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## An Idol of the Old Errors

Amy Kaye Lafferty

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**AN IDOL OF THE OLD ERRORS**

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of  
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Amy Lafferty

May 2017

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# **AN IDOL OF THE OLD ERRORS**

English

Missouri State University, May 2017

Master of Arts

Amy Lafferty

## **ABSTRACT**

This work is a collection of short stories exploring the religious, social, psychological, and relational consequences of territory and isolation. Though not necessarily within the same world, they are set in modern times and exemplify similar commentaries on religious structures in rural, Midwestern America.

**KEYWORDS:** territory, myth, isolation, rural, religion

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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May 2017

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## INTRODUCTION

The house I grew up in was a large Victorian relic that peered out of a wooded, two-acre plot on the thinly-inhabited eastern edge of town. It had been somewhat neglected over the decades before we arrived: the basement had a flooding problem, the wallpaper and carpet were grotesquely outdated, and the front porch railing was bent and flaked with rust. Under these conditions, and because the current owner wanted to be rid of a house she was now too old to care for, my parents got a good price for it. Even with those flaws, it was still an imposing and beautiful place.

As far as I was concerned, the house was also haunted. From the first night we stayed there, I told my little sister stories about a young girl, Rose, who had lived there a century before and had been murdered by her father in grief after his wife (her mother) died in childbirth. He murdered the newborn, too, before he could even be named. These wronged spirits still roamed the place where they had died; if you listened, you could hear their footsteps creaking up the stairs; if you looked, you could see their shapes beckoning you toward a reenactment of their deaths. I don't remember making these things up, but they were the first stories I told.

Perhaps it was grisly stuff for a seven-year-old, but everything about the old house lent itself toward that kind of grim, preternatural speculation. Maybe it was this that drove me toward the kind of stories that featured the fantastic: *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* was a life-changing experience that followed the same year (I began the series out of order). Others stand out, still bright in my mind from that incomparable

experience of encountering a new world for the first time: *Artemis Fowl* by Eoin Colfer, *The Two Princesses of Bamarre* by Gail Carson Levine, and *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman.

In *Heterocosmica*<sup>1</sup>, Dolezel discusses visible and invisible worlds as components of the modern myth. As a child, these worlds and their points of intersection, eclipse, and juxtaposition, enchanted me. The ability to extrapolate imagined characters and events from a damp, dimly lit cellar or peeling, rose-patterned wallpaper offered me a new way of perceiving and transcending reality. I was always confused when later, well-meaning grownups would call my writing and storytelling “escapism.” How could I write about anything by escaping? I could only write by being intensely present, by paying close attention to whatever was around me.

Almost invariably, this attention has led me to conceive of myths drawn from the observable world. Without that world, there is no story. Dolezel distinguishes myths as stories that “highlight(s) the contrast between a human and antihuman world” (197). In the modern myth, humans are also responsible for the antihuman world, while in classical myths, supernatural explanations are offered (197). Deleuze and Guattari use the term “territory” in describing the function of myth and setting. As they assert, territory is “an act that affects milieus and rhythms, that ‘territorializes them’ – an intentionally circular description (314). Looking back, this was my experience of creating stories from the features of my house. There was no moment where the objective qualities of the house passed from real to mythic. The entire process was an act composed of simultaneously shifting parts, with the original territory undergoing a new kind of re-territorialization as

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<sup>1</sup> References throughout this thesis will be provided according to MLA8 format.

the possibilities for supernatural influence occurred to me, and then back again as the milieus and rhythms of my stories shaped it.

The kinds of myths I tend to prefer reading and writing are not modern myths. Though Dolezel notes a rise in the modern myth as the natural result of an increasingly secularized world, children's and young adult books continue to be earnestly mythical in defiance of modern philosophical advancement. Where Dolezel makes a sharp distinction between a supernatural past and a secular present, Deleuze's definition is more fluid and anachronistic, allowing for elements of past, present, and sometimes even future. For that reason, his judgment appeals to me more, and I have seen it more often in the children's and young adult literature I enjoy.

Even though it could be argued that this lack of philosophical sophistication is due to the naiveté of books for young people, I have a hard time making that leap of judgment. I don't think there is much that is naïve in Gaiman's *Coraline*, where the eponymous main character can only confront the terrible alternatives to her imperfect life through a supernatural journey to a bleak mirror world. Even for stories that exist in worlds modeled after one-dimensional fairy tales, such as Elizabeth Duncie's *A Curse as Dark Gold*, the classical myth (based on the Rumpelstiltskin story) still functions as it has since humans developed language as an exploration of complex human psychologies within the context of a complex, incomprehensible, and often hostile territory.

Maybe this idea is too fundamental; I can see it in almost every story. But I still find it beautiful. In George MacDonald's "Photogen and Nycteris," the territories of light and dark are essential to developing the titular characters after the witch Watho experiments on their personalities by raising the boy, Photogen, only in light and the girl,

Nycteris, only in darkness. Because of this, they are both weakened when they finally find themselves exposed to the opposite environment. Only by reconciling themselves to the hostile elements of their own and each other's territories are they able to escape

Watho, as Nycteris summarizes in the following scene:

“No, no,” persisted Nycteris; “we must go now. And you must learn to be strong in the dark as well as in the day, else you will always be only half brave. I have begun already -- not to fight your sun, but to try to get at peace with him, and understand what he really is, and what he means with me -- whether to hurt me or to make the best of me. You must do the same with my darkness.” (MacDonald)

This story is a fairy tale; the themes are necessarily overt and allegorical. Another powerful example of the mythic function of worlds or territories exists in nearly every book of one of my favorite authors, Ursula K Le Guin. Her book *The Tombs of Atuan*, part of the Earthsea Cycle, tells the story of Tenar, a girl who was chosen to be a priestess of a dark, death-obsessed religion when she was very young. She has spent her life confined to the temple grounds in the middle of a desert. Isolation and death surround her, especially in the labyrinth where light is not allowed, where the Nameless Ones her religion serves exist and empower her. Her experience with darkness is similar to that of Nycteris's, and like Nycteris, she must decide whether to remain within her territory or risk the dangers of departing. Ged, her guide, warns her of the complexity of this decision and of the need for understanding both territories completely and without idealism:

“The Earth is beautiful, and bright, and kindly, but that is not all. The Earth is also terrible, and dark, and cruel. The rabbit shrieks dying in the green meadows. The mountains clench their great hands full of hidden fire. There are sharks in the sea, and there is cruelty in men's eyes... She [Kossil, one of Tenar's guardians] tells you that the Nameless Ones are dead; only a lost soul, lost to truth, could believe that. They exist. But they are not your masters. They never were.” (128)

It doesn't seem right to say that this is what I try to achieve in my writing because I'm not sure that I do achieve it, only that I must go through the process of it in order to

even come close to the kind of story I love best. I have not achieved that, and for that reason, discussing my work according to any kind of theoretical or critical framework is extremely uncomfortable.

Nevertheless, I will make an attempt. Most of my work connects to these ideas through elements of magical realism or outright fantasy, and even the pieces that are completely realistic deal in imagery that has anthropomorphist or otherwise borderline-mythical connotations. My story “Nativity,” for instance, follows a woman after she has had an abortion when she returns to the woods near her childhood home to be alone and encounters a sleeping woman in the snow:

Her white-gray hair was frothed with moss; bizarre, vibrant fungi formed colonies in the likeness of fans and umbrellas across her wax-paper skin; tiny wildflowers studded her like jewels. With everything that grew upon and around her, it was impossible to tell if she was wearing clothes. But in addition to the flora, there were odd, synthetic things: bits of wire, bullet shells, plastic bags. She seemed bound to the earth from the knees down by snaking fingers of roots that thickened as they withdrew from her, growing knobby and vast until they soared upward into the trunk of the ash. The old lady must have been there a very long time...and yet...what pieces of skin she could see were wrinkled, yes, old, yes, but not decayed, not rotted, not sucked clean of all tissue like the skeletons of deer and elk she used to find in the clay creek bed. (Lafferty 9)

Here, the activity of the supernatural is occurring within the story, since this is not the kind of thing one stumbles upon in the real world. Themes of human responsibility and the incomprehensibility of human action addressed by Dolezel are visible here; however, as a way of coping with this grief, the supernatural dominates the story at the end. The protagonist does not turn to God or attempt to rely on a supernatural force to make sense of her experience, but a fabulist turn of events consumes her in a world that is suddenly much larger than the one that was suffocating her. In others, like my story “The Law of False Positions,” nothing supernatural occurs within the story, but I still rely on

that language to indicate the importance of mythic elements, as can be seen when Tommy finally begins to see his wife's perspective on their natural setting and on their life together:

She pulled out her phone and showed me the pictures she had taken of her paintings. I flipped through them a few times, seeing the series she had done of the view we had now. In her paintings, the lodgepole pines looked alive. It looked more horrible than magical – not like Tolkien's Ents, which were alive but neutral. Ents, at least, had faces to make them seem more familiar and less strange. Jean's trees had no faces, and that only made the life in them seem trapped and silent and vindictive. I wasn't sure what I was looking at, how to explain that sense of life even to myself. I didn't get art. But in her colors and shapes, I saw the life and death in them. Each new painting she did was a progression on the last, as the seasons and the lighting changed, her colors changed, the faceless expressions of the trees changed, and their vindictiveness seemed to grow. (Lafferty 11)

In both cases, the idea of the mythic is coexistent with a kind of territory.

Deleuze and Guattari's insistence on territory as an act combined with milieus and rhythms is crucial to the types of scenes I want to convey. These terms, the authors clarify, signify the patterns that emerge from chaos, which "is the concern of very ancient cosmogonies... [and] is not without its own directional components" (313). In other words, territories are composed of the rhythms and milieus that rise from chaos, which is the same motivation underlying all myths and all stories, which rely on the presupposition that patterns exist. Going a step further, Deleuze and Guattari make the claim that, taken to its logical conclusion, territories are the result of art rather than the other way around. This indicates that the observance of setting and context only becomes an observance of territory when the mythic is drawn from it through the creative process. Or, as I experienced it as a child, an old house only matters if there are ghosts in the walls.

