

# **The Modern Myth**

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## **The Modern Myth: The Endurance of Fairy Tales in Creative Writing**

My father keeps bookshelves throughout our house, filled with anything from the latest Piers Anthony paperback to *Gulliver's Travels*. Though I was not allowed to watch PG-13 movies alone until I was fifteen or older, my parents never restricted the books I could read. As a curious seven-year-old, the lack of restriction allowed me to consume novels with subject matter I did not entirely comprehend – like *Cider House Rules*, *Deerskin*, and any number of others. Included in this array were what I called the color fairy books, the anthologies by Andrew Lang that were identified by a color named in the title and the cover of the book. The stories in Andrew Lang's collection were different from what I saw on my VHS collection of Disney movies. In the color fairy books, good did not always conquer evil, and even when it did, the punishments meted out were sometimes overblown. Snow White's evil queen was forced to dance on heated iron shoes, Rumpelstilzkin split in half after the miller's daughter guessed his name – these and more showed how extreme punishments could be.

Only a few years later, I realized that the fairy tales I read and watched were interwoven with modern stories. In the fifth grade I used this knowledge to design a social studies project tracing a few media, literary, and cultural occurrences to their antecedents in ancient myth. I did not realize it as a ten-year-old, but I had stumbled on an ongoing cultural thread that many recognized before me. Folklore, in whatever form, is perdurable. It reaches from different cultures, extinct and extant, to influence the stories we create today.

Thus, as a junior at Washington and Lee University, I decided I would try my hand at fairy tale canon. As an honors thesis student, I planned to write fairy tales set in the contemporary world, deeply informed by the stories of princesses and monsters and ghosts.

This endeavor – to write stories that repurposed folklore – was not spawned independent of other authors. Even before delving into the mountain of literature about folklore itself, other anthologies of short stories inspired me to write my own work. In particular, James Joyce’s *Dubliners* and Roddy Doyle’s *The Deportees and Other Stories*, two texts containing stories unique to the Irish experience, provided me with the concept of a narrow framework for a set of stories. Both Doyle’s and Joyce’s anthologies follow different characters in Ireland and focus on the particular environments and time periods and how they impact the characters. These place-based series of stories influenced me to find my own connective element. Ireland might have been an obvious choice, as it had already imprinted on me after only one spring there, but I did not want to limit myself to a location. I wanted to limit myself to a theme.

I looked at my own interests, the literature I was most interested in, and I rediscovered there my interest in mythology and folklore. My constantly expanding young adult selection contained books such as Meg Cabot’s *Abandon* series, a trilogy retelling the Persephone myth; *The Mortal Instruments* series and its companions by author Cassandra Clare, which includes a variety of mythological references and characters, particularly those in modern monotheistic religions; urban fairy tales such as *Tithe* by Holly Black; and many other texts putting new spins on fairy tale, myth, or other forms of children’s literature. Outside of the YA genre, Neil Gaiman, Tanith Lee, Terri Windling, and many others cluttered my shelf, offering literature sometimes directed to an older audience but just as steeped in lore. I knew mine would not be the first steps on this path; others more prolific and educated on myth had reimagined every possible story.

With fairy tales in mind, I stepped sideways into realistic fiction and memoir. I read anthologies: some assigned, such as the 2010 edition of the Pen/O. Henry Prize Stories, some out

of interest, such as *Modern American Memoir*, and other collections of contemporary writers for these reasons. I took a detour to read the entirety of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* – a novel that successfully wove six stories in different time periods together into one text – and barely talked myself out of attempting to emulate his work, but not so much that I did not weave at least minor, imperceptible parts of my own stories together. I came back to fairy tale to read modern renditions of stories from around the world in *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me* and to consume fairy tale poems in the form of *The Poets' Grimm*. The ways in which authors, contemporary and otherwise, developed their own stories influenced the strategies I decided to use to manipulate mine.

Firmly convinced that reimagining fairy tales was the path I wanted to take for my thesis, I turned from literature to analysis. Many have approached myth as a topic of scholarly analysis and touched upon the parallel structures seen in the stories of different cultures, the hero archetype, the concept of magic items, the usage of myth as warning or admonition, amongst many other methods of study. Prominent among these scholars are Bruno Bettelheim and Joseph Campbell. Campbell argues that myth is universal and varies little between culture, social group, or era (*The Power of Myth*), while Bettelheim believes that fairy tales allow children to grapple with real life issues in symbolic form. Without myth, the vagaries of life might become too much for them to bear (*The Uses of Enchantment*). Campbell feels myth portrays universal truths about different cultures, while Bettelheim focuses on the influence these stories have on children and ways in which they can be used to help children evolve socially.

However, the majority of researchers and anthropologists can agree that myths make an appearance in most world cultures, universal, socially involved, or otherwise. This project allowed me to read a variety of myths, fairy tales, urban legends, and other forms of lore with

one goal in mind: to discover stories that I, in turn, could recreate in my own image. Japanese ghost stories were as inspiring to me as German and Italian fairy tales; Greek myth as fascinating as the decades of princess movies produced by Disney. Each story I encountered either recognized an antecedent in another story or oral tradition. However, this legacy of retelling made it easier for me to forge my own path into folklore.

I wanted to retell stories, free from the constraints of magic: instead, I planned to write all my entire fairy tales rooted firmly in the modern world. I wanted to show how unfair it was when Diana transformed Actaeon for accidentally stumbling on her glade, or how even something lost, like Penta's missing hands, can be replaced, though not always in the same way. I selected the stories I used without seeking a common denominator. Yet in a long project like this, motifs rise to the surface. By the time I had finished solid drafts of my first three pieces, it was obvious that the main characters of my stories had something in common: they all were oppressed in some way.

In order to better understand and develop this theme, I turned to a collection of stories by Alice Munro. Munro is known for the way she develops oppressed female characters in a realistic and descriptive manner, which led me to read stories from her collection *Runaway*. The depictions of women in Munro's stories helped as I wrote my next few stories and as I edited the ones already drafted.

Throughout this process, I also turned to television and movies that had taken fairy tales and redeveloped them. Two television series began in 2011 that took different stances on the retelling of fairy tales. The first, *Grimm*, takes its material primarily from the fairy tales written by the Brothers Grimm. The show appears as a police procedural with a supernatural twist; the main character operates both as a human officer and as a descendant of a long line of "Grimms,"

or those with the power to see monsters. Each episode operates primarily under the monster of the week format, though sometimes the monsters turn out to be friends in disguise.

*Once Upon a Time* takes a lighter stance, focusing its plot around the daughter of Snow White. Raised in the human world, she is lured to the town of Storybrooke when her son (whom she gave up for adoption as a baby) finds her and tells her the inhabitants are all fairy tale characters. Though she at first does not believe, she is convinced over time and works to save the characters from the curse that traps them in the human world.

Other television shows, such as *Lost Girl* and *Being Human*, also focus on mythic creatures trying to adapt to life in the human world. Along with these series, movies ranging from comedies to tragedies to slasher films have been produced in the past couple of years that have either riffed off fairy tales or followed their stories faithfully. Examples include *Mirror, Mirror* (2012), *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* (2013), *Jack the Giant Slayer* (2013), and many more. Disney, the producer of many classic films based on fairy tales, has also continued to produce new fairy tale princess movies, such as *Brave* (2012), *Tangled* (2010), and *Frozen* (2013).

Yet the vast majority of movies still approach fairy tales from a mystic angle rather than retelling them sans magic. Even Helen Oyeyemi, author of several novels that focus on fairy tales as contemporary stories, drifts into the fantastical at times. Her recent novel, *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014), retells the Snow White story from a striking angle, while also engaging in race and cultural issues. Though primarily void of magic, moments where doppelgangers play tricks on the characters and mirrors refuse to show their faces toy with the mystical in our own world.

Despite the differences in my approach and Oyeyemi's, her work did inspire me to weave minor pieces of different fairy tales into the stories I wrote. Every moment of her book was so



carefully worked, so delicately woven into the piece as a whole, that the reader sees many fairy tales outside of Snow White, and yet may never realize it. Characters are also aware of the roles they play: Boy, the primary narrator, never forgets her responsibilities as the evil stepmother.

All these stories and shows and novels helped me as I wrote my own pieces. Along with materials reflective of modern fairy tales, I also read texts about the process of writing. For example, John Dufresne's book, *The Lie That Tells a Truth*, served as a source of writing prompts and support during the creative process. His emphasis on characterization influenced the way I developed my own characters. It also affected the choices I made regarding stories.

Before the term began, I knew I wanted to write a version of the story of Actaeon. This Greek myth always fascinated me because of the severity of the punishment the titular character receives, especially when considering the crime. When taking a Latin course my sophomore year, I even had an opportunity to translate parts of the *Metamorphoses*, the primary version of the story I used to write my own rendition. I wrote an analytical paper on the fairness of Actaeon's punishment for the course's final. Comparing the Latin and English texts side by side gave me valuable insight in to the extremity of his situation.

With that in mind, "Release the Hounds" moved from an ancient forest and into the modern realm of high school. The main character, Darby, is no longer a hunter who stumbles upon a bathing goddess; instead, she is a transfer student who catches the queen of the popular crowd snorting pills at a party. Instead of transforming her into a stag to be hunted, the senior instead ruins Darby's reputation and makes it impossible to find her niche in the new school.

The primary challenge for this story was making Darby a likeable character. This is not because she possesses bad qualities; instead, she becomes too much a victim of circumstances. Unable to defend herself when assailed on all sides, she initially was passive in her defeat. As

the story underwent revisions, she began to find more places to turn to for help. Her resilience makes it all the more tragic when there is nowhere else to go.

Next, I turned to classical German stories for my second piece. To write a set of short stories steeped in fairy tale without at least one Grimm acknowledgment might imply a slight to my Western upbringing. However, I wanted to avoid the more popular pieces, so I chose instead to use the “Snow White and Rose Red,” a story by the Grimm Brothers in the late 1800s. This material had its source in an earlier story by Caroline Stahl, known as “The Ungrateful Dwarf.” In both versions, the story focuses on two sisters and a dwarf they persist in helping. The dwarf is churlish and is ultimately killed by a bear. However, in the Grimm version, the bear that the sisters befriend is a prince in disguise.

In my retelling, the bear is a friendly neighborhood man with an irrepressible crush on the Rose Red character, though she does not feel the same. The dwarf becomes a real estate lawyer who swindles money from people ignorant of the legality. Though the bear character eventually helps save the Rose Red character and her family from destitution, the ensuing relationship between the bear and the Rose Red characters forms not without reservation on Rose Red’s part. The idealistic happy ending no longer seems as perfect when in reality, one of the characters is not as interested as the other.

After covering a Greek myth and a German fairy tale, I delved into the myths of a different European country to find the story of “Penta of the Chopped Off Hands.” Part of Giamattista Basile’s *Pentamerone*, written in 1634, the Penta story follows a young woman who has her hands removed to avoid marrying her own brother. She eventually finds love and her hands are restored, but only after suffering exile from multiple kingdoms.

My Penta, a cancer survivor named Lutie, loses her voice instead of her hands. However, when one is an opera singer, one's voice is almost as essential as one's hands. Lutie's loss turns her into a recluse, a woman unable to interact with family or to function in her day to day life. It is only after she finds a new method for participating in music, that of a pianist and voice instructor, that she is able to move on, with or without a clean bill of health.

After three stories of conventional length and development, I wanted to change my methods for the fourth. I wanted to show that the process could work in a variety of literary genres instead of just short story. I became interested in the idea of flash fiction after attending a few readings in Lexington and hearing members of the community read wonderful, concise pieces. I acquired an anthology edited by Robert Shapard and James Thomas: *New Sudden Fiction*. After realizing flash/sudden/short short fiction could exist in any length less than one thousand words (give or take, depending on the definition you are following), I decided to do a whole sequence of them. It was easy to choose a theme for this sequence. I had been avoiding Disney and the theatrical retellings the company had produced, but I decided the surplus of princesses would be ideal for developing this sequence. I did not limit myself to the Disney versions of the stories, however. Many of these pieces more closely resemble versions found in oral tradition or early literature than the corresponding animated movie. I also started this sequence after the realization that my stories had developed their own motif: thus, each short continues the theme of featuring women in oppression, whether by themselves, a loved one, or something else altogether.

