eggs and sausage and maybe two strips of bacon left." He stood upright and stared at the unopened freezer. "Or I could make pancakes, if you'd like."

Adrianna moved to the table and placed her hands on a chair. "Why don't you sit, Dad," she said. The chair legs squeaked against the floor tiles as she pulled it out for him.

“I can make breakfast. Really, I’m happy to. You’re all sweaty and tired from yard work anyway.”

He moved over to the chair and stood in front of it before sitting down. “Thank you,” he said, playing with the cloth napkin at his seat. “Eggs sound great.”

She walked over to the cabinets wondering when her father would be able to look at her again. She wondered if she looked different now, under the light of new truths. “I’ll make some coffee too,” she said.

“Thank you,” he said again. Then, as she opened the fridge and carried the eggs to the stove, “You should try to get out of the house today, see some friends or something.” She lit the gas under a small pan. He leaned on the table, its thin legs squeaking under his weight, and watched Adrianna. “Go for a walk, a run, whatever. Call up a friend, I can even give you a little money if you want to go eat at The Tavern. Or go to someone’s place and order in.”

“I think I’m okay, Dad.” Heat rose from the pan and warmed her cheeks. “I have a book I’m in the middle of. There’s a drawing I’ve been meaning to finish too.”

“How about going to see that boy, Roland? Nice house, if not a bit creepy given its alternative use.” She cracked an egg, then another, and spilled their contents in the heat. The whites sizzled and browned. “Please, honey,” he said. “I want to help, but I am treading on uncertain grounds.”

Adrianna used a spatula to divide the whites as they fused in their cooking. “What about you? How are you dealing with this?”

“I’m fine. I’m going to be fine. This is new, I know,” her father said. “But we can get back to a semblance of normalcy. Plus, that kid seems to know more about this stuff than he’d like to let the rest of us know.”

She flipped the eggs, the yolks breaking and bleeding yellow into the empty space of the pan. “Okay, Dad. I’ll try to call Roland after we eat.”

Family

Four other demons lived in the apartment. Three children, though ages were hard to differentiate post-mortem, especially for demons. There was also a father named Royal, though Cori had not seen him yet. A low snore came from the room at the end of the hallway where he slept.

A family of monsters from myth, father and four children. Living in squalor in a shitty apartment with just enough to their name to take in a human girl as a helper around their home.

Cori found it hard not to sympathize with them, even if she couldn’t shake the connotation of their demonic heritage. Plus, she was fascinated by their strangeness. They all had eyes like Henric. A calm campfire crackled in Joel’s eye, an outdoor cafe in Zelda’s, and a snowy cabin in Leopold’s. Cori scolded herself for staring, but none of them seemed to notice or care.

Hero

Roland hung up the phone. Videogame gunfire sounded through the hall to him, roars of dying monsters and the laughter of his basketball co-captain, Matt. “Who was that?” his friend shouted to him.

“Adrianna,” Roland said as he reentered the living room. “She’ll be coming over in just a few minutes.”

“Cool, cool. I haven’t hung out with her in forever,” Matt said. His fingers pressed different buttons on the controller, pulled on the triggers, and the on screen hero fired round after round into a tentacled beast. Roland laid on the couch and rested his head on Matt’s thigh, still staring at his phone. “So,” Matt continued, “How do we talk to Adrianna about Cori? Like, I literally have not spoken to her since before she died, you know?”

“I don’t know, man,” he said. “Just pull her off to the side when I go to the bathroom or something and give her your condolences. She probably doesn’t want to linger in those feelings for long anyway. She won’t want to talk about that.”

“If you say so, dude.”

Roland had not spoken to Adrianna about Cori’s death either, glossing right over it in light of her own funeral the night before. That was kind of shitty, he thought. Really fucking idiotic and awful. He texted Adrianna, “Just come in when you get here. We’re in the living room playing some games. Door’s unlocked.”