These days, the myths I focus on are some of the most prevalent in modern society. Orson Scott Card's *How to Write Science Fiction & Fantasy* has been instrumental in helping me explore these myths without falling into the traps of triteness and reductionism that so often pervade mythic, especially religious, writing. The Judeo-Christian religious tradition finds its way into my stories over and over again, usually in ways that exaggerate their most extreme rites and rituals. These manifest most starkly against the isolated backdrops of rural societies, where social norms can grow, quietly unchecked, into bizarre and grotesque forms. Often, the identity of the individual is lost or disfigured under the weight of religious and social mores, as in my third person plural story "The Baptistry." In other cases, the power of the individual to choose creates incomprehensible dilemmas that can either reinforce or dismantle the powers that be, as I explore in "The Ram."

This is the very real condition of many in rural, closely knit societies, where grapevine gossip functions as incontrovertible truth, neighborly eyes peer over every fence, and the ideals of simple work and simple worship hold powerful sway. Beneath these commonalities, however, there is often the sense of something larger, something older, something in the tilled soil and the growing trees that finds its way into the people who occupy a territory. The expression it finds in America's Midwest is generally religious, manifesting in the Christian religion planted into this land from older realms, and which was itself forged in the hungry, blood-soaked, sacrifice-demanding practices of the world's oldest religions.

Over and over again, even as new religions and modern practices attempt to cull the most gruesome practices and to progress along humane, compassionate paths, those

older ways seep through the cracks of society. They find their way into the words and hands and paths of people who otherwise believe themselves incapable of violence and wrongdoing. The struggle of society as a whole and of the individuals who comprise it is to find an understanding between the old and the new and to enact their choices based on how their perceptions change; often, however, they are defeated by this choice. In this I draw on Bakhtin's notion of the hero, which is an individual defined by his or her own "free act of self-consciousness" and who "seeks to destroy that framework of *other people's* words about him that might finalize and deaden him" (58-59).

This attempt at free will and independent identity is often limited not only by other people, however, but by the territories inhabited by the heroes. The land around them is complicit somehow, and even in new places and new times, there is no way to escape their society, their relationships, or even their selves. It is no accident, after all, that the oldest gods were the rivers and the forests and the stones; territory was the birthplace of religion and spiritualism. Then N-force (nature force) as described by Dolezel is "metamorphosed into an animate, supernatural partner in quasi-interaction" with the people who are forced into contest with the land around them (41). These forces and people's reaction to them drove the earliest human migrations, allowed for settled civilizations, granted and retracted life itself, and defined the earliest forms of man's introspection. The land was the first thing people knew; it may also be the last.

Even before religion institutionalized their use at shrines and temples, mankind has relied on idols of one sort or another. An idol is an aspect or effigy used by humans to worship gods and powers whose natures they can barely comprehend. All people have their idols, as do the characters, heroic or otherwise, in each of these stories. The error

many of these characters make – the oldest error – is in knowing what their idols are and learning how to give names to the objects of their worship. Whether they transcend these idols or submit to them helps determine the nature of the framework, territorial and social, in which they are embedded; this layering effect, of the external defining the internal and the internal comprising the external, is at the heart of my heroes and their stories.

## THE BAPTISTERY

They were always pulling things from the river, but this was their first body. Usually it was small treasures: an abundance of trout, endless canning jars, clothes that always washed perfectly clean, hunks of river ore that became anything they needed in the smelter and forge. Once there had been a 1971 Ford F100 they'd towed up that had worked just fine once the men put a new engine in it. Another summer the old women netted up five huge pregnant turtles, whose taut bellies they had sliced open to get at the round, leathery eggs, and there had been enough for each person to gulp down the raw, musky yolk before they boiled the turtles themselves and shared the feast equally among themselves. Nothing the river gave was wasted.

Often they would dredge up more curious things: bits of gold and silver jewelry or an old wooden chess set or an old police issue 1911 with a magazine full of rounds like a single row of brass teeth. Once, a thing of real power: a fat leather-bound Bible whose words and pages were pristine despite its river journey, protected from harm like the baby Moses himself. When pastor read from it, they felt its power tugging at them like the tides and breakers, like God dredging their murky spirits for something pure.

The children would crawl down the valley's flank in the summer time and hold their breaths and wriggle into the mud like crawdads to see who could find the most treasure. Afterward they'd clean their catches and admire them together on the grassy shore and nap beside them in the afternoon sun like dragons at their hoards.

When they saw the body it was late spring, and the flooding of the early season had since receded, taking the grass and flowers with and leaving the bank an ugly rough and tumble of knobby tree roots and stones and rubbish.

It's a fish, they thought at first, some monster cannibal river catfish like there'd always been tall tales of. But then they'd seen the fingers, and a skinny little arm. Child's fingers, a child's arm, stuck in the mud like someone had planted it there. Oh, the thoughts that flew through their minds. Bleak thoughts, sinking to the pit of them like lead balls. Excited thoughts, expanding darkly. Thoughts of murder, thoughts of someone tossing their child's body into the river to erase the unspeakable guilt.

They couldn't defile a crime scene, they knew; they couldn't get too close, though undoubtedly the river had done all the work that could be done to dispose of any evidence.

But the children were already at the body, doing their work. They dug around it and tugged it partway up the hill until it was free of the mud, and the boys took off their shirts to wipe the mud from the face, and the girls scooped up water in their shoes to rinse it, and soon they saw clearly it was a boy. He lay there clean and polished as a pearl, hardly looking like a corpse at all, so newly dead that he might have been sleeping, calm as Isaac on the long walk up the mountain with Abraham.

It was too late, then, to think of authorities and evidence. This was their responsibility now, and theirs alone, theirs to make use of as they made use of the other gifts from unknown sources, the refuse that found their journey's end in their town on the elbow's bend of the river, in their own Promised Land.

They remembered the drowned Bible that still sat on the church pulpit, the way its leather had felt against their fingertips as real as the stone commandments from the mountain. They remembered the round little eggs, warm and bloody as they plucked them from the viscera like cherries and passed them hand-to-hand.

The men began their task with their hunting knives and removed the scalp as gently as taking off the top of the top of a carrot. They peeled the skin from him in strips. The women helped to cut out his tongue and pluck out his eyes, which had maybe once been green. They kept the organs and meat aside – all except the gall bladder, which they tossed back into the river. When they got to the bones, the women took up hatchets and saws, and they cut him into neat calcified pieces while the children splashed in the water and the men smoked and waited.

They passed around the bones until each hand had its own; they didn't bicker over who got the bigger chunk of femur or who got the delicate scythe of rib, for it was all there, each relic forming the whole.

The men carried the barrel while one of the women carried the head, which was still smiling with its even baby teeth, to the pastor's house next door to the church. When he learned what they had done, they saw the same tears come to him, and for a moment they wondered if they had done wrong.

But that night, at the river's edge, he baptized them anew. He prayed over them, and they clutched the bones to their hearts. They counted them among each other like rosaries; they marveled at the provided sacrifice. The pastor lifted the naked skull, and in the ruddy light of the setting sun, it looked to be cast in gold, like something unbearably precious. They burned the flesh and took communion with the body and the blood, and

they sat filled with the spirit on the river's edge, the sluggish water lapping at their feet, their hands already sifting through the mud and silt, feeling blindly like the mouths of catfish along the river bottom, already hungry for whatever would wash up next.

## THE LAW OF FALSE POSITIONS

If the summer had been difficult, winter was proving to be a different monster altogether. It wasn't the temperatures alone that made it that way. I'd thought all that through: the heat and the cold, the dryness, the exposure, and everything we'd have to do to cope. In the beginning, Jean and I had accepted, and even relished, the prospect of extremes. But I couldn't have known the real enemy would be the wind.

I still had the pictures Paul first sent me saved to my phone. I flipped through them sometimes when I couldn't sleep, wondering what I had seen before. The pictures couldn't communicate much about the reality. They couldn't show the motion of the high plains frothed in grass like seafoam and the portly green hills loping into the distance, or the scale of the ridges falling razor straight as guillotines into deep valleys. They couldn't show the strangeness of the trees. Admittedly, even after living there I hadn't given much thought to the scenery until Jean showed me her view of it, and once I saw what she saw, I could never see it the same. Maybe that's why I looked back at those pictures so much, even though I was living in the real thing – covered as it all was by snow, a weight of snow I'd never known could happen south of Canada.

But it was the wind it all came down to. Even in the summer, it was ferocious, even if it helped with the heat. It scoured us like iron wool, left us with cheeks so red and chapped they eventually toughened under the abuse. There was so much outdoor work to be done outside that we couldn't avoid that. That was what I wanted from moving in the first place: for it to take away our softness, to make us into something else. The wind did

that better than I could have guessed. It changed everything here; nothing lived without its consent.

But no picture could show that.

\* \* \*

When we first got here, Jean was amazed at the trees.

“They’re wonderful,” she said of the deformed, peeling pines. They were scarred and knotted, their branches pressed flat so that they grew almost more horizontal than vertical. They grew at the top of one of the steep ridges, hunching over the valley beneath. The most noticeable features were the spiral grooves encircling their trunks. I could tell what had caused them: the wind, swirling around the indefensible trunks, flaying the bark and leaving behind strange patterns. Jean traced them with her fingers.

“Lodgepole pines,” Paul said. “Tough bastards. Ugly. Not as ugly as some things, though.” I remember the way he nodded his head at me and winked.

“You’re hilarious.”

“Bet you don’t get trees like that in Illinois, do you, Tommy? I hear it’s all cornfields. Except for Chicago. One big, shitty city and a bunch of cornfields.”

“Something like that,” I said, and left it at that because my brother was giving me the look he gives when he wants me to correct his ignorance or explain something on a technical level in order to make me look arrogant in front of other people. It’s the kind of stupid trap he’s enjoyed laying for me since we were kids.

“They look like they could fall at any minute,” Jean said.

“Nah,” Paul replied. “They got deep roots. Even in this wind. The people are the ones who fall over. Especially you, Jean, little as you are. You’ll need to put rocks in your boots.”

She smiled at that, and Paul patted her shoulder. “C’mon, the path is right there down the ridge. You’ll be able to see the house as soon as we’re through. And remember, my new place is only about fifty miles west of here.” He swept his large hand in the general direction of the sunset. “In Wyoming, that’s close enough to spit. You both have my number, so call if you need anything. You’re not alone out here.”

“Being left alone is the point, Paul,” I said, moving in front of him to help Jean down the narrow path.

The house was made of the same lodgepoles that stared down at us from the ridge. In this part of the country, dwellings had been made of those ugly but unbreakable trees for an untold time, comprising the center masts of Shoshone teepees and the slapdash cabins of French-Canadian trappers and, as soon as we finalized the sale on our old house, the place Jean and I would call home.