But because I now recognized this motif, I decided to once again detour, just a little. Instead of writing my first short short from a woman's perspective, I instead took the perspective of the prince character. In this Cinderella story, the prince is something of a trust-fund baby with

an eye for the Hispanic maid in the blue dress. While not overtly oppressive, the narrator is already in a position where he holds power over this woman. He uses this power to manipulate the Cinderella character's life to suit his own purposes, even if it appears harmless.

The second story, featuring a young girl disguising herself as a boy, follows the traditional Chinese tale of Mulan. While the Disney movie is one of my favorites, the strongest influence to this story comes from a memoir by Maxine Hong Kingston. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston retells the Mulan story from her childhood in a way that echoes her own imagined childhood experience, as well as that of her mother's. While fantastical and ultimately impossible, Kingston's Mulan exists as a protector for her people. In a similar way, my Mulan character joins a gang in order to draw attention away from her younger, frailer brother. She gives up much to follow this path, but she feels protecting her sibling is of more value than her own future success.

Sleeping Beauty developed out of an Italian version by Giambattista Basile. In his tale, the sleeping princess is not awakened by a kiss. The prince who sees her rapes her and leaves, and it is only after she has borne twins that she is finally able to wake. The inverse occurs in my own tale. Arianna remains awake as her boyfriend rapes her, though she wishes for a sleep to keep her from her nightmares.

After examining three characters who were oppressed by people or circumstances beyond them, I turned to a character who is oppressed instead by her age. Rapunzel becomes a girl grounded in her bedroom after attempting to rebel against her mother's rules. The prince becomes a well-intentioned boy who asks too much too quickly, leading the Rapunzel character to run away from home. Though the story does not follow the characters after Rapunzel sneaks out, it can be assumed that the lives of two run-aways are harder than expected.

The “Beauty and the Beast” story reflects the Disney story while also returning to older versions, where the captive element was more clearly expressed. In my story, Beauty is trapped in an emotionally and physically abusive relationship, but is unable to leave or resist, due to the debilitating nature of abuse. Even worse, her boyfriend convinces her to have a child, even though she realizes that the child will be forced to live in the same hellish environment.

The last short short of the sequence focuses on the Snow White story, but turns the tale by introducing the seven dwarves as younger siblings Snow White becomes responsible for, and the charming prince as the boy who gets Snow White pregnant before she’s even had a chance to explore the world on her own. Trapped between her siblings and her own pregnancy, Snow White realizes she may not ever be able to escape her bonds.

The fifth story does not follow a living woman, instead focusing on a narrator haunted by a dead friend. The haunting is not a supernatural one; the narrator projects his own guilt into the form of the woman. The conversations he has with her are ultimately internal. However, much of the story reflects Japanese folklore. It especially focuses on American perceptions of Japanese ghosts. In order to develop this story, I turned to *Myths and Legends of Japan*, a collection of tales from the island country collected by F. Hadland Davis. The stories supplement the psychology of the narrator, and offer an explanation for his belief in the supernatural. I also read pieces from *Modern American Memoir*, edited by Annie Dillard and Cort Conley, in order to create a narrative voice that reflected a piece of memoir rather than short story.

Altogether, the five pieces I created for this project reflect a yearlong journey into fairy tale and folklore. I have met witches and anthropomorphized bears on this journey, and discussed life and men with princesses and ladies of note. This project has been like taking the

outline of old stories and coloring outside the lines. There is a flexibility in these stories that allows such imagining, and an endless number of ways to refresh old tales. This project has put me in conversation with the past, with the writers who took the oral traditions of their youth and recorded them for mine, and it has allowed me to engage in a dialogue I hope I have responded to intelligently. There are no boundaries in fairy tales, no lines that cannot be crossed. Instead, a whole realm exists to be explored. Who is to say I will stop here?

### Release the Hounds

The party was already in full swing when Brendan and Darby pulled up in a beat-up Sedan. Gravel crunched beneath the tires as he settled the car into a narrow slot between a black truck and a Volkswagen. Brendan shifted gears and pulled the key from the ignition, dropping it into the well between the seats.

“No reason to lock the doors out here. Besides, we won’t be driving home tonight.” One hand, callused from years of lifting weights, tucked a strand of hair behind his sister’s ear. “Cardinal rule of drinking: never drink and drive. It’s more trouble than it’s worth, and it’ll only lead to grief. Besides, it’s a warm night. My crew’s slept out in the barn plenty of times before. The woods are safe around here.”

Darby looked at her feet.

“Okay. But you’re sure Mom won’t mind? She didn’t seem happy earlier. Did she really believe us when we said we wouldn’t drink?”

“She doesn’t care, Darbs. She was fine. You’re just nervous.” Brendan smiled at his sister. “This is your first big high school party. This was totally Mom’s scene when she was in high school. Dionysus’s lady, they called her.” He reached behind his seat to grab his jacket. “Come on, Darby. It’s just a few drinks. We’re far from town so we won’t get caught, we take care of each other, and we all go home safely in the morning. No harm done. This is literally the best first drinking experience anyone could ever have.”

“Maybe I don’t want to drink.” Darby muttered.

“You’ll change your mind pretty quickly.” Brendan grinned. “Plus, it’s not like we do the hard stuff. My crew sticks to beer, maybe liquor if we’re looking to get there faster. No pills or needles. We’re pretty middle-aged.”

Darby furrowed her brow.

“Okay. If you say it’s alright, then I trust you, Brendan.” She acquiesced. The door pushed open easily and she stepped onto the gravel. She circled the car as he exited. A small farmhouse sat in the shadows of the oak trees, but there were no lights on inside. Closing her eyes, she could hear the owls hooting in the trees.

The click as the trunk opening pulled Darby back around to Brendan’s side. The case of beer he handed to her was heavy and damp from condensation.

“Hey, one more thing,” she began. Brendan paused, shoulders hunched over as he lifted another case of beer.

“Will they like me?” Darby’s voice quavered. “You’ve known them for ages. I’m just meeting them tonight. This is like when you came and visited Dad while I was living there and my friends thought you were a jerk even though I told them you weren’t. I don’t want your friends to think I’m a jerk.” The words poured from her mouth like a faucet stuck on open.

“Ah. Darbs.” Brendan smiled. “You’re my kid sister. They’ll love you.” He nodded at the case she was holding. “You’re also walking in with the booze. What’s not to like?”

She giggled, pulling the case of beer closer to her body.

“Let’s go, then.” The confidence in her voice felt forced, but she wasn’t going to back out now. “Brendan?”

“Yeah?” He was looking to the party now, his attention focused away from his sister.

“I’m glad I moved back in with Mom and you.”

“Me too, Darbs.”

The barn sat in the middle of a sprawling green field, a quarter mile away from the farmhouse and gravel lot where the Sedan was parked. Darby’s upper arms were tired from



carrying the case by the time they reached the wooden structure. The main doors were open, haloed by a light that pulsed with the beat of the music.

“Here goes nothing,” Brendan remarked as he led his sister into the haze.

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Snores and a soft thumping: these sounds pulled Darby back into awareness. As she twisted her body onto its side, she was halted by a dull pounding in her head. It felt as though someone had stuffed her brain with cotton and set the whole thing on fire.

The night came back to her in fuzzy pieces, less quickly than she might have liked. Brendan had introduced her to a few people before disappearing with his girlfriend. Darby had latched onto Brendan’s friend, James, someone that she had met during the short month she had been living with her mom. Everyone else felt like a stranger. James had taught her some game involving cups of beer and a ping pong ball.

That must be where the headache had come from. Losing. A lot.

The straw crunched beneath her as she rolled back onto her stomach. There were a few other bodies in the loft, sprawled apart or tangled together, but none were close enough for Darby to disturb. Crushed beer cans littered the planks not covered by sleeping teenagers. She saw James curled around a half-empty case and grinned. He looked cute in his rumpled state.

She resettled and glanced over the edge of the loft, looking for her brother. It might make him angry to wake him at this hour – she guessed five or six by the amount of light filtering through the slats in the roof – but she desperately needed to use the bathroom, and she really wanted to sleep off her headache in her own bed.

The soft thumping ceased, and Darby noted its absence. It was then she saw a girl directly below her, working over a hardware table. The girl was slender and garbed in a black

shift dress. Sandals were positioned next to the table and the girl stood barefoot in straw, blood red toenails standing out against the gold strands. Darby squinted, trying to make out the girl's face. An image from the night before flashed in her mind: girls in shift dresses and cowboy boots. The one in the sandals had been particularly nice to her. Dana was her name. The barn and much of the wilderness around it belonged to her family.

Dana picked up an orange bottle that had been obscured from Darby's sight. She carefully rolled a small white pill onto the hardware table. The thumping sound began again.

Darby was surprised by how mechanical the process appeared. From her vantage point in the loft, she watched as Dana ground the pill into a fine powder. With a credit card she pulled from her black clutch, she pressed the powder into an even line. Using a straw leftover from the evening before, Dana inhaled the pulverized pill in a swift movement. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes. A smile curled her lips.

A few stray pieces of straw dug into Darby's jean-clad thigh. As she reached a hand back to scratch her leg, some of the straw dislodged and drifted to the barn floor. One bent strand landed on Dana's bare shoulder.

Her eyes opened and she looked upward to where Darby perched. Dana began to pack up her tools carefully, the orange bottle of pills disappearing back into her purse.

"Come down, please." She called, her voice even. "I'd like to talk to you."

A thick sense of dread pooled in Darby's stomach, but there was nowhere to hide. She forced herself to stand and brush the straw from her shirt. She descended the ladder slowly. By the time she reached the ground, the only trace of Dana's illicit activity was a light dusting of silver in the shadow of the straw. It looked a little like a sliver of moonlight.

“You’re Brendan’s kid sister?” Dana asked. “You look like him. Same blue eyes.” She leaned against the worktable. “What’d he say your name is? Darla?”

“Darby,” Darby whispered, trying her best to look anywhere but Dana’s sharp blue eyes.

“Darby. Cute name.” The calm in Dana’s voice convinced Darby to look at her. It was a mistake. Dana’s eyes were narrowed and her lips downturned in a scowl. “A freshman. Kind of a shame. With a brother like Brendan, you could have had it made. He’ll be so disappointed.”

“What?” Darby squeaked.

“Don’t mention this to anyone; it’d be a huge tarnish on my reputation,” Dana remarked. “Understand?”

Darby nodded frantically.

“Good. Go find your brother. Get the hell out of my barn.”

Dana’s half-moon earrings jingled as she bent to pick up her shoes. Releasing Darby and spinning away, she exited the barn with her bag grasped tightly by her side. Darby rubbed her jaw and stared after her. After a moment, she began her search through the bodies for her brother.

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Darby spent Sunday locked in her room, clutching her stuffed giraffe – a birthday present from Brendan when she was five – and wondering if she should share what she had seen with her brother. Before, she had never questioned what she could or could not tell him, but Dana was his friend. Living in separate homes had made candidness easy. There had never been a possibility of stepping on each other’s toes.

She just wished she could remember more about the night, about what she had drank and whom she had spoken to and what games they'd played. As Sunday progressed, seeing Dana crush and snort pills seemed more and more like a beer-addled dream.

Brendan came to find her around dinnertime.

"Darbs," he called through her door, "Mom made pizza. It's her night before a new school year tradition. Come eat with us!"

Darby vacillated between joining them and pretending everything was normal or remaining in bed.

"I don't feel well," she called, doing her best to sound weak.

"You're just hungover! Food will make you feel better." He twisted the knob, but Darby had locked the door. "Hey. What's up, Darby?" His voice softened.

"The party..." Darby began ready to explain what she had seen, "the party was just crazier than I expected." She held her breath. She had chickened out, but maybe Brendan would ask her to elaborate.

Silence came from the other side of the door.

"Darby... you didn't hook up with anyone, did you?" Brendan finally asked, his voice so muffled by the door that Darby wasn't sure she understood at first. "Because it was pretty much all seniors, and that will look really, really bad when you start school tomorrow. People our age are vicious."

Darby climbed out of bed and untwisted the lock.

"Of course not!" She snapped as she yanked open the door. "Who do you think I am?"

Brendan hesitated.

“Well, that is why you moved here. To get away from the rumors about you...”

