

Fluid Bodies

By

Abigail Lynn Ebelherr

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:
David Zimmerman, Major Professor
Stephen W. Pett
Linda Shenk
Marwan Ghandour

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2012

Copyright © Abigail Lynn Ebelherr, 2012. All rights reserved.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWARD	iii
TRAPPED BY SKIN	1
PATIENT SIMPLETON	12
GOLDILOCKS AND THE THREE GENDERS	27
BOOTSTRAPS	36
NOT ALWAYS THE PREY	60

FOREWARD

Fairy and folk tales are often used to impart community values. If you are loyal to your lover like the fox women of Japan, you have a better afterlife. If you stray from your task and speak to strange men, like Red Riding Hood, you may be gobbled up. And if you're kind to elderly, like many a prince seeking glory, they may impart wisdom that will benefit you on your journey.

But even as they reinforce the status quo, the magic in fairy tales begins to blur lines. What are the boundaries of marriage when a human can marry a rabbit? Can you justify dominion over the non-human when bears cook porridge for breakfast? Does everyone need to look the same when even a mermaid can gain a soul? Whereas the brothers Grimm might wish to emphasize the mores of their time, these stories explore how a body is more than it appears on the surface, how magical and transforming our containers really are.

"Trapped by Skin" resembles stories of the mythic hero in the tradition of such legends as Heracles and Jason of the Argonauts. Marina is headstrong and confident in herself as many a demigod has been. Heracles never wrestled with his place as only half-human in the original legends, but this idea has been explored more thoroughly in recent versions. It's never subtle, however. Heracles tends to know what he is and why he doesn't fit in. Marina's struggle is with the unknown of herself.

Simpleton is a character that appears in many of Give first name (even though he is so famous). Grimm's fairy tales, usually as the third brother that everyone expects to fail. "Patient Simpleton" most closely follows Grimm's "The Golden Bird," which is about three princes who try to bring a golden bird back to their father. They all meet a fox early on in their quest, but

only the youngest takes its advice about at which inn to stay. The fox keeps giving the third son advice on how to retrieve various items he needs for his quest, but the prince ignores the advice each time, though all goes well for him in the end. This story is also the first in the collection to feature the convention of threes that appear in many fairy tales.

“Goldilocks and the Three Genders” uses a non-gender set of pronouns familiar to trans and some feminist groups. Three of the short stories feature gender queer or gender ambiguous characters, but all are handled in different manners. In “Patient Simpleton,” the oak tree and owners of the farmer are not referred to using pronouns or given any gender descriptors. Goldilocks and Baby Bear are handled the same way until they put on their pronouns. Casey in “Bootstraps” uses alternating she and he as Mary wouldn’t know about unconventional pronouns.

Finally, “Not Always the Prey” takes a departure from the others in focusing on East Asian mythology instead of Europe. Foxes are often depicted as tricksters in Japan, Korea, and China, though their malevolence can vary depending on the region. Most folktales involve a fox possessing or transforming into a beautiful woman. It then seduces men in order to steal their life. In Korea, they prefer to eat the livers or hearts of humans because those areas are believed to contain vitality. The works of Junji Ito inspired many of the horror scenes. His short graphic work, “The Enigma of Amigara Fault,” embodies much of what is great about his work.

It is easy to see that many of these stories borrow from or parody established canon. That was always the point. When we read a story, we always attempt to look for ourselves in it even if the author did not put us there. *Fluid Bodies* finds the oppressed already present in folk stories and focuses on them. The magic of the physical body is wonderful, and perhaps one day will be understood at the status quo.

Trapped by Skin

It had been a long time since the Ohio River god desired a human, but the young woman who slept under the sun's heat near his shore stirred him. She wasn't in one of the sandy areas where many humans gathered, but rather lay on a grassy bank, bare back exposed and gleaming with lotion. The river god smelled destiny and a rich longing in her.

When she woke up, the woman felt something cold at her side. She turned to look and saw a small, brown snake lying on the grass next to her. She froze and it moved, slithering back to the river's shore and disappearing beneath the lapping waters. Eight months later, the woman died giving birth to her only child.

The woman's child was given the name Marina, and she was raised by her mother's husband. Intuition told him Marina was not his child, and he suspected she was not human. Her hair was the sandy color of lake water instead of black, and it contrasted sharply with her light-brown skin. Her eyes were the grey of pebbles in a tadpole's shadow. Looking at her stirred up images of lakes and rivers rather than fondness.

Marina's father worked at a cardboard factory, folding the sheets that came down the conveyor belt into boxes that would be used to ship flat sheets of boxes to the businesses that ordered them. When he came home, his arms were often covered with baby pink scratches that ran to the edges of his t-shirt. It was too hot in the factory to wear long sleeves. After work, Marina's father would take a quick shower and watch an hour of television. Marina always cooked dinner, and they ate in silence. Her father might go out after that, down to Tito's Bar to drink with his pals where he could win or lose some good money at darts.

If she was honest with herself, which Marina often was, she did not mind her father's rejection. Intuition told her he was not her father, and she suspected she was not human. When he was at the bar, she filled the bathtub and drifted in the steaming water, concentrating on keeping as many of her limbs submerged as possible. It was difficult; her body was buoyant and the bathtub was small. In order to get her head in the water, she had to bend her legs, which left her knees exposed to the air. In a relaxed state, her arms would float on the surface like tentacles, drifting away from her body to brush the cold porcelain of the tub. Sometimes she would pull them down, feel the power of her muscles as they shoved the water out of their path, the wholeness of her skin as it easily deflected the hydrogen and oxygen around it so she wouldn't soak it all up and disperse into millions of cells among ripples.

Most of the time she hated her skin for this, but it was also a point of fascination, that her body was so perfectly built to keep her together.

She joined with the water in other ways. She walked in ninety-degree weather for hours until her shirt was a second skin and her thighs itched painfully. Only then would she take a mouthful from her canteen and concentrate on the liquid as it slid over her tongue and down her throat. A few more gulps, and her body seemed to come alive again like a brittle sponge run under a faucet. Denying herself the water only made it sweeter when she finally took it in.

Because of this love for exercise, and because she always seemed to have more stamina and strength than her peers, Marina stayed athletic as she grew and entered college on a soccer scholarship. One day while practicing dribbling outside her dormitory, she saw a beautiful young woman crossing the commons. Her skin was the ashen black of a night sky at the edges of the moon, and her hair was frizzy and full. She wore a long, muted-silver dress and jean jacket that Marina thought accented her lanky frame perfectly.

Marina swiftly crossed the green grass, nearly mowing down several students in her focus. The young woman looked surprised to see someone coming at her so determinedly. But Marina's bright smile was disarming.

"My name is Marina," she said to the woman.

"I'm Ronna."

"Would you like to go to a movie this Friday?" Marina asked.

"Excuse me?"

"I want to take you on a date."

Ronna stared at her for a moment.

"Is this a joke?"

"No." Marina was determined and a bit hard-headed. "I think you're beautiful, so of course, I want to know more about you." It seemed like a natural, logical course of action to her.

Ronna turned her face away; she seemed embarrassed, but also a little flattered.

"Well, I suppose I could."

They dated that fall into the spring and were very much in love. Their favorite activity was to gather snacks and water and, after they were finished with their classes, walk hand-in-hand down to Neptune Lake. The lake had been created by damming one fork of the Hathaway Creek. Sometimes when they sat closer to where the creek ran, Marina would feel longing. The emotion reminded her of tearful goodbyes between students and their parents the first day of college.

Because it made her sad, they often stayed on the other side of the lake, nearer to where the school's manicured lawn ended and a small forest began. They would sit in the grass as close to the bank as possible. If it was too hot, they would find a place closer to the tree heavy

area on its west banks. Though Ronna usually wanted to leave after the food was gone, Marina would convince her to stay until night came and it was impossible to tell the waters from the sky. She liked this time because in the darkness, Ronna's skin was the exact same color as the lake. Marina often found herself trailing a hand down one black arm, pressing just enough to make small indents to test the tension of her skin. It was frustrating that she couldn't melt into this dark pool any more than the waters before her.

Ronna didn't seem to mind the touches as long as Marina stayed with arms, calves, and throat. When Marina's hands wandered into more intimate places, Ronna always pulled away.

"Pervert," Ronna teased one night, though even in the dark Marina could hear an edge to her voice. Though a virgin herself, Marina's desire to meld with Ronna overrode any nervousness she shared with her girlfriend.

"What's wrong?" Marina sat on her knees a few inches away. "Why is it that you never let me touch you?"

Ronna sighed and fidgeted with the hem of her skirt.

"You'll run away if I tell you," she said. Marina grabbed Ronna's hand away from the skirt and squeezed it tightly.

"I promise I won't. You have my word."

Ronna bit her lip and hesitated a moment longer.

"Marina, I really want to have sex with you. I do. But I can't because something's not right with my body."

"What?"

"I am missing my vagina."

Marina thought a moment, chewing her lower lip.

“Where did it go?” she asked.

Ronna laughed loudly. “Here I thought you might run away.”

Marina frowned. “Why would I do that?”

Ronna shook her head. “No. *You* wouldn’t, would you?” She sighed. “Never mind.”

“Ok.” Marina shrugged. “So, where did it go?”

“Hm?”

“Your vagina.”

“Oh.” Ronna smiled sadly. “It left me sometime before I was born. Instead, I was given something that doesn’t belong to me. But if I earn enough money, I can have a doctor make me a new vagina.”

Marina nodded. “How much do you need?”

“A lot. About \$12,000 just for the surgery. There are pills that I’ve been taking, and they use up all the money I earn right now. My mom can’t help me with my brother still in high school. I don’t think I can get my vagina until after college. Maybe not for a few years after that, even.” There were tears in Ronna’s eyes now. “I’ve wanted to have one since I was four. I hate this waiting.”

Sad tears were the one type of water Marina hated to see. Part of her understood Ronna, that feeling of incompleteness she could alleviate only by immersing herself in a shower or swimming pool. She didn’t want to see that pain on Ronna’s face.

“I’ll get you the money,” she said. Ronna smiled.

“Thanks, Marina.” Ronna kissed her. “But you can’t get a part-time job with your scholarship. The school doesn’t allow it.”

All the same, Marina wasn't going to give up so easily. One of the girls on her soccer team was in the Sigma Lambda Gamma sorority and had been trying to get Marina to join since the start of the spring semester. Marina wasn't really interested in the sorority, but she overheard the other young woman talking during an informal practice session about how her sisters were going to participate in contest with a large prize.

The next day she packed a few extra clothes and what little money she had and hitched a ride with the Gammas. She didn't tell Ronna because she knew her girlfriend would tell her to stay at school. Ronna would think it was a stupid, idealistic idea. Marina thought it would be nice to surprise her with the money.

The contest was at a Big Bass Hunting and Fishing store in Indiana; if she kept her hand on a boat the longest, Marina would win a 2012 Triton 17 Explorer Series (trailer and outboard motor included). She figured she could turn around, sell the boat, and have the money Ronna needed in just a few days.

The event was sponsored by a radio station. WXNS 107.5, known as Hard Rock 107. The rules of the contest were simple: contestants had to keep one hand on one of the contest boats at all times. There were bathroom breaks every three hours. Someone could bring you food; water was provided by the station.

There were fifty contestants total, which meant four different boats were being used. Marina and three of the Gammas were assigned to a beat up old canoe. The rest of the sorority would be there to bring them food and moral support.

There was a little old lady across from Marina, hand on a green jon boat, who stared at the girls with a malicious grin.

“I’ve been to dozens of these events,” she cackled. “I travel all over the state for radio contests. Keep nine different stations on speed dial. You young chicks won’t last the afternoon.”

Marina didn’t heed her, and the first day went smoothly. Two of the girls she had traveled with lost; the first when she went to unwrap her sub sandwich with both hands, the second when a fly landed on her shoulder and she inadvertently swatted it. The rest of the sorority went to a hotel when night fell, though the other girl reassured Marina that she could always use her cell phone to get them in an emergency.

When dawn broke, many of the other contestants looked sleepy. Marina was hearty, however, and her athletic prowess was paying off. She stretched her limbs to ease the stiffness and felt fine. At the 9 A.M. bathroom break, the weakest of the contestants gave up including the last Gamma. The final eight were placed around the canoe to begin the real competition.

“Well, you made it pretty far for a first timer,” the old lady told Marina at the noon break. “I’ll give you that. But you might as well give up now. The rest of these people, they know what they’re doing. That man there – “ she pointed to a balding man in a dusty yellow, happy face t-shirt, “ – I met him three years ago at one of these things to win a station wagon. He’s trained himself so he can fall asleep for only five minutes at a time, yet it feels like a full hour of rest for him!

And that woman there – “ and here the little old lady pointed at a wide-eyed brunette in a flower print nursing scrub – “has a whole vitamin regimen worked out so she can keep awake for three days straight.”

Marina realized she had come into this contest extremely unprepared. However, she wasn’t about give up. Ronna was counting on her to get the money, and she was going to get the

money. When the contestants were called back, Marina made sure to stand on the opposite side of the taunting old woman.

The Gammas bored quickly and left with the promise they would be back to give Marina dinner. They returned around six, and the food did Marina some good. She was beginning to feel a little sleepy after being awake for nearly 48 hours. Two more people had dropped out, but the five-minute man and vitamin woman were still there along with the little old lady.

“Are you sure it’s your first time here, girl?” the old lady asked around midnight when Marina only drooped a little. Her sharp voice cut across the lot. “You haven’t done this before?”