We all stayed at the cabin that first night, so Paul could teach us the technical ins-and-outs of the place. He showed us the plot and the creek and the solar panels and how to work the generator and set up the batteries for the reserve power and all the other specifics of living in a place that was miles from anywhere. He and his wife had lived there for a year before they divorced, and I could almost feel his cynicism when I signed the papers, laughing at me for bringing my marriage out to the middle of nowhere to die, as if I was still the little kid trying to follow my big brother’s footsteps.

The house was furnished with just about everything we needed; Paul had built most of the furniture himself. He was handy that way, always the practical brother, the one who had started his own construction business when he was younger than I was now and now directed three different crews that had put together about half the houses and businesses in this corner of Wyoming.

Sometimes I wished I'd been the one with that enterprising, handyman nature, but it didn't come natural to me, and it irked me when Paul tried to explain it to me like I was a ten year old. I thought I'd done well for myself in my own way, but having ink stains on your hands and all the way up the side of your arms from grading math problems just didn't communicate the same air of accomplishment that Paul's sunbaked skin, calloused palms, and comfortable bank account did.

But still, it was a good night. We ate Omaha steaks and baked potatoes from last season's harvest and washed it down with more than a few fingers of homemade moonshine, and for once, I could tell that Jean and I were both excited about something. With the wild openness surrounding the place and the rare meat and honest-grown potatoes and liquor filling us, there was something visceral, something real about the space we occupied, that we hadn't felt for a long time.

Paul was telling some kind of loud, gesture-filled joke about messing with the Greenies (hippies who travelled up from Colorado, recognizable by the green license plates), when Jean cocked her head a little to look at me, lifting her eyebrows to indicate her amusement at Paul's melodrama.

I put my arm around her, and she even leaned into me a little.

“You’re out of moonshine, Jean,” Paul said, catching the lapse in attention being paid to him.

“Better fix that,” she said.

“Damn straight. There’s plenty of this left in the cellar, by the way.” He laughed at Jean as he refilled her glass with the clear liquid, then sat back and lifted his own glass to toast her. “Think of it as a housewarming gift. Nothing’ll keep you warmer than a few glasses of this on a cold winter night, sure as sin. Warmer than my skin-and-bones brother, anyway.” He laughed again, and despite my annoyance at his insults, I really was grateful that he let us buy the place, so I laughed with him.

\* \* \*

We’d thought of moving for a while. We were sick of the Midwest, and we had enough saved up that Paul’s offer to sell us his property for a fraction of its listed price told us it was the right time to follow it through. Jean wanted to live somewhere solitary and close to nature so that she could have new material for her paintings, and I was ready for anything different than the life we’d been stuck in.

Near the beginning of summer, we moved away from the land of cornfields (Paul had been kind of right about Illinois, though we lived nowhere near Chicago) and onto the harsh, lonely plot of Wyoming land.

I’d wondered about Paul’s motives in offering it to me. Growing up, I never thought he liked me much. It had crossed my mind that the offer was a trap, a way of setting me up for something he thought I couldn’t handle. Like the time when I was six and he was seventeen, and he’d casually mentioned to me that he and Jason had found a way to climb up this steep sandstone ridge near our old house in Ohio, and they laughed

as I tried it and fell and broke my collarbone. They carried me back, admittedly, but I'd never been madder in my life, and I'd learned after that to be wary about Paul sharing anything with me – whether it was knowledge, experience, or some land in Wyoming. Though he was nearing forty now, I still couldn't be sure that he'd matured.

Either way, I knew that I was meant to take this offer. Out here, you either made it or you didn't. The land didn't allow for compromise. Was it dangerous for Jean and me to come out here without the experience it would take to manage the property? Was it arrogant to rise to that challenge? I'd long since accepted that, as far as most people were concerned, any choice I made was likely to be arrogant.

For once, when I first brought up the Wyoming idea, Jean didn't tell me so. I wasn't sure she would even come at first – I thought she might finally take it as her excuse to drift away from me for good. Almost immediately after we got married, she started to make a point of showing how little she needed me. If she didn't come home till long after I'd fallen asleep, if she floated past me in the house like a ghost, would she move across the country with me? I showed her the pictures – those deceptive, still, and silent pictures – while we were sitting on the couch one night and said, “What do you think about finally moving somewhere new?”

“What good would that do?” she said.

“I don't know about good,” I said. “I know we could both use a change. Paul says it's nice up there, even if you're more likely to get bit by a poisonous snake or shot for accidentally stepping on someone's property. But what's life without a little danger?”

I'd meant to make her smile, but instead her frown deepened. “What about work?” she said. “There's not a lot of options in a place like that.”

“There’s work in Wyoming.”

“For you, maybe,” she said in her way of reminding me how inept I was at considering her.

But there was no real venom in the comment, and she seemed to be actually thinking about it. She took my phone and looked through the pictures again. “I could use some new inspiration, I guess. It could be good to get away from all this.”

I wasn’t sure what she meant by “all this,” but I didn’t want to say anything in case I said the wrong thing. I waited for her to finish up whatever thoughts she was having. After a few minutes, she put her head on my shoulder and said, “What the hell? Let’s give it a shot.”

\* \* \*

When I was in college I took an elective class for my major on the history of mathematics. It fascinated me to see the evolution of math, the way ancient cultures had touched on concepts that they never named, the way their minds tried to formulate the world into numbers and algorithms for a thousand practical tasks that most people in the modern world can’t grasp that complex math actually expresses.

Take algebra, for instance. It wasn’t officially “invented” until the Arabs (though some would argue for the Greeks) started extending practical mathematics into theories of equations. They called it al-jabr – the reunion of broken parts. Algebra exists to resolve different sides of an equation, in which unknown variables create uncertainty, into a coherent whole.

But algebra is more ancient than both the Arabs and the Greeks, of course. The ancient Egyptians, for example, solved algebraic problems using something called the

law of false positions. In whatever equation they had, they would attempt to solve it by plugging “false” variables into the equation and then adjusting it accordingly as the variables narrowed in the true solution.

It’s nothing more than trial and error. If you have an equation in the form  $ax = b$ , and you know the values for  $a$  and  $b$ , you can try random numbers for  $x$  until you come closer to the answer. You can also do this for more complex equations, like affine linear functions. Or like marriages.

It occurred to me that that’s what this was. I didn’t know the theory here; I couldn’t resolve the discrepancies between my side of things and Jean’s the way I could using the tried and true theories of algebra.

But I could try a series of false positions, like moving to Wyoming and into a whole new way of life, and I could hope that eventually something I put into the equation would bring us back to each other.

\* \* \*

Getting a job in Wyoming was almost too easy. The closest high school – which was still an hour’s drive away – was desperate for a math teacher, and even if that was a step down from community college, at least it would give me a steady income and some time off until August to get used to the property. Those first several weeks were hard to get used to, with the level of work the place demanded, and also in my and Jean’s proximity to each other. We weren’t used to only having each other, with no other voice but the wind whistling around the cabin. When there was no wind, the silence of the place was almost unbearable.

It took me a while to get used to that kind of silence, but once I did, it made me pay attention to things in a different way. I started noticing things about Jean that I'd never noticed before, even though we'd been married for a year and lived together for two years. The mornings were often silent, and I'd feel her rise up from beside me and hear her feet pad over the creaking wooden floors. I'd hear the sounds she made in the bathroom: the pipes groaning as she took her shower, all the clicks she made picking things up and setting them back down on the bathroom counter as she brushed her hair and moisturized or whatever else she did. I suppose I'd heard those sounds before, but now, for some reason, all sensory information was different, significant, and heavy. There was something inscrutable in those sounds, something I was missing.

I don't know exactly when things started to go bad with us, though I can round it back to within a few months of our marriage. At least, that's when I found prescriptions for antidepressants and anti-anxiety meds in the bathroom cabinet, though she'd said nothing to me about getting them. That was just her way, though. At first, I'd found her way of understating things endearing. We had never needed to be overt with each other. When you understood someone, and when they understood you, all that noise about declaring your love didn't need to be there. I thought we both preferred it that way.

Before we moved, I was working all the time. Three classes may not sound like a lot, but it added up to a hell of a lot of grading. And she was busy, too, working at her studio and hanging out with the friends that kept her out late drinking and walking around downtown and whatever else she did.

It had occurred to me around that time that we didn't talk as much as we used to, and rarely at all about anything more than what groceries we needed or could I please, for

once, help out with the dishes. I had tried to talk to her, to reopen the communication channels that had collapsed somehow, for reasons I didn't know. I'd make her dinner and talk to her about my students or some new theory book I was reading, but doing this only seemed to annoy her. She would eat her food without talking, taking tiny bird bites, as though even the food, in being associated with me, had deprived her of her desire to eat. Eventually, I learned to shut up. I stayed in my office longer so that I would be exhausted by the time I came home, so exhausted I wouldn't have the energy to talk to her. Until she showed some indication of wanting to fix things, too, I would match her, silence for silence.

\* \* \*

There was a lot to be done around the house and land. Paul had started us a little plot of beans and corn and sugarbeets in the spring, and we tended it with all the ability our prior Google searches and my brother's advice had given us. We had to make sure the generator and solar panels were maintained. There was always some minor repair to make. We had to keep an eye on the water levels in the creek. As Paul had pointed out, having water on your land was better than a gold mine out here in this dry, wind-scoured place.

I loved the challenge of it. I was already good at solving problems on a page, but out here, the problems were tangible, and the stakes were higher. If I couldn't solve them, we'd be without power for days or end up with dirty, undrinkable water. A fence would fall over if I didn't engineer it properly, or I would fry the batteries that hooked up to the generator if I hadn't worked out the right flow of power. It was all math. Every time I figured out a way to solve a problem or improve an existing thing, I felt a thrill go

through me that was infinitely greater than the thrill I got just from solving equations. This was real. It almost made me regret that I'd chosen to stick with theoretical, academic side of mathematics rather than becoming some kind of engineer. Then again, maybe there was still time.

Sometimes, the wind was already going too crazy by morning for me to know what Jean was doing. One morning, I didn't wake up right away when she left bed, and when I felt that she was no longer beside me, I sat up in full wakefulness. The bathroom door was closed, but I couldn't hear anything over the screaming outside.

I knocked on the door, and after a few long seconds, it creaked open.