Brendan shrugged.

“Rumors,” she responded firmly. No reason to let him know his doubt hurt her.

Brendan grinned.

“Good! Now come to dinner.”

She laughed and followed him to the kitchen, feeling better than she had all day.

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Monday morning brought some of Darby’s anxiety back, but she wrote it off as first day nerves. Her mother woke her up at the crack of dawn to get ready.

“First day of high school, Darby!” She declared cheerfully. “Are you excited?”

Darby, somewhat well-rested, decided Dana’s threats should not keep her from having a good day.

“Yep!”

With a dress tugged on and her hair straightened perfectly, Darby felt ready for anything. She slung her backpack over her shoulder and went to the kitchen to grab breakfast. There her brother sat, looking thoughtfully at his cellphone.

“I’m ready, Brendan.” Darby said. Startled, he straightened from his hunch.

“Ah. Well, let’s go then, I guess.” His words seemed stunted. Darby tried to ignore the chill bumps that raced across her skin. Surely he was only unhappy with the early hour, not with her. Not with anything to do with Dana. The rapport they typically shared felt out of her grasp suddenly. Why had he been looking at his phone?

The car ride was silent. Darby fought with herself, desperate to tell her brother about what she had seen. She waited for him to speak, to provide her with an opening. But he

remained quiet, his eyes locked on the road. Normally, Brendan would have teased Darby, reassured her that her first day of high school was not going to be as terrible as she expected. It felt like snakes had nested in her stomach, twisting and turning over one another.

“Brendan,” she finally interjected, “I’m nervous.” It hurt to tell him her feelings. They were so attuned to one another; she never previously had to let him know how she felt.

“Yeah, well, you should be.” He retorted as they pulled into the school parking lot. Stunned, Darby let him exit the car without another word.

The high school was small, two hundred students rounding out each of the four years. Darby immediately felt the familiarity in the environment, but it was not directed toward her. Instead, she watched as friends exclaimed as they saw each other for the first time since June, listened to locker doors slam, and observed teachers greeting students in the hall. She found her own locker in silence, a tiny cream-colored piece of metal covering a narrow, rectangular opening. She did not have anything to put in it quite yet, but it made her feel better to have one point of reference in her new school.

She chatted with a few students in her homeroom, doing her best to make friends even with the churning in her stomach. She missed the group of people she had gone to middle school with, now halfway across the state and out of touch. The other freshmen were nice enough, some as nervous as her. As her class on classical history ended, she felt more confident. Clearly Brendan’s attitude that morning had been random, not the result of Darby’s encounter with Dana. She resolved to find him at lunch and act as though nothing had happened. After all, she had kept her word. She had not told him or anyone else what she had seen Dana doing.

She went through the lunch line with a group of other freshman, but she broke apart before they sat down. She spotted her brother in a group of his friends. Crossing the crowded cafeteria, she squeezed in at the end of the table.

Someone snickered as Darby took her seat. The nervousness that had left in the normalcy of the morning returned to her stomach, but she tried her best to keep it from her face.

“Darby!” Dana’s voice. Darby shuddered internally, but she forced a smile across her face and looked over. The same half-moon earrings from the party dangled from Dana’s ears. Though she smiled back at Darby, her eyes were flinty. “I got you those things you were asking me about.” Dana leaned forward conspiratorially. “Yanno, the things to keep you safe. So you don’t get pregnant.”

Darby wondered if she looked as confused as she felt.

“I got you condoms, Darby!” Dana slid a brown paper bag across the table. “I know you were concerned after you slept with James the other night. You really shouldn’t let a guy convince you it feels better without one. Getting knocked up would pretty much ruin your life.”

Her face was burning as she opened the paper bag. She could hear her heartbeat in her ears, and tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. Foiled squares peeked out from the opening.

“Excuse me?” She stuttered.

“I know you confided in me, Darbs, but Jamie here doesn’t keep secrets very well. Everyone knows you slept with him at my party on Saturday. Way to start out high school with a bang.” Darby glanced at James, hoping he would deny the statement, but he simply stared back at her with a grin stretched across his face.

“I just can’t keep a secret, sweetie.” He winked at her.

“But... that didn’t happen!” Darby protested.

“No need to deny it, Darby.” Dana continued. “We all know what a huge slut you are now.”

“It’s not true!” Darby looked wildly about the table. Brendan wouldn’t meet her eyes. “Why are you telling lies? You’re the one I caught snorting pills!”

Dana laughed, her voice high and cold.

“Please. Don’t tell stories just because you got found out. Being a slut is totally okay. All the guys will just *love* you.”

Darby could not stop the tears. She turned to her brother, looking for a friendly face.

“Brendan. Please.” She begged. Without looking at her, he replied.

“James told me all about it. Why would he lie, Darby? Especially after everything that went down at your old school. Mom told me your friends said you were sleeping with a different guy every week.”

With a strangled cry, Darby ran out of the lunchroom. Dana’s laugh followed her down the hall.

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Brendan did not speak to Darby for the rest of the day. The drive home was silent. When they pulled into the driveway, he flung open the car door and stormed off into the house. Darby followed, determined to talk to him, to share her side of the story.

“Brendan,” she beseeched, wriggling her way into his bedroom before he could shut the door. “Talk to me. I wasn’t like that at my old school, and I didn’t do what Dana said I did. She’s just saying that because I caught her snorting pills.”

Brendan did not glance at Darby as he pulled out his homework and started reading.



“Brendan, I promise. Why don’t you believe me? You know I wouldn’t do anything like that.”

He pulled out his phone silently a fiddled with it for a minute, before turning it so Darby could see. A picture of James and Darby, playing beer pong.

“So? We played that game for hours. Everyone played,” she protested.

He pressed an arrow on his phone and the picture changed.

James and Darby, his hand on her waist, his lips close to her ear.

“These don’t prove anything,” Darby cried. “It didn’t happen.”

“I’ve known Dana and James for years, Darby.” Brendan finally broke his silence.

“You’ve known me my whole life.”

“Yeah, well, we’ve lived apart. I trust my friends. I thought I trusted you.” Brendan turned off his phone and turned back to his backpack. “Please get out of my room so I can study.”

Darby left without another word. The rolling chair at her desk creaked as she flung herself on it. She blinked back tears and wrested her math book out of her backpack. She hoped that by throwing herself in her homework she could forget all about what had happened. She fell asleep as she was working on a set for geometry.

When she got up the next morning, she dreaded the car ride with her brother. However, he was gone when she went downstairs. Her mother waited at the kitchen table.

“Brendan left for school already. He said he had a morning commitment.” Her mother inspected Darby’s haggard appearance. “Is everything okay with you two? He asked if I could drive you.”

Darby thought about explaining everything to her mother, but years of living with her father had conditioned her to keeping personal problems to herself. Her father had not really thought Darby's issues were important. After all, when the rumors had started up at her old school, he had sent her to her mother rather than dealing with them personally.

Darby shook her head.

"We're fine. Let's just go to school, Mom."

Homeroom seemed normal enough when Darby arrived, the students chatting cheerfully in the rickety school desks. Darby dropped her bags to the floor next to an isolated seat. She wanted to sort out her feelings before approaching anyone.

Amanda, another freshman that Darby had seen sitting near Dana yesterday, entered the room. Darby steeled herself and went over to talk to her.

"Amanda." She was not sure what to say next when the girl looked up at her, a blank expression on her face. "Are you friends with Dana?"

"Our moms play tennis together," Amanda replied.

"Is she a... nice person?" Darby bit her lip.

"Super nice. She got me this bracelet for my birthday." Amanda waved her wrist, a bow-and-arrow charm dangling off the silver band. "She kind of rules this school, too. She throws all the best parties. But you would know that, wouldn't you?"

Darby shook her head.

"I don't know what you've heard, but it's not true."

"I only heard what everyone's saying. That you're trying to sleep your way to the top of the food chain, and you asked Dana to point out the fastest way to do it."

“That’s not true!” Darby struggled to hold back tears. “I saw Dana snorting pills. She made me promise not to tell anyone or she’d ruin my life. I didn’t tell anyone. So why is she doing this?”

Amanda shrugged.

“Well, you’re telling people now. But I don’t think you’re telling the truth. It sucks that Dana outed you as a slut, but seriously Darby, grow up. Lying about someone else is only going to make your image worse.” Amanda turned to face the chalkboard, ending the conversation.

Darby returned to her own seat, stunned. She had no idea what to do.

Classes where Darby had felt safe were no longer a haven: wherever Darby went, her peers laughed and whispered derogatory names when her back was turned. It felt like a pack of dogs chased her, nipping all day at her heels. A sophomore girl who had sat with her through three classes yesterday made a point to move across the room in each of the courses. By the fourth period of the day she was feeling so sick she skipped class and went to hide in the art classroom. Art had been her favorite class in middle school, and several of the paintings she had done hung in her mother’s kitchen. She talked to the teacher about transferring into the course, but after counting the number of students already in the class, he told Darby no. It took everything Darby had to keep from crying as she left the classroom. By the time lunch arrived, she was not sure she was going to make it through the day.

She went to the nurse’s office, hoping she could wait out the lunch period there. She sat down on one of the plastic cots, the smell of antiseptic floating up from the seat. A man walked by briskly. He paused a few feet away from her, turned, and looked her up and down.

“Name?” He asked tersely.

“Darby White,” she replied. “I have a stomachache.”

He grabbed a thermometer out of a box on the wall and inserted a plastic cap on the metal piece.

“This goes in your ear,” he remarked, gesturing for her to move her hair. She lifted it off her neck, tilting her head. He inserted the thermometer in her ear and glanced at the watch on his wrist. After a moment, the thermometer beeped.

“You don’t have a fever. Go get some food and stay in class. Come back if you puke.”

“Wait,” Darby cried as he started to walk away. “Can’t I just stay here?”

He shook his head.

“You’re a freshman, right? I don’t care about your issues or your ‘drama’ or anything else that goes on in your life. If you’re throwing up or have a fever, you can stay here.

Otherwise, deal with your problems outside of my office.”

Returning to the lunchroom seemed like an awful decision, but she did not think she had a choice. She ducked into the cafeteria as quietly as possible, hoping no one would notice her. The food line wound through the kitchen, obscuring her from the general cafeteria. However, as she stepped back into the lunchroom, another foil packet landed on her shoe. She looked up to see the sniggering shoulders of James. A teacher monitoring the lunchroom went over and rested a hand on his shoulder admonishingly, but she walked away without approaching Darby.

Tray in hand, she glanced around the cafeteria, trying to find a friendly face. The corn and chicken on her plate slid around as she walked from table to table. Most of the people simply glared at her or ignored her when she approached their tables. One particularly crude group of boys told her she was welcome to sit with them – provided she spend some time “behind the bleachers” with each of them. It took all of her willpower not to cry at their suggestion.

She walked out of the cafeteria to the sound of baying laughter and cries of “slut!” She felt hounded, as if someone was coming after her from every corner. She was not hungry anymore, but she did not want to stick around to dump her tray. Instead, she walked down the empty hallways, looking for a safe place to wait out the lunch block. She crept into the first floor bathroom and locked herself into a stall.

The toilet seat was uncomfortable, but Darby resigned herself to the irritation. She picked at the corn on her lunch tray. Sniffles echoed from through the bathroom, originating from her stall, but no one stopped to check in on her. A few minutes before lunch ended she discarded her mostly untouched tray and scurried to class, afraid to encounter anyone. They would tear her apart.

### Passing through the Woods

“Happy Birthday!” Samantha announced, rousing Rhiannon from sleep. “God, sis, you’re forty-seven! No man will ever want you now. You’re so far over the hill I can’t even see you anymore.”

“Because forty is the height of youth,” Rhiannon mumbled as she rubbed the crust from her eyes. Samantha beamed at her and thrust a present wrapped in bright pink onto the bed.

“I can still go out with men in their thirties and not be a horrible cougar,” Samantha insisted. “You, however, can only date upwards. Men younger than you will only want you for your money.” She nodded sagely, hands folded in her lap. “You must not let gold diggers try to take advantage of you.”

“Sam!” Rhiannon screeched, shocked. “Don’t talk like that!”

Samantha smiled.

“If it makes you feel better, I don’t think you have enough money to interest most gold diggers.”