“Nope,” Marina answered. She closed her eyes, more tired by the lack of activity than lack of sleep. She had to be back on campus Monday for classes. If the others held out until tomorrow night, that was it for her.

Marina tried to keep her mind off these negative thoughts. She thought of Ronna’s kissable neck. She thought of her dad, realized that this was a form of gambling, and wondered if maybe she wasn’t just a little bit his daughter. But mostly she thought about water, about swimming in Lake Neptune, the night sky above and around her, liquid darkness, swimming in Ronna’s skin, part of her, part of the sky, part of the lake. It felt like she was moving, being pushed back and forth by the waves.

Marina opened her eyes, and in the bleary early morning hours, she got confused. It was like the canoe was on top her. She had a sudden memory of boats sailing across her skin. But the boat was too big. It would crush her! She panicked and pushed away from it, yelling out loud in fright.

Her own voice snapped her out of her mind. By then it was too late. She had taken her hand off the canoe and lost. A surge of misery gripped her chest. How had she lost? One of the

attendant nurses came to collect her, and she was led towards a cot in the nearby building, the old woman's laughter following behind.

The sorority girls woke her up early the next day, and she stumbled half dead to their car. They tried to cheer her up as her exhaustion had more to do with depression.

"You lasted two whole days!"

"That's so cool. It's probably because you're in such good shape."

"What's that supposed to mean? I'm in good shape too!"

"You totally have a bragging story when you get back to school."

Marina smiled at their attempts and tried to look happy. But she knew Ronna would be mad at her when she found out about the contest, and now Marina didn't have any prize money to make the scolding bearable. She eventually fell back asleep, leaning against the window.

The window was on the sunny side of the car, Marina was sick with a slight heat stroke for the rest of the week. Ronna yelled at her, nursed her, kissed her, chastised her, and held her hand while she puked. When she finally felt better, Ronna borrowed a friend's car and drove them out to Lake Neptune so Marina wouldn't have to walk.

They sat in their usual spot at the water's edge. The night was warm, and the grass felt good beneath Marina's fingers.

"I'm sorry I didn't get you the money," she apologized for the hundredth time.

"Shut up," Ronna said. "The thought was sweet even if what you did was really stupid. I wish you had told me."

"So you could stop me from going?"

"So I could go with you."

"You would have just watched me fail," Marina said.

“Yes.” Ronna nodded. “And then I would tease you about it for the rest of your life.”

Marina drew her knees up to her chest and laid a cheek on them.

“I’ve always felt,” she said, “like my body wasn’t exactly complete, either. Like there’s something holding me back from what I’m supposed to be.”

Ronna stiffened. “Are you saying you’re a man? Because I don’t know if I’m interested in men.”

“No.” Marina shook her head. “I mean, I feel contained. Like my skin is too tight. Like I should be more...” she lifted her hand, gesturing helplessly, “...fluid.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, clouds racing across the sky to cover the moon.

“I don’t understand,” Ronna finally said. She grasped Marina’s hand. “But whatever you need, if you figure it out, I’ll try and help you.”

Marina smiled. “Thanks.”

“But I won’t do any stupid contests without telling you first.”

Marina rolled her eyes. She looked at the dark surface of the lake, wondering about the feeling of the boat pressing down on her during the contest. She remembered how she had moved with the waves even miles away from a body of water.

“What are you doing?” Ronna asked as Marina stood up and began stripping out of her jean shorts.

“Skinny dipping. C’mon.”

Ronna shook her head.

“I don’t want you to see it.”

“Then follow me in. I won’t look.”

There was silence, then the rustle of clothing behind her. When Marina was finally bare, she held out her hand behind her without glancing back. Ronna took it, and Marina walked them into the lake, leading Ronna far out until they were in chest deep water. Only then did she turn around.

Water lapped at Ronna's clavicle, and the two held hands tightly beneath the surface. Marina grinned. Ronna looked like a sea goddess as her body blended into the lake.

"That's a beautiful dress you're wearing," Marina said.

Ronna laughed and splashed water at her face. They kissed, toe tips barely hanging onto the sand beneath them, hands grasping each other's cheeks for purchase as the lake lifted them up and apart.

Patient Simpleton

In times gone by, there was a grandmother who raised her three grandchildren, two girls and a boy, after the state took them from their parents. As she aged, a chronic cough settled in the grandmother's chest. Though she visited many doctors and took many pills, the cough never seemed to get any better. The medical bills piled up. Eventually, the two older grandchildren noticed their grandmother's resources were dwindling.

"If things continue at this rate, we won't have any inheritance left!" they grumbled. The eldest, a bright woman who graduated from a state college with a 4.0 GPA, came up with an idea.

"Grandma," she said, "the local doctors aren't helping you. Let me go out into the world and try to find a specialist who can take care of your cough."

The grandmother didn't want to see her favorite grandchild leave, but the graduate was old enough and smart enough to make it on her own. So the grandmother gave her best luggage to the granddaughter and packed a few homemade dinners in the bottom. Then she sent her granddaughter on her journey.

As the granddaughter drove down the back roads (because this was summer in the Midwest, so the interstate was backed up with construction), a figure suddenly blocked her way. It was a gnarled old woman, brown and bent. It seemed to the granddaughter as though she had worked hard in the cornfields her whole life, which was odd, because though this was a long time ago, it was still an age and area of many machines. The granddaughter waited for her to cross the road, but the old woman seemed to take a very long time. Eventually she ran out of patience, and the granddaughter got out of her car and helped the woman to the other side.

“Oh thank you,” the woman said after they made it to the other side. “Let me repay you.”

“You don’t have to,” the granddaughter said. She knew the only thing old people ever offered was old candy, usually sticky with the heat.

“But I insist. I’ll give you some advice. When you get tired and stop for the night, you’ll have the choice of sleeping at a Holiday Inn or a run-down motel across the way. You’ll want to go to the motel.”

The granddaughter went back to her car, thinking the old lady had perhaps spent too much time in the sun. Still, it was uncanny how, when she started to feel drowsy, there happened to be an exit with a Holiday Inn and a cheap motel called Happy Dreams sitting right across from it. But Holiday Inns were everywhere, so it wasn’t much of a trick to guess there’d be one eventually. Crummy motels were just as plentiful. The granddaughter sure wasn’t going to stay at that filthy-looking place, though, not when the brightly shining hotel with its fancy guestrooms and indoor pool was right there.

At the free brunch the next morning, the granddaughter met an executive for a high profile lumber company. The executive thought the granddaughter looked like the type to do well in the lumber business.

“We’re doing very well for ourselves,” the executive told her. “Someone smart like you will be making six figures in just a few years.”

It was a great offer, and now the granddaughter didn’t need to worry about her inheritance. Plus, the executive was rather handsome, and the granddaughter noticed he wasn’t wearing a wedding ring. Forgetting about her grandmother, she signed on with the company and went to make her fortune.

A full year went by, and the grandmother never heard from her granddaughter – not even a phone call, the ungrateful brat – she began to worry. Worrying agitated her cough, and her doctor prescribed more pills. Her grandson, confident that he would get a larger share now that his primary competition was gone, was still distressed that his money was slipping away. So he too told his grandmother he would go out into the world and look for a specialist. Though he hadn't gone to a state school like his sister, the grandson had completed two years of community college, and the grandmother thought he could do alright. So she picked out her best carrying case, put in a couple of homemade lunches and sent her grandson on his journey.

He too took the back roads to avoid construction and was stopped by an elderly person crossing the road. This time it was a bent old man, whom the grandson helped once he ran out of patience. The old man gave him the same advice the old woman had given the granddaughter. Like his elder sister, he ignored the advice and stayed at the Holiday Inn. Over brunch, he met an executive for a nationwide agricultural business and went to work for the company to seek his fortune.

More time went by, and neither grandchild called to let their grandmother know what became of them. Her cough became so bad that she stayed in bed most of the morning. Finally, her youngest grandchild, who was a simple thinker and thus called Simpleton, went to her grandmother and pleaded to go out into the world and find a specialist. At first, her grandmother wouldn't hear of it. If her two, brighter grandchildren couldn't do it, how would Simpleton manage? If any misfortune were to befall her, Simpleton wouldn't know what to do. But Simpleton continued to ask and gave her grandmother no rest until she said, "Very well! I have a duffel bag at the bottom of the closet you can use. And since I'm too weak to make you anything, take some of those Ritz crackers and the jar of peanut butter from the cabinet."

Simpleton bartered for a used moped with what little money she had, but since it couldn't get up to interstate speeds, she was forced to travel the back roads. Like her siblings, Simpleton's path was suddenly blocked by a brown, twisted shape. As Simpleton approached, she saw that it was a white oak tree growing right in the middle of the road. Its gnarled roots spread from one side to the other and curled out of the ground at awkward angles.

"How am I supposed to get around this?" she wondered.

"I don't mind moving if you ask," the tree replied.

Simpleton was surprised, but, as her name implied, she was not one to overthink these matters.

"If it's not too much trouble. This moped is pretty heavy, and I'm not sure how easy I could get it around," she said.

"I understand. I'll move right away."

But the tree didn't move, and after a minute, Simpleton said, "I thought you were going to move."

"I am moving," the tree replied. "I'm a tree, after all. You can't expect us to move very quickly."

"I supposed not," Simpleton said. "How long do you think it will take? I don't mean to be rude, but my grandmother is sick. She has a bad cough that only gets worse as she worries, so I want to find her a specialist before she worries to death."

"What has she got to worry about?" the tree asked.

"I'm not sure." Simpleton didn't worry about a lot herself. "Right now I think she's upset that my sister and brother haven't come back home after so long. They went out into the world and haven't called."

“I wouldn’t want my children to call,” said the tree. “I make tens of thousands of seeds each year. Can you imagine all of them calling home?”

“That would be a lot.”

“Once they’ve dropped off my branches, they’ll either be eaten or find a nice place to take root. You can’t help it.”

“Don’t you love your children?”

“Of course.” The tree rustled in agitation. “But I don’t have legs to walk around to make sure they all get in the right place. You can only do what you were built to do.”

“That makes sense,” said Simpleton. “Even though I’m worried about grandma, I won’t look for a specialist all the time. I’ll still sleep when I’m tired and eat when I’m hungry.”

“About that,” the tree said. “You’ll want to stay at the motel and not the Holiday Inn when you stop tonight.”

“Ok.” The tree had given such good advice so far, so Simpleton thought she should continue to listen.

“Well, on your way, then.” And Simpleton noticed the tree was out of the road. She thanked it for its advice and continued. When she stopped for the night, she went to the run-down Happy Dreams. It was family owned and served a very good homemade dinner and breakfast. When Simpleton told them about her grandmother, the owner recommended a hospital in a nearby town that was doing research specifically on throat and lung diseases. His mother had been treated by its specialist, and he had only good things to say about her.

Simpleton found the hospital in little time. As she walked up to the entrance, she was distracted by a red flash in the bushes to her right. She looked over and saw a fat fox rolling on his back in the grass.

“What are you doing in the city?” she wondered out loud.

“Plenty of us live in the city,” the fox replied. “Good eating. Not too many predators. Since people don’t raise livestock that we can steal, they’re much more tolerant than farmers.” Simpleton thought the fox’s logic was sound. He flipped back onto his stomach to look up at her. “By the way, if you want to get treatment for your grandmother, just go up and ask for Dr. Ortega. She’ll see you right away. But whatever you do, don’t complain about the cost.”

“Ok,” Simpleton said. The fox yipped once and ran off. Simpleton went into the hospital and followed the fox’s advice. She was immediately able to get an appointment with Dr. Ortega. After discussing her grandmother’s case, Dr. Ortega outlined a general plan to get them started.

“I’ll need to see your grandmother’s previous records, of course,” she said. “And she’ll need to come in for my own diagnosis. But this is the best hospital in the nation for throat and lung conditions.”

“Thank you very much,” Simpleton said.

“My assistant will help you with the billing. But this is about the standard charge.” Dr. Ortega handed her a piece of paper with instructions and costs. When Simpleton saw the number, she forgot about the fox’s warning and exclaimed, “That’s expensive!”

What Simpleton didn’t know was that she was the fourth patient that day – and the thousandth patient since Dr. Ortega started working at that hospital – to complain about the price of her practice. Dr. Ortega wasn’t a particularly stingy person, knowing how terrible her country’s healthcare system was, but even you would get tired of people telling you how to do your job better.

“Look here!” she said. “I provide a valuable service. Not only do we work with patients everyday to try and help them with their illness, but we spend countless hours doing research.

We don't have nearly enough staff, our equipment isn't as up-to-date as it could be, and we're completely underfunded. But we try."

Simpleton immediately felt bad.

"I'm sorry. Why don't you have enough money?"

"Most of our research department runs on grants and donations, but people aren't willing to give up their money for throat and lung diseases. We just don't have the same publicity that cancer and Alzheimer's do."

After a little more ranting, Simpleton was able to appease Dr. Ortega and leave the hospital. But she didn't go home right away. Simpleton was disturbed by what Dr. Ortega told her about the lack of funds for her research. After calling her grandmother to check in and tell her about what arrangements needed to be made, she went to a poorly maintained park across the street and sat on a bench to think. As thinking was not a specialty of Simpleton's, very few ideas came to her.

"You look a little constipated, dear. Been picking through wrong garbage I suspect."

Simpleton looked over to see a skunk peering up at her.

"Not recently," Simpleton replied. "I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"How to get money so the hospital can do more research on throat and lung diseases."

"Oh, that's easy." The skunk looked over at the cars sitting along the edge of the park.

"You should become a bus driver. You can make money that way. Plus, you can help with that funny smell in the air caused by all these cars. They spit out the most awful gasses from their backs. That might make the number of throat and lung diseases go down."

