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Teeth and Claws: A Collection of Reformed Fairy Tales

Elizabeth J. Kepsel
Northern Michigan University

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TEETH AND CLAWS:
A COLLECTION OF REFORMED FAIRY TALES

By

Elizabeth J. Kepsel

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This thesis by Elizabeth J. Kepsel is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

Committee Chair: Jen Howard

Date

First Reader: Leslie Larkin

Date

Second Reader (if required):

Date

Department Head: Raymond Ventre

Date

Assistant Provost of Graduate Education
and Research: Dr. Brian Cherry

Date

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NAME:

Elizabeth J. Kepsel

DATE OF BIRTH:

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ABSTRACT

TEETH AND CLAWS: A COLLECTION OF REFORMED FAIRY TALES

By

Elizabeth J. Kepsel

Fairy tales, despite their modern transformations into child-friendly stories, were once upon a time violent, filled with wolves devouring children, men murdering their disobedient wives, animal cruelty, and cannibalism. These original stories showcased wide examples of human jealousy, vanity, and greed; as Alice Hoffman said, “every fairy tale had a bloody lining. Every one had teeth and claws.” My thesis transforms fourteen of these fairy tales, both classic and lesser-known, into stories which bring out their teeth and claws once again, sharpening them on an audience which has come to expect such stories to be sweet and innocent.

Many of the stories in this collection are flash fiction – stories less than one thousand words in length – though also included are several longer retellings. They display unexplored viewpoints, modernization, acts of courage sprouting from the will to live, and good overcoming evil, despite the cost. These stories attempt, in fourteen different ways, to reconnect readers with the fairy tales they thought they knew as children.

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INTRODUCTION

“Every fairy tale had a bloody lining. Every one had teeth and claws.”

– Alice Hoffman

I don't remember any of the books my mother read to me as a child except Norton Juster's *The Phantom Tollbooth*, though she swears we went through the all of C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* and most of Roald Dahl's novels. I have no recollection of the disbelief my elementary school teachers had concerning my reading material when, in third grade, I began gobbling up books well above the expected reading levels for my age. Only after I came across a yellowed test with “96% - Great Job!” written in red pen did I remember being part of an optional reading contest in third or fourth grade; we were assigned several books, ranging from Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods* to George Selden's *The Cricket in Times Square*. We then took a test on the books; those of us who scored the highest competed, game show-style, against one another in front of the entire school to see who had the best reading comprehension skills. I don't know who won, but memory likes to give me that blue ribbon – or was it a gold medal?

Though my memories of elementary school may be hazy, I do remember the summer before fifth grade. My best friend and I would take turns begging our parents to take us to the modest town library, so we could return our books and check out another armload. More often than not, my mother acceded to our plea. What makes this summer stick out in my mind is that it was the summer I skipped right past the YA section and plunged into adult literature.

Literature may be too strong a word, though – at the tender age of ten or eleven, I began reading romance novels, much to my mother’s chagrin. Though I skimmed past the boring sex scenes, the storylines at least had the adult feel I sought. I even found a favorite author in Madeline Baker, whose novels often involved Native Americans and their socially-oppressed captives. My mother tried tempting me with the books I had devoured in previous years, but Madeleine L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time* just confused me and I had read old favorites, from Rhea Beth Ross’s *The Bet’s On, Lizzie Bingham!* to Beverly Cleary’s *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*, so often I could recite even minor plot points from memory. Even the librarians tried to tempt me with more age-appropriate reading material, but I needed new plots, excitement, action. I turned up my nose when presented with childish fairy tales, instead turning my attention to adult books presented as thick paperbacks.

My mother would not stifle my reading, but even I, with my nose between two covers for hours every day, could feel her relief when I moved away from romance. I cozied up to the short stories in Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen’s *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, inhaled Jean M. Auel’s *Earth’s Children* series, and, by eighth grade, wolfed down John Grisham’s *The Testament*, though I often found myself lost in his courtroom jargon.

Only in high school, when I thought I had memorized my small town library’s shelves, did I stumble into a back corner I had avoided due to the garish posters encouraging patrons to READ! I nearly ran when I saw K. A. Applegate’s popular *Animorphs* and spine-bend copies of Ann M. Martin’s *The Babysitter’s Club*, storylines which had never captivated me for long. I was bored with the adult section, though, and I

poked a book from the shelf, one whose pretty script caught my eye – I am still known to judge books by their covers – and soon an hour had passed.

I'd discovered a section where the books, by and large, did not interest me – books I had always thought were aimed towards a reading level I'd long since passed. I no longer recall what initially drew me in – *Zel* by Donna Jo Napoli, perhaps, or maybe Gail Carson's *Ella Enchanted* – but I do know the story hit me like a spell. These books took the fairy tales I'd known my whole life and made them edgy, replacing singing animals and bright colors with hardship and gritty reality. Beauty's beastly prince received his own story, including a middle-eastern background; girls were forced to dance until their feet bled, night after night; old men competed against young women to see who really could create gold from mere straw. I'd found a place where the comforting and familiar stories of my childhood were told from angles I never would have imagined, removing the childish themes, graphic sex, and technical language I had been trying to escape.

My mother startled me when she found me in that back corner and tapped my shoulder – I'd been lost in another world, far from our small town library. She asked, whispering in the all-but-empty building, if I was ready to go, and my fingers gripped the edges of the retold fairy tale in my hands. Yeah, I told her – I'd found what I had been looking for.

My History, Ruined

Before my grandson learned read, he told me stories, not realizing some of the tales he heard from his mother were based on my own history. His quiet, stumbling voice brought a smile to my lips, though his version often missed the truth. I played along, nodding my head and encouraging him to continue when he got most of the facts right. When he began describing the woods, though, I felt my eyebrows crease, and stopped him mid-sentence.

“Bunnies? What do you mean, bunnies?”

“Bunnies live in the woods, Gramma!” Jacob was adamant. “And deers, and raccoons, and, and, and...” He paused, struggling. “And badgers!”

“But wasn’t it scary for the poor girl?” I asked. He shook his head and began talking about how the girl sang on her journey, as though she had just gone on a stroll. He didn’t seem to understand she had been fleeing for her life.

I asked my daughter about it later; she said she didn’t want to give him nightmares. “I couldn’t sleep for weeks after you told it to me the first time,” she reminded me. “Your version is awful. No one wants to hear it told like that.” I agreed that it wasn’t a pleasant story, but she put her foot down when I tried to convince her that Jacob needed to know what really happened.

So, at my daughter’s orders, I had to sit by while my miserable past was made cute and tolerable, and maybe my daughter was right. It is a terrible story. The pitch woods were dense, allowing no sunlight to peek through the boughs that rested inches above my eight-year-old head; the dangling spiders crawled across my skin, itching to get

away; the fear burned my stomach with a hollow that never quite vanished. If there were rabbits or deer, they kept away.

He told me the stepmother was wicked when I asked why the girl was in the woods. “Wicked?” I asked. “Why?” I wanted to know what lies he’d been told, and to find a way to insert some facts into the tale.

“Um.” He paused, clenching his brows together. “She was jealous, I think.”

At last, I thought, some truth. “Jealous of what?”

“The girl was prettier than she was.”

I nodded, urging him to continue. “So what’d the stepmother do?”

“She sent the girl away!” He seemed pleased with this answer, and went back to babbling his story. I kept silent, holding back the derisive snort that threatened to tear from my lips. My stepmother wanted to eat my heart, and would have killed me herself had I not run away. I wonder if the replacement heart the woodsman brought her tasted like my own, the pig’s raw juices rushing down her throat as she’d imagined mine would.

I didn’t bother correcting Jacob when he described the little girl finding the house with seven meals and seven beds. I wasn’t afraid then, it was true; I was home, comfortable for the first time since my own father’s death. My stepmother was miles away, and I combed the spider webs from my hair, ready to face the house’s owners. The hut was dirty – I have yet to find a filthier household – but the creaking floorboards spoke of ease. The seven who called it their home were like uncles I’d never had, warm and kind, worried for my safety.

No one looked for me, at least for a while. When her mirrors found me alive and well, though, my stepmother again plotted my death, this time with choking corsets and

poisoned combs and apples. I still deal with the echoes of her jealousy; every day I am reminded of it when I find myself comparing my daughter's beauty to my own wrinkled face.

Jacob's story has a happy ending. The girl does not die, but marries a prince, of all people. Together they live happily ever after and, with a smile, Jacob jumped off the couch to play with his toys or bother his mother. He does not notice my furrowed brow, deep-set with thought.

A prince, he claims, though he does not yet know to question whether the prince loved the girl, or if she loved him, or whether the girl wanted children or if the prince wanted a wife. By the stepmother's mysterious disappearance in his version, I see Jacob knows nothing of the wars fought when the stepmother died, her feet encased in iron shoes heated over a coal-red fire to make her dance at the girl's wedding. He doesn't think that the prince might have died only a few years later, leaving his wife, barely old enough to have produced children, with the weight of a household on her shoulders when she should have still been playing with dolls herself. He doesn't understand, poor child, that there is a life after ever after, and that forever isn't always happy.

I Would've Eaten That Pea If They'd Told Me It Was There

My first word, Ma said, was “hungry.” She might’ve mixed me up with Tilla, though; one of us was “want,” that much she knew for sure. She thinks Mel’s was “more,” though I’m not so sure about that; Mel always was a light eater.

Ma, well, she was hungrier than all of us put together. She didn’t complain, though – she just worked harder.

She’d begin every lesson after we’d spent a long day peddling on the streets. We would gather in front of the scant fire and try to keep our eyes open as she lectured. Some nights she taught us manners, or rules, or instructed us how to walk or talk or breathe in tiny gasps, as though a corset bound our ribs. She gave us the only thing she had to give – knowledge of royalty gleaned after working for years in the castle.

Mel was the first out of the house, off to seek her fortune, followed by Tilla a few months later. Ma got sickly when it was just her and me. She had me return earlier each day from the streets, and fed me her share. “I’m trying to give you some shape,” she would mutter when I protested. We’d heard from Mel, who was working in a tavern and had earned enough from some side job to send money home; Tilla’s body turned up a few days after she left, ravaged by men and wolves in the forests outside our village.

I stayed until Ma died, and after she was buried in the far end of the churchyard I took the last scraps of food from the cupboards and headed into the world. Ma’s last words rang in my ears: “Never sleep well until you’re safe.” I heeded her words and slept poorly, helped by the pinecones below my back and animal noises in the night.

Heavy rains beat the road to mud, and though I was ready to collapse from hunger – perhaps “hungry” really was my first word – I kept moving until I reached a town.

Once inside the gates, I found the castle and demanded entrance.

I claimed to possess royal blood, and they put me up for the night, a bit reluctant without proof of my birth. The prince wasn't young, but he was unmarried. When asked of my country, I claimed I had amnesia, caused by the storm. They put me in a bed I could only assume was made for royalty – mattress upon blanket upon pad. I needed a ladder to climb the pile and found, once I had reached the top, it was a softer surface than any I had ever felt before. Within moments I was fast asleep.

Just before dawn I awoke, rejuvenated and ready to prove myself worthy of wealth. Ma's last words hit me then – never sleep well. I pinched myself all over, making little bruises appear just before the servants entered, asking how I'd slept.

My Husband's Work

The giant offered me a choice: I'd be his wife or I'd be his dinner. His hair wasn't as coarse as the other giants of the area, his eyes so yellow, or his skin so mottled with patchy callouses – so I chose life. My groom barely looked my way during the ceremony, instead picking at his nails between repeating his I do's, cheeks burning red with each mumbled word. Bits of flaked skin and spittle rained down, sticking in my hair and clinging to my dress, and the priest had to repeat himself twice before my new husband heard, "You may kiss the bride."