Rhiannon threw a pillow at her sister and pulled the comforter back over her head.

“I see you’re flustered,” Samantha announced. “I’ll be in the kitchen. Mom and I are making breakfast for you.” Rhiannon heard the squeak of Samantha’s wheelchair as she left the room.

The present Samantha had left behind sat enticingly at the end of the bed. Rhiannon tore it open with the eagerness of a child on Christmas morning. Inside, Samantha had stowed a small stuffed bear. A stitched smile stretched across its face. Its brown fur was soft when Rhiannon stroked it, but there was something eerie about its button eyes. She tossed it into the corner of the room to deal with later.

Twenty minutes later, Rhiannon had mustered the energy to climb out of bed and into an old green dress, worn in the skirt from her time spent kneeling in the garden. She brushed her hair and tugged it back into a bun. Knowing her mother and sister, there would be no way she would avoid going out at least once during the day. They did not seem to understand that with each passing year, Rhiannon wanted more and more to stay at home and let time forget her. If she only ever went outside to tend her garden, she would be satisfied.

“The birthday girl has arrived!” Samantha announced as Rhiannon emerged from her bedroom. Samantha had a mixing bowl in her lap and she was whisking at it one-handedly as she used her other hand to maneuver the wheelchair.

“We have a guest,” Samantha muttered under her breath as she approached her sister. “Be friendly.”

Rhiannon immediately stiffened. The three women had very few guests, but when they did, it was typically the same man. She could see the back of his head from where she stood, the curly hair peppered with more gray than the last time she had seen him. Had it really been ten years? Ten years since she had forgiven him, but retained her distaste for his presence? As she watched he twisted in his seat on the couch to face her, a smile splitting his face.

“Miss Winters,” Arthur Brown began, “it’s good to see you again. Happy Birthday.” He stood and walked around the couch. “If I had realized the auspicious occasion I would be interrupting today, I would have brought a gift.”

“It’s fine,” Rhiannon replied tersely. “I don’t need presents.”

“But birthdays only come once a year, and we have so few,” Arthur continued. “They are meant to be celebrated.”

“Is that the way they have you speak in the government?” Rhiannon asked, her words more harsh to her ears than she intended. “Making disagreeable things into niceties?”

Arthur’s smile faded, lingering only in the corners of his lips.

“It must be so,” he replied. “And I must be honest. What I’m here for is not a pleasantry.” He strode toward the kitchen.

“Mrs. Winters. Do you remember years ago, how I came here and mentioned the government’s plan to build a highway?”

“I do, Mr. Brown,” she replied.

“Well, it was deferred for so long I had assumed it would not happen during our lifetimes. However, the plan has resurfaced and will be implemented within the next few years. The road will travel directly through Wood Lane. The house stands in the way.”

It felt all too familiar. Rhiannon remembered clearly the last time Arthur had come to the house to share the news of the highway with them, more than two decades ago.

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Rhiannon was twenty-two the first time Arthur Brown visited the house on Wood Lane. Even then, he was a grizzly man, over six feet tall with a wild and untamed beard hiding his youthful face. He was only four years her senior, Rhiannon reminded herself, but he was trying his best to appear older, more mature. He wore a suit that was a little too tight and too short at his wrists and ankles and clutched a battered leather briefcase, polished until the patches that were still smooth gleamed.

As he approached her house, she pressed her spade into the overturned dirt of her garden. Dusting off her hands, she straightened and watched as he knocked on the bright white front door. The red rose-tree, one of two her mother kept in front of the house, must be obscuring his



view and keeping her out of his sight. She considered returning to her gardening. Later, Samantha would tell Rhiannon the reason behind his visit.

Rhiannon crouched to the ground and tugged her spade from the earth. A hole formed easily in the soil, large enough to fit the young tomato plant. The front door creaked open and she heard her sister's exclamation of surprise. She never understood how Samantha could be so pleasant to Arthur; Rhiannon had not been able to speak a civil word to him in years.

Hours passed as she worked in her garden. Toward sunset she finally finished preparing her tomato plants for the summer. She had enjoyed gardening even in elementary school, starting with flowers and moving toward more practical plants as she grew older. She was proud of her garden: it provided the majority of the vegetables her family consumed. It helped during the weeks her mother's paltry salary as a sales clerk wasn't even enough to cover the bills.

She cleaned her tools off and locked them into the tiny shed beside her house. Wary of tracking dirt into the house, she took her shoes off by the door and walked in barefoot.

Arthur was still there, sitting on the couch, talking and laughing with her sister. Mrs. Winters was busy in the attached kitchen, cooking something that smelled of garlic. When Rhiannon walked in Samantha stopped mid-laugh, looking up at her sister with a lifted brow.

"Rhiannon!" She exclaimed. "How are you? Arthur is staying for dinner!"

"Is he?" Rhiannon asked tersely. "And why is he here in the first place?"

"He had news for me," Mrs. Winters said. She walked into the living room, wiping her hands off with a dish towel. "I invited him to stay for dinner."

"You didn't think to ask me if I minded him being here," Rhiannon retorted.

"Rhiannon!" Mrs. Winters chided, "have some respect! He is a guest."

Often Mrs. Winters reminded her daughter of an orchid flower, delicate yet surprisingly hardy. Even after years of Rhiannon's combative behavior she still made it clear that she was the mother.

"It's alright, Mrs. Winters," Arthur replied, standing. "I'd hate to disrupt your dinner. I'll keep in touch and let you know if anything changes." He said his goodbyes and left.

"That was horribly rude, Rhiannon." Mrs. Winters remarked as she returned to the kitchen.

"He doesn't belong in this house."

"He belongs in this house if I want him here. He went out of his way to share information with me, and you were disrespectful." Mrs. Winters sighed. "We'll discuss it later. It's time for dinner." She opened the oven and pulled out a glass pan.

Rhiannon plopped into her seat at the table, disgruntled. She managed a small smile at Samantha as she rolled herself from the corner of the living room to her spot at the table.

"Did you have a nice time in your garden?" Samantha asked as she settled her chair onto the linoleum. A strand of her ebony hair fell in front of her pallid face.

"I did, Sam. We'll have some delicious tomatoes come fall, and maybe even a few pumpkins."

Samantha's face brightened.

"We can carve them for Halloween! We must decorate the house this year. You could even be a mad doctor and I'll be your patient."

"Maybe, Sam." Rhiannon replied, suddenly tired. "Halloween is a long time off."

Samantha frowned. She opened her mouth to reply, but instead reached for the food her mother had set out on the table instead.

Samantha went to bed early after dinner. Rhiannon offered to help her get ready, but Samantha insisted on doing it herself. After she disappeared into her room, Rhiannon cornered her mother.

“What did Arthur want?”

Her mother thought for a moment before replying.

“He told me about a government plan.” Her mother sighed. “Apparently, they’re building a new highway, which may cross through our house. We’ll have to move out.”

“He can’t take our house away,” Rhiannon declared. “This is our place. This is where my garden is and all your memories of Daddy and how the hell would we transport all of Sam’s books to a different home?” Rhiannon bit her lip. It had started quivering as she spoke.

“If they decide to build the highway, we won’t have a choice, Rhiannon.” Her mother’s voice was gentle. “It’s called eminent domain, it’s one of the amendments to our constitution. Mr. Brown explained it to me.”

“Mr. Brown?” Rhiannon spat. “That’s Artie, the asshole who killed Daddy and ruined Sam’s life. Just because he’s got a fancy job in the government now doesn’t mean he’s any better than he used to be.”

“Rhiannon!” Her mother admonished. “Have some respect. He’s worked hard to get where he is in life. His parents never helped him. And he is certainly not responsible for your father’s death.” Her mother paused, looking into the distance over Rhiannon’s head. “That was a tragic accident, one that Mr. Brown has regretted ever since.” She glanced back at Rhiannon. “But it was not his fault.”

“If he hadn’t been in the way, Daddy would never have swerved into the ditch. The car wouldn’t have flipped and crushed him. Sam wouldn’t have been thrown out and broken her

back. Eight years old and she would never walk again, Mom! Tell me that's not Arthur's fault." The words felt familiar, like a shirt stretched and soft from overuse. Rhiannon anticipated her mother's response, an infuriating acceptance of the tragedy and forgiveness for Arthur. They had danced around the same argument for years, ever since Rhiannon had decided to forgo college and instead stayed home to care for her sister and mother. Arthur Brown's carelessness had removed her options; her future had narrowed the day he had strayed into the street.

Her mother sighed.

"I hope one day you're able to let go of your anger, Rhiannon." The response startled her. Her mother pushed herself up from her chair and Rhiannon noticed her hands, wrinkles arcing across their backs. When had her mother started showing age?

Her mother walked over to Rhiannon and kissed her cheek.

"Good night, sweetheart. Try not to let this keep you up. You need your sleep."

With a smile and a squeeze on Rhiannon's shoulder, she ambled off toward her bedroom. The door closed behind her with a soft click. Disconcerted, Rhiannon went to her own room and climbed into bed, trying to forget the lines engrained in her mother's skin.

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Now that Arthur Brown was once again in her living room, Rhiannon warred with the old anger she fostered toward him. Her fists clenched, but she remained rooted to the ground in the living room. She knew that she would spray vitriol if she attempted to join the discussion. She had worked so hard to let go of her regrets, her bitterness, but on days like this – days like her birthday – she remembered all the irritation of twenty-five years ago. She felt as if her options were being stripped away from her yet again.

“Well, Mr. Brown, what does that mean for us? Obviously we can’t stay here in the middle of the highway,” Mrs. Winters’s chuckle turned into a hacking cough. Rhiannon mechanically moved to the kitchen and poured a cup of water for her mother. After handing it to the older woman, she leaned against the counter farthest from the stove.

“The government will buy your house from you. They will help you find a new home. I will personally help you with that, if you want me too.”

“We’d be grateful for that, Artie,” Samantha remarked. “I know you’ll help us find a place that’s accessible for me.” Samantha placed the mixing bowl on the counter. “Anything else I can do to help, Mom?” She changed the subject gracefully.

“Not at all, Samantha. I’ll finish breakfast from here. Why don’t the three of you wait in the living room?”

“First,” Rhiannon interjected, “I want to know how we plan to make sure the government pays a fair price. I don’t trust them to not just kick us off our land and leave us in the streets. Not only is this a lovely house, but my garden...” she paused, “my garden is excellent. If they are going to demolish that, I want to be fairly compensated.”

“You could hire a real estate attorney,” Arthur suggested.

“An expensive one, no doubt.”

“Well, yes, but if you’re so determined to get an appraisal, that’s the best route. I know a good one –“

“No,” Rhiannon interrupted, “I’ll find one myself. I want our attorney to be unmarred by governmental influence.”

Arthur nodded hesitantly.

“Alright, Rhiannon,” he replied.

After breakfast, Arthur offered to help clear the dishes. Samantha and Mrs. Winters disappeared into a different room. Rhiannon could only assume they were off planning another unwanted surprise.

“I wanted to thank you for being so agreeable,” Arthur said as he immersed a plate in soapy water. “I know we parted on good terms ten years ago, but I was still worried you’d react the same way you did the first time I came by with the news of the government highway plan.”

“I’ve grown up,” Rhiannon replied simply.

“I also wanted to talk to you about our last time we saw each other. I know I explained everything to you then, but I wanted to make sure you knew of my feelings--”

Rhiannon stopped him with a wave of her hand.

“No, Arthur. I don’t want to talk about that.”

“I know it’s been ten years, but nothing’s changed --”

“No.” The cup she was holding sank into the sink. “I don’t want to talk about it.” She dried her hands and pulled a yellow phonebook from the drawer. “Do you mind finishing? I want to get in touch with a real estate attorney.”

“Not at all...” he trailed off, watching as she flipped through the pages without a glance his way.

---

Mr. Klein, the real estate attorney Rhiannon finally hired, was a thin, spindly sort of fellow. Instead of getting in touch with him herself, he had called the evening of her birthday, offering his service. He claimed to be aware of the planned highway and was offering his expertise to those who might not otherwise realize they had options outside of simply letting the

government take their homes. It had seemed a serendipitous event, though after meeting him Rhiannon felt less comfortable with his unsolicited phone call.