"What?" she asked. Her hair was still wet and tangled. She had toothpaste on the corner of her mouth. I wiped at it with my finger, and she let me.

"I didn't know where you were."

She stared at me. "We're in the middle of nowhere. Where would I go?"

"I don't know." I was still sleepy and muddled, and she was starting to get the look in her eyes that meant she was turning inward again, so I said, "You want to go somewhere today? We still haven't seen Sheridan. You wanted to go to that place, right? The Mint Bar?"

"That's hours away, Tommy," she said.

"So? You got other plans?"

"I'm painting the trees," she said. "I have to paint them early, while the light is right. We can go after."

\* \* \*

The thing about Wyoming is that all the stereotypes are true. We walked into the bar under a neon sign of a cowboy on a bucking horse, out of place without cowboy boots, trying not to smile at the framed pictures of cows and rodeos and John Wayne that blanketed the walls, as well as the large number of taxidermied animals displayed in imaginative and disturbing ways. We figured it wasn't smart to express condescension in a place where half the people you saw had a gun at their hip or slung across their back, and the other half likely had one tucked inside their waistbands.

The Mint Bar was first a cigar company, and then a soda shop, but in the Prohibition Era Wild West, it also hosted a backroom speakeasy that spoke for the place's true identity. It had survived decades of attempted government intervention, emerging triumphant into the 21st century as one of the best known bars in the state now that there was no need to hide its main product.

We sat at the bar, and Jean ordered us each a pint of Blue Moon. She pointed out a sign over the bar that said "Hangovers Installed and Serviced" and said, "My kind of place" with an energy I hadn't seen from her in months.

I asked, "What do you think the 'serviced' part means?"

"Hair of the dog," she replied. "You've got to come back the next day to stop feeling hungover."

"Sounds expensive."

"Alcoholism takes dedication." She clinked her glass to mine, tapped it on the bar, and lifted it to her lips. She drained half of it in one gulp, and I shook my head but took a sizable gulp from mine as well.

"You might want to slow down," I said. "We're here to have fun, remember?"

“Well, do you want me to slow down, or do you want me to have fun?”

“Fair enough,” I said, trying not to express my wariness. She was talking to me in full sentences, at least. That was something.

We had a good enough night, especially since we made friends with a couple who insisted on welcoming us to Wyoming by paying for round after round of whiskey that made me grimace and which Jean downed like it was an Olympic sport and she was out for the gold.

Before we got married, Jean was mostly a social drinker. I knew she had taken to drinking much more since then, but since I didn't go out with her very often – bars weren't my favorite place in the world, and being a painter allowed for the lifestyle more than being a teacher did – I didn't often see her like this. I only saw her when she came home late at night or early the next day and crawled into bed with me. On some of those nights, I would feel her shake like something inside her was trying to get loose. On other nights, she would be as still as stone.

We stayed at a hotel in Sheridan, and though we were both exhausted, something was different. At home, sex between us had turned into an arduous matter. I mainly avoided the subject because initiating it felt like having to pick my way across a minefield during a snowstorm only to arrive at a house with no lights on inside and a locked door. It was easier for me to channel my energies away from sex than it was to figure out what she wanted.

But here, in a hotel in a Wild West town, with whiskey in our blood, we sidestepped the minefield and the storms and the locked doors and met each other on some previously unknown no man's land. For a brief instant, I wondered how long it had

been, and why. But then there was no time for wondering, and afterward, we slept deep and long into the next day, like it was the first time in months we'd actually been able to fully sleep next to each other.

\* \* \*

Not long after the Sheridan trip, it was time for school to start, and I was gone on the weekdays from 5 a.m. to 6 p.m. I was glad to be teaching again, but it left me exhausted.

I was getting up too early to hear Jean in the mornings, and by the time I returned, the wind would be stalking through our valley, screaming against the doorways, shaking the glass in their panes until I was scared they would shatter.

We were sitting out on the porch one evening, with the wind in such a state up on the ridge, but coming from the west so that by the time it battered its way through the trees and dropped into our valley, it was tolerably breezy. Even without the full force of the wind, it was cold. Winter started much earlier here, but we were well bundled-up and had our fire pit going strong to ward off the chill, along with mugs of hot chocolate mixed with Kahlua. The combination of all these things made me feel sleepy and strange, and I watched Jean without thinking for a while, and then wondered what she was watching when she looked out at the bent shadows of the lodgepole pines.

“What are you looking at?” I asked.

It was a minute before she answered. “I can show you,” she said, and lifted her bundled form up with some difficulty and moved closer to me. “I sent the paintings off already. They’re going to be displayed in Cheyenne.”

“Oh,” I said. “That’s good, right?” I wondered why she hadn’t told me before.

She pulled out her phone and showed me the pictures she had taken of her paintings. I flipped through them a few times, seeing the series she had done of the view we had now. In her paintings, the lodgepole pines looked alive. It looked more horrible than magical – not like Tolkien’s Ents, which were alive but neutral. Ents, at least, had faces to make them seem more familiar and less strange. Jean’s trees had no faces, and that only made the life in them seem trapped and silent and vindictive. I wasn’t sure what I was looking at, how to explain that sense of life even to myself. I didn’t get art. But in her colors and shapes, I saw the life and death in them. Each new painting she did was a progression on the last, as the seasons and the lighting changed, her colors changed, the faceless expressions of the trees changed, and their vindictiveness seemed to grow.

Had Jean always painted this way? I’d seen her work before. I’d admired and praised and respected it. But it had never made me feel this: that I was frightened for her. I saw her looking up at the trees and wanted to make her look away, if this is what she saw when she looked at them.

“It looks like they’re trying to pull their roots up,” I said. “It looks like they want to fall.”

“I think they do. Everything that puts down roots does,” she said.

I handed her phone back and swallowed the rest of my Kahlua and hot chocolate. My head was pounding. I could hear the distant, agonized wind. I could hear the trees shaking their needles, shaking the way Jean so often did when she thought I was asleep.

“Are you going to leave?” I asked.

She was silent for long enough to make me think that was it, the answer, the soundless spaces in between her footsteps and the things she picked up and replaced onto bathroom counters, the  $x$  that had no solution that would add up to me.

“Do you want me to?”

“No.”

“Why haven’t you asked me before?”

“I have...isn’t that what I asked when I married you?”

“I don’t know how marriage works, Tommy,” she said, “but I don’t think it works that way.”

“You don’t talk to me anymore,” I protested. “How am I supposed to know anything? I try to figure it out, but nothing adds up. Nothing I do reaches you. You stopped letting me a long time ago.”

I tried to explain to her, then, the way I saw it. I told her about my theory on false positions, the way people were like two parts of an equation, the way marriage required each side to put in whatever variables they could until something worked out. I couldn’t see what was on her side; I could only try from mine.

She scarcely waited until I was done talking to reply. “You could ask,” she said in a small, hard voice. It got louder and harder as she went on, spitting words out from her teeth like cherry pits. “You could ask me, like a person. That’s why I stopped telling you.” Soon, her voice was loud enough to rise over the shifting wind and rustling needles and the nearby creek. “You get off on treating people and situations like they’re math equations, like it makes you better if you can figure it out on your own. But with people,

you have to ask.” She was screaming by then, her voice cracked and her face red. “Just ask me.”

I felt the familiar anger rise in me at the fact of being screamed at. It reminded me of Paul telling me what to do in his mocking, authoritative voice, a voice meant to make me look stupid and small, to force me into a course of action that wasn’t my own. There was nothing I hated more than that.

“Ask you what?” Unlike her, I kept my voice quiet but stared straight into her eyes. “I don’t know what’s wrong with you. I don’t know what I did to make you so unhappy, and I’m tired of you blaming it on me. I’d hoped coming here would help. There’s nowhere for you to stay out so late. I thought you’d talk to me more, maybe drink less. But then I realized, the point is still the same. Whether you go out or stay in, you’re trying to punish me for something, and I don’t know what!”

For a few moments she stared at me, liquid-eyed. Then she looked away. “I’m not punishing you.” Her voice sounded high and broken. “It’s just me.”

“What’s just you? That makes no sense.”

I waited for her to reply, watching her fiddle with her mug and the blanket she was wrapped in and her own hair while she avoided my eyes. After a while the fire had died down enough that I couldn’t even see her, and she was as much a small, twisted, silent shadow as the trees on the ridge.

“Right,” I said. “Still nothing to say. I guess we’ll talk tomorrow.”

I picked up both our empty mugs and went back inside, throwing the dishes in the sink and myself into bed.

\* \* \*

In the morning, the wind was back. It was a northerly wind, bringing with it the frigidness of pure tundra winters. It sounded like a pack of wolves, howling and scrambling after some unseen prey, attacking everything it saw, devouring all other sound. Jean wasn't beside me, but with the wind, there was no chance of my hearing her in the bathroom.

In my lingering anger, I went to the living room instead of knocking at the bathroom door. That's the only reason I happened to see Paul's monster of a diesel truck retreating back up the single unpaved road that led to our property, fighting its way through the solid force of wind, away from here, not toward. It had begun to snow, which blurred my field of view.

I went back through the bedroom and into the bathroom. There was nothing of hers on the counter that would have made the familiar clicks and taps. I went through the rest of the house and then outside to check the cellar and the shed. Without my coat, the wind assaulted me without mercy, whistling and screaming things that I couldn't understand, tearing my hair back from my face with so much force I thought it could probably strip me bald if I stood there long enough, making my eyes water uncontrollably.

Up on the ridge, there was no wind. The pines were still and calm, except for the occasional breeze that passed through them like a sigh of relief, now that there was nothing to strain their deep roots or twist them into unnatural patterns or hold their highest branches back from the sky.

## DIGGERS

In summertime, we look for things buried in the clay. Our parents call us, but we lose their voices by digging deeper. We find arrowheads and campfire rings. Deeper, and we find Pleistocene glaciers, and past that, terrible feathered monsters. Deeper, and the town is an ocean floor. We drown as we dig until the earth is molten. We dig and burn until it crumbles to dust. We dig as the universe sucks its breath in to a single everything, and as that also fades, we dig still, like a stone into God's own heel, to find what came before.

## THE RAM

Everyone else had their excuses, so it fell to Elise to burn the bodies.