His lips covered my own, along with my nose and chin, and his breath smothered me as I shook, fearing he would eat me then and there. The priest took his fee – he was allowed to live – and the giant threw me over his shoulder, the same way he brought me into the church. I saw the poor priest fall to his knees and begin repeating a prayer as we left the sanctuary, floorboards cracking below.

Two long days of hard rowing by boat brought us to the island my husband called home. My father's words rang softer in my ears with each stroke of the paddles, delivering me further from my home: "I'll find you, I'll save you, I promise." I realized why my husband had grunted a laugh at these words. His arms pumped oars against the billowing waves the entire trip, and he ignored my questions. He wouldn't even meet my gaze, though I did catch him stealing a few glances.

"Where are we going?" I asked. "When will we get there? Who are you – what do you want me for, anyway?" Giants, as far as I knew, didn't take wives, but he made no moves to eat me, crush my bones, or drink my blood. If anything, he seemed nervous

around me. It had taken a lot of cajoling to convince him I wouldn't run away and that he could untie my arms on the boat – I wasn't going to try to escape by swimming, not in the shark-infested waters I'd been taught me to fear from an early age.

A late sun burned the treetops when the island came into sight. My husband secured the boat to a primitive island dock made of rough branches tied with leathery vine rope. He moved to pick me up, but this time I sidestepped him, weak as my legs were from the ocean, and walked myself down the dock. "I'm not going to spend the rest of my life," I told him, "being carried around like luggage." He watched my movements but made no move to grab me, instead guiding me towards a house as gigantic as it was crude.

I figured out his schedule in the days that followed. My husband rose at dawn, tidying the house and preparing breakfast while I lingered in a bed so large I needed a ladder to climb into it. I watched the sun rise across the stunted trees until I got up out of boredom or an uncomfortable bladder. At first I let my husband make meals and ate whatever he placed before me. I was a farm girl, though, raised for work and toil; after lying about for a week or so, I grew bored and began cooking for him instead, a change which appeared to please him. Though I could not reach the sink without a ladder or lift the pans by myself, I was able to prepare at least one meal a day. It gave me some purpose. Fresh flowers began appearing in crude, oversized vases, and we settled into a routine that, while loveless, was not unhappy.

I asked one morning, as I climbed from the enormous bed, if I could see what he did during the daylight hours. I saw him only in the early morning and when he came

home at sunset, and wondered what could possibly take up his time. Every evening on his return a look of relief would pass over his face, as though he feared I would run away.

Innocent though my question was, he snarled like a beast, and for the first time since our wedding I feared him. “You’ll stay here,” he warned me, eyes clouded. “You can go anywhere you want on this island, but never follow me.” He didn’t even eat breakfast before stomping away, pounding a beat into the earth.

The island didn’t take long to memorize. On the first day I ventured out of the shack I did get lost, and my husband located me at twilight, trying to find my bearings atop an undersized tree; I never let that happen again. Though I could not see them, I knew there were other islands near enough for my husband to visit, as he rowed away each week, returning after darkness with food and other supplies. I never lacked clothing, though I often had to alter the everyday outfits he brought me, and the kitchen remained stocked with everything from avocado to wine. He even brought me little offerings, gift-wrapped packages of sparkling jewels and ball gowns I wore for no one. My curiosity raged as I searched for hints of why a giant would want a wife; at the same time, I grew bored with the sedentary lifestyle. As my husband’s snores shook the leaves outside our hut, I resolved to find out what he was doing.

My husband liked two dozen eggs and a sack of potatoes for breakfast, and I kept the silence he enjoyed, just like any other morning. I counted to one hundred before following him into the misty forest, listening for his heavy footfalls. Despite his size, he left no path I could discern, perhaps fearing his nosey wife might follow. I listened for his heavy breathing and watched for flashes of his stained tan shirt to keep the trail.

At last I found him, stooping in front of a large boulder. His hand flattened against the stone, fingertips pressing against the rough side. It swung open, like a door, and, eyes darting in caution, my husband entered. The rock clicked softly behind him, blending into the earth like any ordinary boulder.

He did not notice anything different in my manner that night. We ate in silence, watched the sun sink into the sea while I rested in his clumsy arms, and slept in his giant's bed. If anything, I watched him closer, trying to see if he knew I'd followed him. My husband was a creature of habit, though, and the days passed as they had before. I did not follow again him the next day, or the next. When he prepared to leave the island that week, he asked if I needed anything from the nearby village, as he always did.

"Not that I can think of," I sighed, looking away. I needed to know what was in that hidden room, and though his trips always took the entire day, I wanted to make sure he did not return early.

"Nothing?" he asked, prodding. I knew he wanted to please me, in his own way.

"Only..." I paused, and a slight smile pierced his face. "I'd like a little cloth, if it isn't too much to ask. To make the house a little cozier – I'd like to make curtains, maybe, or a tablecloth." He nodded, grin growing, and left with the tide as I waved from shore. A shock of guilt shot through my chest; he really didn't seem to be bad, as far as giants went, and he was my husband. Still, my curiosity would kill me if I didn't find out what he was up to, and I vowed to be secretive as I snooped. He would never need to know I'd followed him.

His boat hadn't disappeared from sight before I ran back to the cabin. Despite having no path to follow, I stumbled over rock and hill before finding the secret hollow,

nestled into a low rock wall. My waking thoughts had not left the rock, and my dreams showed me fantastic visions of what lay inside that mound of stones – a shining dragon’s hoard, a weaponry of clubs and swords, or perhaps something he collected – fish bones or toys from his childhood.

My hand, so much smaller than my husband’s, caressed the morning-cool rock, and I hoped it would work for me. After a moment the boulder shifted open, eager to please. I took two steps and the rock soundlessly trapped me inside.

A scream, high and wordless, echoed from the dripping walls; I did not realize it was my own, only that my heart shrieked in tune with the fearful song. Bodies hung from the walls, some with only bone and clothing – all feminine – others with flesh still clinging. Flies lowed their buzz, and wriggling maggots lived in the walls. A crusty butcher’s knife gleamed in the light which filtered through the rocky ceiling, and a barrel, half-full of persevering salt, sat in a corner. Cured hunks of meat hung from the walls and everything went dark.

The light shone in a band across my eyes when I awoke, and I had no way to tell how much time had passed. Though I wanted to avoid the gruesome vision, I couldn’t help myself; my eyes studied my husband’s work. On the floor at the far end of the cave was a sight that made me feel faint again, though I had not yet managed to even scramble to my feet: a small pyramid of heads leaned against the wall, stacked on top of one another. The different shades of hair were tied together in disheveled knots in order to keep them balanced. The ones nearest to the top, the freshest ones, still had eyes which seemed to plead with me: they wanted vengeance. They wanted justice. And I did not want to die as they had.

Though my stomach lurched as I stood, I approached the knife stuck into the massive table. It was, I already knew, my husband's size, and even with two hands I could not manage to grip the handle he would carry with ease. I scanned the room, trying to get an idea of what to do, trying – and failing – to ignore the bloodstained walls, the hooks and nooks stuffed with old clothing and nails, the jars with floating fingers and toes. Everything in that cave was made for a giant. A shaft of weak light struck my eyes, and I realized I had to get out of there before my husband came home. I needed air and to plan what I would do when he found out what I had done – and I had no doubt now that he would find out.

In my haste to escape, I stepped into a pool of congealed blood puddled near the table, but I ignored the squelching between my toes, instead inching along the walls until I reached the door. To my joy it sprung open with a soft touch, and I couldn't believe that the sun had not moved. I discovered upon reaching the water's edge that my hair had not turned gray from the shock, and though I shook, my reflection was still fair, not wrinkled with age as I felt it should be.

I dove into the sea, rinsing with salt and sand the fresh sweat from my skin. I saw everywhere the gaping eye-holes of those dead women, women who, like me, had been to this island. I noticed the blood on my foot would not come off, no matter how I scrubbed. I grew worried when, using soap retrieved from the hut, I found that the stubborn stain seemed to have dyed my skin. I dug up the shoes I wore when I was first brought here, which had been abandoned after a few days of living on the island, and used them to cover the shameful mark.

By the time my husband returned, night had crept across the island, and I still had not determined what to do. Every moment had passed by as though it were an eon, yet time seemed still to slip like water through my fingers. He presented me with a gift, tiny in his hands and tied up with a blue silk bow. “I hope you like it,” he murmured, a gnarled finger brushing my hand. His cheeks flushed as red as the stain I hid on my foot. “I wasn’t sure what colors to get. I can always take it back, if, you know.” I could not meet his yellowed eyes, and focused instead on the bundle in his thick fingers.

“What is it?” I asked, reaching for the package. He held it out of my arm’s reach.

“What you asked for this morning,” he said, confused.

My brain whirled. Morning had been a lifetime ago; my foot itched. “Oh,” I said, the thought hitting me, “the fabric!” I reached again, but my husband continued to hold it above my head, all traces of embarrassment gone.

“You were excited for it earlier,” he said.

“I am, I am,” I said. “I’m sorry, it’s just been a busy day.”

His eyes roamed the house, pausing on the unwashed dishes and floor. I kept my own trained on the package above my head. “You’re wearing shoes,” he said after a moment.

I looked down; the traitorous leather tips peeked from beneath my skirts. “I was walking on the beach today.” He had never before mentioned my way of dress. “The sands were hot.”

“Take them off.” I’d never heard such flint in his voice.

I took a step towards the kitchen, trying to distract him. “Wouldn’t you like dinner, or—”

“Take them off, or I’ll take them off for you.” He loomed over me, taller than I’d ever noticed, and I had no choice. I sat on the floor, removing first the shoe from my clean foot. I glanced up; he stood, arms crossed, brows creased with a severity I had not seen since the day he kidnapped me. I removed the other shoe slowly, inching it from my skin as my husband cleared his throat. Once the red showed, I slid it off in one movement. The stain screamed my guilt.

“I’m sorry,” I said, voice shaking. I wanted to be brave, to confront him about his horrible deeds, to demand to know about the dead women, but the words would not form. I could not meet his eyes.

“You’ve been to the cave,” he said. Reaching down, my husband picked me up and carried me like a child. “You disobeyed my orders.” Setting me on the massive bed, he removed the ladder that I needed to get down. He turned, and though I could not see his face, I knew his forehead would be wrinkled, his lips pursed. “All I ask is for obedience – I don’t even ask for love. I thought you...” he paused, voice sticking in his throat, and though my stomach churned, I wanted to comfort him. I may not have loved him, but I did not hate him, either; he had been kind, which was more than many husbands could say. “My wives are never content with the life I offer.” My pity shrank; I had known the other women had been to the island, that the clothes he had given me were from their corpses, but I had not wanted to believe I was just another replacement.

“Prepare yourself,” he ordered, opening the door. He added one warning: “Take this time to pray, and don’t try to escape. I will find you.” He looked over his shoulder, one quick, longing glance, and said, “If I you force me, I will make it painful.”

The rebuke was unnecessary; my knees had no strength and I could not fathom rising. I heard an unfamiliar thud as my husband barred the door from the outside, closing off all hopes of escape. I could not focus on prayer, and my fingers gripped the coarse fabric of the quilt. “I don’t want to die,” I whispered; I did not want my head to join that macabre pile. Taking a deep breath, I crawled to the edge of the bed and, not giving myself a chance to think of the outcome, I tumbled to the floor. My feet tingled with pain as small bolts of lightning coursed up my calves, but I limped toward the kitchen; my husband had not moved the ladder leading up to the counter.

He returned with the butcher’s knife gleaming his hand, clean of crusted blood and gore. His face likewise burned with a sorrow that did not fit. He was a giant – a man-eater, a cattle-thief, a bride-killer – yet I knew his task was not enjoyable. “You don’t have to do this,” I said from the counter, standing next to a wooden cutting board. My husband turned from the empty bed and narrowed his eyes. I had not hid, and stood straight as a nail, my head thrown back so I could look in his eyes. “We’ve been happy, haven’t we?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and I actually believed him, despite what he was about to do, “but you broke my law, my rule, the only one I had.” He shook his head. “And there is punishment for such actions.”