Matt rested his arm over his chest, circling his head as the two laid together and continued to play their games. Roland turned his head to watch the game, colors and explosions erupting from the screen.

Matt paused the game as Adrianna entered the room. Roland hadn’t even noticed her until Matt waved her in, opened his hand to a chair for her to sit. “Hi, boys,” she smiled, “You seem comfortable.”

Matt laughed. "You get pretty comfortable with friends once you've asked them to check out your swollen balls after they've been stepped on in a football game."

"Oh my god," Adrianna walked to the chair and crossed her legs. "Who'd that happen to?"

"That's a story for another time," Roland sat up. "Very intimate and gruesome details. Not for polite company, and not for the faint of heart."

"So you're saying that it was your balls that swelled under those football cleats?"

All three laughed and reclined in the comfort of the living room.

Matt did not offer his condolences when Roland left the room to retrieve drinks for his friends.

Adrianna faked smiles as other games flashed across the screen for the boys.

Roland bit his nails and hid his bleeding cuticles in his already stained pocket.

Work

The children sat at a table as Henric showed Cori how to prepare meals for them. They fidgeted in quiet and watched the blood drip down the meat in their brother's hand.

"Y'all don't really need to eat, do you?" Cori asked Henric. "I haven't eaten in two weeks, well, a week since my dad left."

"You don't," Henric explained. "We do. Though, as you can imagine, there isn't much to kill to eat in the land of the dead."

"Why not be vegetarians?" Cori leaned against the counter. She watched him slice the slab into thin shreds and place them into a pan. He drizzled some oil and spices over it.

“Plants are still alive back where you’re from. They don’t come here when they die,” Henric said, lighting a small flame under the pan. “Neither do the different kinds of animals. Neither do the aliens.”

“Are you telling me that aliens exist?” Cori asked with a little excitement.

“No idea. Point being they won’t come here. I think they all have their respective places if you know what I mean.” The meat sizzled and began to release into the air. The demon children began to fidget in their seats and grin.

“So where did all the demons and stuff come from? The ghouls and deities and whatnot?”

“No more questions for now,” Henric said, flipping the meat with a spatula. It hissed and Cori salivated at the sound.

“Okay,” she said. It’d been awhile since she’d seen food. Since she’d smelled meat cook and remembered the taste of it. “What kind of meat is that anyway?” she asked.

“Hush now,” he said and slid the meat onto five plates. “No more questions, I said.” He balanced the plates and walked them over to the table and children. One for Joel, one for Leopold, one for Zelda. The children didn’t wait for silverware before lunging for their meal. Henric took the last two plates through the hallway, enter Royal’s bedroom, and disappear behind the door. Cori sat at the table, hand over her yearning stomach.

Warmth

Matt left to meet his parents for dinner, leaving Roland and Adrianna alone.

The two sat in the living room, talking through their anxieties about school, graduation, colleges, and scholarships. They lamented upcoming projects for their Government and Economics classes. They joked about the winless season of basketball for both the boys and girls teams. They complained about their English teacher's lisp, how she pronounced *Rs* like *Ws*, *Roland* like *Woland*. Roland loved the way the little Polish woman said her name, *Adwianna*, *how would you describe the romance between Romeo and Juliet?*

Her drink had made a circle of condensation on the wooden coffee table and he pretended not to notice or care. "Are you getting hungry?" He asked. "I have some deer jerky and venison steaks from a buck I shot last week." She smiled politely and he stood up to retrieve the food, but paused in the open doorway to the kitchen. "It occurs to me that you might not feel hunger, now that you're, you know, and I don't want to push you into eating if you don't want to or can't or whatever."

"I still eat, but the hunger is quieter," she said. "Numbed almost."

Roland nodded his head and wandered to a bookshelf to the left of the television. He lit a stick of incense, rosemary, still trying to wrap his head around the concept.

Adrianna stood and walked around the table toward him. "You know so much about all these strange things, Roland. So many little details and particulars. But there is so much that you're missing too."