He perused the house with a notebook in hand, marking down various details with an ink pen. Rhiannon winced when a drop of ink splattered on the cream carpet of the living room, but Mr. Klein simply sniffed and continued his examination.

Mrs. Winters and Samantha had gone out while Mr. Klein was visiting, but Rhiannon wanted to understand as much about the process as she could. Still, she was confused by the charts he used and the way he assessed the property. She watched as he diagrammed the house and made notes in his book. He knocked on walls and ran water in the sinks and checked underneath all the furniture. It seemed like he was being productive, but Rhiannon had no idea what he was measuring.

“Can I help in any way?” She finally offered as he struggled to shift the kitchen table by himself. She winced as it scraped the clean linoleum.

“No, no,” he responded, his voice a nasal whine. “Really, it would be better if you stopped hovering entirely. I know what I am doing, Ms. Winters.”

Wounded, she stepped out of his way.

He spent a good hour and a half poking and prodding around the house. He rifled through their belongings as though he had every right to be investigating the contents of the cutlery drawer. Rhiannon backed off after he snapped at her, but she kept a wary eye on him. She was beginning to feel like she should have taken Arthur up on his offer to find an attorney. His judgment probably would have been far better than hers would. The preliminary contract Mr. Klein had asked her to sign sat on the kitchen counter, drawing her gaze every time Mr. Klein did something she considered particularly outlandish. It was too late to back out now.

Finally, Mr. Klein produced, with a grandiose rip of the page, a chart detailing the assets and liabilities of the tiny house and the surrounding property.

“Not bad, not bad,” he remarked. “You’ve kept the place up well, I suppose. Here’s a copy of my work for you to keep. I’ll submit the rest to the government officials who are in charge of eminent domain.”

“Thank you so much, sir-“

“There’s also the matter of my bill.” Mr. Klein produced another slip of paper. “I charge a flat-rate for my services depending on size of property and accessibility. I included the mileage I put on my car to drive here, as I mentioned on the phone the other day. You don’t live in a very convenient location.”

Rhiannon looked at the bill, face falling. It was full of figures and notations, all summed into a number that her family could not possibly afford.

“Twenty five hundred dollars?” She mumbled.

“I’ll expect payment by the end of the month. If that is impossible, there is a monthly plan for payments – phone for details. However, that comes with interest.” He paused, glancing around the house one last time. “Have a good day, Miss Winters.”

He left brusquely, notebook in hand. Rhiannon listened to his car start and pull away. Then, she sank to the couch, bill clutched in hand.

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Around three, Samantha called to inform Rhiannon that she and Mrs. Winters were getting dinner out, and would Rhiannon like to join them?



Unable to face her family with the bill in her possession, Rhiannon declined, simply asking that they bring food home for her. She avoided questions about the real estate attorney, simply explaining that she preferred to work in her garden that evening.

As she pulled weeds from the dry earth, she felt even more strongly that she should have taken Arthur's help. Pride had kept her from accepting his help when he had offered, and pride was going to cost her family more than they could afford. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more she wanted to get in touch with him to look over the attorney's notes and the bill. She wasn't sure he'd be able to do anything about it, but he could at least explain it to her.

She finished the weeding and checked the state of her tomato plants. Leaving her gloves and shoes by the door, she went back into the tiny house. She picked up the phone and dialed before she lost her nerve.

"Hello?" Arthur's steady voice sounded distant coming from the old receiver.

"Arthur, it's Rhiannon." She sucked in a deep breath. "Can you look over the bill the Mr. Klein left?"

"Sorry, what'd you say?"

"The real estate agent. I want you to look at the bill he left."

There was a crackle on the line, but no response.

"Arthur?"

"I'm here. Yeah, I'll look at it for you. Tonight?"

"That'd be fine, yeah."

"I'll be over soon, then. Bye, Rhiannon."

He hung up and she carefully placed the phone back on its dock.

Fifteen minutes later, a knock on the door announced Arthur's arrival. Samantha and Mrs. Winters were still gone, but Rhiannon preferred it that way. She didn't want their added naivety confusing her any more than she already felt.

She pulled open the door. Without waiting for Arthur to enter, she went over and sat on the couch, picking the bill up to show him. He walked in and sat across from her.

"Before I look at that, you said it was a Mr. Klein who looked over the house?"

"Yes."

Arthur nodded. "Alright, let me take a look at it." He took the bill from her, pulling a pair of glasses from his pocket. Rhiannon sat, one foot tapping as she waited for him to make it all make sense to her.

He pushed his glasses up his nose, flipping the slip over to see if there was anything written on the back.

"Rhiannon... would you mind if I took this into work and showed it to a coworker of mine?"

"Not at all," she began, "but why? Is there something wrong with it?"

"I can't say for sure until someone more informed than I takes a look at it. But certainly don't pay the man yet. I'll try to get back in touch with you tomorrow."

He stood.

"Thank you for the help," Rhiannon blurted.

Arthur smiled.

"Anytime, Rhiannon. You know that."

Uncomfortable with the weight behind his words, Rhiannon was glad when he moved toward the door. As he approached it swung open, barely missing his face, and Samantha wheeled into the living room.

“Oh! Sorry, Artie! What’re you doing here?” Samantha waggled her eyebrows at Rhiannon. Mrs. Winters slipped in behind her.

“Just leaving, actually,” Rhiannon watched as Arthur surreptitiously slipped the bill in his pocket, out of her family’s sight.

“No, no, stay! Hear the good news!”

“Good news?” Rhiannon asked.

“Yep! Mom and I found a new place for us. It’s perfect! That’s where we were all day,”

“You didn’t want my help?” Rhiannon choked out the words.

“Sorry, Rhiannon, we just thought you’d be negative about the whole process. But I promise, you’ll love it. It’s ground floor for me and there’s a community garden you can help with.” Samantha hesitated. “You’re not mad, are you?”

Rhiannon walked over to her sister and knelt so that she was at eye level.

“No, I’m not.” She smiled. “Can I go see it tomorrow?”

“Of course!” Samantha exclaimed. “Artie, you can come too!”

“I have a busy day at work, but I’d love to see it in the future,” Arthur replied.

“Good. You’ll be invited over all the time.”

Arthur laughed. “I’ll look forward to it. But for now, I have to go.” He said his goodbyes and left.

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Rhiannon managed to stave off her sister and mother's questions for the evening. She went to bed early and rose early, nervous at what she would hear from Arthur. She knew her family could not afford to pay Mr. Klein's bill, especially if they were planning to move to a new home soon. The money from the government would not be enough to cover everything.

The Winters went to visit the new apartment complex, and Rhiannon had to agree that it was ideal. The apartment was a little smaller than their house, but it had three bedrooms and was handicap accessible. The community garden was well-tended. It seemed perfect for their little family.

She spent the rest of the afternoon avoiding questions about the attorney and waiting for Arthur to call. When the afternoon went by without correspondence, she began to worry that he had forgotten about the bill.

Around eight, there was a knock on the door. Rhiannon jumped to answer it, hoping it was Arthur with an explanation. Instead, Mr. Klein stood outside, fuming.

"You awful woman," he screeched, "thanks to you I've been found out!" He stormed inside, shoving Rhiannon out of the way. "Your miserable little scheme is going to ruin me!"

"Mr. Klein, what are you talking about?" Rhiannon looked frantically toward her sister, gesturing for her to get out of the living room. Samantha remained rooted where she sat in the kitchen.

Before Mr. Klein could reply, Arthur strode in the open front door.

"Henry Klein, what are you doing here?" Arthur growled. "This is a private residence."

"I am the attorney for these women!" He retorted, stamping a foot into the ground. The force of his stomp ripped the seam of his pants.

“You’re also trying to swindle them,” Arthur roared. “You were disbarred months ago. Did you think you wouldn’t be found out?” The tall attorney seemed to deflate. Without a comment, he turned and left the house.

“Rhiannon, please explain,” Mrs. Winters had emerged from her bedroom. Her hair was already in rollers.

“I can explain, Mrs. Winters,” Arthur interjected. “Mr. Klein was disbarred months ago when he failed to pass his supplemental exams. He’s been grossly and unfairly overcharging his clients since then. He shouldn’t be practicing as an attorney at all.”

“How’d you find this out?” Mrs. Winters asked.

Arthur looked at Rhiannon. She nodded.

“Rhiannon asked me to help. She wanted an extra eye to see if there was something wrong with the way the real estate attorney operated. But she was the one who noticed how fishy he was.”

“Well. We’re certainly grateful for your assistance. What does this mean for our house?”

“The government still plans to build the highway, so you’ll still have to move. But thankfully I have a friend that’s willing to look over the place for free. If you don’t mind my help.”

“Of course not,” Rhiannon interjected. “I think it would be foolish of us not to accept your help after how useful you’ve shown yourself to be.”

“I have one condition,” Samantha announced, breaking her silence. Everyone looked at her. “Rhiannon, take him on a date.”

Arthur looked sharply at Rhiannon. Blushing, the red-head forced a nod. Her insides twisted at the idea of spending too much time with Arthur, but she felt obligated to him now. The smile that lit his face when she acquiesced made her feel even worse. A glance at Samantha showed that the dark-haired woman was just as excited about the prospect as Arthur. Only a pleading look toward her mother offered any sign of sympathy, but her obligation to Arthur kept Rhiannon from asking for help.

She thought of the brown bear she had left in the corner of her room on her birthday, and how its eyes had disturbed her. She thought of how indebted she was to Arthur, a man she no longer despised but certainly did not find attractive, and how his stare would bore into her at times. If only she would not appear ungrateful – but no, instead she resigned herself to more time spent with Arthur Brown.

**Mezzo Piano**

*Poor lovely maid who has no hands, what future can there be?*

*But never mind. You will survive if you come home with me.*

- From "Penta with the Chopped-off Hands"

"Mom's wasting away. I don't think I've seen her eat a full meal in days –"

"That's how she's always been, Anna."

"She eats less than she did that year she tried to go vegan in Austria."

Wes snorted. "She didn't last very long on that, did she? On our wedding anniversary she caved and ate so many sausages she couldn't move."

Anna ignored him.

"She's become so withdrawn, Dad. She missed Breslow's concert, and that's not something she ever would have done before."

"She's still recovering from the chemotherapy and surgery and everything. Besides, it would have been painful for her to attend. Hearing others do what she can never fully do again...."

"Her seven-year-old grandson's choir concert is comparable to twenty years touring in Europe?"

From her position in the wicker rocker in the sitting room, Lutie wondered if she should interrupt before the exchange became a full-blown argument. The voices reached a crescendo until one would shush the other, a low hissing sound that brought the volume back to a *mezzo piano*. Not that she needed to hear individual words; it was always the same debate.

The heated whispers had begun when Anna had arrived at the door of their tiny cottage three days ago, suitcases in hand. Though she only lived a short drive away, clearly she felt she needed to be a more consistent presence in Lutie's life. Lutie might not have minded if it had not distressed her husband, Wes, so much. She half-smiled to herself, thinking about his desire to keep everything upbeat and blasé. The smile twisted as Lutie considered the reality of Anna's accusations. Perhaps she really had become a recluse. After all, the purpose had fled from her life with the first splatter of blood against the white porcelain sink in the bathroom of the Queen Elizabeth Theatre.

The doctors in Vancouver had sent her to alleged experts in her home state of South Carolina, and they had poked and probed her in a series of tests designed to discover what was wrong. Two months of torture, of needles digging into organs and the blue bruises that had blossomed around the punctures, had passed before they had delivered the strangling news: cancer.

She felt like Aida, buried alive, but without her Radamés at her side. Trapped in a pyramid of bricks made of her illness and chemotherapy. The poison had flooded her veins, killing the vulnerable, cancerous cells, but also damaging the healthier surrounding systems. Though it had been a year since her diagnosis and the ensuing radiation, surgery, and complications that had followed, the cancer was still smothering her. The scar on her throat where her feeding tube had opened was a persistent reminder of the nights she woke up struggling to breathe, certain that her death would not be by malignant cells but instead by suffocation.

The glare from the sun startled Lutie as it filtered through the tall windows of the sitting room. She moved to shield her eyes with a thin hand, but refrained from standing to close the



curtain. The warm light was comforting to her, especially after so much time spent under fluorescent bulbs in the hospital. It had become a habit to sit in this room around this time of day, one she knew Wes noticed but did not mention. He had tried to sit with her one evening, even putting on a little Chopin, and attempted to provoke her into conversation.