“That sounds like a good idea.” Simpleton stood up and brushed her pants off. “Thanks a lot.”

“Word of warning,” the skunk said. “You should never go hiking during the hottest days of the year. Better to stay inside and sleep until night.”

So Simpleton followed the skunk’s advice and applied to be a bus driver. She enjoyed the job very much. There were occasionally rude passengers or a drunk who fumbled with counting their fare, but Simpleton found that most people were kind and that the work was relaxing.

Though Simpleton was simple, she could focus if she was passionate about a topic. So after two months as a bus driver, Simpleton realized her salary wasn’t quite meeting all her expectations.

‘I’m not making nearly enough,’ she thought. With food and rent, Simpleton had barely a dollar to put towards the hospital each week. They were giving her grandmother such good treatment, too. They even let her stay at the hospital for long visits rather than drive constantly back and forth. But she didn’t know a better way, and no more animals came to give her advice, so she kept on driving even though it depressed her to do so little for the hospital.

Simpleton was very good to her passengers, and so one of the regulars she talked with in the morning noticed Simpleton’s personality was wilting. The regular suggested that Simpleton should try hiking among the beautiful hills surrounding the city as a way of relaxing. Simpleton thought it was a good idea.

Her next day off was one of the hottest on record, but, ignoring the advice of the skunk, she went hiking anyway.

After hours of sweating, she reached the top of the largest hill in the area. Smiling at her accomplishment, she turned around to see the city far beneath her. It was covered in a blanket of thick smog.

‘What use is my bus driving against something like this?’ she thought with dismay. There was no way she would make even a tiny dent.

Simpleton sat down among some rocks and sighed heavily. She took this time to think, which she strained to do until she heard a tsking noise at her shoulder.

“You people never listen, do you?”

A robin fluttered down and landed in front of Simpleton.

“When you’re told not to do something, don’t do it. I really shouldn’t help you.”

“Please, robin, do help me.”

“Well, since you said please.” The robin tilted her head to the side as if thinking. “There’s an organic farm a few towns over. They’re testing out some new methods for crop production without using the traditional pesticides and machinery. You should work there for awhile.”

“Will that help me earn money for the hospital?”

“No.”

“Will it make the smog covering this town go away?”

“Not really.”

“Then why should I do it?”

The robin ruffled her feathers. “Don’t do it if you don’t want to. It’s just the advice I have for you.”

She hopped in a half circle and spread her wings.

“But if you do go, here’s my advice. And you better listen to it this time. Don’t look at the numbers at the end of the year.”

And the robin flew off.

Since Simpleton had no better ideas, and since she had followed the advice of all the other animals up to this point, she decided consistency was a fine thing and went to work at the organic farm. It was the hardest work she had done yet. Before the sun had even risen, Simpleton had to get up to start the day’s work. Weeds needed to be picked by hand. Fertilizer needed to be spread in a timely manner. Animals needed feeding. Sometimes Simpleton would have to get up in the middle of the night to pick the squash because rain was expected early the next morning. Sometime she had to herd the meanest goat to the barn for its monthly check-up. But she made friends with the other farmers and enjoyed her time there. When a year had passed, Simpleton was sitting at the kitchen table with the couple who owned the farm, Jesse and Alex. They were going over the books, and their faces were grim.

“What’s wrong?” Simpleton asked.

“It’s just these numbers,” Jesse said and turned the book so Simpleton could see it. “We did really bad this year.”

Simpleton, forgetting the robin’s advice, looked over the records. Though numbers weren’t her thing, even she understood all the red markings.

That evening, Simpleton sat out near the cornfield and cried.

“What’s wrong, Simpleton?”

She looked up and saw the white oak tree who had blocked her way on the road. It was flourishing in the backyard. How had she not noticed it before?

“Everything I do is a failure. I did what the fox told me and learned that nobody cares about throat and lung diseases. I did what the skunk told me and learned that one person can’t make a difference. And I did what the robin told me and learned that this type of farming only makes people poor. Only your suggestion worked out.”

“Silly Simpleton,” the tree said. “It wasn’t the advice that was bad. You ignored the warnings each time, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” said Simpleton, who was too simple to make excuses for herself. “But if I hadn’t, I would have found out each of those plans were useless eventually. It just would have taken longer.”

“They weren’t useless,” the tree huffed. “You just didn’t give them enough time to work out. Hurry, hurry, hurry! That’s all you humans do. Trees never hurry about anything, and we get along just fine. I have eight-hundred years to look forward to, and I’m not about to see them all move by in a blink.”

Well, that was true. Simpleton thought about it, and it did seem that trees were better off in the world for all their stillness. It made quite a bit of sense to her. She looked up at the tree to thank it, but the tree no longer looked like much of a tree. It looked like a beautiful person with deep brown, bark patterned skin and a young, leafy face.

“What are you staring at?” the spirit of the tree asked.

“You look a little human.” Simpleton blushed. “And you’re very beautiful.”

“Hmph.” But the tree seemed flattered. “Well, you’re beginning to look little more tree-like. If you keep it up, you could be a very fine oak one day.”

“Thank you,” Simpleton said. “Will you please stay here? I will be patient and work here for a couple more years. I would like your company.”

“It is tiring to move around so much,” the tree said. “If you’ll stay put, I don’t mind.”

The crops were not much better the next year, but Simpleton kept working. The third year, the farm went into the black. And stayed there the forth. Eventually Jesse and Alex began to make a decent profit. Other farmers began borrowing ideas from them or modeling their own techniques off of Alex and Jesse’s ideas. Simpleton noticed that the area had a nice smell and kind neighbors, so she convinced her grandmother to move out to the farm. Dr. Ortega thought it was an excellent idea, so her grandmother didn’t need much more convincing.

A few years into her work, the farm was visited by a representative from a large agricultural corporation. Simpleton recognized the man right away.

“Brother!”

The grandson looked at Simpleton with surprise and disdain.

“This makes sense,” he said. “Simple farming for simple Simpleton.”

“Are you here to see Grandmother?” Simpleton asked. “She is doing much better even though the cough can’t completely be cured.”

“I’m here to buy this farm,” the grandson said.

Simpleton frowned. “I think Jesse and Alex are doing a good job on it. They’re not having trouble with money at that moment.” At least she didn’t think they were. Simpleton didn’t understand finances very well, after all.

“They’re doing a terrible job,” her brother said. “Their methods are terrible for maximizing profits. The farm won’t last another ten years. We’re going to save it before it’s too late.”

What Simpleton didn’t know was that Jesse and Alex were doing fine. Her brother’s corporation merely wanted to stamp out the competition.

“If you’re their friends, Simpleton,” her brother said, “you’ll advise them to sell to me.”

Simpleton did think herself a friend of Jesse and Alex, so she went and told them what her brother said.

“We’ll be fine,” Alex said. “You shouldn’t worry.”

“What do you think?” she asked the white oak later that day.

“I like the plants around here,” the white oak said. “Jesse and Alex seem like good people from what you’ve told me about them. I’d trust them.”

Simpleton preferred not to worry because she often had trouble remembering what she should worry about. So she trusted Alex and Jesse and forgot about her brother’s words. After he was sent to jail for a scandal involving his corporation, she even wrote to him from time to time. He never answered, of course.

A few more years passed, and another stranger visited the farm. Simpleton recognized the woman right away.

“Sister!”

The granddaughter looked a little worse for the wear. Her lumber company had tied itself up in too many international legal issues. There were several secret services from various countries looking for her bosses right now. She had bailed before they could tag her with any crime.

“I heard Grandmother died,” she said.

Simpleton nodded sadly.

“I’m here to collect my inheritance,” the granddaughter said.

There wasn’t much left; Simpleton had mainly supported her grandmother through the last year of her life. The granddaughter had been left with a nice vase and a coin collection.

“What am I supposed to do with these?” the granddaughter cursed. She had expected enough money to tide her over while getting back on her feet.

“The coin collection isn’t finished,” Simpleton offered. “You still need about five states. You could try and find them.”

“You really are simple, aren’t you?” The granddaughter sighed and stomped off. On her way back to her car, she noticed the large white oak swaying in the backyard.

“I bet you could fetch a pretty penny for that,” she told Simpleton. “If you cut me in for 50%, I’ll let you know a place that will give you a fair price.”

Simpleton was very angry at the suggestion.

“I think,” she said slowly because she wasn’t used to saying it, “that you should leave.”

So the granddaughter did.

Simpleton walked over to the tree and patted its trunk.

“I’m sorry you had to hear that,” she said.

“I’d like to see her try and sell me,” the tree replied. “I’d like to see anyone get near me with an ax and come back with their limbs intact.”

Simpleton laughed.

Her brother and sister never bothered her again. The years passed, and Simpleton continued to work with Jesse and Alex until old age bent her and made her hands arthritic. In that time she acquired a new nickname. When the residents of the suburb asked her about making big impacts and raising lots of money for her causes, Simpleton would smile and say, “Oh, it will happen eventually. And if it doesn’t, that’s ok, too.” So they called her Patient Simpleton.

Nobody really paid much attention to the white oak tree until someone remarked that Simpleton seemed to take a break under it every day. And when the years passed and Simpleton died, they buried her under that tree. At that spot, there are two oak trees growing close enough together that the tips of their branches touch, and for anything I have heard contrary, they are living there still.

Goldilocks and the Three Genders

Once upon a time in a house in the woods, there lived three bears. There was a Mama Bear, a Papa Bear, and a Baby Bear. The three bears often got into fights. This is what they fought over: Mama Bear knew she was a female bear. She used feminine pronouns, wore pretty and lacy clothing, and often slept with a stuffed toy dressed like a ballerina. Papa Bear knew he was a male bear. He used masculine pronouns, wore sturdy and rugged clothing, and often slept with a stuffed toy dressed as a lumberjack.

However, Baby Bear said zie didn't have a gender. Baby Bear insisted on gender-neutral pronouns, wore colorful combinations of frills and denim that were practical and flirty, and slept with a stuffed animal that zie sometimes pretended was a teacher, sometimes a painter, and sometimes unemployed. Mama Bear and Papa Bear didn't agree with Baby Bear's decision to be gender free. They told Baby Bear zie had to pick whether zie was a Daughter Bear or a Son Bear. But Baby Bear refused.

The Bear family's arguments escalated until one morning, Mama Bear shouted, "That's it! I've had enough. We're going to leave this house for a bit and get some fresh air."

Papa Bear and Baby Bear both agreed this was a smart idea. So the family dressed up—Mama in her bonnet, Papa in his baseball cap, and Baby in a bandana—and walked off into the woods.

Now, the Bears were a trusting sort and the neighborhood they lived in was known for its safety, so they didn't think anything of leaving their door unlocked.

Along came a young human named Goldilocks, named so for the beautiful ringlets of blonde hair sprouting from that fine head. Goldilocks was taking a shortcut to the roller rink that

day. Upon seeing the Bear's front door mounted into the side of a hill, the young human thought, "I wonder what creature lives in a burrow such as this?" As the door was open, it seemed fine to enter and satisfy that natural sense of curiosity that makes humans so wonderful and dangerous.

The first thing Goldilocks saw upon entering the house were the Bear's pronouns. They were hanging on the coat rack next to the door all, sparkly and just polished. Goldilocks was curious about these pronouns and thought, "I'm going to try them on."

First, Goldilocks put on Mama Bear's pronouns. But she found them uncomfortable, as if they were restricting her movements. Next, Goldilocks tried on Papa Bear's pronouns. But he found they also seemed too tight, as if he couldn't breathe properly while as he wore them. Finally, Goldilocks tried on Baby Bear's pronouns.

They were perfect! Goldilocks had never felt so good. These pronouns were light and loose and fit zir body like a warm, furry second skin.

Wondering if there might be more magnificent items in the house, Goldilocks explored further. Zie eventually came to the bedroom Mama Bear and Papa Bear shared. In the first closet was Mama Bear's clothing. Goldilocks thought the various colorful bits of silk and floral patterns was very pretty.

"I think I will try some on," zie said out loud.

So Goldilocks got out a cream sundress bursting with bright red flowers and slipped it on. Zir shoulders felt too bare, however, so zie put a red camisole over them. After complimenting the ensemble with some strappy high heels, zie went over to the mirror hanging on the far wall and looked zirsself over.

Goldilocks liked the way the dress hugged zir hips, and the heels gave zir calves to die

for. But zie just didn't feel like the image staring back at zir was really the Goldilocks zie felt to be. So zie took off the clothing and threw it on the bed.

Next, Goldilocks found Papa Bear's closet. The clothing inside looked comfortable and simple, so zie decide to try these clothes on. Zie found a pair of jeans and a t-shirt with the Greenwich Grizzlies' team logo on the front. The tennis shoes at the bottom of the closet were too large for zir, but Goldilocks slipped them on anyway just to complete the look.

Looking again in the mirror, Goldilocks posed a few time. Zie liked how the loose pants felt and looked, but the large shirt hid zir toned upper body. Once again, the image in the mirror just wasn't right. So zie changed back into zir own clothes, throwing the jeans and shirt on the large bed.

Goldilocks was a fairly smart human, and since zie had found three sets of pronouns downstairs, zie thought that perhaps there might be a third closet somewhere as well. Zie turned the corner out of Mama and Papa Bear's bedroom and found Baby Bear's room.