She was so sick of hearing their pretenses, it was all she could do not to slap the silly smiles off the other ladies' faces as they all but fled the church. "Sorry, dear, I just have to get back home to my roast before it dries" and "I'm afraid with George still sick in bed, I just can't leave my girls to their own devices – no telling if I'll have a house to come back to!" and so on and so forth until it was clear no one else would come. It was obvious to her that they just didn't have the stomach for it. She wasn't sure what bothered her more: the ones that made excuses or the ones that didn't, as though they just expected that she ought to be the one to do it. And she would, wouldn't she? Of course she would. To do otherwise would be unthinkable.

It was a poor season for burning anything, but it was always this way. The heavy fall rains had swept through all last week, making the just-harvested cornfields look bedraggled and pathetic, sludgy with mud and stubbled with the dry leftover stalks. It ruined most of their firewood, too, when Charles spent all day *finally* chopping up the fallen walnut tree only to forget to put it all in the woodshed. And the only reason why the woodshed would have kept it dry was because *she* patched up the roof after the walnut tree fell through it in the first place. Her husband was good at pastoring, and she had no problem trusting him to keep the people in the church on the straight and narrow that would lead them all to heaven. But when it came to things of this earth, he didn't have much of a clue.

Eventually, Elise got the woodpile going with a decent enough fire. It was smoky from the wet wood, but once it burned past the surface, it would be good and dry and hot. It would take time for it to get hot enough, so she went back inside. Charles was still at church, and she was glad to have the house to herself. The house was old and simple, but it was sturdy and strong. Elise's great-granddaddy built it when they first settled out this way, and he'd known what he was doing. The foundation was straight and even: you could set a marble on the wood floors to see that there was no sag or incline to make it roll. It had already lasted a hundred fifty years, and she was certain it could last ten times that, barring no earthly or ungodly disasters. She wondered who would live there after she and Charles were gone but couldn't picture it. It should be her family here always, her blood. But she and Charles learned long ago that it wouldn't be that way. Whether it was his fault or hers she preferred not to know, but one way or another, they'd never been able to have children.

She sat down at the kitchen table and nibbled at a biscuit leftover from breakfast. She wondered when Charles would be back. She figured he didn't have the stomach to watch anymore than the church ladies did. Sometimes she suspected he was a big part of the reason why people had been losing their grit for it in recent years, why the numbers to show up at the burning had dwindled and dwindled. In the beginning, he respected it as much as anyone, even though he was an outsider. Just last year, he'd turned away after the pitiful assembly placed Emily Jameson's sleeping body on the pyre. And when he finally said the prayer, his voice sounded small and unsure, not like his confident pastor's voice at all. She knew something was going on, but nobody told her anything anymore.

It seemed to her that folk these days were losing their mettle. They were getting soft. They didn't accept the way things were sometime. Like the church ladies who couldn't accept growing old and put color in their hair and on their cheeks to feel beautiful again. Like Charles, trying to swoop into town and startup their church again when the old pastor died and be a good husband to her when he didn't know two licks about life outside the city. At the time, he had saved her. Not in the way he saved the souls of all their neighbors by being a good pastor. No, he saved her for real from an awful mistake, and she loved him for that. But then again, she had spent almost every day since saving him from his own inexperience, so maybe it had all evened out.

Most of the town had forgotten things like evenness and fairness and shared responsibility, too. Sometimes she thought she was the only one whose memory still worked. She remembered when they were united on things. That was when she was a little girl, but she knew her parents both helped keep people together, especially for the burnings. In those days, no one would have dared miss it, because who knew what the consequences might be? Her daddy had been a quiet man, but when he met people's eyes, they did what they knew was right. And mama had been the best shooter in five counties with a pistol as well as a rifle, so no one would have dared to make flimsy excuses to her face without thinking real hard about how ready they were to meet Jesus. But they were gone now, of course.

Thinking about her parents gave Elise a rush of determination. She threw the half-finished biscuit down and went back outside. She needed to prepare herself, and that meant facing what she was about to do.

The bodies were in the wood shed, laying on the work table. Every year they were provided: the year she turned 16, it was an old man whose name no one remembered because his family had long since moved away; and just after she and Charles married, it was the gimpy young girl, Sarah, who lived on the other side of town and took up with the postman. There had been at least one person every year of her life, and every year of her parents' lives, and onward back as far as the people who'd settled here could remember. No matter who it was, it happened in the same way. The rains would come, and a person would fall asleep, and no one would be able to wake them.

Elise asked her daddy once how they knew to do what came after. He looked her in the eyes. She never asked again. That was all she needed to know how important it was. And even if the whole town was too soft or forgetful or irresponsible to help, she'd make sure they were all looked after.

This year, it was twins, two little year-old girls with perfect noses and stick-out ears. They'd both fallen asleep. That was strange, to have two at once, but not unheard of. Their mama was Amber Higgins, and their daddy had run off not long after her belly started to swell. Amber was working forty hours a week at the Citgo to take care of them all, and she'd seemed almost relieved when she confided to Charles and Elise that it was them. She'd handed them off without a struggle. People usually did, though there had been fights over the years. But no matter what, it had to be done.

Elise watched their breathing, thinking for a while about Amber's bloodshot eyes. Without knowing why, she picked up the smaller of the two. She cradled it to her chest and put a finger to the perfect nose. Other than the breathing, the baby didn't move. It

couldn't. They'd done everything they could to try to wake the two of them, just to be sure. But they'd never wake again.

Though the fire was all the way across the yard, she could feel the heat of it now. It was less smoky now. The flames were large and red, crackling and leaping up toward the gray sky, alive and hungry, a true bonfire. She'd always been good at building fires. She'd helped her parents get fires like this going on this same piece of their land for as long as she could remember. Not for the first time, she regretted that she and Charles never had a little one to help them start the fires, to teach them the ways of things, the paths to be followed. She would have loved to teach the child how to upkeep the land and the house and watch a new branch of life grow up from the deeply planted roots. So long as that happened, she would have been happy to let Charles add in his bit about heaven and God and righteousness. She believed in that, too, after all, even if she was more practical about it than he was.

Elise wasn't normally prone to imagining, especially when it was about things she'd long since accepted as impossible, but she was so lost in her thoughts she didn't hear Charles's footsteps squelching through the waterlogged ground toward her.

"That's quite a fire," he said, stepping into the shed.

She jumped and set the baby down before turning to face him. "Still not hot enough," she said. "Give it another hour."

"Elise," he said. He embraced her, then touched her face with his soft hands. They were large, manly looking hands until you felt them up close and knew that he'd never plowed or shoveled or built. But still, they were nice hands. They felt cool against her face. "I've been talking to some of the others. They have some concerns."

“Why aren’t they here?” she huffed. “They ought to be here. This is for them.”

“We have to end this,” he said. “That’s why they didn’t come.”

“End this? What do you mean?”

He removed his hands from her face and ran one through his graying beard. “I’ve built my life here. Even before I married you, I knew this was where God wanted me to be. There’s power here. I could tell this was a holy place. I know about sacrifice. Everyone likes to forget about Abraham and Isaac, that sometimes God asks you to give up what you love most. They forget that. Sometimes it’s your own son, sometimes it’s only a ram.”

“Oh, spare me your Bible talk for once,” she said. “What do you mean about ending it?”

“I’ve been talking about things with the others for a while now, and it’s time to do something,” he said. “They don’t want to be a part of this anymore. Amber Higgins doesn’t want the babies back, but we’re going to drop them off someplace away from here, let someone else decide what to do with them.”

In that moment, Elise could have slapped him. “Let them decide what? Are you crazy? Who knows what’ll happen if you do that? We have to do it. They fell asleep, and they ain’t going to wake up again. It’s always been like this.”

“Not always,” he said.

“Oh, hush,” she said. “That was different. You know it was.”

“They were going to burn you,” he said. “Your own parents, the first year I saw the burning when I was still doing my mission work.”

“I was sick,” she said. “But it was Sam Barnes that year. They made a mistake. I was just sick.”

It was how she and Charles finally met, though she'd seen him around town for months before. The brain fever, as they called it after, had put her in a coma, and it was the right time of year, so who could blame her parents for thinking it? Even she hadn't blamed them, afterward, when they'd found someone else and realized it wasn't her before any harm could be done. Charles had found Sam Barnes slumped unconscious in the church parking lot, breathing evenly, but unwakeable. He'd reached Elise's parents before they could lead the burning. And sure enough, she'd woken up. It wasn't her that was chosen.

Charles shook his head. “It wasn't Sam Barnes. I never told you this, Elise. I already knew I wanted to marry you, even back then. I could see God's hand on you. You were so strong, so unwavering. So full of faith. I knocked out Sam, and I think your parents knew, but they didn't want it to be you, either. So they burned him, and you woke up again, and I married you. And nothing bad happened.”

Elise opened her mouth, but she had no words. If it really was her all those years ago, then what was she doing now? She shouldn't be here. Her soft-spoken, God-fearing husband was looking her in the eyes and telling her he'd defied God's will. For all his talk of sacrifices, and he'd tried to switch Sam out for her like the ram in that Bible story that had kept Abraham from having to burn his son. But here, there was never a ram. Here people had to give up their sons and their daughters and their siblings and their neighbors, and that was just the way it was. And her husband had done something so awful in trying to defy that she could barely think straight.

After several long seconds, after an eternity, one thought wiggled its way through. There was no ram. If she was supposed to have been burnt, she knew that she must have still sacrificed something. She knew then why she'd never been able to conceive a baby. She knew then that she'd had to give up her own children because her husband wanted to play God.

He touched her again, holding her strong, work-callused hands in his soft ones. "That's how I know, honey. That's how I know nothing will happen. We have to stop this before something happens to all of us. The world's a different place now. People pay attention. If the wrong people know, they'll put us all away. It'll hurt all the people you care about."

Through all her turmoil she didn't even pull her hands away, though she was beginning to feel something toward him that chilled her to the bone. "How did I wake up," she said. "If it was me, and Sam was a substitute, how did I wake up?" Was it possible her husband had done right after all? Why else would God let her wake?

"While your parents led the burning, I put you in my truck and drove you away. You started to wake up again once we were a few miles outside of town. It only happens here, Elise. I don't know why."

Charles dropped her hands and moved past her. He picked up the smaller baby again and handed it to her. "Maybe it'd work for them, too."

He picked up the other twin as well and cradled it, facing her. She didn't think she'd ever seen him holding a baby before, but she'd imagined it enough times that the picture fit smoothly into her head like a key turning into a lock.