“Today was good, Lutie,” he had said, though the question in his voice belied the words. “You’ve put on some weight.”

“Yes,” she had responded.

“I think the curtains could be changed,” he conjectured, tugging at the thin tan material that floated near his seat. “Brighter colors, maybe.”

She had shifted restlessly and left before the sun had hit the angle to flood the room. He had not tried to sit with her again.

Music, while once her passion, had become her enemy over time. In the early stages of the disease, she had brushed off the old VHS copies of *Otello* and *La Boheme*, *The Magic Flute* and *Madama Butterfly*. Seated in front of their small television, she would sing along with the women and belt along with the men. She found solace in the familiar notes and soaring melodies. However, as the cancer progressed and her voice became more and more unwieldy, she made Wes box up all the reminders of her time on the stage and stow them away. He protested, but he was easily swayed. The playbills and programs disappeared from the frames on the walls, replaced by unassuming images of the city of Charleston. Novels by Nabokov and Dickens replaced the scores that had filled their bookshelves. Lutie watched Wes’s efforts with a critical eye, angry that he did not argue, that not even his poster for *Pirates of Penzance* remained on the walls. The frustration was unfair, but it felt good after months of deadened emotions.

Her resentment never lasted long, however; she was too indebted to him for all that he had been through with her. Not only had he driven her to and from each grueling radiation treatment, each painful surgery to remove malignant cells, and each chemotherapy session, but he had held her when she cried after her first speech therapy session and every successive time she opened her mouth to sing and scratching noises came out instead.

“She has a grandchild who doesn’t understand....” The voices from the other room hit a *sforzando*, loud enough to knock Lutie from her thoughts. Rather than face her husband and daughter, she let herself slip back into her memories. Easier than dealing with the weight of her apathy.

One afternoon, not long after her doctor, Dr. Knoll, had told her she was in remission, she had pulled out old librettos and sheet music. She had traced the notes of her favorite arias with a shaking finger. The pages were ragged from years packed in and out of suitcases. The black ink was faded, the words in German, Italian, Latin, and French almost imperceptible. But she did not need the music or the words; the songs were ones she knew by heart.

A piano had been tucked in the corner of the sitting room then, a sleek Steinway that she had kept polished throughout even the most painful months of cancer. Wes had always been her favorite accompanist and he was happy to oblige her in anything, if it brought a smile to her face. She had pulled out a short piece, one written for a mezzo that she felt would be easy to replicate, even with a voice much weaker than she had ever had before. Yet with each faltering line and each hacking cough that had followed, she lost her confidence. Wes had moved quickly from the piano to hold her as she crumbled to the floor. At her tearful insistence, he had the piano removed and all her music had disappeared, pushed into boxes and stowed in the attic. The last remnants of her time as a musician had disappeared from the house.

During her reminiscence, Anna and Wes had stopped arguing. With a sigh she pushed herself out of the rocker and walked across the hardwood floors to the kitchen. If there was one thing Anna's presence had done, it was distract Wes enough that Lutie had to start doing things on her own again. Appearing active would also keep Anna quiet for a few hours before finding something else to pick on in Lutie's life.

"Church, tomorrow." Anna had found Lutie in the kitchen. "Breslow would love to see you. You up to going, Mom?"

Lutie stared hard at her daughter. Anna's eyes were greener than Lutie's, but her thick brown hair would have matched her mother's before chemotherapy had left Lutie's head smooth. Even now, Lutie kept it cropped close to her head rather than allowing it to grow.

"Mom." Anna repeated. Lutie blinked, uncertain of the question.

"I suppose," Lutie finally replied, turning back to the kitchen counter and pulling slices of bread from the breadbox.

"You have to wear something nicer than that." Anna gestured at her mother's frail body, hidden by gray sweatpants and a baggy shirt. "I can pick something out for you. Remember that green dress you wore when you sang at the Teatro della Pergola?"

"Lovely."

When a moment passed without an extended response from her mother, Anna left with a huff.

Lutie doubted she would sit through the entire service, but Anna was persistent enough that if she did not at least make the appearance of normalcy on occasion, she would be harassed until she attended some luncheon or movie night or event in town. It was only after Lutie had

finished her toast and prepared herself for bed that she began to wonder if she was making excuses to appease Anna, or to appease herself.

She squeezed her eyes shut as she crawled into bed next to Wes. He wrapped his arms around her and she stiffened, certain she could hear her bones cracking under her frail skin. An easy sleeper, Wes did not even notice as she held her breath, terrified of the protective way he held her. When she finally settled, thoughts plagued her until she fell asleep.

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Wes drove the three of them to church the next morning.

“If we sit in the back, Lutie can leave more easily if she needs to,” Wes whispered to Anna as they walked into the chapel.

“But Breslow and Arnold are up there,” Anna replied, gesturing to her family.

“Sit with them, then,” Wes retorted. Without a glance at her daughter or her husband, Lutie settled in a corner of the back row. Wes shot a look at Anna and sat beside his wife. After a moment, Anna flopped at Wes’s side.

Breslow, a sturdy child with a flop of brown hair, turned around from where he sat several pews in front of them. When he saw his grandmother, his face broke into a wide grin. Throughout the opening prayer, he turned to look at her until his dad tugged him back to the front. Lutie tried her best to avoid his glances. The guilt she kept shuttered always threatened to overwhelm her when Breslow shot a smile her way.

The song leader went up to the front of the congregation and began leading the first hymn. Stomach already roiling from guilt, the minor key of “Trust and Obey” made her flinch in anguish. Without a word, Lutie stood and walked out of the auditorium. The music followed her as she moved into the hall.

“Mom,” Anna hissed, then: “Breslow, stop right there!”

Lutie ignored her daughter and flung open the first door she could find out in the hall. A winding staircase led into the basement. The wooden steps creaked as she descended into the dimly lit room.

She coughed, the stale air burning her lungs. The church basement was filled with cardboard boxes and stacks of old Bibles. She ran a hand over an outdated hymnal, the dry skin of her fingertips catching on the fabric. Distantly she thought she heard her daughter calling her name, and Breslow’s, but she was distracted by the upright piano that she noticed in a distant corner.

The bench groaned as she settled herself down, thin though she was. The keys were unyielding beneath her fingers, the dust on the ivories clinging to her skin. Piano had never been her forte – she allowed herself a small smile at the pun, though the expression was twisted with bitterness – but maybe this was the outlet she needed. She had never tried to play at home when the piano had still sat in their house. Wes had been too accommodating, too prepared to play if she ever needed him. Now she realized she wanted to play herself.

The first key landed with a thud, the note hanging heavily in the air. The second key she pressed with gentler fingers, and by the third she had the feel of the instrument. It was wretchedly out of tune, but it felt so good to create music that she did not mind the imprecisions in the pitch of the instrument. Her mindless playing slowly evolved into the beginning notes of a hymn she remembered from her childhood. G, B flat, G, B flat, G, F sharp – the simple melody flowed from under her uncertain hands.

“If the skies above you are gray, you are feeling so blue.”

Breslow's voice wavered as he stepped up to Lutie's elbow. She had not even heard him descend into the basement. Her hands fumbled at the keys for a minute before she recovered the piano line to accompany his voice.

"If your cares and burdens seem great, all the whole day through. There's a silver lining that shines, in the heavenly land, look by faith and see it my friend, trust in his promises grand."

"Deeper breaths: from the diaphragm, not your chest," Lutie instructed. Breslow nodded and sucked in more air, and Lutie felt a smile stretch across her face.

"You gotta sing and you'll be happy today, press along to the goal."

"Breslow!" Anna's voice found them from the top of the stairs. The steps creaked as she approached her mother and son.

"Trust in him who's leading the way, he will keep your soul."

"Try to put the sound in your cheekbones and upward, dear, not in your nose." Lutie added. She slid her left hand onto the keys, adding the other voice parts.

Anna stopped a few yards away, mouth agape as she watched her mother making music for the first time in over two years.

"Let the world know where you belong, look to Jesus and pray."

Wes, who had followed after Anna to help her search for her son, paused behind her. After a moment, a grin appeared across his face and he walked forward to rest a hand on Lutie's shoulder. The hand felt supportive, not suffocating. He added his voice with Breslow's:

"Lift your voice and praise him in song, sing and be happy today."

Maybe Lutie herself would never be able to sing again, but she no longer felt the need to hide from music. Her expertise could benefit others. A sour feeling still shifted in her stomach, but she tamped it down. She wanted to be musical again, even if it was hard. Even if it hurt

more than it helped. Even if she were still waiting for news that she was entirely cancer free. As she lifted her hands from the piano, Breslow wrapped his arms around her.

“I missed you Nana,” he whispered into her blouse.

“I know, sweetie,” she pressed a hand to his back, the cotton fabric soft under her shaking hands. “I know.”

## Disney Variations

### *Cinderella*

Really, the thin Hispanic maid might never have caught his eye if not for the staff party. The annual event required him to act as the servant in their stead, and he refused to pretend to enjoy it. Disgruntled, he fixed a frown on his face and clutched the tray his mother had filled with hors d' oeuvres. He lumbered through the room, glowering at anyone who paused to thank him.

The blue dress drew his gaze first, but the way it swirled around her russet knees kept him entranced. He dragged his eyes up over the body she had sheathed in the blue material, and focused on her face. A white-toothed smile stretched across her face and drove the grimace from his. She laughed at something a wrinkled gardener said. Jealousy shot through him, replacing his grimace with a stiff-lipped glare. He wanted to be the one to make her laugh. Distracted by his thoughts, he hardly noticed as a servant raided his tray and made off with a half-dozen spinach puffs.

He did not approach her. Instead, he watched as she held court with her fellow staff members. Black hair fell in waves around her shoulders, shifting as she tilted her head to better hear the wizened housekeeper, or falling back in a curtain as she let out a deep belly laugh. The smile never left her face. Instead, it became conspiratorial as she spoke to a girl her own age and deferential as she talked to the older staff.

The natural familiarity she displayed with everyone frustrated him. She was better than the rest of them, he decided. It showed itself in the regal arch of her back the way she kept her shoulders square and poised, like a dove prepared for flight. He found himself mentally rehearsing his first words to her. Tomorrow, he would sweep her off her feet. After his tennis



session would be best. He imagined himself, muscles tensed from the workout and the way she would bite her lip when she saw the sweat dripping from his skin. A shiver ran up his spine as he pictured it.

“Mother,” he whispered as he collected a fresh tray of food from her, “who is that girl?”

His mother followed the direction of his gaze, blinking as she focused on the woman in the blue dress.

“She saved a bird that flew from the chimney once,” she replied, tapping her nose with her pointer finger. “Coaxed it out and set it free, all without hurting the poor thing. She brought her little brother up from Mexico with her. He still only speaks Spanish... oh, what’s her name?”

Her son grunted impatiently. Across the room, the girl laughed again. The young man who tended the horses had one hand on her back, and he wanted to go physically remove it.

“What’s her name...” his mother continued to mutter. “Oh! It’s Astrella. Astrella Valdez.”

“Astrella,” he repeated, tasting the name for himself. “Make sure she’s the one tending you by the pool tomorrow, would you?”

“Certainly, dear. But why?”

“No particular reason,” he responded. He moved back into the party, one eye always on the girl in the blue dress.

*Mulan*

The bandages pinched as she wound them tightly around her chest. She expertly knotted the end and tucked it beneath a layer of the white fabric before admiring her handiwork in the cracked mirror on her vanity. Maybe the Black Shadows would still have taken her in as a woman, but exposing her gender came with its own risks. Safer instead to keep up the charade of a young boy, clean-shaven and lithe. She had proven herself to Fang, the chief gang banger, on more than one occasion, until even he was satisfied that the surly but effeminate boy was worthy. If her conscience pricked when she crawled, army-style, through a vent and into a jewelry store or when she jimmied a lock of a house where unsuspecting residents slept, she ignored it. Everything she did was to keep her brother safe. If she made herself an invaluable member to the gang, maybe Fang would stay away from her brother. Bai, with his wracking cough and brittle bones, would never survive the street. He cared more for his oil paints and charcoal pencils than picking locks and slitting throats. She would have to struggle in his place.