"I suppose so," he said, gesturing her to the kitchen. The tiles chilled his feet even through his socks, and he wondered if she felt the cold too. "I mean, I know what the clitoris is, and if you recall, where it is," Adrianna laughed and punched his arm, "but I'll

never know what it feels like.” He opened a cupboard, a single moth fluttering from the dark, and he pulled a glass jar of jerky out.

“Good analogy,” she said and accepted the meat from him. “Asshole.”

“Sorry,” he said, and smoothed his hair on the back of his head. They ate their jerky standing in the kitchen, not even motioning to sit in the wooden chairs or to move back into the living room. It was a little over salted and gamey and had almost no fat. Between bites Roland asked, “Do you want to talk about what we’re obviously supposed to talk about?”

“Actually,” Adrianna said, leaning against the counter and staring at the moth bouncing into the ceiling light, “can we talk about something we’re not supposed to talk about? I don’t want to talk about my death or the funeral last night or how I’m adjusting to being a ghost or how my father is doing or how the world is so fucking different now and I sure as hell don’t want to talk about Cori.”

A slow rhythm of the moth hitting the glass bulbs rang in the room. Roland leaned against the counter with her. “So what do you want to talk about?”

Frost was beginning to form on the windows, and the trees outside were growing darker as night approached. “How fucking lonely and surprisingly horny I am in all my grief,” she laughed, and Roland forced a chuckle out of his throat.

Her hand was warm on his fingers.

Snow

“I have an odd question,” Cori began, “and you should feel free to be offended or to not answer or-”

“What’s up with my eye?” Henric said.

“Yeah,” Cori laughed. “Thanks.”

They sat at the table in the kitchen, the smell of their earlier cooking still lingering. The children made laughing screams from their shared room, and the sound of Royal’s growling snores had quieted.

“It’s no problem. No one coming to the land of the dead has seen this kind of weird shit before. Here, come closer,” he said. “Look.” The eye glistened as she leaned closer to Henric’s face. Puffs of white seemed to be descending in the iris. “I’m a snow spirit. I coexist between this world and the land of the living where I am literally just part of the winter.”

Cori watched, mesmerized by the light snowfall. For a moment she even could feel a hint of cold on his breath.

Deer

Adrianna left Roland’s bed without looking back on the rise and fall of his chest under the covers. On the way out the door, she stole an apple, and walked into the beginnings of winter snowfall.

Distracted by the long night and the regret of her latest in a long line of mistakes, she didn’t even notice a wild doe taking cautious steps toward her until she was already looking it in the eye. She rolled the apple in her fingers, then offered it.

Its long tongue stole the fruit from her loose fingers. The red delicious was small and was halved in a single bite. It chewed with her mouth open. It licked her empty hand searching for the last bit of sweetness, and she stroked its soft hide with her other. The echo of an out of season gunshot found its way to them from far away, but still it did not

startle. She never knew how black a deer's eyes were. It could be looking everywhere all at once, but it also looks blind.

An arrow will rest in its too trusting heart soon, Adrianna thought. A hunter knows that any other wound is unwanted, is unfazing, it won't fell a beast like this. Too many arrows find their way into skulls from the inexperienced and no meat is gained. The arrows simply graze the hard bone, deflect into the tight skin and muscle and the animal will continue living. Adrianna had only tasted venison once, but the savor was forgotten under these trees.

Its ears peaked at the sound of nothing in the forest. They searched for a moment before it vaulted over a bush, left her alone with its saliva sticky on her skin, disappeared into the dark.

Hunting

Roland watched Adrianna walk out of his home, careful to make as little noise as she could as she closed the door behind her. He loaded a bolt into his crossbow, then swung the weapon over his shoulder. He followed behind her at distance, crouching through the dark so he would not be seen. The thin layer of snow crunched under his feet, so he crept slowly to soften the sound.