“If you thought that would work, why didn’t you end it sooner? Why are you so sure now?” Her voice sounded distant, like her ears were stuffed with cotton.

“God’s plan changes,” he said. “We did what we were supposed to do, but maybe it’s different now. Like Jesus said: ‘Now I give unto you a new law.’”

Elise pictured it then. A new law. If it worked, they could save the babies. If Amber didn’t want them, maybe they could keep them here. She could teach them to do the washing and how to patch up holes in the roof and tend the garden. Charles could teach them how to read his King James Bible and how to hear God’s voice. One of them would marry and stay here, and they would raise their children here. Maybe nothing at all would happen to the town for moving on from the burnings at harvest time.

“Here,” she said, shifting the baby to nestle safely in one arm while extending her other arm for the child Charles held. “Let me see her.”

Charles smiled and handed the child over, and she knew he’d had the same thought she had, that maybe they could begin again. The babies in the crooks of her arms were heavy, but she was strong, and she held them and looked down at their expressionless faces for a while. She wondered how Charles could hide the truth from her for so long. She wondered how her parents had. She wondered if they really knew about Sam Barnes as Charles suggested they had. If they had... well, she didn’t think she’d have any trouble now meeting her daddy’s gaze. She thought that now he would be the one to look away.

“Alright,” she said to Charles. She hoped he didn’t notice the breaking in her voice. “Why don’t you go start up the truck.” The sky was starting to darken, and this

time of year, it got cold quick once the sun was gone. Charles moved past her, planting a kiss on her cheek while he went to warm up the truck.

Once he was gone, she walked out toward the fire. It was a real monster of a bonfire now, hot enough that she was sweating within ten feet of it. But that didn't stop her from walking right up to it, as she had every year since her parents died, and as she had watched them do in all the years before that. Usually she didn't approach it alone. Usually Charles helped her. Usually they all did.

She set the two bundles down, back from the reach of the spitting sparks, and walked forward alone. She would do it alone because everyone else had failed, had faltered, had turned away from what they knew. But she wouldn't. She had suffered all these years because those she trusted had turned away. She would set things right again.

Elise was close enough to smell her own hair singing in the heat. Soon that smell was joined by the ones most familiar to her, all mixing in the cold air: the wood smoke, the wet grass, the citrusy smell of the walnut fruits that had fallen just before the tree did. She almost never felt God's presence in the church building, but she felt it here.

She stayed there for as long as she could. Soon she heard Charles's call from across the dusk, no doubt realizing that something was wrong. If only he'd realized what would happen the first time he tried to change things. If only he understood the truth that she always had.

"You don't get to choose your sacrifices," she yelled to him over the crackling of the wood. She didn't know if he could hear her, since her mouth filled with smoke the second she opened it. She said it for herself, anyway, speaking around her own choking.

“You don’t try to dress up a ram as your son and act like God doesn’t know the difference. In the end, you always pay.”

“Elise,” he called back.

But there was no more time, and he was still too far away to do anything to stop her when she climbed up onto the pile, and the timbers caved in and crumbled beneath her, pulling her down into the flames.

## FOSSILS

Eva leans against the kitchen counter, her arms crossed over her stomach while the wind coming through the window makes her short hair shiver over her ears. The same window tells her that her children are going farther and farther, past the boundary of the yard, into the woods. She could call them back, but the day is sharp and bright, and these are the last weeks of summer.

Stephen sits at the table with his sweet iced tea and his folders of paperwork and looks up to the window mostly obstructed by his wife. “The kids still out there?” he asks, as though they might have suddenly vanished or been abducted by aliens. He is not really worried: fifteen-year-old Amber is old enough to keep an eye on the younger ones.

“Still playing,” she replies. For a moment, it occurs to her that she doesn’t know exactly what they do out there when they disappear into the looming wall of green, what makes them want to play in the water and the mud, why they search for things that crawl and swim. If she ever liked those things, she can’t remember it. She likes the cool draft of the air conditioner and the cushion of the chair she sits in to rest her feet by her husband for a while until they return and she will have to get up again and start dinner. She likes the outside better from here, where the window might as well be a painting on the wall of the crisp blue sky without having to feel the muggy heat it carries or the bugs that are inescapable this time of year or any other number of unpleasant things.

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The kids are in the creek that runs perpendicular to the house through the woods, rushing away from the heart of town like an artery. They struggle to wade through the sludgy, sandy clay that feels like it could suck them in to the center of the world.

They are an army drenched from the waist down, faces slick with muddy war paint. Amber leads them into the deep places of the woods, the hidden places, the caves and inlets and groves that she has taken pains to discover, always needing to find someplace new, someplace significant. Nate is next, her shadow of a younger brother who struggles to keep up on his short legs, who hasn't yet confessed that he lost one of his shoes because he doesn't want to make them turn back. After him is Cassie, the middle child, who likes the feel of moss when she runs her hand over it and the color of the frilly neon fungus that grows on the dead trees, and Amber often has to call for her to hurry when she stops to admire them. Despite the bugs and the heat, they don't spend much time looking out through windows.

Amber checks her phone, careful not to splash it with her strides through the creek. The creek is the quickest way to their destination; the paths through the woods don't lead there. She has described it to Cassie and Nate and finally agreed to show them, though it is difficult to get to, with the creek as their main road and then a trek up a hill covered in thorn bushes and sticky thistle. She puts Nate on her shoulders for this part. One of his feet has a sock on it but no shoe.

"It got stuck in the mud," he says. Amber sighs. Mom and Dad will probably blame her for this, though they have told Nate many times not to wear his new light-up school shoes outside. If they don't find it, they'll have to buy him new ones, and they don't have a lot of extra money for things like that.

"We'll look for it on the way back. You didn't see it float past you, did you, Cass? Cass, come on! Did you see his shoe?"

“Huh?” Cassie looks up startled, still back near the creek bank. She jogs to catch up, tripping a little as she focuses more on whatever is clutched in her fist instead of on the sloping ground before her. She opens it to show Amber. “I found this rock. Look, it has something inside it. A fossil or something.” The stone is as big as her palm, polished and dark, etched with the parallel lines of tiny bones and a spine perhaps something that indicates a tail.

“Cool,” Amber says. But it also makes her shiver a little to think of being trapped in the mud that way, trapped until you die and the mud turns to stone around you. Or maybe the animal died first, long before it could feel trapped at all. “But did you see Nate’s shoe?”

“No,” Cassie replies with a shrug. She closes her hand around the stone.

They continue their climb, and they find the secret place. At first it seems like many of the sandstone gulleys in the area, but then it ends in a circular hollow that soars above them like they are inside a globe, though it doesn’t close over the top. A little waterfall trickles over the top of it, cutting its way through the soft stone and creating a small stream through the gulley, one that rejoins the larger creek they have just left behind at the base of the hill. Moss slicks the smooth sides of the sandstone, and ferns peer out from the cracks in the walls.

Amber checks her phone again while Cassie and Nate explore and splash and hunt for the electric blue tails of skinks and orange speckled salamanders that inhabit the cracks and catacombs of the gulley. They don’t question it when a boy drops down into the gulley, a boy who is older than Amber and who touches her too much until she uses her stern voice to say “Stop it.” But he is nice enough to take the last couple cigarettes

out of his pack and give the empty carton to them so that they can keep the skink they have caught inside it. And they have all long-since agreed that Amber will only show them the secret places she knows if they keep her secrets from Mom and Dad.

\* \* \*

It doesn't matter to Amber that she and the boy both taste of whiskey, that her mind can't seem to focus on details, or that the world seems to be circling the sun a little more noticeably than it had been earlier in the day.

The words "Do you want to?" come out of his lips and into her mind, and she wants to laugh. Laugh at his chivalry, as if they don't both know that this is the only reason he's here.

They go together on newborn-fawn shaking legs down the basement stairs, where even if her parents come home early, there will be plenty of time to hear them. She is glad the floor is carpeted. She is glad she took out the room's only light bulb. She apologizes to the boy that there is no light, but he doesn't seem to care.

Once she is sure he has protection, she lets gravity happen. He crashes into her with the smell of stale alcohol, kissing blindly, digging fingernails into her hips in an effort to get off her jeans. She expects pain, and there is some, but she lets the circling world pull her away from her body until his clumsiness rolls away from her and becomes still.

*Is that all?* She wonders about this thing that everyone at school seems to want. It's useful to know what people want, and why. She still isn't sure she understands the why of this, but it's only the first experiment, after all. Once you know where people want you to go and what they want you to do, you can use it. She learned that as a child,

when she realized her parents would be less harsh with her if she took over the care of her siblings, if she gave her overworked parents a break, if she gave up weekend after weekend to cook grilled cheese dinners and watch TV and make up stories. It made them blind to her, at least selectively. She has found that the same idea can apply to most people.

She needs the boy, so she gave him an idea of what he wanted. She needs the way he says “I love you” and the truck he drives and their saved-up money. She needs him for the way she feels now in this tiny basement in this tiny one-stoplight town. She needs him because she has not found an answer here to a question she is not sure how to phrase. For some reason it makes her picture the stone Cassie found in the woods and which she placed atop the jewelry box on her dresser in a place of importance, like some kind of altar. Though it’s completely dark, she can picture the concrete basement walls around her. She imagines them trapping her like the stone that made the fossil.

The boy still has the cheap fifth of whiskey in his discarded jacket pocket, and she takes another sip. It’s disgusting, but she likes the feeling that comes after.

\* \* \*

Nate wanders the house. He runs his hand over the curtains as he goes by, but there is nothing behind them. He stares hard at corners before he rounds them and at doorways before he passes through them, not wanting to miss anything that might appear. He opens the drawers and cabinets in the kitchen with an expression that is at once confused and indignant, as though he can’t believe everything else would dare to be in its proper place.

He cannot go to Amber's room without Mom and Dad yelling at him to get out again. He doesn't touch anything – he just sits on the suede ottoman and waits, but when he tells them that he's just waiting, Mom's eyes get red and Dad gets a strange lump in his throat like a frog is stuck there. His voice even croaks when he repeats, "Out. Back to your room."

Amber has been gone for two weeks now. Nate has been asked by bald men in uniforms to describe the boy he had seen meet Amber in the woods a few times, the one who always had the square shape of a pack of cigarettes outlined in the back pocket of his jeans and the car keys dangling from his belt loop and who taught him how to skip the smooth, flat rocks over the water. But he doesn't tell them about the skink, which Amber helped him sneak past Mom and Dad, destroying the cigarette carton after they set him up in their old fish tank. Nate now recognizes the police station's number on the caller ID and the way Mom draws her shoulders together when she is trying not to cry.