And here was everything zie could have asked for. The closet contained loose and tight fitting pants, skirts of various lengths, blouses, button-down shirts, vests, neck ties, and so much more. Goldilocks stared, absolutely dumbstruck for a few moments with all the choices available to zir. After coming to zir senses, zie spent the next few hours trying on different combinations of clothing. Goldilocks eventually settled on a pair of brown, loose-fitting pants with suspenders, a blouse with ruffles down the front, and a loose fitting scarf to tie it all together. Looking in the mirror on the closet door, zie could not stop posing this way and that, taking in the sleek way zir outfit outlined zir body while at the same time giving zirself a sense of strength and confidence. Goldilocks smiled brightly, feeling truly happy for the first time in awhile.

Eventually the glow wore off and, once it did, Goldilocks noticed the mess zie had left in the room. Shirts and skirts were strewn everywhere and different tie and blouse combinations lay at angles on the bed. Feeling a bit guilty, zie straightened up, putting everything back in its proper place while sneaking glances to the mirror every once in awhile.

When zie was finished, Goldilocks felt a brief sense of satisfaction before zie remembered about Mama and Papa Bear's room.

"I better clean those up too!"

So zie went back to the other bedroom and hung up the dress and jeans and camisole and t-shirt, though in a brief moment of playfulness, zie put the t-shirt in Mama Bear's closet and the camisole in Papa Bear's.

Once this was complete, Goldilocks looked around the room for anything else to clean, and it was then that zie spied Mama Bear's stuffed ballerina lying on the pillow at the top of the bed. The ballerina was adorably dressed in a pink leotard and tutu with the cutest white ballet slippers on her feet. Goldilocks picked up the plush and admired the frills of the tutu and the silky brown hair. Zie felt the sudden urge to hug the doll, so zie did. It made zir feel warm inside.

"Thank you for that," zie said to the doll before putting it back down.

On the other side of the bed was Papa Bear's stuffed lumberjack. He was dressed in a yellow and brown flannel shirt, his overalls splashed with brown paint to make him look a little dirty. Goldilocks picked him up and admired the ragged hems of his shirt and the slight five-o'clock shadow stitched onto his chin. Zie felt the urge to hug this doll as well and so zie did. It made zir feel warm inside.

"Thank you for that," zie said, placing the lumberjack back on its pillow.

As said before, Goldilocks was fairly intelligent and so zie immediately went back to Baby Bear's room to look for a toy. On Baby Bear's bed was the unemployed teacher/painter, dressed in a suit jacket and white apron, blue hair brushed back into a pony-tail. Goldilocks fingered the paint stains on the apron and the piercings in the doll's nose. Zie felt the urge to hug it and so zie did, and, for some reason, zie felt like zie couldn't let go. It was like hugging zirsself and Goldilocks squeezed the plush body tightly.

It had been a physically and emotionally taxing day for Goldilocks, what with trying on all those clothes and cleaning up both the rooms. Plus, zie didn't want to leave this wonderful house just yet.

"Just a quick nap is what I need," zie thought and crawled into the bed. Still holding the teacher/painter in a firm grip, Goldilocks fell into a deep sleep.

It wasn't much later that the Bear family came home from their calming walk. But the relaxing mood lifted almost as soon as they got in the door.

"Someone's been wearing my pronouns!" Mama Bear said.

"Someone's been wearing my pronouns!" Papa Bear said.

"Someone's been wearing my pronouns too, and they didn't put them back!" Baby Bear cried in dismay. Mama Bear and Papa Bear glanced at each other. Perhaps this wasn't such a bad thing after all.

"You can share my pronouns," Mama Bear said. "Just until we find yours."

But Baby Bear refused.

"You can share my pronouns," Papa Bear said. "I'm sure it will be fine, just until we find yours."

But Baby Bear refused.

So the Bear family bustled about to find Baby Bear's pronouns because Mama and Papa Bear thought it would be very confusing to speak about Baby Bear without them.

After looking in the kitchen and living room and finding nothing, Mama and Papa Bear tried their closets.

"Someone's been wearing my clothes!" Mama Bear growled. She held up Papa Bear's t-shirt that she had found in her closet.

"Someone's been wearing my clothes!" Papa Bear growled. He held up Mama Bear's camisole that he had found in his closet.

"Someone's been wearing my clothes, and...oh, wait. These aren't mine." Baby Bear had found Goldilock's old clothes—a set of blue trousers and a white blouse—between the bedrooms where Goldilocks had set them down and then forgotten them.

Mama and Papa Bear turned to their bed to look under it but Mama Bear noticed something amiss.

"Someone's been playing with my ballerina!" she said picking her up. Mama Bear always kept the ballerina's hair in perfect condition, but now a few strands had made themselves free of their bun.

"Someone's been playing with my lumberjack!" Papa Bear said picking him up. One of the overall buttons had come unlatched, and Papa Bear quickly corrected this mistake. What respectable lumberjack would walk around half-buttoned like that?

"Someone's been playing with my unemployed painter! And that person is still holding it!" Baby Bear shouted, bringing Mama and Papa Bear running to Baby Bear's room.

The three Bears stared down at the human sleeping peacefully in Baby Bear's bed, wearing Baby Bear's pronouns and clothes, hugging Baby Bear's stuffed toy. Mama and Papa

Bear didn't know what to do; it was an unusual situation. Most burglars took what they wanted and left, didn't they? What was this one doing still in the house?

Baby Bear, however, was quite upset at still not having any pronouns and, so, poked Goldilocks in the cheek with one sharp claw.

Goldilocks jerked from the pain and awoke. When zie saw three bears standing over zir, zie was too frightened to properly speak at first.

"What are you doing with my pronouns?" asked Baby Bear.

Still gathering zir bearings, it took Goldilocks a moment to process the question and answer.

"These are your pronouns?" zie asked.

Baby Bear nodded.

"Then these are your clothes?"

Baby Bear nodded.

"And this is your doll?"

Baby Bear nodded.

A huge grin spread across Goldilocks' face.

"Oh, you're so wonderful!"

All of the bears' eyes widened in surprise.

"What?" Mama Bear asked.

"What?" Papa Bear asked.

"I've never felt quite right, you know," Goldilocks said to Baby Bear. "I've tried female and male pronouns and all the kinds of dress my parents would allow. Nothing ever seemed to work. And then I came here and everything just seemed to fit. I understand it now. I'm not a

woman or a man. I'm just Goldilocks."

Mama and Papa Bear couldn't believe what they were hearing. They had thought their Baby Bear was a little out there, that their child wasn't like anything or anybody else in the world. They had thought Baby Bear was just going through a phase or perhaps had a mental illness. And yet here was another animal that said the exact same things. Neither understood how this could be.

Baby Bear, meanwhile, was the happiest bear in the forest at that moment.

"That's exactly how I feel too! Mama and Papa don't believe me, but I know it. I'm not a Daughter Bear or a Son bear. I'm just Baby Bear."

Baby Bear and Goldilocks clasped paws and hands. They had finally found a kindred soul, someone that understood exactly what each had been feeling their whole lives.

"Baby Bear," Goldilocks said. "Do you mind sharing your pronouns with me? I'll give back the clothes and go buy some of my own, but I think these pronouns are really the best for me."

Baby Bear seemed to think it over a moment.

"On one condition," zie said. "You have to be my friend."

Goldilocks laughed.

"Well, of course."

And this is how it ended. From that day onwards, Goldilocks often went to Baby Bear's house and zie always invited Baby Bear to zir house too. Mama and Papa Bear, now realizing that maybe Baby Bear knew a thing or two about zirsself (and now that Baby Bear had someone to argue on zir side, therefore making the field even), stopped trying to get Baby Bear to make a choice between being a Daughter or a Son Bear. From that day on, Goldilocks and Baby Bear

were inseparable and remained good friends, always.

Bootstraps

Near the town of Albany, about fifty miles straight southwest, there was once a large forest that would take a person many days to travel. It is no longer there, not since the trees were taken away for the paper mills, but you can still drive down the gravel roads for miles between rows of corn and get lost.

Back when there still was a forest, however, there was a poor family that lived at the edge of it. Because they were so poor, they couldn't afford contraception, and they had many children. Eventually the children became too many and the family began to starve. The parents were left to make a difficult decision. So one day, the mother took the two youngest, a girl and a boy, out to the forest to collect mushrooms for dinner. The children were thin and near starved, and after half a day's walk, they complained of exhaustion and asked to rest. Their mother obliged them, and the two children made a nest of fallen leaves near the roots of a large oak. As soon as they were fast asleep, their mother knelt next to their bodies. She prayed that they may be blessed with a miracle and saved, and if that could not happen, that their deaths would be quick and painless. Then she left them.

When the children woke up, it was dark. They called for their mother, but there was no reply. Huddled among the roots, they continued calling throughout the night.

Dawn approached with no answer. The girl, whose name was Mary, turned to the boy, whose name was James.

"We have been abandoned," she said.

"What are we going to do?" asked James.

Up to that point, Mary, like any other child of eleven, had been frightened and near hysterical. But when her brother asked her that question, she realized that nothing was going to save them, and it was only up to the two of them to make it out of this situation. So she wiped away the tears that had streaked her face during the night and stood up.

“We are going to find food,” she said. “We know which berries are good and which are poisonous, and which mushrooms to avoid and which taste fine.”

James nodded.

“Dad always told me,” he said, “to find a river if you get lost. So maybe we can get some things to eat if we find one.”

“And to drink.” Mary smiled. “I almost forgot about that. Good job, James.”

James beamed at the praise and stood up as well. Mary grabbed his hand, and together they set off into the forest.

A tiring day went by, and the two had to stop often because of their hunger and weakness. James was able to find a few nuts by watching where a squirrel was burying its treasures, but it was hardly enough to satisfy them. That night was cold, and they tossed and turned in each others’ arms, bellies rumbling.

On the second day, they had better luck.

“I hear something,” Mary said and strained her ears. James went still and tried to listen as well. There was a very faint clinking sound.

“Water?” James asked hopefully.

“Let’s see.”

But the sound was not water. Instead, Mary and James came upon a house made entirely out of sweet things. The walls were banana bread, the roof was chocolate, the chimney made of

peppermint. The clinking sound had been the sugar windows expanding under the heat of the noon sun.

“This is great!” James said as he rushed towards the house. Mary trailed after, unable to quite believe what was before her eyes. Upon reaching the walls, James immediately bit into the bread and came away with a mouthful.

“So good,” he mumbled through his chewing, and with that, Mary gave up her reservations and began to eat the house as well.

The two filled their empty bellies, and in fact, gave themselves a very bad stomach ache from eating so much so fast. They spent most of that night groaning next to the house as they were unable to walk from the pain.

In the morning, after eating a more sensible meal, they decided to explore the house itself. Mary peered in through a hole they had made licking at a sugar window. The interior was too dark, and she could not see much.

“Well, I guess we invite ourselves in?”

The two walked through the gingerbread door to another surprise. The house seemed to be magical. While the exterior was edible, the interior resembled any other cabin one might find in this part of the forest. The walls were made of stacked logs, the floor was smooth wood, and the fireplace consisted of stone. It was one room, though with the fire out and the curtains closed, they couldn’t quite see all the way to the back. But there seemed to be a table and chair near the door and a large bed further in.

“Hello?” Mary called out. James peered around her. Nobody answered.

Mary stepped further into the house.

“Hello?”

Still no reply. Mary glanced back at her brother.

“Maybe they’re out working or gathering food,” James said.

Mary shook her head. “No, I don’t think anyone lives here. There’s too much dust everywhere, and look,” she pointed, “there are even cobwebs in all the corners.”

James walked toward his sister. After allowing his eyes to adjust to the dim light, he saw that she was right. If anybody lived here, they sure hadn’t cleaned up in awhile. Not only was it incredibly dirty, but it smelled terrible.

“Eww...” James pinched his nose. “Did somebody poop in here?”

Mary shrugged. She wanted to appear mature, so she kept her hands away from her face. Still, she breathed only through her mouth as she moved over to one of the windows.

“It probably just needs to be aired out,” she said. She drew back the curtains to find a glass window on the other side.

“Wow.” Mary had seen glass windows only once before. It was a time when she travelled with her father from their little house into the closest city, which was still several miles away. Back then they had a donkey. The donkey had eventually been butchered for their empty stomachs. Her family never would have dreamed of owning glass windows.

She gingerly touched one finger to a pane, afraid of breaking it. The glass felt a little warm from the sun.

“Ahhhh!”

Mary spun around. James was frozen in place, gaping at one corner of the room where he had his finger pointed. She followed his line of vision, and almost immediately, her body went rigid.

There was a woman. Or what had probably been a woman back when she was still living. The light from the window illuminated a large, decaying mass of flesh that resembled the form of a fat woman, hunched over, chin resting on her breasts. She was completely naked, and long, oily hair hung over her face. No flies buzzed around her, but it was obvious that she was the one creating the stench in the room.

It had to be a witch. Mary had heard the stories of ugly old women who lived far from other people and practiced magical mischief.

“It’s...it’s..she’s dead!” James yelled and ran toward the door. His motion brought Mary back to her senses, and she was soon behind her brother. They shut the door tightly behind them, hoping to contain whatever evil might be inside the house.

They stayed outside for the rest of the day and into the night. James wanted to leave as soon as they had gotten out of the house, but Mary, no longer in the presence of the body, regained a little of her courage. They were near a good food source and hadn’t eaten well for days. It would be foolish to leave for unknown parts of the forest at this point.

Still, James refused to eat from the magical house until Mary boldly stepped up and snapped off a chunk of roof. The idea of eating while a dead body lay inside didn’t exactly help her appetite, but she shoved the chocolate into her mouth, anyway, chewing it quickly and swallowing without really tasting it.