Sometimes she forgot that only a year ago she had kept no secrets. As a junior in high school, she had kept decent grades, good enough to maybe go to college. Her dad had always gotten her to help handle bills and taxes. Math had come easily to her, numbers crunching in her mind rather than in a calculator or on paper. She had even maintained a few strong friendships with girls in her grade, though she was never one for crowded social functions.

But her father had died, struck down as he walked home from work by an unwieldy teen learning to drive, and their primary source of income had been truncated like a decimal striving too hard into infinity. The family had moved into a lower-income district and she had lost touch with her old friends. When the gang members came around demanding money or support for their protection, she had sold the last of her skirts to a consignment shop and picked up a few

sturdy pairs of jeans instead. Chopping off her hair had been the hardest part. Each lock that hit the cracked tile of the bathroom floor had pulled tears from her eyes.

They were the last tears she cried.

A toss of her head cleared her thoughts. She tugged a thick black sweatshirt over her bandages and bare skin, checked herself in the mirror a final time, and swept out of the apartment before Bai could ask her where she was going. The Black Shadows were hunting that night, and she needed to be at the front of the pack. She would be the barrier between her brother and the street, and she knew how replaceable street kids were. She could never let herself be one of the disposable bodies left for the police to find, hours after any fight. Even if it meant concealing her sex, her ideals, her whole identity – she would do it for him.

*Sleeping Beauty*

“I brought you dinner. Sweet and sour chicken. Your favorite.”

Seeing him every day was the hard part, she decided. The flop of chestnut hair, the big hands that had held her to the bed, the mole on his shoulder that she had focused on the third time it had happened and she was too tired to cry instead.

He handed the plastic bag to her, the large yellow smiley face belying the revulsion that clenched in her chest as she looked at the proffered food. Every time she accepted his offerings, she knew she also acquiesced to his late night invasions.

Sometimes, as she imagined herself climbing into that mole on his shoulder and hiding there, she would think about how lovely their first few months had been. The arm he slipped around her shoulders in the dark movie theater. The lilies that appeared on her doorstep that her mother had discovered and passed over to Arianna with a knowing smile. The kisses pressed to her forehead at the end of each date.

Weeks of this had passed before she realized it was all going onto a scale in his mind, where the effort he put into her was far greater than the effort he felt she was putting forth for him. When he sent her roses he expected her to let him tug off her shirt and unclasp her bra. With every movie ticket, he purchased inches of skin until he now let his hands slide beneath her waistband instead of around her shoulders. He pushed her boundaries and grew upset with her when she asked him to stop, to give her time.

“I do so much for you, Arianna,” he would remark, staring at the ceiling after she had demanded he stop trying to unbutton her pants. “Why can’t you just do this little thing for me?”

Eventually he stopped asking.

Later that night, after the Chinese food rested half-eaten in the trash and he had made a show about leaving for the night for her parents, he came back to find her. Nights like this she broke him down into his component parts and stopped thinking about the whole. It was not her boyfriend who climbed the rose trellis outside her bedroom each night, not her boyfriend who knocked on her window at two in the morning, not her boyfriend who pushed her down on the mattress, not her boyfriend that shushed her as she whimpered, reminded her that her family slept only a few rooms away.

She tilted her head to the side, watching the bedside table rattle as the bed knocked against it. The room made her feel claustrophobic, though it was the largest bedroom in the house: her parents had let her choose first when the family had moved to the area. The pale pink walls felt juvenile now. Her cheerleading trophy from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade sat perched on the top of her dresser, the untarnished figurine waving her pompoms and smiling. An unfinished cross-stitch project rested on her desk, abandoned after she had pricked her finger one too many times.

Maybe she would renovate the room, paint the walls a deeper red, store away all the remnants of junior high.

If she kept thinking about the inane, maybe she would stop thinking about the way he moved on top of her.

Being awake was the hard part, she decided as he grunted and flopped next to her on the bed. She let him pull her body against his, limp like a ragdoll in his arms. Even after he slipped into snoring slumber, even after he pushed away from her in restless sleep, she laid awake. If only she could sleep, she could escape for just a moment.

*Rapunzel*

When he first approached her after the concert, he made her palms sweat enough that she had to wipe them against her choral dress. His hair was a little too long and black ink lines peeked out from beneath the collar of his shirt. A silver bar winked on his eyebrow. He made her nervous but he also made her smile, his earnest comments about each choral piece filling her with security. He asked her out for coffee but she refused, insisting her mother's rules kept her from dating. Laughing, he convinced her to break the rules, "just this once."

Maybe she was tired of being a good girl. She thought about how she could get a thrill from waiting until the night before to write a paper and changed her answer to yes. Something beyond slight threats to her academic success was required to make her feel. Smiling at him, she called her mother and claimed she was grabbing food with a friend. Her mother, ever doubtful, coerced her into giving up more information about the meal. That was when the lying began.

After that first night, it became easier to make up excuses to see him. A homework project with a partner; a late night practicing in the choir room. Her mother would drop her off and she would find him standing just out of sight. Grabbing her hand, he would take her to parks and concerts and museums, introducing her to a way of learning she had not experienced on the museum-funded audio tours. The pair would sit in front of a painting, fingers interlaced, and plan their lives inside the acrylic cottage or behind the brush-stroked lilies. Once, he took her to the park just before midnight. He tugged on her long braid and kissed her cheek. She remembered that the stars had shone through the smoggy city skies, bright even as street lamps and skyscraper windows strove to outshine them.

When her grades started slipping her mother noticed. One evening she followed her daughter and saw her beloved golden child with the pierced and tattooed boy. She was not taken

in by his wide smile or the easy way he mediated the conversation; she was not even convinced by the flicker of love she saw in his green eyes as he looked at her daughter. She remembered times when she had chased after smiling boys and how it had required she give up everything: her desire to be a veterinarian, her plans to travel the world. An education meant more to her than matters of the heart, and she wanted to ensure her daughter got the education she never had.

Later, pacing in her second floor bedroom, the girl pondered a way to escape and see him again. Her mother's chastisement had done nothing if not increase her interest in the boy and the restrictions placed on her throughout her youth left her straining to be free. When the boy climbed the tree outside her window late that night and rapped against the glass, he did not have to persuade her to follow him out into the darkness.

*Beauty & the Beast*

The blow, directed toward her stomach, landed on her rib cage instead as she twisted toward the wall. She flinched away from the pain but did not crumple to the floor the way she had the first time he hit her. This only served to enrage him: he moved toward her with fists flailing, tears streaming from his reddened eyes.

“You bitch, why would you smile at the bartender like that? Trying to get free drinks? I’ll get your drinks, slut.”

The whiskey on his breath made her nauseous. Her hands groped at the wall and she slid down it, slick palms squealing against the paint. The first time he had been like this, she had cried until he, drifting into sobriety, had apologized between choking sobs. He promised he would never do it again, it was an accident, he was too drunk – and she believed him. She told her mother she had slipped and hit the doorknob on her way out of the house.

He attacked her too carefully this time, limiting the assault to her body instead of the face. Unless she showed someone, there would be no reason to make an excuse for these bruises: they would stay hidden under the thick sweaters she wore in the winter. The library where she worked always felt colder than the outside anyways.

He finally stopped bombarding her and turned away, slumping against the adjoining wall.

“You have to stop doing this to me, Myra. You know I hate hurting you.” His arm muffled his voice. Her head felt strangely empty of emotion, like a light on in an unfurnished room.

After a moment he joined her on the ground, crawling over and resting his head on her knees. He reminded her of a little boy, a child lost and in need of love. This emotion she



understood: her father, with his early onset Huntington's, had never been available to care for her. The deterioration of his mind and body had taken that ability away from him.

“Myra, Myra, I can't trust you anymore. I don't trust you not to leave me for someone else.” His voice was muffled by her jeans. They tightened against her skin as he clenched the material.

“How can I prove,” her voice cracked, “how can I prove to you that you can?” Already the pain in her side was dulling, though she knew it would persist for a few days. She imagined the purplish stain against her skin, rising imperceptibly from her body.

He looked up at her and into her eyes. The irises shifted erratically but stilled as he began to speak.

“Myra, have my baby. Then I'll know you love me. I'll know you'll never leave me.”

She sucked in a deep breath. Genetically she had a fifty-fifty chance to have Huntington's herself, and if it progressed as rapidly as her father's had she might never have another chance for a child. But if she did have Huntington's, it could then be passed on to the baby.

Maybe that would serve him right, after using her body as a punching bag. A baby could forever tie him to two people who would slowly crumble into nothingness as he was forced to care for them.

“Okay,” she responded, the vitriol well hidden from her voice.

*Snow White*

Bianca hit the floor of her German classroom right inside the door. The dizziness that had been building in her head had finally gotten the best of her. As she drifted back into consciousness, memories barraged her. She wondered if this was what having a life flash before your eyes felt like.

Eight years old when her mother walked out, and ten years old when she assumed role of female caregiver. By the time she was fifteen she was well-practiced in the way Gregory liked his carrots cooked and exactly what hour Hal needed to go to sleep if he was to be of any use the next day and how to get the twins to stop fighting over the same X-Men toy. Her father did not seem to care about the responsibility he put on his eldest child, instead preferring to keep all his attention focused on the string of women he marched through his bedroom. When one, a spindly, dark-haired lady, settled in, Bianca thought that she would finally catch a break.

Instead, the woman lured Bianca's father away on expensive vacations and the seven rowdy children received less attention than usual. Bianca found herself juggling a new schedule at her high school with the full-time job of parenting. She could barely sleep or eat; instead, she worked through the day to manage her siblings and through the night to finish her schoolwork.

As she slipped back into consciousness, a boy's face slowly became clear above her head.

"She's awake. I can take her to the nurse, *Frau* Kinsolving?" The boy's mouth was moving. Still fuzzy from her fall, the teacher's answer only registered in her mind as garbled acquiescence.

"I'm Charles. I sit behind you sometimes," the boy remarked as he helped Bianca to her feet. "I don't think we've ever spoken before though."

Bianca shook her head.

“We should talk more. Want to get ice cream after school?”

She must have looked startled because he used his spare hand to smack his forehead.

“I’m sorry, you’re probably exhausted. Tomorrow then?”

Maybe the delirium drove her to say yes. She did not have the time, but she went anyways, hoping her absence would force her father into caring for his children. When she told her father she would not be home right after school the next day, he gave her a noncommittal shrug. The step-mom had been enthusiastic, urging her to “get out there, get around,” as she bit into a Gala apple.

Eager to please, Charles bought her ice cream and dragged her to romantic comedies. He made her laugh and he listened when she spoke. It only took a few dates before she let him kiss her, let him tug her to the back of his car.

It certainly was neither that time nor the next, but lack of experience and knowledge left the young lovers careless about contraception. Eighteen and pregnant with her first child, Bianca wondered if this was the natural progression of life or if she could have found another way. Maybe now Charles smiled as he rubbed her stomach, but she wondered how long it would be before he, like her father, became distracted and let her take on the whole responsibility of parenthood. She pictured him at the breakfast table, newspaper in hand, as she juggled an infant and a pot of coffee. No help from Charles when the children needed changing or dinner needed to be cooked. After all, it was all she had ever known.

## Ghosts and Airports

The airport seats crack along the edges, aided by your right hand as you nervously pick at the pleather. Your left hand remains clutched around a tattered newspaper clipping. Directly ahead, a plane pulls into gate E30. The red lettering under the gate number informs the passerby that the plane leaves in forty minutes on a trip to Dallas. You imagine yourself picking up your backpack and boarding that plane, flying to Texas and getting lost with the tumbleweeds. You imagine boarding any other plane but the one you are waiting for.

A large chunk of charcoal-colored pleather breaks off in your hand. You glance down at it, nonplussed, and shred it into smaller pieces. The material feels smooth but unyielding: the pad of your finger cannot slide in a clean path across the piece. A disembodied voice announces a change of gate and a woman in a red shirt, cursing, lunges to her feet and runs down the concourse. She looked a little like the girl who works in the cubicle next to you. Probably not, though.