“The way you punished those other girls?” I asked.

He groaned, waving his knife in front of himself. “You women! Too curious for your own good. Of course I killed them – you know what I am!” He didn’t look like a giant then; he was my husband, large and ungainly, to be sure, but his was still a face I

had come to know. He approached the counter, the anguished look still driving furrows into his face. “I give you a good life, lots of food and pretty clothing –”

“The clothing of dead girls.”

“And what do you do?” He ignored my comment, staring at the treacherous stain on my foot. “The one thing I tell you not to. Now you’ve got to join them.” He raised the knife, wincing himself. I jumped back at the last second, \ shrieking as the blade thudded into the wooden countertop. He had closed his eyes, and opened them with some shock. “Stop that,” he said, raising it again. “Don’t make me hold you down; go with dignity.”

Instead, I reached behind the cutting board and pulled out the largest knife I could handle. My husband was a slow man, and he wrinkled his brow again, surprised that I fought back. I raced towards him, but he easily took a step away and was out of reach. “If I have to go,” I hissed, “I’m going down fighting.”

Every time he approached the counter I brandished the knife. He had the upper hand, I knew that, but I remained true to my word – I refused to just die and join that pile. My husband concentrated on my movements and, with only a little warning, he jumped towards the countertop, cleaver sailing.

That quick tick of eyebrow and tightened clutch of knife’s handle was all the warning I needed, though. Instead of facing his superior strength I jumped to the ground, holding my knife away from myself. I ignored the shots of bright-white pain rushing up to my knees as I hit the ground and slammed my sharpened blade into the back of my husband’s right foot, slicing through a tendon. He crashed to the floor, alternately roaring and screaming and making my eardrums ring. His butcher’s knife lay forgotten on the counter.

“I don’t want to die,” I said, wondering if he could hear my voice amidst his own ringing screeches.

“Little bitch!” he screamed, voice still going high and low as he swatted at me. I ducked, feeling the breeze from his hand pass over my head. “Little...” His words died off as he tried to staunch the blood flowing from his ankle.

Those were his last words. I had to jump to reach his neck, but I managed to smash my knife into a pulsing vein. I left it there, and he did not pull it out, though his blood-soaked hands probed the wound. A flash crossed his eyes, some emotion he couldn’t speak – sorrow, or maybe relief – and then he slumped to the ground, curved fingers reaching for me. I could not stand that strange, sad look on his face, and burned the oversized hut to the ground. The darkness softened with the dawn, and my bloodied heel ached at what remained of the dying flames.

Grease and Soot

“Beauty deserves wealth,” Mother preached to me when I was a child, and for a long time I believed her, longing for a way out of our middle-class lifestyle. Father had sworn at my birth that he would find me a rich husband and a life without work, and Mother clung to his promise. She sheltered me from all toil and strain, teaching me that servants could do the housework; I just had to order them about.

I loved her, but in the months following her death it was Jacques, the kitchen boy, who helped me survive. He lived in a squalid shack on the edge of our property and saved every penny he came across even though he would, we both knew, never afford a wedding band. Mother once rebuked him with the lash for smiling at me; she would have fainted at my dalliances. The oil and grime of the kitchen made her cringe, but after Father remarried and my step-mother relegated me to the kitchen, I had no choice but to learn how to work. I don’t know how I would have made it without Jacques teaching me how to tend a fire or keep a roast from burning.

But this night would make Mother proud. I am led by four waiting women – my waiting women – who titter behind open fans. I can feel their eyes on me, wishing for a chance to exchange our places. I stare at my gloved hands, trying to loosen the tight knit my fingers have created. I see Jacques everywhere: in the servants with whom I sense a kinship; in the woodsy fires whose smoke, despite the gagging perfume of the peacocks around me, I pick up; even my hands are alien without his fingers twisted around mine.

Perhaps I should have blushed at the prince’s proposal, or cried during the wedding – acted the part of the virgin bride. A smile graced my face, as false as these

clothes; I am an overdressed foreigner among women who are accustomed to such splendor. This is what my mother wanted for me, yet I only think of Jacques.

Nevertheless, I think my groom holds certain expectations – namely, that I be untouched, though he knows of the work of my past. My new husband is charming, true, but I've seen how his eyes follow me. He expects a wall of resistance, innocent fears. He doesn't know what I've learned from Jacques' greasy hands and sooty body. He doesn't know how my pleas to return to my pampered life ended the night I found Jacques, his voice whispering low in the darkness of the fireplace, luring me to the cramped hovel where I slept from that night on, entangled in his arms.

When the giggling women finally leave I rip open the lacing on my dress, filling my lungs for the first time since daybreak. Only when my breath returns do I note the splendor of the room – flamboyance for which my step-sisters would have killed.

My husband enters. He is handsome enough in the fire-lit room, and I need no coy smile to gain his embrace. He knows my base work of the past eight years, and still he has married me. I push Jacques from my mind as I lead my husband to the extravagant bed. He will be grateful for what Jacques has taught me, and if he isn't, there are always extra workers needed in the kitchens. I find I already miss seeing his grease on my fingers, my soot on his clothes.

What Happens When Your Granddaughter Stays Home Sick

Your daughter can't get off work, though you can tell she regrets it. She explains over the phone that her daughter is ill with a sore throat and stomach pains. "The flu won't kill her," you say. "She's probably just trying to get out of school."

"I know, it's just..." There is a quick pause on your daughter's end. "I've been calling the house, but she isn't answering. Could you..."

You smile; it's nice to know you're still needed. "I'll stop by." You glance in the fridge. "I've got some homemade chicken soup that should perk her right up."

Your daughter lives in a brick house surrounded by thick forests, and the drive only takes a few minutes. No one answers the door when you knock, and you give the handle an experimental twist; it is unlocked, and the key you were searching for is unnecessary. Your daughter must have forgotten to lock it when she left for work.

The house is silent. Though you want to call out for your granddaughter, you don't want to wake her if she is asleep. Setting the thick-noodled soup on the counter, you hobble towards the back bedroom.

Outside the door you hear a sound, a soft cry of pain. Your hand is on the tarnished knob when a deeper voice grunts, snorting like an animal. The higher voice – your granddaughter's, you're sure – sobs, and you jump back from the door, faster than you've moved in years.

You rush to your son-in-law's den. The gun cabinet is shut but not locked, and you survey the wood-stocked weapons, looking at rifles and shotguns before picking up a

pistol. You marvel for a moment at the power such a tiny weapon packs, but a groan sounds through the wall, and you rush from the room.

The bedroom door opens at your touch. Though your hands shake you remain unnoticed. Everywhere there is red: red blanket, red sheets, red skin that surely indicates a fever. You fail to recognize the young man your granddaughter brought to Christmas dinner, do not see your granddaughter clutch him in her pearly teeth as tight as the boy clutches her with those large hands.

The gun wavers in your hand, though, and you do not pull the trigger. You remember cleaning the house when your daughter was only fifteen, and spotting condom wrappers and latex dried stiff, all hiding beneath crumpled notebook paper. You didn't talk to her then, for fear of embarrassing her, and ignored the nights when you first began to hear her window slide open to those young men who hid in the cool evening air. She sometimes spoke of college, travel, and adventure, dreaming aloud in those rare moments when teenage hormones didn't make her sullen and moody.

You knew the news was bad when, three years later, she came to you, red-faced and unable to meet your gaze. She clutched her boyfriend's hand, told you she was pregnant and, though she did not voice these thoughts, you knew she wanted to sob, say how scared she was, that she wasn't ready. That brave mask fooled only the boy. Neither of you were ready to let go of those dreams she had entrusted to you.

Your finger twitches on the trigger as your granddaughter looks up, screaming in surprise; your shot goes far, leaving hole in the wall that will take your daughter another three years to finally patch and clean.

The Singing Contest, as Judged by Death

I heard from the wren, who heard from the lark, who heard from the crows that scavenged through the royal garbage: the Emperor was dying. The message was, of course, meant for me, though the rest of the forest knew I did not want to even think of the castle. The Emperor had replaced me as his nightingale long ago.

I couldn't sleep that night, though; I didn't relish the idea of the Emperor dying. In return for my music, years ago, the Emperor had tied a string to my foot and kept me in a golden cage, as though I should be honored to be held hostage by someone of such high rank. I hated every moment of such captivity. I was offered riches, titles, anything I wanted – but I was abandoned when the Emperor found a new wonder, a pretty mechanical toy with one repetitive song.

“A creature made of clever gears and wheels might sing all day and night, if someone remembers to wind him, but are the songs original?” I'd asked after returning to the forest. “Does the machine distinguish its audience between Emperor and common fool?” I shook my head when recounting my story. “I think not.”

Though darkness still tied the forest together, I left my perch, telling myself I just needed to stretch my wings. The palace soon appeared, white marble walls glowing in the moonlight. I landed on the Emperor's window ledge, remembering the spot where I sang so long ago, and shivered from more than the pre-dawn chill.

Something whirred inside. “What are you doing here?” a stiff voice asked.

“I see they haven't tossed you out yet,” I said, searching for the mechanical bird.

After a moment he hopped into view, head held high. He stood on a table near the Emperor's bed, ruby-and-emerald plumage glittering even in the dark. Stray moonbeams echoed from his golden beak as he spoke. "Of course not – I am everything you are not. I can sing a perfect melody indefinitely for the Emperor, so long someone winds me up."

"What's the point of singing if you only repeat same song over and over again?"

We had never gotten along well.

"Pathetic warbler."

"Mechanical freak."

"Short-lived bird brain."

"Unnatural contraption."

"The Emperor loves me better! He gave you away!"

I scoffed. "I left of my own free will – something you'll never understand, you wind-up toy!"

A hacking arose from the Emperor's bed. "Sing for me," he said, voice creaking. I was surprised at how much he had aged; he'd grown thin and white-haired since I'd last seen him. "I've given you everything – jewels, titles, expensive oil, costly tune-ups – now sing for me!"

"I am not wound," the mechanical bird said, voice so low I almost couldn't hear him. "I cannot sing."

"Why is he alone?" I asked. "Shouldn't an attendant be with him?"

The mechanical bird hung his shining head. "They think he is already dead; when they left they said he would not survive the night."

Something moved in the midnight recesses of the Emperor's chambers. When the mechanical bird turned to see what I was staring at, he started from shock: Death, in a black cloak held together with bone-white hands, approached the Emperor, whose gasps for air were the only sound in the room. A shiver of cold ran through my breast. Death prepared to take the Emperor, and I opened my beak, ready to release the song building in my chest.

"What are you doing?" The mechanical bird screeched, and Death and I turned towards the golden creature.

"Who, me?" I asked.

"Yes, you! I'm the Emperor's songbird – I'll sing to him!"

"But you haven't been wound. You can't sing!"

The mechanical bird looked at the diamond-studded knob on his back. "Well, wind me, then!"

"You expect me to wind you? With what thumbs, robot?"

Death had been listening to the argument pass between us. "You're a noisy bunch of animals, aren't you?" he asked, voice like wind through a dried river bed. "Why do you want so badly to sing?"

"If the Emperor hears my voice," I said, shy before Death; the mechanical bird cut me off before I could finish.

"If he hears my voice, more likely, then maybe he'll find a reason to live."

It took me several moments to realize the sound in the air, what reminded me of dead cattails crumbling to dust, was Death's laughter. "You think a pretty song will save him?"

“Well...” I paused, looking to the Emperor, who lay curled on his side, the blankets pushed from his emaciated body. He and I had been friends once. I ate from his hand, and he sang my own songs back to me in his clumsy human way. “I’d like to at least try.”

Death looked at the mechanical bird. “And you?”

“I would like to save my master – and beating this brutish animal would make it all the sweeter.” He bowed to Death. “I cannot, as the nightingale so crudely pointed out, sing without proper winding, though.”