“Boy, that was good! Never tasted anything so good in my life.” She bit off another piece. “Yum-yum! De-li-cious.”

“Stop it!” James yelled, his fists balled at his sides. “I know what you’re doing. I’m not stupid.”

Mary ignored him and picked at the toffee gutter.

“This is really sweet.” She ate a bit slower. They hardly ever had sweets back at their old house, and the candy was really some of the best food she had ever tasted. “It practically melts in your mouth.”

“I’m not listening,” James said, crossing his arms. But Mary could see the hesitation in his eyes.

“Well, I don’t mind. It just means I get to eat this whole, delicious house all by myself.”

It didn’t take much longer to convince James to nibble on some wall, though Mary had to pick it off for him as he wouldn’t go near the house himself.

A full stomach and a good night’s sleep helped ease their minds considerably. The next afternoon, they explored the area around the house and found a good well in the back. They drank until their bellies were extended. After that, they washed the dirty and dust from their bodies and lay naked under the sun to dry themselves off. By the afternoon, Mary’s resolve had strengthened.

“James. We’re going to live in this house.”

He turned his head to look at where she lay next to him.

“What?”

“We’ll have plenty of food and water and a good place to sleep.”

“But...but the woman in there...”

Mary’s mouth felt dry. She swallowed.

“We’ll just have to move her out.”

James eyes widened, his mouth falling open.

“We can do it,” Mary said. “We’ll even dig her a grave and say prayers over it so that she’ll be happy in the afterlife.” She hadn’t thought of this part before, but saying it out loud

changed her view on the matter. She felt pity for the witch who had been abandoned by everyone just like them. “We have to do it James. If we hadn’t of come along, she would have sat in there with no friends or family to give her a funeral. It could be that the whole reason we’re here is to give her a proper send off. We’ll help her, and in exchange, she gives us the house.”

James frowned, the space between his eyebrows creasing. What Mary said made a lot of sense. He had been to funerals before; there were sisters and brothers that hadn’t made it past their first year and those that had but never got to adulthood. But the dead person’s face was always wrapped, and he certainly hadn’t been the one to bury them.

“I don’t know.”

“We have to do it,” Mary said, and she believed it at she heard her own words. “It’s the right thing to do, James.”

Through much effort over the next week, Mary and James dug a large grave with sticks and boards they found lying about. They tugged and rolled and used the bed sheets to slide the body out of the house and into the hole. After their small funeral was over, the two of them cleaned their new home, scrubbing particularly hard in the witch’s corner and along the floor where they dragged her out.

It took Mary awhile to gather the courage to open the precious windows, afraid as she was of their delicacy, but in the end, the smell was too much. The contrast between the normal inside of the house and the eatable outside was most noticeable in the window frames. The wooden interior gradually transformed into bread, so gradually that neither of the children could tell you were one material ended and the other began.

“It really is magical,” James said, poking a particularly squishy piece of wood/bread near the middle.

That wasn’t the only thing magical about the house as they discovered over the next few days. The parts that had been eaten would grow back so that food was never scarce. And for some reason, the creatures of the forest never came into the clearing that surrounded their house. The witch’s spells were truly wonderful. So much did Mary and James feel blessed that they stopped being afraid of the dead body and went once every week to the grave in the backyard. They prayed over it, thanking the witch for her help and hoping she was having a nice time in the afterlife.

It was about three years later that they had their first visitor. Mary was outside, dragging water up from the well, when she heard someone loudly swearing in the nearby trees. Startled, she dropped the rope, and the bucket fell back into the water with a loud splash.

“What was that?” said the voice from the forest.

“It was me,” Mary replied, scarcely able to believe she was hearing a human voice that was not her brother’s.

“And who is me?” the voice asked.

“I am me.” To be fair, Mary hadn’t held a decent conversation in a long time, and she and James always knew who the other person was since, if it was not them, it had to be the other.

The voice harrumphed.

“What is your *name*?”

“Mary. What is your name?”

“Darlene,” the voice replied and a person stepped out into the clearing. Darlene was an older woman, the sides of her eyes slightly pinched inward, her hair pulled back tautly to stretch out her face. Strands had been pulled out and hung limply with dead leaves clinging to the ends. Her very pretty, moonlight colored dress was stained around the hem, and the velvet at the top was damp and tangled every which way. She was bony, her hands resembling the dead carcass of a rabbit James had once found.

“Oh my!” Darlene said as she finally got a look at Mary. “Oh, dearest, dearest,” she tutted, her eyes wide and head shaking back and forth.

“Um...” Mary had no idea what Darlene’s problem was. “Are you lost? Would you like to come inside the house?” Mary remembered how famished she had been the first time she and James discovered the house, and based on the way Darlene looked, she could probably use a bit to eat.

Darlene looked over at the house and gasped again. Mary smiled.

“Yes, it’s magical.”

“It sure is something!” Darlene looked back over at Mary. “That’s what you’ve been eating? If so, it explains your figure.”

Mary looked down at herself. In the past three years, she had grown upwards quite a bit and outwards just a little more. She was not boney like Darlene, but she didn’t think that was a problem. She felt strong, in fact, mostly because of the muscle she had built up while working around the house and yard with James.

“Oh, honey, honey, honey,” Darlene tsked, smushing Mary’s face between her hands. “Where *is* your mother?”

“We don’t have a mother,” she managed to squeeze out.

“Well that explains a lot.” Darlene let her go. “We? There’s more than one of you?”

Mary led Darlene over to James, who became excited when he realized another person had found them. Unfortunately, Darlene’s reaction to James was pretty much the same reaction she had upon meeting Mary.

“You poor things,” Darlene said. “Is this all you eat? This disgusting, sugary junk?”

Mary and James glanced over to one another. They had never felt embarrassed about their diet before, but Darlene’s question caused them both to blush. They now realized they had been doing something wrong.

“We don’t know where to get anything else,” James said softly.

“Why, the forest is all around you,” Darlene replied. “Go out and get some good plants or nuts or berries. I’m sure if you hunt around here, you’ll find something much better for your bodies.”

James’ eyes immediately began to shine with tears. Mary put one hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

“We’re afraid of getting lost,” she said. Indeed, James even still had nightmares about being left all alone in the woods.

“Honestly. I try to help, and you two reject it outright.” Darlene sighed. “Well, if you’re not going to eat right, the least you can do is exercise.”

Mary didn’t understand. They exercised plenty.

“We do chores around the house every day. I usually get water from the well, and James will scrub the pots from breakfast and-“

“That’s just work,” Darlene said. “I’m talking about healthy, useful exercise.”

Mary and James looked at each other and shrugged.

“Push ups! Sit-ups! Timed walking!” Darlene threw up her hands. “Sustained cardiovascular! Your heart needs to get pumping! Why, that’s just what I was doing before I got here. Taking a nice, long jog. It’s why I look so good at my age.”

“Oh,” James said. He didn’t know if that was the truth. He hadn’t seen any older women in several years.

“I’ll tell you what,” Darlene said. “I’ll stay for three days and teach you a few of the basics. Nothing fancy, just some warm ups, good movement. Maybe even a little yoga, if we can work it in.”

“That would be wonderful!” Mary said. They would have their first human guest in a long time. She was glad Darlene wouldn’t be leaving them immediately. It would be good to hear another voice. Maybe they could even convince her to stay for longer than three days. Darlene could be their new mother!

But despite Mary’s wishes, Darlene barely even made it through the three day promise. She only ate little bits of the candy house presented to her, preferring instead to subsist on dried grains and fruits that she happened to carry with her. She was pleased that Mary and James got up early to start their chores, and in between the water drawing and wood gathering, she taught them how to jog in place, how to stretch their legs, and how to maintain a Happy Baby Pose. Most were not difficult for the siblings; what was hard was finding the time in between all their other work. They needed to draw water for baths, laundry, and scrubbing the house. They needed to collect wood for the fireplace and to heat up the water. And they needed the energy to think for general household upkeep; if something broke, they often had to find the solution through trial and error. Darlene did, for her part, try to help, but she wasn’t used to their routine and often interfered more than anything.

On the morning of the fourth day, she hoisted up her skirts and headed to the edge of the clearing.

“Please, please stay just a little longer,” Mary begged.

“We’ll take good care of you,” James added. “I’ll even try harder to find nuts nearby. I bet we could plant a tree if we find some good seeds!”

“No, no, no.” Darlene shook her head. “I’m sorry, children, but I just can’t. This place will be terrible for my health. You two really should think about finding a different home. You won’t survive long if you stay here.”

With a final ‘tsk’ in their direction, she disappeared into the woods.

Mary and James attempted to maintain the exercise routine they had set-up, but it became increasingly harder to follow a rigid schedule as the weeks went by. Exercising often left them too tired to complete their daily chores.

Eventually, they gave up Darlene’s lessons altogether.

It was three years later when they had their next visitor. This time both siblings were outside when a young person stepped out of the forest. Mary could not tell if the person was a woman or a man as thick leathers rendered their shape formless, and his or her long hair was tied up in a ponytail at the neck. She or he, however, was rather pretty, and as Mary was now a young woman herself, she suddenly felt a slight longing that she could not quite identify.

“Ah!” the person spoke. “Didn’t expect to see people out this way.”

Both James and Mary nodded. The three all stared at one another until James seemed to remember he had a mouth.

“We never see people,” he said. “It’s been years since the last one...um...I can’t remember her name.”

“Darlene,” Mary supplied.

“Right.” James nodded.

“I see.” The person nodded. “Well, nice to see you. I’ll be going then.” She or he made to leave.

“Wait!” Mary grabbed the person’s hand. “Won’t you please stay for a little while? We haven’t seen another person in so long!”

The person sniffed and pulled away. “For the better, I think. People are just trouble. That’s why I became a hunter. Sleep under the trees. Live and die with the animals. I eat ‘em, and they’ll eat me when I’m gone or one of ‘em bests me. It’s simple that way.”

“Just one night!” Mary pleaded.

“I want to hear about your hunting,” James added.

This last statement seemed to please the hunter.

“Well, a night wouldn’t hurt.” The hunter nodded. “Name’s Casey.”

They invited Casey inside for dinner. The hunter had a couple of fresh squirrels from earlier in the day, and Mary and James added bits of their house to make for a pleasant meal. As James requested, Casey told them many stories about hunting in various places all around the world. The exotic animals described delighted both of the siblings, and they enjoyed listening so much that nobody realized it was morning until the sparrows began singing outside.

“Now where did the night go?” Casey asked. “I’m a bit of a blabbermouth, I suppose, when you get down to it, though you’ve both probably been the best company I’ve ever had. Everyone else I meet seems to like to hear themselves talk”

Mary and James beamed at the praise.

“Perhaps you should stay a bit longer then,” Mary said. Casey had taken her or his hair out of the binding, and Mary thought it looked charming as it framed those high cheekbones.

Casey refused the invitation.

“I don’t know how you two’ve done it, but I couldn’t live like this. Sweet things all the time. Can’t be good for your stomach or heart. You’re likely to kill yourselves if you stick to this junk.”

Those words reminded Mary of Darlene’s advice. It was true that she and James became sick often enough, but that was normal, right? Nobody in their house seemed very healthy when they were children. But that had been a long time ago, so Mary thought that perhaps she was remembering it wrong.

“What do you eat?” James asked.

“Anything I can kill or find.” Casey nodded. “Plenty of game in the woods and some good pickings to ward off scurvy if you know where to look.”

“We wouldn’t know where to start,” said Mary. They had become a bit more adventurous in the past three years, but James still refused to go anywhere that he couldn’t see the house, and even Mary tied a length of rope around her waist, attaching the other end to a stake in the yard, whenever she went further.

“I’m not really the teaching type,” Casey said. “Plus, I have my own problems to worry about. But I’m sure if you just try, you’ll eventually figure it out. Hunting’s pretty easy once you get started.”

“But we have tried!” James protested. “We tried holes and putting ropes around trees and throwing rocks at birds and rabbits.”

“Well, you just need to try some more. You’re giving up too early.” Casey stood. “I’m not letting you two trap me here like a partridge. I’m leaving now.”

Mary tried once again to grab for Casey, but this time the hunter danced out of her grip.

“Keep your fat hands off me,” Casey said before dashing out the door and away from them.

Mary looked down at her hands. They were thicker than Casey’s had been, and certainly bigger than they had been last year. But wasn’t getting bigger just a part of growing up? The way Casey had said it, though; it seemed like a bad thing.

James was crying.

“Is there something wrong with us?” he asked.

Mary rubbed his back, but she didn’t say anything. She wasn’t too sure of the answer.

Despite what Casey had said, Mary and James were unable to figure out the mechanics of hunting and trapping. The best they could do was fish, and even that only happened when Mary could find the time to trek down to the river she found nearly three miles away. She had marked up the trees nearly three times and always double checked going from and returning to the house. She often had to stop several times while traveling to catch her breath; for some reason, her health seemed to be getting worse and worse. James nearly always panicked while she was away, so she made the trips only when necessary.

It was on one of these trips that she found their third visitor. An older man, about the same age as her father when she last saw him all those years ago, was lying on his side in the middle of her path. His breathing was labored. Sweat soaked his gray hair and made strands of it stick to his face.

“Help...me...” he wheezed.

The man was too big for Mary to carry by herself, so she ran back to the house for some food and water and to tell James about what she found. After getting sustenance and a bit of rest, the man was finally able to stand up with her help. They slowly got him back to the house, where James had already cleaned the bed. In the past year, James was more often sick than he was healthy, and he had grown much larger than even Mary. Just fixing the bed had caused him great stress. When Mary came in, he was sitting in one corner of the room, pale and panting. But even after Mary had gotten their guest settled, James refused to let her care for him. He even gave up half of his dinner for the man in the bed, who ate ravenously and promptly fell back asleep. Mary pulled a spare comforter around James, and the two slept against each other that night.