A deer approached Adrianna in a clearing. It ate an apple from her palm. She smiled as it licked her fingers and Roland smiled too, then remembered why he was stalking the woman he had just been inside of through the woods. The deer escaped over a bush, and she continued on her way home.

Once inside her house, Roland ducked behind a tree trunk and lifted the crossbow. The cold air nipped at his dry lips. The light click on, then off in her upstairs bedroom.

She said she wanted to regret something when he protested against it. She didn't regret killing herself. She didn't regret hiding her body or leading Cori to her death. She was grieving, but she was angry and just wanted to fuck everything away. Fuck it if she regretted it later. Roland, she said, I just don't want to be alone. And then they kissed and undressed and he pretended to fall asleep and then she left.

A figure approached her back door from the dark. Roland looked down the sights of his crossbow, his fingers shaking in the cold. The figure turned the handle to her home, and he pulled the trigger.

The bolt landed in the back of the figure's knee cap. He was about to scream, but Roland was already upon him, covering his mouth with his hand.

"I'm sorry," he said, then threw the man's skull against the hard wood of the house. The man went limp. Roland turned his face with his boot to get a better look. "Oh," he said, and was genuinely apologetic, "Sorry again. Nice to see you again, Mr. DeJesus."

Kid

Mr. DeJesus woke feeling stiff. His muscles felt weight they had not experienced since he had died. The room was bright, too bright, unnatural light blinding him as he tried to force his eyelids open. He smelled flowers, but was unsure of if was perfume or if they were real. When he tried to stand, something resisted him. He was bound to a chair, and realizing this, he began to struggle and panic. He should be able to just disappear, phase through whatever was holding him there.

"I'm sorry about this, really," a voice came from behind him. "I imagine you have a lot of questions." He walked into view finally, a young white boy holding a crossbow.

“Who is this kid who shot me in the kneecap with a fucking crossbow? Why can’t I move? Why is this happening?”

The kid looked familiar, blue eyes, short blond hair, little scar hidden in his eyebrow. But Mr. DeJesus couldn’t quite place him.

“Listen, I don’t want to be doing this. Really, I would rather not have a dead man bound in a soundproof room, crossbow bolt in his knee, but I can’t let you take Adrianna to the land of the dead. And yes, yes, I know why you’re here, obviously, and yes, I am not going to let you go anytime soon.”

Was the room really soundproof? Or was this kid just trying to discourage any attempts at seeking help?

“It’s rosemary and thyme water, what’s binding you to the physical plane. And just a little blood of the living. The bolt is soaked with it.”

The kid turned away and placed his weapon on a counter next to a variety of tools. Was he going to torture him? What else did this kid know about the dead? What else did this kid know about him?

“Mr. DeJesus, I’m not sure if you remember me,” he said as he kneeled and touched his leg with soft fingers. “My name is Roland. I was a friend of your daughter’s.” His hand tickled the skin around the wound in Mr. DeJesus’ knee. “When those spices wear off, I’m going to need to stick you with another bolt. Now I don’t want to. I’d rather not hurt you anymore, but I have to. I need to ask, are you going to be a good prisoner for me? Or you going to scream and struggle and make me worry about bringing people around the house? Are you going to be a piece of shit and make me shoot a bolt into your eye just to shut you up?”

The kid grabbed the bolt in his knee then, twisting it and Mr. DeJesus grit his teeth, let out a little tear, but he did not yell or scream.

“No? Good.” The kid walked toward the heavy door but hesitated before opening it. “Again, I’m sorry,” he said. “You’re the father of a dear departed friend of mine. But then again, you also took her away from me.”

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Will Walawender knows what it's like for deer to eat apples from his palm. He has taught students from dozens of countries for Exploration Summer Programs at Yale and The Baccalaureate School for Global Education. His fiction has previously been published in The Bookends Review, NANO Fiction, and The Conium Review where his story was a finalist for their 2015 Flash Fiction Prize.