“Interesting. I should like to see why you think your whistles and cries could save anyone.” Though Death did not touch the mechanical bird, I could hear the clicking gears wind. “Now, then,” Death said, sitting in a chair by the Emperor’s bed. “One at a time, go ahead. Sing.”

I hesitated, the song I had prepared having died in my throat. Across the room, though, the mechanical bird wasted no time; opening his beak, the golden toy began singing. His notes, both high and low, were pitch-perfect, and even I had to admit, though he knew only one song, he certainly knew it well.

When the mechanical bird finished his minuet, Death nodded to me. My first note fell flat and I faltered. My rival smirked from within the Emperor’s chamber, mocking me. I closed my eyes and imagined the Emperor as the only person in the room, his attention devoted to my music.

It had been years since I had allowed myself to sing as I did with that picture in my mind. The aria bounced from the high ceiling, echoing like the music was haunted. I opened my eyes during an especially high trill and saw the Emperor sitting up in bed,

eyes trained on me – me, a bird who had once been the Emperor’s nightingale. I’d felt the same pride when I’d held the title, before I had been caged.

Death looked from me to the mechanical bird and back again. “I cannot judge between two such melodies. Will you sing for me again?” The mechanical bird complied: the same notes, sung with the same perfection.

When he’d finished I sang a new song, a sad, slow nocturne that welled up from memories of my escape from the castle years ago.

The Emperor’s face was glowing with life by the time I finished. He had lost the sallow, thin-cheeked look of illness, and I wanted to fly to him, past the mechanical bird and Death, to sing again. His face reminded me of why I was there in the first place – not to fight with the jeweled creature inside the palace, but to see my old friend.

As the mechanical bird began his same song a third time, I did not wait for my turn to start a new song, instead joining in his music. I added flourishes when the mechanical bird, surprised to be part of a duet, slowed down; I faded to the background, giving support when needed, and sang a different octave to add balance. I was careful to accompany him, and did not try to out-sing him.

Caught up in the music, I did not open my eyes again until the song ended. I looked at Death, who had a half-smile on his pale face.

“I do thank you for this early morning’s entertainment,” he said, offering a slight bow to each of us in turn. “I do not look forward to the day when I must silence your songs. For now, though, I will content myself with this man.”

“What?” I looked to the Emperor. His frozen smile was so large it resembled more a grimace.

Death touched his fingers to the old man's forehead. "He died happy, at least." The eastern sky began to lose its darkness, soft oranges and pinks replacing the coldness of the night.

"But who wins?" The mechanical bird asked, watching Death walk from the room. He did not turn to look at the Emperor's grey corpse. "I am the better singer, am I not?"

I shook my head. "It doesn't really matter anymore."

Death's low laugh was a damp breeze passing through the air. "No, I suppose it does not, does it?" He faded into the shadows, and I stretched my stiff wings.

"I guess I'll be off, then."

"Nightingale?" the mechanical bird asked, his monotone voice small and unmusical.

"Yes?"

"Good singing tonight."

"Same to you," I said. I paused, still looking out the window. "What'll you do now?"

A small sigh of air released from the mechanical bird's internal gears. "The Emperor's eldest son does not care for music. I might be taken apart for my gold." A shiver ran through his jeweled body.

"There's always room for one more in the forest," I said. As soon as the words left my beak I knew the mechanical bird's answer; no metal, precious or common, lasted long in the forest. I hoped he wouldn't take my offer the wrong way. I didn't give him time to respond, just caught a warm southern breeze beneath my wings. "Anyways, you

know where to find me if you need me,” I called, glancing back one more time. The mechanical bird hopped to the window ledge, iridescent in the dawn, and though he made no move to follow, he did lift his wing ever so slightly, offering his farewell. I sang in reply, repeating the same notes to his song that even Death had loved so well.

Snip, Snip, I Always Imagined, As Though Knives Sliced Flesh Like Scissors Cut Paper

This doctor is the best, friends told me, and she acted the part: smooth, suave, as precise with her words as I hoped she'd be with her knife.

“Our clinic often works with cases such as yours,” she said as we entered her office. A nurse pushed me from behind, guiding the small water tank I sat in. I didn't have much room to stretch, but tanks used by those of us without legs are usually for transport, not comfort.

Though it didn't look old, the clinic lacked even basic irrigation channels for water-bound creatures to use for traveling within buildings – perhaps to further convince clients of the benefits of losing their tails. Most buildings were now land- and water-friendly, but it was still a suggestion, and not a law, to cater to those of us without legs. I didn't bother complaining.

I noticed no trace of disinfectant or blood lingered in the air, like in a regular hospital; rather, it smelled of fish and the ocean on a hot day. The doctor's words floated in the background, and I tried to focus, to ignore the smell. “No one is content with who they are anymore – but with modern science as it is, it's easy to be whoever you desire.”

The surgery would be difficult, the recovery long, the cost high. “You may never walk,” she warned me at one of our many pre-operation sessions. “It isn't too late to back out, if this isn't what you really want.” These were just rehearsed lines, I knew. She wanted me to get the surgery, to give her my money. I wasn't going to back out, either – I needed to get away from the ocean, to escape from my loan shark. I knew he was keeping tabs on me, waiting for me to pay him back money I didn't have. I counted it as a miracle

he believed I was going into the city for work, that he had no knowledge of my appointments. Only a few close friends knew about the surgery; they understood that my only choice was to leave the ocean for good.

The doctor smiled when I first asked about the procedure itself. “You’ll be out for the entire thing, I promise. You won’t feel a single slice. We cut everything below the waist off, snipping your flippers and gills entirely.” I mentioned toes, small bone structures, and she nodded. “Of course. We’ll grow everything here in the lab – bone, muscle tissue, skin, hair, nails. No one will be able to tell once I’m through with you.” She glanced up again, saw my eyes flicker towards my aquatic half. “If you’re not absolutely certain –”

But I was certain, and every week for three months I came for another session. I had always wanted legs, though I’d never thought I would find an excuse, a real reason, to go through with the operation. Now that I had debts I couldn’t repay, I had no choice but to have the surgery.

The doctor could not move the process any faster, though I did try to speed it along; legally, I was required to have at least twelve weekly therapy sessions, so that I would have plenty of time to make sure my decision was an informed one.

Despite my impatience and my fears, my weeks began to revolve around those precious half-hour intervals after I arrived in the clinic. After leaving the ocean depths for the sunny shoreline I would begin the short swim upstream, coming into the city. The water was more polluted there, but you get used to it over time. Before my appointment I would drop off a box or two of stuff from my grotto – laminated books, cooking supplies, little waterproof knick-knacks – at the new apartment I rented. It lacked irrigation, like

the clinic, so I had to pay the doorman five bucks each visit to take the boxes up the stairs to my apartment. I only hoped I would be able to get myself up those stairs when the surgery was complete.

Most of all, I looked forward to seeing my legs during these visits, despite how much I knew I would miss the sea. I felt like a child when I approached the clinic, my eagerness to see my legs growing stronger each time I transferred from the irrigation channel outside and into a waiting tank. The nurses, all human-born and unable to understand my curiosity, would roll their eyes when I came in, knowing that, before seeing the doctor, I would request to see my new flesh.

There, in a clear glass laboratory cylinder, I watched my legs grow over a three-month period. At first they were stick-thin bones floating in hazy water which, the doctor assured me, contained the proteins necessary to grow tissue. At my next visit, I noticed shreds of pink; after that, the flesh grew at an extraordinary rate, gaining nerves and pores and little shafts that would house the hairs I would shave off each morning. The pale skin came last, encasing the muscles like sausages and glowing pale under the luminescent bulbs above. Already I pictured myself showing them off in short skirts, walking down inland streets and staying far from the waves.

At our final meeting the doctor reminded me one last time that I had a choice. “You can still back out.” Her voice verged on monotone, and I wondered if anyone had ever stopped her there and agreed that they were not ready. “Are you sure this is what you want?” My last night in the ocean had strengthened my resolve.

I’d arrived at my grotto only to find the loan shark waiting outside, fingertips drumming on the wall. My payment, borrowed to pay for my father’s funeral, was five

months overdue. I only convinced him to leave after claiming my mother – dead years before my father, though the shark didn't know this – had sent me a check by snail mail.

Inside my apartment I found torn bags of food and slashed pillows, bits of soft sand and food flakes filtering through the dim light. The gilt frame which had housed a photo of my parents was gone. I'd packed and moved everything else I deemed important – everything, including all the money I had, enough for surgery, but not enough for my loans and late fees. I was to see the loan shark the next day; I made sure our appointment would coincide with my final pre-surgery consultation.

“Are you sure?” the doctor asked, repeating her question when I paused. I handed over my life's savings in silence, not giving myself a chance to change my mind; deep-gathered pearls and sunken coins, treasures unreachable by humans, passed to her hands.

A nurse rolled me away at the doctor's request, in order to prep me for surgery. We passed through those gray doors and that fishy smell, thicker in the back of the clinic, coated my nostrils. The nurse did not notice my discomfort.

Our path took us through an open recovery ward. Other patients – mostly women, those who craved long-legged men and romantic dancing – lay half-drugged, eyes vacant. All were pale, all were silent, their arms strapped to the sides of their beds. No one save nurses walked. Everything below their waists were covered, though one girl shoved back her blanket to reveal sickly yellow skin tarnished with arching red lines along a jagged surgical scar. Crusted black flakes lined her sheets, and the nurse flicked the blanket back into place. Behind me, the gray swinging doors went still, hidden in the plastered walls.

The doctor's words filled my ears: “You still have time.” There were dangers on land – elephants and evil men, cars and the chance that I would never walk – but dangers

lurked also in the sea. Either way I was taking a chance. I clamped my teeth down on my tongue as the nurse fixed an IV in my arm. I tried to reach for my fins, to feel their slippery smoothness one final time; the IV line would not reach, though, and the world began spinning before I could think to try again.

Kissing Without Lips

It had to be a princess – I'd forgotten that little rule until after I hit up twelve girls and none of their wet, tongue-infested kisses changed me back into a man. The witch didn't mention memory loss as a symptom, but I think all that slime disturbed my thinking – even now I'm struggling to get it out of my ears and nose.

Of course the nearest royalty lived miles away. Do you know how long it takes to hop one mile, let alone sixteen? Don't even get me started on how the end-of-summer traffic tried to stomp or run me over day after day, or how the heat dried out my sensitive skin. I never lost the chance to soak in a puddle, and I had to travel during the cool night, keeping vigilant watch for owls and coyotes.

What's worse, I thought I'd be playing tonsil-hockey with a smoking beauty – you know, regular princess-level hotness, at least – but no, of course not. I found the princess, but she couldn't have been a day over eight. A cute enough kid, sure, but if I'd had any other options, believe me, I would've taken my luck with the owls and found another castle.

The swamp grasses swayed above my head as I kept one eye on the girl and the other on the hungry fish swishing in center of the pond. The castle was just visible at the end of a dust-ridden path, stone gargoyles snarling at all who passed by. The kid was playing with this golden ball, throwing it up and catching it, humming some tune and giggling each time her toy came back to earth, as though gravity were a new discovery. Anyways, she threw the ball – she seemed pretty entertained by it – and it fell into the

pond, rolling past me. I caught it just before it slipped into the deep, and settled it into the sand.

Using my sleekest voice possible, I offered to help retrieve the toy. She was all too eager to accept. My demands? That she let me come live with her. I couldn't just ask a princess to kiss me; she'd've squashed me flat. I had to work my way up. She jumped up and down, eager for me to save her ball, and agreed. I swam over to my spot in the reeds, grabbed the ball, and nudged it out of the water, fast as a frog could move. I was ready to charm this chick, to get back to my old body.