“Hey! Hey!”

Mary slowly woke up to a loud noise. Usually she got up around the same time each morning, when brightness of the sun and the sound of the birds told her it was day.

“You girl! Hey!”

It was just dawn. She felt James shivering next to her, and she pulled the comforter a little tighter around him before getting up to see what their guest wanted.

“Good morning,” she greeted him sleepily.

“Good morning,” he replied. “I’m thirsty. And hungry.”

“Oh.” Mary looked around the room. “Just a moment.” She got him some water and then went outside, puffing in the cold morning air. After breaking off a few pieces of wall and roof, she came back in and set the food before him.

“Thanks,” he said and began to eat immediately. She watched him for a few moments before realizing that she was forgetting something. What was something a good hostess would do?

“I’m Mary,” she said, then pointed to the corner. “And that is my brother, James.”

“Simon Anderson,” he said. “Mr. Anderson, if you don’t mind.”

“Ok.” Mary wasn’t sure what the mister was about. Perhaps it was something other people called him?

“Thanks for saving my life,” he said. “I’m not usually one to go tromping around in forests, but my horse got spooked and ran. I’m not good with horses to begin with, so I just held on for dear life.”

“I see.” Horse? The word put a vague picture in Mary’s mind.

“It eventually stopped, but as soon as I got off, it just ran again. So then I started walking. I’ve been walking for practically two days! I didn’t think I would ever make it out. But now fortune has smiled upon me.”

“We are happy to have you as long as you like,” Mary said. “My brother and I have lived here many years with few visitors. We love any company we can get.”

Simon took Mary up on her offer. He was a dodgy fellow, answering very few questions about his personal life directly. But he could talk at length about his hobbies, which included hunting and fishing for sport, singing fine songs, and criticizing all the fine arts, from painting to the latest fashions. He often commented on the structural soundness of the house, obviously impressed by whoever constructed it.

While the company was enjoyable for the first few days, Mary discovered for the first time in her life what it could be like to have a guest overstay his welcome. Simon did nothing to

help around the house, citing his weakness from all that walking as an excuse to be waited upon. James had gotten worse from that first night of sleeping on the floor. He developed a cough and sweated constantly from a mild fever.

Simon remained in the siblings' bed and refused to let James sleep with him "on account that I wouldn't want to catch whatever he's got." James' illness worsened as he slept with Mary on a makeshift bed of dried grass she gathered together and brought in the house. With James unable to assist her, Mary found herself with twice the housework and one more person to take care of. At night, she would often collapse on the bed next to James and sleep soundly until the morning.

Two weeks passed in this manner, and Mary was clueless as to what she needed to do to get Simon to do some work. James had always been naturally good about chores, understanding their necessity. Simon was an anomaly in Mary's eyes. She finally confronted him one afternoon while he was sitting in a patch of sun outside the house, munching on a roof tile.

"Mr. Anderson?"

He smiled up at her, his teeth stained brown.

"Good to see you, my dear. Would you please get me a bit of water to wash this down with?"

Mary almost said yes; her body tensed as she forced herself not to turn back toward the house as habit would have her do.

"Well, first I have something I would like to ask you."

"Go ahead, my dear," Mr. Anderson said, his sunny disposition never leaving his face. "I'm always happy to help when I can."

“That’s good to hear!” Mary said, thinking this would now be much easier. “I was hoping that you could help me with a few of the chores. It would free me up a bit so I could take better care of James.”

Simon’s face immediately fell. He looked down at his gooey fingers.

“I haven’t done many chores in my life,” he said. “I doubt I’d be any good to you.”

“That’s no problem. I would be happy to show you what to do, and I’m sure you’ll pick it up quickly.”

“But what if I’m not any good?”

Mary frowned. James never talked to her like this, so she wasn’t sure how she was supposed to respond.

“Well...” she said, thinking for a bit. “How can you know if you don’t try?”

“What’s the use of expending the effort if I’m just going to fail anyway? Seems useless to me.” Simon smiled at her again as if to apologize.

“Well...that kind of makes sense...” Mary wasn’t sure what to argue. She was ready to give up, but her aching legs reminded her of why she needed to try and convince Simon.

“I think -” she began, but at that moment, the sound of many feet trampling the ground interrupted her. Mary thought that some fearsome animal must be coming, and she grabbed Simon’s arm to pull him along.

“We need to get into the house!” she said.

“Are you daft? Those are horses,” he replied and began shouting to whatever was out there.

Several men astride their mounts came into the clearing. They were all well dressed; their uniforms, though muddy, were pressed and neatly arranged about their figures.

“My prince!” one of the men cried upon seeing Simon. “We have finally found you!”

“It is good to see you, Jonathan.” Simon pulled away from Mary and walked over to the man. “I knew you wouldn’t give up the search, easily.”

“You honor me with your praise.” Jonathan nodded toward Mary. “Has this woman been taking care of you all this time?”

“Yes, yes.” Simon didn’t bother to follow Jonathan’s gaze. “She’s been quite the help. But we can talk about that later. I wish to get home as quickly as possible. I miss my own dwelling so much.”

“Of course, my lord.” Jonathan had one of the other men dismount and move to double up with another rider. Simon swung himself up on the free horse.

Mary had been struck mute by the many novel experiences she was having all at once. First, it had been many years since she had seen so many people at the same time. Second, she was a bit amazed with the horses themselves. They were much larger than the donkey she vaguely remembered from her childhood. How ever did the men manage to tame them? Third, the conversation was hard to keep up with. They were using many terms she did not understand.

“Um...” she finally said when it looked as though Simon was going to take off. He seemed to suddenly remember she was there and gave her a bright smile.

“Sorry, my dear,” he said. “I never told you I was prince of this land because, well, you can never be too careful what with assassins from other kingdoms and your sisters and brothers trying to kill you and take your spot on the throne. Father’s gotten very old by now, and the quarrels just keep coming. But I swear to you, when I am King, I will do right by you and your brother.”

“Oh.” Mary wasn’t sure what to say. She had no idea what a prince or king was. “Thank you.”

“Of course, my dear.” Simon turned to Jonathan. “Shall we be off, then?”

As the men turned their horses back to the forest, Mary had an idea. It came unexpectedly, and she almost didn’t speak out of fear; the idea she had seemed forbidden. But it was the thought of James that made her shout:

“Wait!” All eyes turned back towards her. “Can you take us with you?”

Simon and Jonathan exchanged glances. Simon drew his horse closer to Jonathan, and they talked lowly at first. Their conversation was short and seemed to get a little heated. Finally, Jonathan turned back to Mary.

“I’m sorry, my lady,” he said. “We simply do not have enough horses to carry more people.”

Mary’s stomach felt heavy.

“I wouldn’t have to come along,” she said. “Just my brother. I think he needs to get out of this place.” She wasn’t sure what made her think that, but some intuition suggested that eating nothing but their current house for years on end had done something bad to James.

Simon let out a loud, jolly laugh.

“My dear,” he said through teary eyes, “I believe he would likely break the horse’s back.”

Mary didn’t understand. She looked to Jonathan questioningly, but he only said:

“I am sorry. We cannot take another rider.”

“But -”

“Jonathan,” Simon said. “Give her a reward for her gracious help.”

Jonathan rode over and dropped a few golden coins at Mary’s feet.

“There, that should satisfy you.” Simon nodded. “Now, let’s go. We’ve been delayed enough.”

With that, the riders took off.

Mary picked up the coins, but she had little idea what to do with them. There were no shops in the forest, after all.

Mary’s feet were painful to walk on, and she was half-starved. But she had finally made it into the large city. It was bewildering to see so many other humans after all these years. She kept to the edges of buildings, one hand pressing firmly against the walls of shops and houses as if she was afraid she might otherwise fall over.

The town was decorated with bright purple banners and white strips of cloth. People talked merrily with one another, and bright smiles shone on every face.

“How do you think he’ll do?”

“His first public address as king. Even royalty has to get nervous.”

“King Simon has always been a good speaker.”

“Who cares how it goes. Any excuse for a celebration is good enough for me!”

Mary didn’t understand most of what they were saying. She just needed someone to tell her what to do. She finally located what looked like one of the more sympathetic of the faces when the blare of a trumpet sounded over the crowd.

“Please direct your attention this way,” a thin voice drifted over the crowd. “His Majesty, King Simon Anderson IV, has graciously decided to spend his most valuable time and energy addressing his subjects.”

Everyone turned towards a center area, and Mary followed their gaze.

Standing upon a raised platform in the midst of his celebrating people, Simon smiled and waved. Yes, it was the same Simon, Mary realized. It had only been six months ago, and he hadn't changed a bit.

King Simon gave a heartfelt speech about how he would rule with kindness and the good of all his people in mind. No more would peasants see their children starving. No more would the politicians and knights dine on good meat and sweet breads while the lowest of serfs scraped porridge from the bottom of their pots. Harvests would be bountiful under his guidance.

Near the end of his address, his eyes caught Mary. She wondered for a brief moment if he recognized her.

"Look at that, my people! Just look at that." He pointed right at her. "This is the very thing I am talking about. This fat harlot has no doubt lived off the pain of others' hard work. Such disgusting excess. You should be ashamed of yourself, woman!"

Mary didn't know what he was talking about. But the crowd turned toward and began booing and hissing. Those nearby retreated as if she emanated the stink of all moral wrongs. She wanted to protest that she wasn't a bad person, but she didn't even understand what she needed to apologize for in the first place.

"Women like her will be abolished under my reign!" Simon proclaimed.

"You've used us enough!" a voice from the crowd shouted at Mary.

"Try pulling your own weight around!"

"Work in the fields for a day! See how you like it!"

"Ugly bitch!"

"You won't be getting anymore free lunches!"

The crowd continued to heckle Mary until she realized that none of them would help her. She slowly turned around and limped away from the people. The crowd parted for her making it easy for her to leave.

Near the edge of town, a horse and rider approached her.

“It is you, isn’t it?” Jonathan asked.

Mary looked up. She recognized him as the man who gave her the coins.

“You found your way here, eh? Didn’t need our help in the end, I suppose.”

Hearing that, Mary’s eyes narrowed, and it felt as if cold fingers gripped her chest.

“Where’s your brother?”

She stiffened, and the icy grip around her heart tightened.

“Dead.” Her voice was rough. “He’s buried with the witch.”

Jonathan paused.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I tell you what. I’ll lead you to one of the nicer inns in town. Pay for your meal and board for a little while, just ‘til you can get back on your feet.”

There was a moment of pause, and when Mary turned to smile up at him, it was if something had possessed her. Her eyes were unnaturally bright and wide, her mouth nearly stretched to its limits on both sides.

“Oh, no. I don’t need any help *now*.”

Jonathan and ~~and~~ remained frozen upon his horse, unable to move as she disappeared back into the forest, the sound of leaves crunching under her feet.

Not Always the Prey

Part 1

Kit took deep breaths in the bathroom stall, reveling in smells. The stale, unassuming scent of toilet water. The chemical cleaners, so overused that Kit's nostrils only burned as an afterthought. Beneath that scent, what urine managed to escape via evaporation during its trip. All normal, all things anyone entering the women's restroom might smell.

She had almost thrown up in class again. Mr. West had decided, since *some* students seemed more interested in talking to each other than watching the Vietnam War video he show the class yesterday, that they would be having a short quiz today. The resulting stink of nerves - a sour scent like lemon juice that had sat under a hot sun for the whole day - had been overpowering. Kit's stomach did flip flops, and she bolted out of the door.

'Mr. West will understand when I explain it to him,' she thought as she slowly lifted her head from between her knees. It was nearly the end of the period, and Mr. West didn't teach his next class until one. She knew because she had taken U.S. history last year as a Junior, and Mr. West somehow managed to keep the same schedule year after year.

The bell rang. A few second later, the restroom door opened with a whoosh of trapped air.

"Kit?"

"In here," she called out.

Ana's bright yellow and orange sneakers stopped outside of her stall.

"You doing ok?"

“Yeah.” Kit could smell her even through the door between them. Concern. It smelled like a candled scented ‘ocean breeze,’ muted, unreal, refreshing.

The door opened again.

“She there?” Rachel asked from the hallway.

“Yeah,” Ana replied.

“I’m fine,” Kit called out to her. “You guys don’t need to check on me every time, you know.”

“You say that now,” Ana said, “But the day you’re in here, throwing your guts up and needing to be dragged down to the nurse, you’ll be happy we came.”

“Was the quiz hard?”

“Naw,” Ana replied. “You’ll ace it.”

“If you’re going to be ok, I’m going to head to class. I need to skim over the last few pages of Chapter 3 before it starts,” Rachel said.

“Go ahead.” Kit sat back. “Let Ms. Arulfo know I’m going to be extra late.”

“Will do.” The door closed behind them.

Kit waited for the bell to ring again before leaving the bathroom. Between the periods, the hallways were too crowded for her. Students were stressed out, either thinking of upcoming classes, annoyed with poorly functioning lockers, or just jittery at being crammed so close together. She had gotten special permission via her doctor to leave classes several minutes early and arrive late.

Mr. West was sitting at his desk, grading the quizzes when she walked in.

“Hello, Miss Green.”

“Sorry about running out like that,” she said. “I suddenly felt nauseous.”

He looked up and peered at her over the desk.

“You always seem to get sick when it comes to quizzes.”