Flying has never been appealing. You believe this is your mother's fault. Her resistance to anything modern means annual trips to visit family in Japan are colored by consistent muttering prayers, words rising and falling in a steady stream. She accompanies the susurrations with white-knuckled fists and tiny squeals of terror with every shift of the plane in turbulence. You are careful to only book flights that are nonstop so she has no opportunity to panic in a layover in France or Kiev or anywhere else. She still manages to spend the fourteen hour flight wide-eyed and immobile, keeping both of you from sleeping through the night.

"If we were meant to leave the Earth we would have been given wings," she repeats every time she boards a plane. "Flying is for the birds and the bats."

Planes are not the extent of her technophobia. In fact, her aversion forced the current predicament. If she called instead of mailing the obituary, maybe you would not be scrambling to get on a plane one day before the funeral.

The funeral. Dropping the shreds of chair to the stained carpet, you unclench your left hand and examine the newspaper cut-out. Some of the ink has smudged from the sweat on your palms, but you do not need to see the words to remember what they say. Instead, you focus on the tiny snapshot of the deceased included on the clipping. The picture shows her smiling, the way you remember her best. Only after you left Pennsylvania did you hear stories of her pain.

“Now boarding Zone 1 for Flight 4281 to Philadelphia, all passengers in Zone 1 please board through gate E29.”

You crumple the newspaper and shove it a pocket. For a moment you panic, thinking the boarding pass is lost, but you find it folded neatly into your wallet. Zone 3. The words mean nothing. Maybe boarding zones have significance to someone who works in an airport, but to you it is a meaningless distinction between seats.

Perhaps there are exit row seats left? The extra legroom might make you feel less claustrophobic.

You check to make sure no belongings linger on the seat around you and stand, boarding pass in hand. The woman at the counter looks up as you approach before returning her gaze to her computer. Her black hair wings backward behind her ears, tied up neatly into a chignon. The blue uniform that designates her as a desk agent hugs her body.

“M’am,” you start, but the sound is huskier than intended. You pause to clear your throat. She eyes you now, thinking god knows what about the hooded jacket you pulled over

khakis and suede shoes. You self-consciously pat your head, making sure no hairs are out of place.

“M’am, I was wondering if there were any exit row seats available.” The usual low tenor. She clicks a few buttons on her computer and shakes her head.

“You would have needed to ask before we started boarding. Maybe ask the flight attendant when you’re on the plane.”

Inexplicably, her response hurts the pit of your stomach. You nod stiffly and move to the back of the group waiting to board, squinting your eyes to avoid tears.

“Don’t cry, Kev,” her voice sounds like it used to, like the low, soothing sound of an oboe. It does not startle you when you turn and see a dead friend staring back. She wears a thin green sundress; her favorite, you remember.

You are aware that talking to her would make you seem crazy to the other passengers, so you pull out your phone and press it to your ear. You wonder if knowing you are crazy makes you more or less so, but the smile on her face drives these thoughts away.

“I can’t fly with you,” she says, “but I’ll meet you in Philadelphia. Kev,” she reaches up to cup your face. You feel nothing – not her hand, not the breeze that gusts her dress around her knees, not the sickening feeling of a moment before. “I need a chance to explain.”

You nod as the desk agent calls your boarding zone. The desire to flee has receded, and you slide your cellphone back in your pocket before stepping into line. You glance back at her repeatedly as the agent slowly scans tickets. Turn around, and then turn around once more.

When the agent gets to you, the girl in the green dress is gone.

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Too distracted to request an exit row, you settle yourself in your assigned seat and wait to take off. Away from her presence, you begin to wonder if you should have reacted so calmly. Normal people do not see dead friends in airports hundreds of miles from home. Normal people do not accept it as normal when they do.

It must have been a trick of the imagination. Stress combined with exhaustion – you feel like the layover lasted forever – and grief. You are certain you read somewhere that grief can cause delusions. Especially when overwhelming guilt mingles with the grief: a recipe for seeing dead girls in airports.

She could not have hidden so much pain from you. Three years together, and fifteen years as friends: it must have been your departure that drove her to the edge. You would have noticed tired eyes, wrists wrapped in bandages. You could not have been so blind when young.

A shake of the head clears out bad thoughts. You decide to worry about it when you land; after all, she is gone for now. You shift against the uncomfortable metal armrests and lean against the window, trying your best to sleep.

You must have been successful because you wake to the sound of the flight attendant announcing the landing sequence. Your stomach rumbles, as it always does after a flight. You dig through your backpack for Pepto Bismol as the plane taxis into a gate.

Mother refuses to get into a car unless absolutely necessary, so a neighbor has been sent to retrieve you. As you wait for him, you settle on a bench just inside the airport. A sign offering *tae kwan do* in the “Japanese style” makes you bristle, then laugh. *Tae kwan do* is a Korean martial art.

Initially you settle your bag next to you, blocking others from sitting next to you, but after a moment you put it at your feet. She settles next to you without comment.

“Gemma,” you mutter, trying not to move your lips, “what’re you doing here?”

Really, you want to ask her why she killed herself, but if she is a ghost, there is no need to make her angry. You remember too many stories from your childhood of vengeful spirits haunting their loved ones for years after their deaths. Besides, your friends in high school were obsessed with *The Grudge*, and as the token Japanese kid, they peppered you with questions you were only too happy to answer with as much imagination as you could muster. Granted, you are only half-Japanese, but your mother had stories enough to sate your friends’ curiosity.

“I can’t leave yet,” she responds. “You don’t want me to.”

“I don’t understand,” you state, but she walks away before you can interrogate her further.

“Your friend is here,” she calls over her shoulder. “Ask him your questions.”

But you worry the neighbor will think you are crazy if you mention ghosts to him. He has several generations between him and his Japanese relatives. He was never immersed in the culture the way your mother baptized you. Instead of enlisting his help, you wait to get home to the woman who might have real answers, your mother. When the drive ends you thank your neighbor, uncomfortable when you cannot remember his name, and walk into the house where you spent your childhood.

“That took longer than you said,” she greets you and takes your single bag. She hangs it on a hook in the hall and scurries into the kitchen.

“Hello, Mother.” You follow her. You take after her: shiny black hair, slight features, almond skin. Your height came from your father, but the rest belonged entirely to her.

“Mother,” you start when you realize she is not going to continue talking, “do you remember any stories you told me when I was little? About Japan?”



“Like Yogodayu or the Miraculous Sword? You loved those stories, you would run around with a stick in the yard and say you were a great samurai –” she scurries about the kitchen, banging pots and pans in a semblance of cooking.

“No, Mother,” you interrupt. “The ghost stories. Do you remember the ghost stories?”

She puts a pan full of water on the counter, staring into it intently.

“*Yurei*?” She whispers the word. “Why *yurei*? Why not happy stories about heroes and pretty ladies?”

“I’m just curious. With the funeral tomorrow...” you hesitate, “well, I was thinking about ghosts and death and this is all really morbid, I guess....”

“*Yurei* are not to be thought of, Kevin.” She declares abruptly. “Put it out of your mind. Gemma Blight died in America, she does not become a *yurei*. Not enough power in this soil.”

“But Mother –”

“No, Kevin,” she retorts.

“How did she die?” You ask, hoping this is an alteration in the subject she will accept.

“Kevin,” her voice is sharper now. “Do not focus on her death, think instead about her life.”

“That’s the point,” your voice cracks, “I think I ruined her life.”

This is more emotion than you typically express to your mother. She looks at you with pity in her dark eyes, and pats you on the shoulder.

“Do not give take so much credit,” she remarks. “She was not broken in the heart so much as the head, and that is not a break you created.”

She busies herself with the pot of water, setting it to boil.

“I put together the room from your childhood, so the bed might be short. But you never come home so there is no need to get a new one,” she has fallen back into old sayings, the things she repeats any time you visit. “There is a wake tomorrow and the funeral in the evening. Sleep in all morning and you will feel better about everything.”

“Mother,” you start one more time, but she begins to talk loudly about the neighbors and the antics of their eldest daughter, and you know you have been dismissed.

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Initially you believed you would not be able to sleep, that you would lie awake and think too much about Gemma. But even in the twin bed, wrapped in sheets with ninja turtles on them, you are able to peacefully pass the night. It is a little after noon when you wake up. The wake at four will come soon enough.

Your mother refuses to bring up last night, instead peppering you with questions about Orlando and your work there. She never could entirely grasp the concept of “public relations,” wondering why a person, let alone an entire department, was needed to help the image of a company.

“Meet any good girls?” She slips in slyly. The girl in the neighboring cubicle crosses your mind.

“No.” Too soon to move on from Gemma.

She keeps you distracted for the better part of the afternoon, so that when it is finally time to leave for the wake, you are not even thinking about Gemma or the ghost that may or may not be haunting you. But when you arrive at the funeral home (“Not a church?” your mother sniffs, ever offended even though not a Christian herself), you suddenly feel dread in your stomach.

You almost want her to show up, to see her alive and well and not dead. You approach the front of the viewing room with trepidation.

In her casket she looks older than you remember her, but you cannot tell which is the toll of time or the effects of the formaldehyde and other chemicals they pumped her with. The funeral workers managed to hide the cause of her death: stiff sleeves cover her arms and wrists. You imagine the pale flaps of skin underneath, slice after slice devoid of blood.

Bile rises in your throat and you turn away. Fresh air might do you some good, so you leave the wake and walk a little ways down the road. At a small playground across from the graveyard, you sit on a swing. If she appears anywhere it would be here, where you left her behind.

“They didn’t do a good job of prettying me up,” she complains on the swing next to you.

“Are you a ghost?” You ask, disturbed by the hopeful note in your voice.

“Ghosts aren’t real, Kevin.”

You believe her, but the alternative explanation is scarier than the supernatural. Believing in ghosts means you are not in a quagmire of guilt. Believing in ghosts means she has unfinished business, something to share, someone to blame. To know she is not a ghost means you are the only one still suffering.

She shifts on the swing set, pushing off the ground and tucking her legs as the swing moves in a pendulum. When she spoke, it sounded as if it came from a distance.

“Life doesn’t move in a straight line. It curves and twists and sometimes it doubles back. Events occur in spikes on the line or in slumps, and some mean nothing. On the other hand,” she pauses, sucking in a deep breath. “On the other hand, some mean everything. But maybe the

greatest of bright days aren't enough to outshine the darkest days when you're too far from the light."

"Was I," you swallow, "was I a bright day?"

She turns to you, smile etched across her pale face, eyes like two wide hollows in her skull. You clutch the metal chains of your swing with sweaty palms.

"Is that what I have to tell you? Is that what you need to hear in order to let me go?"

Too frightened to verbalize an answer, you stare into her eyes until you feel like the night is within you instead of without.

"There were days the thought of you kept me on the surface," she finally says, turning forward again. You suck in a shallow breath, wary of interrupting her. "There were days the thought of you made me dash a blade across my skin. But I knew always you never would have wanted this for me. You only wanted to make me happy. You just weren't very successful."

You remember the last time you sat on this swing set with her, when she asked you to stay. When you failed to ask her to follow, instead expecting her to wait. Only three short years had passed, and yet you never returned.

"I wish..." you begin, but the words get caught in your throat. "I wish, I wish that I could fix it. Go back and never leave you hanging the way I did. Maybe you would have been happier -"

"Don't give yourself so much credit," her words eerily echo your mother's. "Maybe it would have been easier with you, but it would have still come to this."

"I don't understand why."

Gemma laughs.

“Honestly? Me either. But it could have been any other day. I didn’t set out trying to kill myself, Kevin.” She slows the swing, flip-flops barely touching the ground. “I just wanted to feel something a little more than I already felt. It’s scary, being numb. You start to forget there are other options.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t help you,” you murmur.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be helped,” she responds. She stands, brushing off her dress. It is too cold for sundresses, you realize. “But don’t let me be a paradigm in your life. You asked me to wait for you once.” She turns to face you. “I think instead you waited for me. I’m gone now, Kevin.”

You close your eyes, tears forming at the corners. You think she tries to kiss you because a feeling like a feather brushes against your lips. When you open your eyes, she is gone.

You walk home alone, Gemma on your mind but not in your sight. With each step, she fades a little more, replaced by thoughts of the woman the cubicle over, the woman in red. Maybe it is time to ask her on a date. Something small. Coffee, maybe?

Tomorrow you return to Orlando, away from this city of ghosts and memories.

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