Instead, what'd the brat do? She ran. Just scooped up the ball and hightailed it home, ignoring me as I yelled for her to wait. Now, I was already tired as hell, but no, I couldn't rest – I had to hop after her through the dust, fast as my skinny legs could go, and scream at the front door. Her father let me in, invited me to the table – a King, asking a frog to hang out with his kid, saying she had to follow through on her promises. Can you believe that?

I was pretty hungry at this point, so I took a few bites from her little golden plate, and her father just nodded, like he's wanted his kid to eat with a frog his whole life. She was disgusted, but I couldn't blame her – my slime had taken on enough dust to turn me into a muddy wretch.

I was tired, so I suggested we hit the hay. Don't look at me that way – it isn't like I was going to touch her or anything. I'd been traveling for weeks on end, worrying about being eaten or squashed or melted in the heat of the day – princes just aren't made for such strenuous activities. The princess took me up to her room and set me down on the ground – touching as little of me as possible, I might add – and crawled into bed. I asked

to come up with her, off the cold floor, and she got pissed, snatched me up – both hands this time – and pounded me against the wall.

So much for a kiss – of all things, being mashed into concrete jolted me back into my human form. She was so pleased to see something other than a frog that she got herself betrothed to me, just like that. It'll be a pretty sweet gig in about eight years, but right now I'm starting to think I had it better when I could just hop around, kissing whoever I wanted without having to worry about some child-fiancé tagging at my heels, trying to get me to play with her dolls.

Flashes of Light, Mouthfuls of Bread

They came for us in the middle of the night, flashing beams of light into our eyes while shouting for us to move. “A scare tactic,” Papa called it, and it worked – I was terrified. One of the soldiers got close to my face and asked how old I was. Papa stepped in, claiming I’d just turned fifteen. My older brother Mark tried to correct him, but one narrowed look from Papa and Mark went quiet.

We had stayed past the move-out date, and were told we were lucky to be allowed one bag each; I walked tilted to one side, as mine was so weighed down with clothes and schoolbooks. Mama – she was my step-mother, really – had packed her bag weeks ago, and though she had warned us to do the same, Mark and I just thought she worried too much. Such madness would never touch our neighbors, for them to complain and send us away. We played with the children in both houses to the sides of our own, and went to school with three of the families on our street. Religious differences meant little. We had never imagined an expression as hateful as those on the faces of the soldiers who tracked mud across Mama’s clean-swept floor.

We had lived in that house my whole life but were told to call the apartment in the ghettos home. There was little room to breathe there, as full as the two-room space was with Mama and Papa, Mark, Grandma Elsie, and me. Home had been our little house with white gardenias planted outside by my step-mother every summer; she raised them indoors from seeds Papa bought months before the snows melted and the cold died away. Home had a merry fireplace with snapping logs where Siegel, our old dachshund, would lie at night, tired as though he had worked in a factory all day. Home had three meals a

day, and sometimes oranges or apples for a treat, and always bread. I soon forgot the taste of real, piping hot bread smothered in butter or seedy jam; after we left, there never was enough food to go around.

Still, Mama did her best to make the cobwebbed new apartment feel like home. She could never quite get rid of the dirt caked into the floorboards, though, and once I heard her crying when I came back from the market early, arms empty of the bread she had sent me to buy with what little money we had left. I expected her to slap me when I explained the bakery had sold out already; instead, she pulled me to her as she never had before, though the tears had been wiped from her face.

Grandma Elsie cried for nearly a week before settling in, though she never stopped asking where Siegel had run off to. We couldn't seem to make her understand that he had been left at home, and eventually we stopped trying. She called for the dog at odd hours of the night, and more than once Papa and Mark had to bring her home, sneaking through back alleys after curfew. Neither Mama nor I could sleep while they hid from the hungry eyes of the patrols, and it was only after they returned home to us, their blood still within their bodies, that we could breathe freely. More than one of our neighbors had never heard from their fathers or brothers after they had ventured out after dark to seek food or a stray child.

The cold apartment became familiar, if not comforting, though there was never enough food or blankets. I would have been mortified to share a bed with my family only a few months before, but without a fireplace to curl up next to, I was only too glad to snuggle near their warmth. My feet were constant icicles, and Mama often complained

when I tried to warm them against her legs. I began to go to bed wearing both of my pairs of socks, though I still had to rub the feeling back into my toes each morning.

I noticed the changes in Mama before I saw them in anyone else. She had always been nice to Mark and me, since she and Papa had never had children together and we were all she had, but the cold and the hunger gnawed away her kindness. She jumped whenever anyone opened the front door and yelled at everyone, even poor Grandma Elsie, whenever they spoke above a whisper. Grandma Elsie would always forget, of course, and she couldn't understand why she wasn't allowed to sing as she tottered around the apartment. Papa tried to talk to Mama, but he had developed a cough which grew worse as the days went by, and he had little voice left to argue. We left Mama alone, and some days she seemed almost her old self, if you ignored her gaunt cheeks and the rim of fear around her eyes.

I did realize, after over a year of living hard, that I fixated on Mama and didn't see the same changes happening to all of us. Mark, my big brother and my idol, used to carry me on his shoulders, laughing and racing against the wind as I spread my arms wide, trying to catch a breeze. He would claim that, if I wore puffy sleeves, I could fly away like a cloth-covered bird. I dreamt of flying over the city for weeks, catching glimpses of the smiling people below in brief flashes. His smile faded into the same line of metal as Papa's mouth, though, and he rarely spoke after we were forced from our home. I would try to catch his eye, searching for some hint of the brother he had been, only to have him duck his head and scowl if he noticed me staring.

Papa almost stopped speaking, though much of his silence was due to his cough. His shoulders would shake and he would heave, scum and spittle jostling in his chest like

death. Mark did more and more of the chores, while Papa lay wrapped in blankets, trying to keep warm near our meager fire and staring at the grime-caked floor.

I grew thin, which even worried Mama, who now noticed little, and the slightest breezes tugged at my breath, chilling me to the bone even in the summer. In my dreams my mouth would be stuffed full of bread, so much that even I, hungry as I was, could not eat it all. The pains in my stomach would only be worse when I woke up. I learned to keep to myself, refusing to bother the others when I scraped a knee or wanted a little more broth. They had their own problems.

I read and re-read the few books I had carried with me from home, but one morning I awoke to find them gone; Mark had sold them for the day's bread, a pitiful loaf with scorch marks on one side and dough on the other. I did not complain but hid in the alleyway next to our building, trying to keep my sobs silent. Mark found me sitting on the ground before dinner, and chided me for dirtying my dress in the rubbish. He stared straight ahead as we returned to the apartment, walking by my side for the first time in months. I asked him if he remembered when he would tell me I could fly away, and he turned from me. "We," he said, "are not made for the skies. The sooner you learn that, the better." His brows creased, carving tight little lines into his forehead, and I said nothing. We walked the rest of the way in silence.

When the soldiers came for us again, they barked orders and questions, hurrying us to get ready to leave while demanding answers about our ages, our possessions, and our health. They didn't look convinced that I was fifteen – I had just turned eleven a few weeks prior, my birthday celebrated with an extra ladleful of weak stew – so I stood up as straight as I could and puffed out my chest, like I had seen the older girls do when trying

to impress boys. The man in front of me looked to the other, shrugged, and they told us to get dressed. Mama began to pack. They yanked the bag out of her hands before she even had time to put in a shirt, though, and she whispered that we needed to wear all of our clothes. I felt bulky, especially since the nights had finally begun to warm up again, but I did as I was told. I was afraid of the grim-faced soldiers and their red, black, and white armbands, and didn't dare start an argument in front of them.

Grandma Elsie had not moved since they entered the apartment, and I didn't think they would notice her. Papa concentrated on tying his shoes and holding back his cough while the soldiers snarled for us to hurry. They were growing meaner by the minute, and I put on my hat, even though I didn't really need it. One of them turned and shouted at Grandma Elsie, who stared at the fireplace, face blank.

I'd learned years ago that that look meant Grandma Elsie wasn't really there. Her body was there, but her mind wasn't; she'd be thinking about Siegel or Grandpa Fredrick or the house where she grew up. If you tried to talk to her she would just gaze past you, though sometimes she would smile faintly. We had trouble convincing her to eat when she was like that, let alone talk or sleep.

The soldier grabbed her by the arm and shook her. I opened my mouth to yell at him, but Mama pinched my arm and I shut my mouth. "No," she mouthed, and I saw narrow wrinkles around her eyes that I had never before noticed. I continued to dress, holding my breath so I couldn't speak.

Grandma Elsie was slow, but the soldier wrenched her arm up so that she shot out of her chair. She didn't even blink, though, just kept looking straight through him, like he wasn't even there. The soldier didn't like that, and he shoved her out the door, his foot

sneaking in front of hers and tripping her to the ground. She hit the floor, hands skittering and failing to catch her body, and she cried then, a thin, strangled whine, like a dog trying to escape a beating. He pulled her up again and dragged her out the door. Another soldier standing in the hallway outside laughed, and I was shocked to hear joy in it, as though someone had just told a wonderful joke. The gunshot rang in my ears for hours to come.

Mama held my hand too tightly, and Mark's lip bled where he chewed at it. Papa didn't cough until we got onto the train, though the cold bit at our lungs and must have hurt him more than the rest of us. There were already too many people on board, and there weren't any seats or lights, but we fit well enough to stay together. They just kept putting more people on, though, until there didn't seem to even be enough air for everyone to breathe. What little oxygen remained smelled awful; we knew too well how many of us had not bathed in weeks.

I had been on a train once before, when I was very small, but the one leaving the ghettos looked nothing like the train I rode with my Mother, my real Mother, to collect Grandma Elsie. Mother's father, my Grandpa Fredrick, had just died, and Grandma Elsie was to come and stay with us. They lived in Dresden, and the trip from Berlin took several days. I don't remember the trip, but Papa used to make me blush by telling my school friends how I was so excited to ride on the train I wet myself before we left and almost made us miss our ride. I had not thought about Mother in weeks – my hunger and aching limbs gave me no free time for reminiscing – but being on that train made me miss her. I wondered if we would be in this situation if she were still around, and though I loved Mama, I shied away from her hand as it tried to find comfort in mine.

I cursed my thick clothes in the heat of the train car, as there was not enough room even to lift my arms or to remove my extra skirts. I sagged in the warmth. When I felt the urge to void, I turned to Mama, who just shook her head and looked away. I asked Papa, and he turned to someone standing nearby. This question had already circulated several times. We were not likely, he told me in a quiet voice, going to be stopping anytime soon.

Several hours later, my stockings grew wet, and I cried in earnest.

Papa's information about when we would stop had been right, though, and as the salt-stale stench of urine rose, other cries sounded above the noise of the train.

"Where are we going? Where are they taking us?"

"It's Friday; we should be in prayer. We should be lighting the candles, praying..."

"Mommy?" At this last little voice, a small hand tugged at my sleeve. "Have you seen my mommy?" I shook my head, choking at the sight of the tattered rags covering the child. I shrugged off my jacket as best as I could in the cramped quarters and slid it over her stick-thin shoulders. She did not smile or thank me, just nodded her head and continued asking if anyone had seen her mother.

Papa had stopped taking Mark and me to synagogue when Mother died, though Mama tried to revive the Friday night tradition. She did get him to go during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but he had trouble with the smaller holidays. Chanukah, especially, was painful for him; Mother had adored the celebration of light, and he always got a funny look on his face when we saw Menorahs in store windows.

I felt as though I could have eaten a Menorah and drunk the pooled wax from the candles by the time we reached the camp. Two days we had ridden, two days of burning pain streaking up and down our backs and legs, our feet ice, all feeling having fled early on the second day. For two days we suffered the unbearable heat of too many bodies pressed close, the carts stinking as people released their bowels on themselves, unable to do anything else. Worst of all, those two days contained seconds, minutes, hours of thirst, though that word hardly describes the feeling of desert, all sand, grit, and the heat of the sun, pounding against the hollow shell of my throat. I doubt I could have spoken if I had tried.