Kit gave him a small smile. She could guess by his tone and the fact that he smelled of the distinct, rotten wood scent of disdain, where all this was headed.

“It’s the stress,” she said. He already knew the explanation; she gave it to him in the Fall when she had finally gotten a note from the doctor. “I just get too nervous.”

“Right. That’s why you need another room to take tests as well, hm?” he said.

“Yes.”

He stared at her for another long moment. Kit didn’t know what he expected her to say, so she merely stood there and smiled at him until he finally sighed and gestured to a desk in the front row.

“Get out a sheet of paper and number it one to five.”

The quiz was easy as Ana said. As Kit turned it in, Mr. West gave her another hard look.

“In the real world, people won’t give you breaks like these,” he said.

Kit stood there for a moment, flushed with embarrassment.

“Thank you,” she said quietly because she felt he expected it.

“You’re welcome.”

She hurried out of the room, a thick, perfumed smugness following her out.

‘It’s not like I’ve never thought that,’ Kit raged in her head as she biked home that afternoon - the school had given her study hall for her last period so she could leave early.

In fact, she had been worrying about that exact issue with more and more frequency. Up until last September, she had been following all the same plans as her friends. Graduation, four

years at a state university, then a career. She had scored 24 on the ACT and decided to go for a degree in Hotel and Restaurant Management. Even after the smells started up, she still applied to schools, thinking that she shouldn't waste the chance; they had a year to fix her, after all.

But as the months went by and she found herself more and more limited by the smells, the fear cropped up. What if she was forced to be a shut-in? Would she ever be able to pay for her own place? Would she have to live with her stepfather for the rest of her life?

No. She wouldn't be able to handle that. And Jason wouldn't allow it either. She wasn't his daughter, not biologically. Jason didn't know for the first ten years, not until the chemotherapy, the surgery, the radiation hadn't worked, and his wife lay in pain in their bed, a few months still from death. He held her hand, and she told him about the affair. Kit figured Jason was more upset than another man might be considering Hisa had never confessed because she loved him enough to feel guilty. The cancer had made her realize that Kit might need to know about her genetic background. The way Kit saw it, her mother loved her more than Jason, and an angry part of her hoped he understood that. After Hisa's death, he had stopped being anything resembling a father to her.

Usually Kit would turn right at Jefferson Avenue, but today she narrowed her eyes and went straight. Jefferson would lead her away from the city proper, where she would spend a good thirty minutes biking through alleys and neighborhood streets to get home. Today she would go straight through the heart of the city. She could handle it, she told herself. She had to handle it.

It was ok for the first two miles. Just the neighborhood around the school, most people still away at work. It was when the stop signs thinned and the streetlights became more frequent that she began having trouble. It was late afternoon, and most people were exhausted with the

work day, ready to put in their last few hours and go home. The air was thick with exhaustion; it smelled like dirty laundry that had accumulated into dusty piles on a concrete floor.

It became hard for Kit to keep pedaling. She just felt so tired, so drained of the will to do anything. She started to imagine curling up on the couch at home, eating reheated carrot casserole in front of the TV and zoning out on the nightly news. Which was odd, because she didn't have leftover carrot casserole and didn't think she had ever heard of it before now. She knew it would be easier to go where the smells and moods weren't affecting her, and the exhaustion was convincing her to give in.

No! she thought. *You're better than this.* Stubborn determination chased down that cloudy mindset, and Kit pumped her legs harder more out of principle than desire.

Crossing through Melrose Park was better; it was still a bit too cold for all but the toughest elderly to be out. Even the concrete fountain at the center looked colder with its water shut off and sticky leaf piles sitting in the crannies. Kit hurried past it all, feeling light headed as she sucked in frigid air. The mid-town depression was leaving her with the rush. Beneath her coat, she was starting up a sweat.

There was a statue at the other end of the park, a donation from another city that had commissioned the work and didn't like the results. Twisted ribbons of metal that started out wide at the top and cycloned down until the base became a cocoon from which a monarch butterfly emerged. Kit thought it was unimaginative and could see why the original city didn't want it. But at the moment, she headed straight for it, making the statue her goal.

Small steps at a time, right?

As she focused so hard on the statue that she barely saw the figures gathered around a horseshoe of benches near the edge of the park. A group of young men were sitting on the metal

pieces, some attempting to stand and balance on the armrests, laughing and horsing around. Kit got the beginning of a smell – something like sharp cheddar – and began to turn her bike to the side to steer clear. The men looked older than her, about the mid-twenties, and whatever they were joking about, she didn't care. Any humor that smelled like sharp cheddar probably wasn't worth dealing with. She made a new goal out of a mailbox in front of the post office, ignoring their sounds and smell as best she could.

“Hey, baby!”

Kit looked up, surprised at being called out. However, she saw that they weren't talking to her. A young woman was walking on the sidewalk on the other side of the park, dressed in one of those poofy parkas with the fake fur trim around the hood. She wore a backpack that looked full and carried a few more books against her chest. Without really understanding why, Kit felt herself squeezing the brakes on her handles.

“How you doing today?” one of the men asked. The woman walked a little closer to the street, eyes down at her feet, obviously hearing the men but trying to pretend she didn't.

“Hey!” the same guy shouted. “Hey, I'm talking to you, baby!”

The woman's fear made Kit stop completely and watch. She smelled sour, like bile diluted with toilet water after throwing it up. Kit had smelled fear before in the hallways of her high school, but this seemed like such a strong emotion for only this one woman. Kit felt like her insides were all closing up at once.

In contrast, the men now smelled like an expensive pâté Kit had once tried at one of Jason's office parties when she was younger. It was a prideful smell, the smell of power.

“Baby,” the guy continued to yell. His friends laughed. “Why you ignoring me? Don’t walk away when I’m talking to you.” He began to walk after her. She picked up the pace, flats clacking as they hit the sidewalk.

“I just want to talk to you.” He was catching up with her.

“He don’t bite!” one of the other guys yelled.

“Leave me alone!” the woman said, glancing quickly behind her but not slowing down.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said. “I’m a very nice guy.”

“Go away!”

She sped up. The man pulled off his jacket and, with a quick flick, snapped her in the butt with it. His friends howled with laughter as the woman jumped but didn’t turn around, didn’t say anything, just ran to her car. The man walked back to his buddies and held out his hands, receiving high fives left and right.

Kit watched the woman get into her car. The woman’s face was scrunched together, hurt, humiliated. The fear in Kit churned with the sour feeling radiating in the area.

“What you lookin’ at?”

One of the guys had noticed her and was grinning.

She turned off the street and took the back roads home the rest of the way.

It was a nice house, she gave Jason credit for that much. During the summer, he hired a gardener to keep up the large front lawn, the flowerbeds bursting with tulips and marigolds. The backyard was trimmed and led down to a small wooded area that was slowly being encroached upon by new families looking to start somewhere with a good reputation. It was small enough

that when Kit enjoyed playing among the trees when she was younger, her mother never had to worry about her getting lost – at least not lost from civilization.

Kit stomped through the manicured grass as she pulled her bike up to the garage. Jason was just using the yard to show off to the neighborhood. It was stupid. They barely knew the couples that lived on either side of them let alone anyone else nearby. Why did he care so much about what other people thought?

The living room was spacious and white, probably to get some nice effect from the wall-length windows, but Kit felt anyone who chose to do their room in all white was either not staying for long or didn't know how to clean. Jason's reason was the latter. Kit picked up after herself, but Jason still had a cleaner come every two weeks to dust, clean out the fridge, and scrub the kitchen floors.

Down the hall was her sanctuary, even-more so now in the last few months than before because of the overwhelming smells. Her bedroom contained a little world of its own, far away from other people and their problems. There was a computer on the desk and a television on the dresser and a personal bathroom to the side. If she had a refrigerator, Kit probably wouldn't come out except for school.

She spent the afternoon on her computer, visiting a few message boards where she was now part of the community. People's smells didn't come through the screen, so it was the best she could do at social interaction. Homework seemed superfluous; with Mr. West's admonishments still on her mind, Kit felt sick just looking at her book bag. What would be the point of doing her homework if it all amounted to nothing in the end?

According to her computer, it was a little after six when Kit heard the front door close. Jason was home early; usually he didn't get in until around seven. She did her best to ignore his

footsteps as she heard him moving through the house to settle in after the work day. Eventually, though, she heard them approaching her door, and shortly after, there was a knock.

“Yes?” she called, not bothering to turn away from the computer screen.

Jason opened the door.

“I already ate, so you don’t have to fix dinner tonight,” he said. “I figured you wouldn’t have anything done when I got home.”

“You didn’t call to let me know you would be early,” she replied.

“It was a bit unexpected.”

Jason smelled nervous. It was an easy to distinguish emotion as the smell was typical of anyone who felt that way; like sweat, only stronger.

Kit didn’t say anything back. She could feel Jason hovering in the doorway behind her, though. After a few minutes of silence, she sighed and finally turned around.

“Yes?” she asked.

“I scheduled you an appointment with Dr. Nobbe.”

Kit’s hands clenched.

“I’m not crazy,” she said.

“I’m not saying you are.”

“I’ve already gone through their tests. I don’t have synesthesia. I’m not schizophrenic. These aren’t hallucinations. Talking it out isn’t going to help.”

“You haven’t tried.”

“Yes, I did.”

She noticed Jason’s jaw clenching. He was beginning to smell hot like chili peppers.

“You went for a few days. That’s not enough time for you to get settled in. Dr. Nobbe said so.”

“I’m not going to see her,” Kit said with an air of finality. Her eyes were watering from Jason’s smell, though he would probably take it that she was being over-emotional.

“The appointment is for next Tuesday after school,” he replied. “Ana’s mom will take you.”

Kit wanted to argue more. She wanted to stare him down until he changed his mind. But the hot smell was overpowering, and the tears building in her eyes began to fall. So she turned away from Jason to fumble for her pack of travel tissues, and in that time, he left.

Once she had cleaned herself up, she left her desk and went over to her bed. Flopping down, she pulled her covers over her head to block out the light on the ceiling. Her head was hurting, and she wasn’t sure if it was Jason, the stress, or the crying. Probably all three.

She would not see Dr. Nobbe. She was not crazy. She was not faking. She had a problem, and she just wanted someone to tell her what it was.

The headache threatened to overwhelm her, and when the blackness came, Kit wasn’t sure if she was falling asleep or passing out.

Chester didn’t mind coming home for spring break. He liked the familiarities of the town. The way his mom still bugged him the next morning about how late he had stayed out the night before. How his dad would always ask him about the car, if Chester was remembering to change the oil, if it still took a few tries to start up, how many miles he’d put on the odometer since he was last at home. Some of his high school friends were still here, going to community college and paying for it by working in the same stores where they used to hang out.

It was predictable. It was dependable.

Tonight would be the same as other nights. He would meet up with his friends at the park where they could sit around and chat like adults without their parents knocking on doors to ask what was going on like they were still in fucking high school or something. When it got too cold to stay out, they would circle the cars at the Quick 'N Ease parking lot. Brian would grab some beer with his brother's ID (not that the clerk actually cared either way), and they would take it back to Jeff's place because he had a pretty nice lounge area in the basement and his parents tended to sleep like the dead. There they might watch a movie, might play some Call of Duty and swear back at the fourteen year olds, might just drink and talk about where they had been and where they hoped they were going.

Dependable.

Jeff was drunkenly shooting at animated Viet Cong to the cheers of all when Chester realized that he really had to pee. Unfortunately, the downstairs toilet had been broken two nights ago during another session, and Jeremy was running upstairs just a few minutes ago, which meant he would be awhile. Chester, a little buzzed, decided the privacy fence in the backyard would do at one in the morning.

"Fuck," he swore under his breath when he stepped outside, forgetting to wear his coat or put on shoes. Not one to turn back, he practically danced across the yard to what seemed like the most discreet corner, then quickly went about his business.

"Hope you don't mind me watering the plants," he giggled when he was done, tucking himself back in.

"Not at all."

Chester spun around, startled at the unexpected reply. In the dark, it took him a moment to notice where it had come from. Leaning over the top of the fence was a young woman. She was very pleasant to look at. Her round face was framed by silky black hair that hung down past her shoulders. Despite the cold, she wore only a long-sleeved t-shirt that fit snugly across her chest.

“Um, hi.” Chester stared up at her in confusion. The privacy fence was just an inch over his head. So how was she leaning over it?

“Hello.” Her voice made him feel suddenly warm. “Are you one of Jeff’s friends?” Chester nodded. “I thought so. You guys have been hanging around here a lot lately. I hear the cars come and leave most nights.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” She smiled, and the blood rose to Chester’s face. “It’s nice to hang out with friends. I wish I had someone to spend time with here. I came home from college for break, but all my friends went elsewhere. I get lonely.”

In the back of Chester’s mind, he knew this was ridiculous. Her appearance, the things she was saying, it was all very convenient, playing out exactly like a badly scripted porn. But it was really happening right in front of him, not on some screen, and the heady feeling of the late night when things seemed unreal to begin with made him giddy and able to put aside the nagging, logical part of his brain.

“You should come over,” he said. “We’re just playing games. The guys would love to have you.”

She shifted on the fence, frowning.

“That sounds dangerous. One girl and a bunch of unknown guys.”

“I’ll protect you.” And it wasn’t some pick-up line, some false prince charming notion that made him feel more masculine. He really, truly felt like he would protect her.

She grinned.

“Why don’t you come over here? My mom’s the only one home, and she’ll stay asleep. It would just be nice to talk to someone.”