His parents don't let him go outside, but he does it anyway. He knows that Amber would. She would watch for him. He sneaks out the window at night, crawling barefoot over the sandpapery grit of the roof and then down the maple tree. But he isn't Amber and doesn't dare to go to any of the far places she's shown him alone. He only goes as far as the creek at the boundary of the back yard and lets the cold water lap at his toes a little. The moon is bright, and it paints the creek's surface a smooth silver like it's covered in ice even though it's summertime. There is a little dam of debris where the on the other side of the creek where it bends and the things in its quick flow gets caught. Nestled in the middle of it like a bird's egg is the shoe he lost with Amber just before she went

away. He steps toward it, trying to keep his balance in the current and against the sucking clay.

\* \* \*

With the house on lockdown, Cassie can no longer wander the woods or swim at the pool with her friends. She doesn't mind this. Sometimes she draws the things beyond the silent house: the vibrant fans of the fungi and the Indian flowers and the tiny armored crawdads. She draws her best friend, Katie, and she draws the games they make up when they play. She draws the stone she found in the woods, the one with the fossil, but it seems less interesting on paper than it is when she holds it.

When she gets tired of drawing, she reads. Mom and Dad are so busy and distracted that they don't notice her slipping books off theirs and Amber's shelves that she isn't supposed to read until she's older. It isn't that she wants to be rebellious, but she's already read all of her books, and they won't let her go to the library for new ones.

Mostly she reads them so she doesn't have to listen to what her parents say to the cops or on the phone to the people who call, though she can't help hearing it anyway: "No, we don't know anything yet" and "the cops say they're trying, but they keep talking in circles." They say the same things over and over again, and none of it ever changes anything. Even worse, though, is the silence they sit in when they're done talking and spend hours staring out the window or at the phone, a kind of silence that makes her feel like they wouldn't know she was there even if she read the bad books aloud right in front of them, even if she found the worst cuss words and dirty scenes ever written and yelled them in their faces.

She doesn't do this, of course.

\* \* \*

Amber begins to suspect there are no truly new places, but she keeps looking anyway. She ditches the boy when she meets a lesbian couple on a cross-country road trip who think she looks like someone who needs help. When they talk to her, she makes up stories about her life based on shows she's seen and books she's read. She can barely pass as eighteen, and she doesn't want them to know how young she is and try to make her go home again. They seem to accept that she, like they, just needs a break from life, an adventure, and she supposes that's the truth, anyway.

While they take turns driving and singing along to bands she's never heard of, she spends hours watching the landscapes change from Midwestern cornfields to craggy granite bluffs to endless oceans of grassland to empty desert. When her eyes lose their focus, she can see her own face melting into the landscape, but when she focuses in again, it is the same face as always.

Sometimes she loves what she feels and what she sees the more places they go, and she is glad she left. She knows it won't last forever. That was never the point.

For some reason, she finds herself thinking of the stories she would tell Nate and Cassie when they were younger. Stories make them sound nice. They were lies, really, like the lies she told her to parents and to the boy and to the women who are letting her ride with them. She likes watching others come to believe the things she tells them.

She had told her brother and sister about ghosts and monsters in the woods. She had told them about tree elves and fairies. She had taught them about the trick she had read in a book of fairy tales somewhere that if you wanted to catch a fairy, all you had to do was place a bowl of milk and honey out at night and drape a cobweb over it. The milk

and honey would attract them, and the cobweb would catch them. They'd tried it a few years ago with nothing to show for it but a bowl of curdled milk and Nate's tears when the fairy she promised failed to appear. She isn't sure Nate would remember that. He'd been so small then, perhaps three or so. She wonders if he misses her, and the ridiculous image comes to mind of Nate setting out a big bathtub-sized bowl of milk and honey draped with cobwebs to lure her home.

\* \* \*

Eva is already screaming when she sees Nate's curled-up little body on the edge of the creek bank. He looks sodden, and his pajamas pants are ruddy with clay up to the knees. The screams wake him, and he sits up.

"Amber?" He asks.

Eva throws her arms around him. When she finally stops squeezing him, he can see that she is not crying at all, not even trying not to cry, but her face is very white and has a shadow to it that frightens him. She doesn't seem to notice her bare feet and bare knees are pressing into the muddy bank or that, when she shifts to hold him tight again, the grass leaves its pigment behind on her nightgown.

"I found my shoe," he says, wanting that shadow on her face to go away.

By then Stephen is there. He pulls Nate away a bit, looking him over, checking for injuries. Cassie follows, one of her hands rolled up in a fist as she yells out Nate's name with fear in her voice.

"Are you okay?" Stephen asks. He grips Nate's shoulders. He stares hard into his eyes. "Did you fall in?"

Nate nods. "I slipped. But I got up again."

“What were you doing out here?” Cassie asks. “We thought you were gone.”

“I was waiting,” he says. “I found my shoe. I didn’t want to go inside in case she came back here.”

Those words settle into all of them like stones in their pockets, weighing them down so that they all sit on the creek bank, too tired to go back inside. They breathe in the green smell of the grass and the complicated mud-and-water smell of the creek. They listen to the hum of the insects venturing back out into the morning and to the tumble-rush of the water and to each other’s breathing. For a moment, maybe they all hope to see something that isn’t there.

Cassie opens her hand and looks at the stone with the fossil. It’s very warm from the heat of her skin when she hands it to Nate. He looks it over for a while and then closes his own fist around it until, finally, Eva and Stephen each take a child’s hand and lead them back in to the enclosed house, to the baths and showers they all need now, to the phone that may or may not ring and the door that may or may not open.

Nate stops and looks at Cassie as if to ask permission, and she shrugs. He looks back at the creek and cocks his arm out the way Amber’s boy taught him, holding the stone flat between his fingers. He tosses it out over the water. It skips once, and then another time, before it either gets lodged in the debris or sinks beneath the surface. Even though he watches closely, he isn’t sure which.

## NATIVITY

It helped that the doctor was so kind. He had dark, curly hair and eyes so pale they looked like frosted over windows, hinting at an inner light, but ultimately hiding whatever thoughts and forms moved about inside. He smiled and held her hand, sweaty skin to latex.

The other doctor wasn't unkind, but she had eyes like a shark. She smiled, too, but stopped before she could count how many rows of teeth she had. It was an uncalled for thought, anyway. The doctor wasn't unkind, just focused on her work. High blonde ponytail, belly swollen enough that to sit on the stool in front of her, she was forced to balance it between spread knees. Someone obviously thought she was kind enough. She held metal tools in her hands that shone like fine silverware.

Though he kept her apprised of everything that was going on, the curly haired doctor didn't allow her mind to settle for a moment. He switched from telling her how to arrange herself to radiant reassurance to jokes that made her smile at the time but that she would never be able to remember afterward, no matter how hard she tried. In the same way, she would never remember their names. Had they ever told her?

Either way, they'd been very reassuring. They told her exactly what to do. They told her what she would feel.

Mostly it was the curly haired doctor who talked. He told her how to breathe, and when the pain and discomfort grew, it was his voice she followed. She pulled the rhythm of it into her own blood and forced her heart to accept it because otherwise it would burst; she sank under his voice like the ocean and felt it above her and surrounding her

like the push and pull of the tides, and his grip in her hand said that he would hold her as long as need be, and he would not let her drown.

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When she'd opened the email three months ago, the elation had made her so lightheaded she could hardly yell for Nico.

"What?" He stepped through the doorway, pajamas still sleep-rumpled. In her excitement she'd forgotten he was still asleep – it was only six in the morning, after all. But she was unrepentant.

"I got in. The Peace Corps. Peru. They picked me."

Nico yawned. "Of course they did. I told you they would. You're only incredibly overqualified."

"Well, yeah, but your opinion doesn't exactly carry the same weight as theirs. This means I actually get to go. To *Peru*. As in the Peru of Machu Picchu and the Amazon and actually getting to work in agriculture and not having to live in this shitty apartment and...did I forget anything?"

"Alpacas?"

"Right, alpacas. Thanks."

"So I guess my opinion that you're amazing and we should celebrate doesn't carry any weight, either?"

She considered it for a moment. "I guess that one can count."

He laughed and kissed her cheek and whispered "I'm happy for you, beautiful," in her ear as he picked her up and carried her back to bed for a more thorough congratulations.

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The news had come just before Nico had gotten his acceptance to the civil engineering program at the University of Texas. It almost hurt her eyes to look at the bright horizon after the dull twilight of the past few years. Finally, they were moving on, toward something that could occupy their hours without the soul-crushing monotony of shit-paying, entry-level jobs. Finally there was something called “more” arriving to supplant the “barely enough” they’d been surviving on for almost three years now.

All she knew was that the picture was growing clearer. Not a plan, she told herself, but a vision of the future that she liked to conjure up in her mind, adding detail after detail. A two year stint in Peru that would complement her graduate degree while Nico finished up his degree and launched into a well-paying civil engineering job. They would rejoin, marry, live somewhere closer to nature than this sardine-packed town, though still close enough to civilization that Nico wouldn’t go crazy. It would have to be somewhere they could have land and pets and, if they ever changed their minds, kids. Maybe in Peru. Or Iceland or New Zealand or South Dakota – they were open to the possibilities. So long as she could walk outside without hearing traffic sounds over the night music of crickets and barn owls, somewhere with good soil where she could grow her own food and put down roots and continue the research and sustainability methods she was about to start in Peru.

Nico always made fun of her for her discomfort with cities. He was from Dallas: he had lived around people his whole life and was immune to the noise, the light, the crowds. He loved the bright downtown centers, the arcs of concrete and steel bridges dominating the interruption of rivers, the multilevel interchanges and overpasses like a

huge circulatory system pumping traffic between the city's heart and the outlying extremities. That was how he described it, anyway. She saw little that was beautiful about it. She had been raised in a small town, and though she didn't want to be like the small towners in their ignorance and stagnancy, she had long since accepted that she belonged close to the land, working with it, making sure that she, like so many others, did not forget how much they relied on it.

"We balance each other out," he always told her. "But I guess we both help people live a little easier. I build the cities, you grow the food."

"Don't put it that way," she laughed. "I don't like people."

"What about me?" He held his hand over his heart as though she'd wounded him.