It was only as I left the carts, legs screaming as I attempted to bend them in the ways they used to move, that I noticed the corpses littering the floor. I had thought that some people were lucky enough to spread out to take naps while the rest of us stood in agony.

The pressure change on the soles of my feet, from the hard wood of the train to the softly-beaten track of the earth, eased the cramping pain, though only for a moment. A hose sprayed cold water at our heads, striking the breath from our chests. It did little to wet my throat; instead, the burning cold against my drenched clothes forced me to sputter instead of swallow. We were hustled forward and denied a second chance to refresh ourselves.

An angry baritone voice ordered us into lots – men to the left, women to the right. We were placed single-file, and though I tried to stay close to Mama, we were separated in the tumult. I couldn't find Mark or Papa anywhere I looked, so I fell into line, hoping we would be placed back together soon.

Two men looked each woman up and down before sending her either left or right. Sometimes they asked questions, screaming and enunciating their words as though we were idiot children; other times they let the woman go through with no objection, waving her forward without a second glance. I stood near the end of the line, and noticed a trend: those who went right were healthy, strong-looking women in the primes of their lives, while the left line hosted the young, sometimes mere children, the old, and the sickly. I shivered under the boiling midday sun.

As I came closer to the inspectors, I stood up straighter. They asked me my age and, taking a line from Papa, I said I was fifteen. My voice shook a little and one of the men sneered, but they shoved me to the right without any other question. I hardly noticed the cramps in my legs through the adrenaline, though they still shook with every step.

I was shoved, as were the other women, through a small room where my clothes were ripped from my body by a man I had never seen before. An icy spray that smelt of lye poured over me from an unseen faucet high above my head. I didn't dare try to sip it. They shaved off my hair, which I had grown nearly down to my waist, and ran a buzzing, burning pen – a tattoo gun, I later learned – across my arm. A ragged shirt and a skirt were tossed in my general direction.

Mama found me when I came into a courtyard full of women similarly shaved, cleaned, and dressed. I don't know how she recognized me; I barely knew her eyes, her scowl. She hugged me, and I shivered in her arms, though I imagined myself in Mother's embrace. The barbed wire fences which surrounded us on all sides creaked in time with the moaning of the women; somehow, the sky still found a reason to be blue. Black dust arose from a smoking chimney nearby, from the brick building where the sick, young,

and old men and women were sent. We had not eaten in days and had nothing left in our stomachs to vomit, but I was not the only one on her knees trying to forget the smell, the grit that found its way into our eyes and throats, no matter how tight we closed them.

We slept on bunks of hard wood, Mama and me and all the others, and sometimes we saw Mark when we took our tiny meals twice a day. He shook his head when we caught his eye, Mama mouthing Papa's name, but Mama was sure he had misunderstood. We simply had not yet seen Papa, she told me; hadn't I been unable to recognize her with her head clean shaven, her clothes a dirty mess? Our work line passed his one day, and Mama quickly asked about Papa. Mark replied: "He coughed."

Our meals consisted of a bit of moldy bread, some rotted soup, and a cup with only enough water to live on. Sometimes it felt like they wanted us to starve, to grow weak. If you couldn't do the work – digging, scrubbing, preparing the new inmates who came by the trainload every week – you were shot or sent to the brick building, which let off a thick black smoke that filled the air and our lungs once a week. The soldiers preferred using their bullets, and often the brick building was saved for the new arrivals who were deemed unfit for work. Sometimes they made their victims wait until evening or, worse, morning roll call, for their execution; if they were in a hurry or just bored, though, the soldiers would take behind the building and shove a bullet into your face.

There were other punishments, of course: missed meals, denied trips to the lavatory, being slapped or beaten or shoved to the ground. Some women were raped, but they rarely lived afterwards. We were all cuffed daily, whether we had done anything or not. They wanted us to make mistakes; they wanted us to die.

I had never seen anyone die before. Even Grandma Elsie had been in the hallway, hidden behind a door. The accused often had to be dragged before us, shrieking and pleading, though sometimes they came of their own free will. One man approached the soldier with a calm I found hard to fathom, whispering unheard lines from the Torah as a gun was raised to his temple. I had always thought of death as peaceful – scary for being unknown, but still serene - something that happened to the elderly in their sleep. This violence was another category, shocking and bloody in ways I had never imagined.

The first time, Mama had to stomp on my toes to remind me to close my jaw. The body fell to the ground, a dark, gaping maw where half of the face had been moments before. Nightmarish gore coated the dusty grass red. I had thought the gossiping whispers of murderous Nazis were rumors created to keep us in line, until they kicked us out of our house and killed Grandma Elsie. When the older man reciting the Torah was brought before us, I made out a few of the words he muttered: a prayer, one I hadn't heard for years. He was shot without ceremony and I finished the prayer in my mind while the soldier walked away like a modern Pilate, wiping his hands clean.

The next time, I cried out along with a few others in the crowd. One of the soldiers shouted for us to be quiet, and the howls of terror became a few quiet hiccups. After that, I promised myself I would live, that I could shed my tears in bed at night. I never did, though; I was too exhausted to give any more energy to thoughts of the dead. All I could think was how to avoid making a mistake, for fear that I would be next.

But I couldn't constantly be on my guard, and one day I slipped.

Mama and I were walking back to the mess hall; we had been digging all day and were coated in grit and mud. Though we were never told why we dug, we knew; the

chimneys always smoked while we worked. We spent hours inside those trenches, hollowing the ground with dull shovels that chafed our hands raw with blisters until blood mingled with the dust and dirt. Despite the pain I was at times comforted, feeling that I might somehow be a part of something bigger. Perhaps, I mused, religion had found me. After all, in the dark shadow of my wasting body, the brown of the ground and my own red blood were close siblings; I knew, looking at the mixture of the earth and myself, there had to be more than this life.

We were walking back from the pit one evening, our stomachs ready for something to help ease the constant cramping. The rain that had begun falling around midday had frozen as evening came on, and we were all shaking from the cold. The thin coats we had been issued a week ago provided little comfort against the windy chill. The wet ground was freezing and, just a dozen meters from the door, my feet fell out from under me. I hardly had the strength to cry out, and I rubbed my backside, wincing.

Mama helped me rise, but one soldier caught our movements. “Trying to rest?” he asked, and Mama began to speak for me, eyes downcast as she attempted to explain that I slipped on the icy ground. Her voice was still strong, though the bones in her shoulders stuck out even through her coat. The soldier didn’t care about her waning strength; he struck her with the butt of his rifle and she fell, a gash spewing blood from her temple. “You want punishment, too?” he asked. I moved to help her, but the soldier pulled me away. Another woman helped Mama to stand, and she swayed back and forth with the effort, fingers pressed to her temple. The crowd enveloped her, keeping her out of sight.

The soldier stood me in front of the mess hall, and I was certain I would be shot at evening roll call. Time died as I was left to stand where the guards could clearly see me.

The soldiers had no reason to believe I would willingly move an inch from where I had been placed, for good reason; I wouldn't have twitched if an earthquake opened on all sides around me. My eyes attended the ground, memorizing every beaten footprint, every stray bit of hardened prison-yard grass that refused to fade. I don't know why I concentrated so hard; if a soldier were to stroll up and shoot me, I would have no more thoughts for footprints or grass. I felt as though every pinprick of new fallen snow coated my limbs, and I shook with every ice-touched breath.

I aged years during the half hour mealtime before the prisoners came to stand before me. None met my gaze, save Mama, whose eye had swollen to a glare. I knew what she was thinking – it was my own fault, my punishment for one careless, weak moment. Now I was as good as dead. I found Mark in the crowd, and though he wouldn't look at me, his eyes and nose ran wet. Roll was taken, but I was not shot; I felt every breeze, ran every syllable of every prisoner number over my tongue. I was so intent on those numbers I nearly forgot to answer when they called my number. The soldier narrowed his eyes when I affirmed my presence and shoved the butt of his gun into my stomach. I fell forward, gasping for air; he ordered me to my feet before I could catch my breath.

I remained at attention in the snow as the others marched inside, and the same sneering soldier gave me my punishment in a bored tone: I would stand outside, all night, and reflect on my own weakness. I could not look around – my eyes were to remain fixed on the ground, neck bent forward – and I would be permitted no breaks for food or rest. He told me to consider myself lucky, and I did. It may have been freezing, but I had a chance at life. Another soldier was left to watch me, a younger man who shivered in his

thick woolen coat, his fingertips stroking the walnut stock of his weapon as he watched me.

The snow had ceased falling during roll, but it started back up when full darkness hit. Feathery flakes settled on my shoulders and head, melting slowly. My toes, already numb from the day's labor, itched inside my wet shoes. I didn't dare fidget, though I was as good as barefoot. The biting flakes nipped my bare ears, my neck, my hollow cheeks. I longed for some form of distraction to help me make it through the night, but I could think of nothing save self-pity.

I am a person; I am human, I thought, whispering even inside my own head. My comfort came as a blanket of blankness, thoughtless thoughts. My mind swirled, feelings slicing one another like the snow that whipped my face. Even the guard in my peripheral vision turned his shoulders against the malicious wind. I wondered if Mama would keep warm without me, if she had already offered my blanket to another, or if she were reveling in having two coverings on so cold an evening.

Brightness flickered in the corner of my vision, and I glanced up without thinking, wincing as my eyes burned. Someone had turned on the electric light in one of the officer's quarters. One man hovered over a desk, writing, while another stood at attention, eyes staring straight ahead. The soldier beside me swore viciously and struck my face with the back of his white-gloved hand; my frozen feet slipped beneath me and I fell, hitting the icy ground with a dull thud. He demanded I get back on my feet before I even realized I had scraped my arm on some jagged rock hidden beneath the snow. "Eyes to the ground, Jew." He spat the words and I did as I was told.

As I rose on unsteady legs which threatened to give away at any moment, I kept my gaze downward, unwilling to anger him further. I closed my eyes and bit my tongue, fighting back nausea. The light had blinded me, and in the absence of that brightness, I felt my attention focus as shapes began to play behind my eyelids. As odd as it looked, I saw a loaf of steaming hot bread, so real I swore I could have taken a bite out of it. I opened my eyes to see the buttered slices rested on a dainty blue plate nestled amongst the mud and snow. My mouth watered and my nose burned at the heady scent that was so real I could almost inhale it. I yearned for those butter-smearred slices to melt on my aching tongue. I flexed my fingers, wondering if I could grab it without attracting the guard's sharp notice. The cold left my body as I tensed, alive and ready to pounce on the meal, when a familiar, feminine hand chose a slice from the plate and offered it to me...

And like that, the bread was gone and I stared at muddy snow once more. I tried to blank my mind, to blot the image of the steaming bread from my memory. My stomach rolled, and I begged it to be still and silent. Just because the soldier had one punishment for me didn't mean he couldn't come up with another – one, perhaps, involving the gun strapped at his side.

Still, when another light flickered on above my gaze, I couldn't help but glance up again. Out of the corner of my eye I saw that the soldier had his back turned once more as he paced the courtyard. An electric light burned overhead, shattering the darkness that had filled the room only a few seconds before. I dragged my eyes from the glare, screwing them shut and praying for the return of the bread. I saw no mere loaf, though; instead, a tremendous fire blazed before me, warming my feet. The flames leapt joyously in the wind, driving back the cold from my fingers and drying my ice-crustred hair. A

spark popped and landed in the snow, melting it away. More followed, until I realized that I stood, not on bare ground, but on the stone hearth of the house where I grew up. A breath snorted near me, and I recognized Siegel's tail, wagging with joy. A few small boxes sat on the mantle, their paper shining white, cleaner than even the snow that melted from my shoulders. The tags had names on them, I noticed: *Matthew, Papa, Grandma Elsie, Mother*, and on the very end, *Laura*. I wondered what the date was; it had to be near Chanukah, Mother's favorite holiday. I had to stop myself from reaching forward as that same dainty arm as before held the box with my name out for me...

And I shook myself again, cursing my stupidity. Did I want to die? If I remained still I had a chance, slight though it may have been, to survive the night. I opened my eyes and looked at the shadow-darkened snow. I could not feel my fingers, and my arm throbbed where the hidden stone below my feet had gashed open my skin, tearing a large hole in the sleeve. The snow had already covered the red drops that fell from the wound. Could I make it through the night?

I was sure the soldier had turned away when I looked up at the light of another room. He was paying more attention than I thought, though; he turned towards me, drawing his pistol and, in one fluid moment, pulling the trigger. Time stopped as I squeezed my eyes shut. I was now sure of the time of year; a menorah shone before my eyes, all candles lit except one. The glowing light filled the room, though shadows lurked in the corners, wavering before the flames took a firm hold of their wicks. I could see a lovely little feast waiting to be consumed, steam rising from the oven-hot plates – a meal perfect for a small family. A sweet laugh rang through my ears, followed by the deeper chuckles of my father; the sounds warmed me to the bone...

The guard's own harsh laugh destroyed the scene, though, and I realized that the gun had not shot. "Keep your goddamn eyes down, Jew-whore," the soldier said. "Next time, I turn off the safety."

And though I wanted life, to live through this punishment for so minor a crime as slipping, as being a Jew, as living in the wrong place at the wrong time, I looked up once more before the soldier had a chance to turn away, chin lifted in defiance that no one would see but him, and which I could expect no one to ever understand. I had heard Mother's laughter, and I wanted to see her face, the face which had left my memory so many years ago, until the word "mother" meant Mama, my step-mother, the replacement that never quite fit, no matter how hard either of us tried.

I didn't look away this time; I continued to stare at the electric lights, their glare shining through the dazzling snowflakes like shocks of life. The soldier sighed. "Fine, then," he said, and for a moment, I honestly think he pitied me. I felt no cold anymore; I could only see my mother's face, smiling sadly even as she cut back the darkness. To her left was Grandma Elsie, eyes alert and focused on my own, while my father stood on the other side; he was Papa as I remembered him, smiling with his entire being, a hand held out for me to take.

I reached out in turn, but could not rid my peripheral vision of the soldier, who had raised his gun once more; this time I knew, as he had said, the safety would be off. The corners of his mouth turned up, a grim smile floating across the whiteness of his well-fed face, and I wondered if it would hurt, this plain metal bullet, when it entered my body. I wondered if I would scream. I wondered what had happened to the person I had been, the little girl who once dreamed of mouthfuls of bread.

Marble Constitution

“Become two statues,” the fairy – though I considered her a witch – said. “Retain your reason, though, as you stand at the gates of your sister’s palace.” No sooner had she spoken than I felt my limbs prickle and burn. My husband paid me no mind, only – vain man that he was – began admiring his reflection in the smooth marble my skin had become. The witch continued her lecture, citing my older sister and me as possessing idleness, anger, pride; I could do nothing but stare.

I could not even blink. My younger sister Beauty, contemptible wretch that she was, clung to her beast-turned-prince and sniveled into his shoulder.

“Please turn them back!” she cried, and I would have cringed if possible. I wanted none of her pity.

The witch shook her head. “Until they learn to overcome their faults, they must remain statues.” She turned to face us. “And I fear that will take a very long time.”

We, of course, could do nothing – not speak, nor scream, nor faint.

Though Beauty wanted us set up inside, to keep us out of the weather, the witch insisted we remain at the gates. I don’t know if normal stones can feel, but I could; every rain drop, every snow flake, every ray of sunshine hit me, burning and freezing and chilling. I could not shiver, could not keep warm or cool enough for comfort. All I could do was imagine what I would do to my loathsome little sister when I was free.

Beauty visited us daily, bringing her idiotic chatter and wearing shining jewels. When her carriage drove past the gates she would wave, kissing her fingers and forcing tears to her eyes. She put blankets around us in the winter – though we had no body heat

and they provided no warmth – and had the gardener pour frog-soaked pond water over us in the summer.

After a year or so I noticed she grew heavy, and she began missing her regular visits. Though I could not confirm the feeling with my other sister-turned-statue, I was glad for the reprieve from her ridiculous cheer. Soon she did not come at all.

After a month of peace she returned, bringing dark circles under her eyes and a wad of cloth in her arms that screamed moments after her arrival. She did not visit us as often after that, coming only once or twice a week, and soon even less. When her carriage rolled by the gates, she no longer waved, and soon she looked through us, as though we really were just statues, not her poor, ill-used sisters. I comforted myself with the knowledge that at least I did not suffer alone.

One night, though, the other stone vanished. Though I could not turn, I felt a part of myself cleave away – my sister escaping from her stony tomb. Soon she stumbled before my fixed gaze. She threw her arms around my marble shoulders, laughing. “Acknowledge you were wrong. Just admit you were bad!” A joyous smile played across her face, and I wished I could close my eyes. At that moment, she looked exactly like Beauty. She turned towards the castle, patting me like a familiar horse as she passed.

The next day Beauty’s prince ordered a new statue to be placed at his gate, one to stand guard with me. Beauty, remembering her lost sister, began prattling to me about this new stone, and had it placed within my line of sight. It reminded me of a man who had courted me in my youth – strong jaw, high cheekbones, a distinguished air. I wished it would stop making me think of what I’d lost.

I couldn't escape him, though. My older sister went back to her husband the minute he annulled the second marriage he'd entered into with a woman from our hometown when my sister and I had turned to stone. Beauty, though, visited sometimes, bringing her plump children and telling them stories of our youth. I tried to ignore her, and soon memorized every chiseled feature of the man across the path.

I began to appreciate his company, and he made my life bearable. When the midday sun grew too warm, I cooled myself in his shadow, which covered me for half the day; during the harsh winters, he took the force of the cold north wind. As they had before my older sister left me alone, everyone soon forgot I was entombed in stone – all except my marble friend.

I called him Pierre. When the nights were at their longest and even I began to blame myself for my sad state, Pierre remained loyal. He stayed with me when I felt I would die, statue or no, from grief at the thought of my lost life. When Beauty's children frolicked at my feet, making up stories of my origin as a statue, it was Pierre who reminded me of the truth.

We did not age, he reminded me as Beauty passed by in her carriage, arms full of children and hair turning grey. When her beast-prince grew a beard and gut, my Pierre remained fair and unchanging. The fluctuating seasons grew irksome to me, and I cared only for that one person who never transformed into something new or strange. He had always been Pierre, and had nothing to hide. Humanity's constant changes appalled me.

I ignored Beauty when she visited, hair white, thick black cloth covering her body. What did we statues know of age? We watched the seasons pass like dying flowers, until I couldn't remember what it felt like to stretch or blink or breathe. All around us,

life continued – even when Beauty’s coffin drove through the front gates, Pierre and I still had each other. We always did, and we always will. Even as Beauty’s children grow old and their children take the throne, Pierre remains true to me, and the rest of the world can rot for all I care.

Extreme Dreaming for Beginners

I couldn't wake up and return to my real life, despite the memories which invaded my never-ending dreams: my father presiding over lords at feasts, my mother offering me a doll with emerald eyes, my nurse's old-milk smell as she hugged me to her breast. Strongest of all was my memory of an old fairy woman whose angry eyes followed me everywhere, turning the dream into a cold nightmare. These images would fade, though, and I shed them like outgrown clothing.

On my right index finger, just beneath the nail, my skin burned with an ember that refused to heal. I couldn't escape that painful twinge, no matter how many cooling dream cures I concocted.

I lived with that inconvenience, though it reminded me with every flex of my hand that I had forgotten my real life, that I was trapped in this dream world. I learned to fly to the limits of my mind's sky; I dove into lukewarm oceans, swimming downward until the icy water burned my frozen pores and my lungs strained for an intake of breath. Here, fairies didn't hold a grudge against me just because my parents forgot to invite them to a celebration.

I knew that time passed in the real world when my memories came more frequently, like cattle returning home on mere instinct. Threaded wheels were spun by the angry fairy, whirring whenever I turned my back, only to disappear when I swung around to face them; spindles danced before me, making my finger throb as they thrust towards my dream-perfect flesh like a lustful animal.

And then, one day just like any of the thousands I had slept through, I woke to an infant's cry. He was tiny, so small I could have held him in one hand. His hungry mouth was clasped around my finger, gums working to find some kind of nourishment. I pinched myself, and my vision cleared; memories flooded my brain. The child coughed up a small piece of twine, just a sliver, and began to howl in tune with a second babe who rested, red-faced and miniscule, between my bloodied, tender thighs.

Don't You Know What Happens When You Say It Out Loud?

See? You shiver, tremble even, back muscles twitching. No, don't hold back; let it shine through, this fear. Let me smell it on your skin, in the air I've befouled with a mere word. *Witch*.

There you go again, eyes wide, spider-thin veins creeping across pinpricked flesh. Your heart strikes like erratic lightning, touching down like a storm as your blood pounds against the door of your skin. Nothing you say, no brave words or looks, will make it cease.

Don't give me that look – this is how you start a good story.

Did I ever tell you how the townspeople once called me witch? No? I thought not. Well, you recall that crumbling house in the woods, the one where your friends dared you to venture just last week? Of course I know you went there – it was all your playmates' parents could talk about. They were worried sick the roof would cave in while you played. One doesn't need to sell corn to have ears at the market. That house, though – you recall how the forest changes as though to suit it, the air near it pungent with decay, the ground spongy below your feet, tempting you to fall, laughing and rolling, to the earth?

Yes, I've been there – that was my home once, away from the children's screams and unwashed smells snaking within the town walls. Back then I lived alone, cutting my own firewood and baking my own bread, and that was enough for me to be a witch in our neighbor's eyes.

Magic? Well, yes, I suppose you could say I did a little magic, too. Why do you think that clearing is still clean of weeds, why the crickets and beetles have stayed away, why the brook which runs nearby remains sweet and clear? I'd probably still be there, and you wouldn't be around, my dear, if I had a choice. I avoided town for years, until the company of others grew foreign.

Perhaps twice or thrice a year, though, children would visit me unannounced, little imps who surprised themselves by finding someone who lived in those woods. They were so often hungry, their eyes fogged with starvation; witch or otherwise, I was not heartless. I would feed them and send them on their way, though none ever found their way back to my retreat – which was fine with me. I wanted no company.

Once, two children showed up on my doorstep – a brother and sister, hair full of twigs, clothing stained with mud. The autumn days had been dying off like the elderly, and I shivered to see them bare-headed and without shoes. They ate like hunger itself when I asked them inside. The younger child, the boy, excused himself at one point to empty his stomach; after being hungry for so long, his body could not handle the food. My own innards twisted when he came back inside, stinking and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand before returning to the meal.

They explained that they had lost their parents in the wood, and I knew they were not expected back. You look shocked, but people were harder in those years; it wasn't unheard of to abandon children when cupboards grew bare. When asked, parents often claimed they didn't want to see their children suffer, ignoring that they left their little ones to instead die alone and lost. These two, disgusting though they were, at least had each other.

Darkness pushed back the daylight and I asked the children to stay. Though they had shown the manners of wild beasts and a hunger like death, they weren't keen on sleeping under the roof of a strange woman living alone in the forest. A wolf howled in the distance, though, and with reluctance they agreed to stay. I led the mites to a back room, locking the bolt to secure them inside. I did not trust them, children though they were.

They were huddled in a corner when I opened the door at sunrise, eyes wide and red-rimmed. I wondered if they had been locked up before – a punishment back home, perhaps, or maybe they were young villains and had experience the town jail. The boy clung to his sister's tattered skirt, sniveling and licking at the snot which crusted his upper lip. Only with great reluctance did they approach me, and then it was only with the promise of a hot breakfast. I heard the girl mutter something about dead children and blazing ovens, but I chalked it up to bad dreams – no one had faced harm under my roof, I assure you.