"Most of the time I just pretend you're a big talking dog. You're shaggy enough for it, anyway." She ruffled his dark hair into his eyes to make her point, and then regretted it instantly when he made his by pinning her to the couch and trying to lick her face.

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The intensity of their vision made it easy not to notice the way it sometimes seemed to peel at the edges. They were both making preparations to move in a few short months, and they were both still so busy with work and with Nico finishing up school that it was hard to focus on anything but the cycle of work and sleep and the occasional moments when they actually had time to say more than "good morning" and good night" to each other. But then the uneasiness would tug at her, and it got more and more difficult to ignore.

It would come over her at work in the morning, clutching at her gut while she prepared for the conservation center's upcoming events on the native wildlife so that she had to sink down to the floor behind the big stuffed Kodiak bear until she was sure she would not vomit.

It tore her out of bed at night, chasing sleep away like a well-aimed kick to a frightened dog. She would slip out onto the balcony and smoke the stale Camels that she kept on hand for emergencies until the shaking in her hands stopped.

"Only two years," they told each other, when they made their grand plans, as if the word "only" could change the fact that they were about to become two stones launched through the air, as if it wasn't a little bit stupid to expect those two stones to land in the same place. She looked up at the stars, exhaling smoke into the frigid air, and then realized what she'd thought. Her cigarette was almost out; she crushed the cherry vindictively against the brick wall as if it could extinguish the thought, and went back inside to the forgetfulness of Nico and warmth and sleep.

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The next day, she stopped at the drugstore on the way to work and took the test on her lunch break, staring at the results while ignoring an hour's worth of knocks to the single-stall bathroom.

She left work early that day. Her boss, David, took one look at her and sent her home, and she spent the time until Nico got home on her laptop, and carefully deleted the history before she heard his key turning in the lock.

Since she normally returned home after him, he was surprised to see her watching Netflix in the living room.

“I’m sick,” she explained. “Nothing serious. David said he didn’t want me spreading disease to the wildlife, so he made me leave.”

“Poor baby. You want anything? Soup? Drugs?” He sat down on the edge of the couch to rub her back.

“Thanks. I don’t need anything,” she said. She stood up, and his hand dropped to the couch. “I’m just going to go to bed.”

---

As the weeks passed, the certainty grew in her mind. The only answer. Whatever her thoughts had been before, it had nothing to do with this reality, which had been reduced to the single path opening before her. It was the only path that still allowed her to be herself on the other side, and she walked it without apology, without help.

“I’m going to go see my parents,” she told Nico one evening over dinner. He still hadn’t noticed that she could barely stomach anything these days. She told herself she was grateful for his preoccupation, but then she would imagine gripping the sides of his head with her hands and forcing him to look at her and screaming into his face until her vocal chords gave out.

“You want me to come?” he asked uncertainly.

“Don’t be dumb. You still have class. I just want to tell them in person about Peru and spend some time with them before I go.”

“Okay. When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Oh. That soon? What about work?”

“I took care of it.”

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The whole thing was surprisingly quick.

“This is it,” the doctor had said. “Three seconds.” He squeezed her hand, and she was calm enough in the rhythm and the tide to bear the sharpest, deepest pain yet, a kind of scraping severance, followed by a withdrawal that turned the pain to a duller resonance of itself, exactly three seconds later.

Both doctors had told her how well she’d done, and they praised her for not panicking. And then that was it.

When the nurse helped her to stand, she saw the metal implements on the metal tray, bright with fresh, thick blood just before they took her out to the waiting room. More nurses came, gave her paperwork and crackers, and asked her to describe how she felt.

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When the nurses told her she was free to go, she drove into Ashwood, her hometown, even though it was a good three hours out of her way. She would visit her parents, exactly as she’d told Nico she would. She hadn’t told them she was coming, but they would be delighted to see her, since it had been more than a year since her last visit. They would give her a hot dinner, and they would watch reruns of *CSI* and *Frasier*, and she would sleep in her old, familiar bed.

But first she drove to the edge of town and parked the car and turned it off. The windshield immediately began to fog over with the cold. Pulling on her scarf and her hat and her gloves, she left the car and walked toward the woods where she had played as a child, the woods that had been so much more than just a playground to her. When all the

people she had known seemed to find her a nuisance, an unwanted and tiresome thing, she came here and was welcomed as just another wild thing roaming the wild, ingrown heart of a land otherwise conquered by homes and fields and roads. Here the road became a dead end, and she thought of something she had read somewhere in an old book: “I know nothing about paths – but I do know the machinery of the Universe. Here it is.”

She walked into the trees, and to her, it felt like stepping out among the stars and planets, like the creaking hulls of wooden ships scraping the shores of new worlds, like a familiar face smiling when it sees you, like first contact and homecoming all at once. The branches were sheathed in ice; the snow burned with the dying light. She blinked and remembered all the stories that had been born here when she played here with her friends. “I know nothing about paths,” she thought, thinking of Nico’s obsession with roads and bridges. But when she walked, she knew the way, following nothing discernible, the way sea turtles and butterflies are compelled to remember migratory paths that they, as individuals, could not, if something more did not pull them along ancient tracks of planet somehow mapped in their genes.

The nurses had told her that she should avoid activity, that she should rest, but who was to say that it applied here? Thanks to the cold, she could feel nothing except the wind needling her exposed face. And now was as good a time as any to find magic in the old place before she had to make the long drive home and return to work and Nico and be ready to leave for Peru in the spring.

But she walked on, trying not over analyze, but to be the kid she was all those years ago, when she had come here to explore and discover. Eventually she came to a tree, a familiar old ash. Though there were innumerable ash trees in these parts - the

whole town had been named for them - she knew this one in particular. It was twisted and massive with age, and she and her mom had once named it when they used to come exploring together. What was the name? She reached for the information in her mind, but it flitted away before she could catch it, though she felt she could see it hopping from branch to branch, higher and higher out of reach. Then she remembered.

She was so tired. Her abdomen throbbed and ached. She settled herself down in among the knobbed roots and the snow-blanketed ground and leaned her head back against the trunk. The tree felt warm, and though that should have occurred to her as strange, she curled up next to the trunk, as close as she could get around it, feeling the warmth seep in through her jeans and jacket, soothing the ache and the numbness, thawing her numb face enough that she could feel the tears on her cheeks, the ones that slipped silently from her closed lids even after she had fallen asleep.

When she woke, she saw a face in front of her. It was a deer's face – a fawn's to be precise, though small nubby antlers were already beginning to grow from the top of his head. His fur was white. It touched her face with its nose and then stepped back. She blinked and sat up, her thoughts sluggishly struggling to process. When she looked again, it was a small white-haired boy, not at all dressed for winter – wearing, in fact, nothing at all.

“What are you doing here?” she asked him, or tried to. The words were slurred and stiff.

“Mommy's sick,” he said. He didn't seem to mind the cold. She realized that she didn't mind it either. She felt warm enough.

“Where?”

“Right there.” He pointed to the ground on the other side of her. She turned to look. A very old woman was lying next to her. Was she dead? The snow did not seem to touch her; in fact, everything around her seemed to indicate high summer in the woods. Her white-gray hair was frothed with moss; bizarre, vibrant fungi formed colonies in the likeness of fans and umbrellas across her wax-paper skin; tiny wildflowers studded her like jewels. With everything that grew upon and around her, it was impossible to tell if she was wearing clothes. But in addition to the flora, there were odd, synthetic things: bits of wire, bullet shells, plastic bags. She seemed bound to the earth from the knees down by snaking fingers of roots that thickened as they withdrew from her, growing knobby and vast until they soared upward into the trunk of the ash. The old lady must have been there a very long time...and yet...what pieces of skin she could see were wrinkled, yes, old, yes, but not decayed, not rotted, not sucked clean of all tissue like the skeletons of deer and elk she used to find in the clay creek bed.

“Oh,” she said.

“You’re bleeding,” said the boy.

She looked down and saw that the snow beneath her legs was dotted with red like crushed holly berries. The doctors had told her she might, but it still froze her. Her throat tightened.

“I know. I couldn’t do it,” she said, though she didn’t know why she thought he would understand.

“It’s okay. She knows, and she’s glad you’re here. She says that all mothers have to make some kind of sacrifice.”

“I’m not a mother. I didn’t want to be.”

“You must be. You couldn’t be here otherwise. You wouldn’t have looked for her.”

She turned to look at the old woman again and saw that her eyes were open. They were like no eyes she had ever seen before, though she couldn’t say what about them, exactly, was different. She thought they might be green, like her own eyes.

“It’s her time,” said the boy. “We’ll need our mother.”

She nodded, still holding the old woman’s gaze. It was the heaviest thing she had ever held. She felt the boy grip her right hand, squeezing it encouragingly. The woman’s hand reached up out of the ground with a creaking, shattering sound, and it was black with the fecund earth and glittering with the carapaces of beetles fleeing the sudden light. Vines grew around her fingers, heavy with green scent. She took the offered hand.

She could no longer look at the woman; her head bowed automatically. The ground between her legs was no longer bloody, and then it was no longer covered with snow. It was sprouting with new spring grass. The boy crawled onto her lap and looked at her with a wide, beaming smile and embraced her. With the arm that wasn’t outstretched to maintain its grip on the old woman’s hand, she held him back.

She had always known him, after all. She had known him when she played here as a child, seeking the company of trees and birds and salamanders. She had felt him in her weeks ago. He was her child, all of her children. She had known him when her ancestors had cried out in childbirth, and when Paleolithic hands carved crude rounded effigies of stone in her image, and when women pressed crushed heads of wheat into the first fields. She had known him when she was new beneath the young sun and aching for something to live from the bounty she grew, to nourish it with her many waters and

soothe it in her shade, to let it grow wild and wily and strong – strong enough to love her and then forget her and then kill her. But that would be right: it would only be her first sacrifice coming home again.

The tree roots that had been clinging to the last of the old woman let her go, and she was gone, and the snow began to fall and fill the depression she left behind. The tree roots stretched to embrace the woman who leaned against their host tree, a young snowy buck cradled in her lap, fungi and flowers sprouting tentative heads over her skin and hair with no regard for the surrounding winter.

The roots finished growing around her, and she felt them as she felt her own bones and veins, and she felt her own heart beating in the burning core of the earth. Her last movement was to touch the fawn curled up in her lap, reassuring herself of his warm life.

Her eyes closed, and for a very long time, she was still.

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