Witch or not – there you are, shivering again! – I wished them no evil; I simply did not want to wake up to missing items or a disheveled house. I had nothing to do with their nightmares. After breaking their fast – such appetites! – I showed them the door, pointing the way to town.

Poor dears, poor children, I remember thinking as I washed the dishes that morning. I feared what would happen when they returned to their home, but could do little. So lost in my thoughts was I that I did not even notice the thickness of the air in my house. A spark caught my eye, and I saw them through the flames: two children, grins running like paint, screaming and jeering when they caught my attention. They scattered

logs from my fireplace and grabbed fresh loaves I'd set out to cool on my counter. The taller specter, the girl, raced towards me, a thin, burning branch in her hand sparking embers at my waist. Her only reply when I asked what she wanted was to throw the stick at me before rushing to the forest once more.

Her strength was poor, and the branch fell at my feet, doing little harm. I didn't care a whit for the lost food, and the fire I put out quickly enough. The damage, though severe, did not destroy the house – as you've seen, I know. Still, I could not let my young assailants go without punishment.

Now, now, wipe away the fear from your eyes – I didn't kill them, or even physically harm them. You know I would do no such thing. They arrived home, greeted by their parents. I allowed them to return to their lives of hunger and abuse.

Ah, see, now you're curious. No need to ask – I'll gladly tell you what happened next. The boy starved to death, I'm afraid, clinging to his breath for a few months after returning home, until his stomach bloated and his family mourned. The girl, though, lived and married a miller when her belly grew to resemble that of her long-buried brother. She gave birth to a boy, a son whom she loved more than any other. Her husband even let her name it after her dead brother. She loved him, but that wasn't enough to save him – she lost him when he was still at the breast, lost him to the woods she once escaped from after trying to kill an old woman who tried to help her.

What's that, now? No, of course it's just a story, a way to pass the time. Yes, I did once live in that house in the wood, but I left after I found you, dear; the forest is no place to raise a child. The night grows late, though. Now, enough questions – as I said, it was just a story. It's time for sleep, Hansel.

The Giant-Killer's Wife Wants a Real Man in Bed

I looked forward to having a troll-slayer, a giant-killer, a capturer-of-unicorns and a tamer of wild boars as my husband. He didn't seem much at first – short, balding, and, worst of all, a terrible conversationalist – but I had faith he'd entertain me in at least one way. From the moment I heard his reputation, I prepared to become a prize he would take by the hand – and to bed.

But what's the first thing he does as my royal lord? He falls asleep on our wedding night, passing out before I can get something more from him than the chaste kiss he planted on my cheek after the wedding ceremony. I was eager enough to forgo common decency and climb over to his side of the bed, but he showed no interest, just started snoring loud enough to rattle my eardrums. I chalked it up to so much wine and excitement; though disappointed, I was willing to wait.

He arose at dawn the next morning like a vulgar common man. I knew little of warriors – perhaps that was part of their training, to rise with monks and bakers. Come evening, though, we were in my territory. I donned a lacy gown that displayed every curve and swapped his wine for juice during dinner, playing the part of the coy and doting wife as I pretended to listen to his mundane tales. I even fed him bits of aphrodisiac that some of my ladies recommended, yet he still turned from me after an innocent peck on the cheek in our chamber later that night.

“Darling,” I cooed, squinting across the dark expanse of our marriage bed.

He rolled, twisting the sheets with his thorny feet. “Mmm?”

I whispered my invitation, and he grunted. “V’ry well, lass,” he said, more yielding than excited. I expected passion, lust, rapture – and was met with regret at having ever asked. He crawled over, climbed on top of me, and soon was done, turning away and going to sleep. I lay in the same flat position as when he left me for hours, wondering if all wives faced such disappointment. In the early hours before dawn, when my loathing seemed greatest, I heard it – my oafish husband, muttering in his sleep.

“Fetch me that leather, boy,” he said. “I need to make those shoes by this afternoon.” He rolled over, muttering under his breath about buckles and polish.

I could barely stand the shame; my husband was no warrior. I was in bed with a cobbler.

The next morning I approached my father, waiting until my husband rode off to hunt, an idiotic belt around his thick waist proclaiming the noble deeds for which he was chosen as my husband. “Killed seven with one blow,” it boasted. He didn’t last seven seconds the night before; he more likely killed seven flies than seven men.

“Father,” I said, approaching his throne. He smiled at me and, waving away one of his advisors, asked how I was. “I fear that my husband is not what he seems.” I told him what I’d heard the previous night, though I left out my misplaced hopes for desire.

We planned how to get rid of my pathetic husband; maybe then, I thought, Father could find a real man to warm my bed. That evening, we arranged guards to wait outside my chambers, and when my husband – the word left a foul taste in my mouth – began speaking in his sleep, they would arrest him. I would not be married to a cobbler for long.

My husband ignored me once more that night, and I lay awake, ears anticipating every grunt and groan that sounded from the other side of the bed. “Fetch me that leather,

boy,” he finally said, louder than the previous night. Every syllable rang out, more stilted than his normal voice, and I knew he was awake. “I need to make those shoes by this afternoon, or I shall remove your own feet for your impetuosity! Do not doubt a man who has killed seven with one blow!” His voice grew with each word, until he finished with a mighty roar. Footsteps swiftly receded from outside the door; a servant must have tipped my husband off to the fear the guards held of him. He was soon snoring, safe from harm.

The next morning father consoled me, saying that it was better to have wed a clever cobbler than a knight who knew his way under the covers. No one dares heed my disagreement.

Talking to Strangers

An hour passed, then two. Her mother's occasional sniffles were all but drowned out by the too-cheery music playing overhead. Allie paced the waiting room, looking back and forth between her mother and the still doors which had swallowed the doctors. Nerves jolted through her stomach, not with worry for her father, but rather concern for her mother: pale, delicate, needing somebody to boss her around and protect her.

The doctors had been vague with technical jargon and ambiguous diagnoses ever since her father's first scan, what was supposed to be a routine screening. "Masses," they explained in hushed tones, "in the lungs. Likely just an infection." They spoke as though they were studying a textbook and not a living person in the same room, sitting hollow-eyed before them. She wondered if they knew her father was drunk at their appointments, that he had not put the bottle down since the first results came back. Allie had her doubts about their analysis of a simple infection; her father had smoked like a chimney since before she was born, daily consuming three or four packs worth of hand-rolled cigarettes. After the biopsy on Tuesday, they were unsure; by Friday, it looked like cancer.

"How long are they going to take?" Allie's mother asked, speaking for the first time in over an hour. Usually she couldn't refrain from conversation; now she was a bird shot down, limp and silent, save for the occasional hiccup. Allie had no comforting words left to offer.

An older man wearing an impeccable suit poked his head into the waiting room. His eyes lit on Allie, and he winked. Something about him – the perfect suit, the wispy

hair, the glittering eyes – resonated within her, striking a memory she had all but forgotten.

As a child, Allie had smacked her bicycle – training wheels removed only the week before – into her father’s car, denting the side. The car door, not her skinned knee, brought a whimper to her lips. Her father would be livid. A finely-dressed man appeared as if out of nowhere, offering to fix her problem; when he mentioned a payment, Allie offered him the charm bracelet around her wrist, worried more about her father’s wrath than the trinket. This was back before her fear for her father transformed into disdain. She never told anyone what had happened, and after a few years she chalked it all up to her imagination; dents and scrapes were not fixed with the simple snap of an old man’s fingers.

The gentleman beckoned her outside the room; a quick glance showed Allie that her mother was, as she had been for the past forty-five minutes, trying to read an article on penguins in an old *National Geographic*. She had not flipped the page once. “I’ll be right back,” Allie said. “I’m just using the bathroom.”

Beyond the glass windows the gentleman leaned against the wall, a blue-light cigarette in his fingers. He puffed out a stream of air, manufactured to look like smoke yet remain safe for indoor use. Allie wrinkled her nose, though she smelled no nicotine. “This is what he’s here for, isn’t it?” the man asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Smoking,” he explained, flicking the white tube as though it needed to ash.

“Gave him the lung cancer, didn’t it? Nasty habit, cancer. Almost as bad as smoking.” He slipped the fake cigarette into his pocket.

Allie didn't like the sneer on his face, how he spoke as though he knew her father, and she wondered why she'd stepped into the hall. "I'm sorry, I need to be with my mother." Her arm was grasped in a steel grip.

"Ah-ah, not so fast," he said. "What would you give to make things better for your pop?"

"Excuse me?" Allie asked again. "Make things better? Are you a doctor?"

"You could say that." He shrugged. "No MD, but I work on people, make them better – and I could help your dad."

"He already has a real doctor."

"Evans?" The man asked, naming the doctor who had her father on the table at that moment. "He doesn't know anything. An idiot who barely skimmed through med school." He moved his hand from Allie's arm to her waist and, never letting up on the pressure, pulled her so they stood hip-to-hip. "Now, I could help him – but it's going to cost you."

Allie raised a hand to her temple as another memory flashed. As a teenager she had gotten her navel pierced, but the needle her best friend's boyfriend's cousin used must not have been as clean as he'd claimed; within days the skin turned red, growing inflamed and swollen. She was sitting in the back yard, trying to figure out how to tell her mother so she could go to the hospital, when a face leered over the fence. A man offered her some salve, and the container looked legitimate: FDA stamps, still sealed with plastic. He guaranteed it, said it had helped many other young girls with such problems. She'd given him her gold class ring as payment, though she threw out the belly button ring as soon as she could remove it.

“Who are you?” Allie squirmed in his grip, uncomfortable being so close to the strange man.

“Never mind names, dear. What I’m offering is much bigger than fixing a scratch or healing a small infection – I’m offering life.”

Allie twisted around to see through the glass, just making out her mother, who still stared through the penguins. “What do you want this time?”

“I knew you’d remember.” He smiled, and Allie’s stomach rolled. “Of course it takes more to cure cancer, my dear, so I’ll need something worth more to you. I hope you don’t mind, but I’d like pick the trade this time. Seems only fair; I want more from you than a simple piece of jewelry.” He removed his arm from her waist and pointed to her stomach, eyes fixated just below where his hand had been. Allie clutched herself; he looked as though he could see inside of her. “I would like a child. Your child – a life you haven’t yet planned for, that has yet to be created.”

“A – what?” She neither looked pregnant, nor was planning on getting pregnant anytime soon, though she hadn’t ruled out the possibility for the future.

“Someday you’ll want them,” he said as though reading her mind. “I was never gifted with such luck.” He ran a hand through his sparse hair. “Always thought I’d make a good father, though. If you were to help me –”

“You’d want my child? Who the hell are you?” Her breath came in short gasps.

He ignored her distress. “No nasty adoption strings, nothing of the sort. You get a healthy father, cancer-free,” he snapped his fingers, “just like that, and I get what I want.”

Allie believed him, knew he would cure her father like the other doctors could not, like how he could fix car doors and skin infections. She imagined her father on the

operating table, bare and fragile and fighting for his life. She could always adopt, and deny him his payment. She wondered if a deal such as this would hold up in court, or if her father would appreciate the sacrifice. Her mother would be torn between gratitude at having her husband and sorrow at losing a grandchild, but her father? She could almost picture her future children, tiny imps with her eyes, her boyfriend's chin; the image was marred by her father – a grandfather – blowing mouthfuls of ringed smoke into their fragile faces.

Another glance into the waiting room showed that her mother was staring up at the bright paintings on the wall, hands clasped as if in prayer. She did not notice her daughter standing outside, fingers pressed to the glass as though she were searching for something just beyond her reach. “No,” Allie said after a long pause. “We’ll be fine, thanks.” The gentleman said nothing, his hands clenched into bone-crushing fists as Allie opened the waiting room door, composing herself for the message she knew the doctor would soon deliver.

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