Chester’s eyes bugged out of his head, and he felt the warmth on his face retreat quickly southwards. Ok, so she hadn’t promised sex, but hell, this was a hot girl who was inviting him to her house where they could be alone. He’d have to be a true idiot not to take the offer.

When he went around the fence, he saw that the woman had been standing on an overturned bucket the whole time. She was wearing jeans and sandals, which might have been odd if Chester wasn’t underdressed himself. When she jumped down to meet him, her breasts bounced in a way that seemed both natural and obscene. Chester found he couldn’t move, just stare, and so it was she who walked over to meet him.

“C’mon,” she said and took his hand. The physical contact jolted him, and he squeezed the warm digits, not realizing his own hand was practically numb with cold until he felt the contrast. There was a smell like sweat and flesh and promises, and he mutely followed her to a screen door at the back of the house. The inside was pitch black, and Chester couldn’t tell if the way led to a kitchen, bedroom, living room, or anything.

“Go on in,” she motioned, letting go of his hand. Chester looked at her, hoping she might go first to lead the way. But she raised an eyebrow in both a questioning and suggestive manner, and he thought, Fuck it, and plunged inside.

The temperature immediately dropped back to the frigid chill of before. Chester wrapped his arms around himself, shivering in his wet socks and t-shirt.

“Hey?” he whispered. “Hey, where do I go?”

He turned around, but all he could see in the darkness were her eyes, canine and glowing orange.

And then, he saw and felt nothing.

There were sounds. That was the first thing he noticed. The air was busy with the chatter of voices. Chester couldn’t quite make out what they were saying at first; it all sounded like white noise to him. His body must be numb with cold; he couldn’t feel anything below his neck. Slowly, he opened his eyes, squinting at the sudden brightness. Was it morning already?

He was at the farmer’s market in the middle of Melrose Park. Which was strange, because it had been Thursday morning the last he remembered, and the farmer’s market only met on Saturdays. Also, the market was supposed to be closed for the winter. Yet here it was bustling in a way he hadn’t seen before. Across from him, an elderly man sat at a table, crates of string beans and radishes piled around him. Yet he wore a winter coat and a tattered scarf, and his ears glowed a bright, chapped red. On either side of him was a pastry seller, smiling over brightly colored strawberries and blueberries, and a bread maker, dutifully cutting samples of his homemade chocolate loaf. Both were bundled up, their breaths steaming in the morning air.

What the hell? Chester tried to speak to a passerby, to ask what was happening, but he found his voice wouldn’t come out. He swallowed and tried again, but the air had left his lungs and couldn’t be forced out.

“Meat! Meat for sale!” he heard above him. Chester tried to look up, but couldn’t twist his head to see. “Get your fresh meat!”

A woman walked over to him, and he tried to get her attention.

Hey! Hey lady!

“Fresh, you say?” she spoke to someone above him.

“Just butchered this morning.”

She hummed and picked up something next to him.

And that’s when Chester realized his perspective was completely off. He wasn’t standing up in the market. The woman’s waist crowded his vision. As people passed around her, he saw that he was about mid-height with all of them. While he wasn’t a particularly tall boy, Chester should be at least eye or chin level with other adults.

“You sure it’s fresh?”

“Doesn’t look like much, I know,” said the voice. “This economy is taking a toll on us all. But I guarantee it’s not more than a few hours old.”

The lady picked up a calf from among the packed ice. A human calf.

Shit! Shit, get me out of here! Chester thought, trying to back away. The calf was still thickly covered in pale hair. The woman turned it over in her hands, sometimes bouncing it up and down a little to check the weight.

“Well, I suppose I’ll take this,” she said. “How much?”

“Five dollars.”

She snorted. “It’s only worth two at the best.”

Where they seriously haggling over human body parts? As the woman and the voice above him argued above him, Chester looked frantically around. Did no one else notice what was happening right in front of him? The woman was blocking most of his vision, but he could hear other people milling around them. Surely a cop had been called. You just couldn’t traffic human parts in the open like this.

The woman paid three seventy-five for the calf and went on her way. Another man walked up to Chester and began looking around.

“How much for the hand?” he asked.

“Five dollars.”

“With or without the fingers?”

“With.”

“You’re trying to cheat me, aren’t you?”

Oh god. Chester watched the man pick up the hand. The fingers were frozen stiff in an upward clawing motion. On the middle finger was a silver ring, a small sapphire set in the side to indicate the wearer was born in September. It was Chester’s high school ring.

No. Oh no, nonononono... his brain began to short circuit. Of course he was surrounded by ice. Of course he couldn’t talk. Of course that calf had the same color of hair as the top of his head.

“I’ll give you two dollars for this,” the man said.

“Sounds fair,” the voice said above him.

Someone help me, Chester thought. I’m still alive. I’m still alive, and they’re selling off my body.

“Hey Michael.” The pastry vendor called from across the way. “Looks like business is picking up!”

The voice above him grumbled. “I’ll be lucky if I can get what I paid for with this. It’s all skin, bones, and fat. Not a damn muscle to be found.”

The pastry vendor laughed.

“What about the penis?” she asked. “You can generally fetch a good price for that part.”

“Had to throw it out,” Michael said. “Was a piece of garbage. Dogs wouldn’t even eat it.”

Hey! Chester thought.

“Oh my.” The pastry vendor shook her head. “Well, what about the buttocks? Some good fat there?”

This had to be a dream. Chester wanted to force himself to wake up, but he stayed numbingly in the market.

“I wish.” There was a sharp noise, flesh hitting flesh, and Chester looked over to see the vendor slapping his blue butt cheeks, turned out for the whole world to see. Even though he wasn’t attached to them anymore, Chester felt sick. Just the sound of it was lewd and invasive and made him feel exposed.

“You could maybe use ‘em for drums,” the bread maker joined. They had a laugh, and Michael beat out a rough tune on the dead flesh, each smack making Chester flinch.

Stop it. Stop touching it.

“Not bad, not bad,” the bread maker said. “You might want to start a band. You’d make more money than off that carcass.”

“True. But every once in awhile I get something beautiful headed my way.”

At that moment, a fox appeared, walking with the other pedestrians among the stalls. It was a normal looking fox, small and red with a white belly and tail tip. Its fur was ruffled against the cold. Nobody seemed to give it a second glance.

The fox stopped in front of Michael’s stall and looked up at the offerings. It regarded the parts of Chester’s body carefully like any other customer. Chester thought its orange eyes were

familiar, that they reminded him of something or someone, but he couldn't remember what or who.

"Need help with anything, little lady?" Michael asked.

Chester thought having his body cut to pieces and sold off was weird enough. He was surprised how weirded out he still was when the fox spoke.

"That head. It doesn't look worth much." The fox had a clear, feminine voice. "What's your asking price?"

"Five dollars."

The fox cocked her head to the side, and it would have been adorable had she not looked so thoughtful.

"I'll give you a dollar for one of the eyes."

"You're kidding," Michael said. "That'll ruin the whole deal. Who would want to buy a head with only one eye?"

"I doubt anyone will buy the head in the first place. An eye won't make a difference."

"Give me three dollars, and you can have the whole thing."

"No." She regarded Chester's face calmly. "I just want an eye."

Michael hemmed and hawed, but finally agreed to the price. Chester didn't see the money exchange hands, only felt warm palms pressed to either side of his face. He was picked up, and lowered to eye level with the fox.

No. He tried to struggle, to turn his head away, but of course, he couldn't.

"Ugh," Michael said. "It's starting to sweat."

Yes! Yes! I'm still alive!

“They tend to do that,” the fox said. Her pink tongue came out and licked Chester’s eyeball, warm and rough at the same time. “Adds salt.”

Please don’t.

But the fox didn’t hear, and she leaned forward and delicately worked her teeth into the eye. It was such a gentle movement that the contrasting pain was made all the sharper. Chester felt his mouth drop open, but he couldn’t scream.

“What the hell?”

Chester sat up fast, his whole body jerking as he began running without thinking of where he was going. He just wanted to get away. His efforts were stopped when he painfully slammed into a wall, falling down and knocking a picture frame into his lap.

He just sat there while his brain attempted to catch up with the situation. Sweaty clothing clung to his body, and he was breathing hard. But he was breathing. Oh god, he was breathing. He put his hands to his face and touched his eyes. Both were still there.

“What are you doing in my house?”

Chester looked up at who was speaking. The bread man was standing above him. He screamed.

“Gary.” A woman was standing in the doorway to the kitchen. “Gary, what’s wrong with him?”

“Probably high on something. Stupid teenagers.”

By the time the police arrived, Chester had come back to reality. No charges were pressed even though he was underage, but for the rest of spring break he would have to deal with his friends teasing him about getting so drunk that he wandered into the neighbors’ house and

crashed. Jeff was particularly mad at him because his parents wouldn't let him bring friends over for the next month.

A few days before heading back to college, Chester and the guys met in the park again to hang out until dark. A pretty young woman came into their view, and they all started to nudge each other. Who would be brave enough to flirt with this one?

"Looking good," Brian called out.

"Hey, Chester." Jeremy nudged him. "Get her with your shirt like you did that one time."

Chester grinned and stepped towards the woman. But he gasped as his right eye throbbed suddenly.

"You ok, man?" Brian asked when Chester clutched the side of his face.

After a minute, the pain stopped. The woman was already down the steps, but Chester had forgotten all about her.

Part 2

Jason was eating scrambled eggs at the kitchen counter when Kit walked down the hall the next morning. They eyed each other warily like two cats on the wrong turf.

"You got any more of those?" Kit asked.

Jason, for his part, managed to look guilty. He was ready for an argument, however, if the defensive wooden smell he gave off was any indication.

"Sorry. I didn't think you'd want any."

Kit rolled her eyes and marched over to the cabinets.

"No, that's ok. I'll just have cereal."

She pulled out a bag of white, puffed rice. With the smells being so powerful, she was beginning to prefer plainer foods. This morning, however she did wish there was something with a little more taste on the shelf. She had woken up with a very nasty taste in her mouth, though luckily the headache was gone.

By the time she poured herself a bowl and put some milk on it, Jason had finished his breakfast and stood up.

“Here. You can have this seat,” he said, leaving the stool pulled out for her.

“Thanks.”

As Kit ate, Jason hovered around the sink, washing his plate and the pan he has used to cook the eggs. He smelled tense, like the strained metal struts on the Skunk River Bridge that would collapse soon if the city didn’t do something about it already.

“Going to be home early again tonight?” she asked.

“No. Same time as usual.”

“M’kay.”

Jason put the dishes in the strainer and wiped off his hands.

“I’m not going,” Kit muttered before stuffing a spoonful of white ovals in her mouth.

“Don’t start,” Jason said. “There’s no time for this right now.”

“Of course not,” Kit snorted.

Jason sighed and walked away at that, probably to brush his teeth and grab his papers, Kit thought.

When she finished her cereal, she went back into her room to get dressed and didn’t get a chance to see Jason leave.

“You like?” Rachel twirled around in front of the blackboard, her brown hair barely swiping small scratches through a week’s worth of chalk build-up. “Me and Ana got it yesterday. Harrison’s was having a half-off sale.”

“Harrison’s is always having a sale,” Kit said.

Ana laughed. “No kidding. Good for us.”

“Well?” Rachel twirled again. The long skirt flared outward with her hair.

“It’s nice. Aren’t you cold?”

“It’s long enough. And I’m wearing knee socks.” She grasped a handful of cotton and held it up. “But it’s kind of plain. Just a big bunch of light blue. I think we should jazz it up.”

“You want it to look like a kindergartener did it?”

“Don’t start that again,” Ana said.

“I like it when you get crafty,” Rachel said. “You could add some beads to this or paint something like a mountain lion.”

“A mountain lion?” Kit’s mouth pursed. “On that blue?”

“Ok, then how about just a mountain Ms. Know-It-All.”

“Well...that might work. Wash it and give it to me tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Ana asked. “You’ll have a design planned out by then?”

“What else am I going to do tonight?”

Several more students began to file into the room at that time. It would be another fifteen minutes before class started, so these were the early birders. Kit was appreciative her friends came so early to keep her company, especially Rachel, who was not a morning person. Ms. Leary always arrived nearly a half-hour before school and made sure her door was open for the girls.

The three of them returned to the back of the class where their backpacks and jackets waited in their favored desks. Kit preferred the back; the other kids around her were bored or sleepy, which tended to smell better and keep her restful. It was the upfront kids, worried about writing down every last thing the teacher said, wanting to get scholarships for colleges, some with anxiety disorders, that often made her jittery.

“Hey, girls!” All three looked up as Sarah Gordan trotted over. She took Advanced American History instead of Civics II, so it was odd she would be here.

“Hi, Sarah,” Ana said. Ana was also in Advanced History but always came to Ms. Leary’s class in the mornings to talk with Rachel and Kit. “Does Mr. Pudenject need something from me?”

“No.” Sarah beamed. She was chubby and pretty, which made her smiles stand out. “I just came over to say hi.”

“Okay...” Rachel said, stretching out the long A. “Well, hi.”

“Yeah, hi.” Kit rested her head on her arms. Sarah’s smell was overwhelmingly sweet. It reminded Kit of the time her sixth grade class had taken a tour of a Hershey’s factory.

“Wake up, sleepyhead,” Sarah said, poking her. Kit’s stomach gurgled as she got a stronger dose of the smell.

“Please don’t do that.” Her voice sounded weak.

“Maybe we should go back to Mr. Pudenject’s room.” Ana moved as if to leave. “It’s only ten minutes until the start of class.”

“Actually, I’m supposed to make an announcement at the beginning of this class,” Sarah said. “For the CCS.”

Kit tried not to sigh too loud. The CCS, or Chargin' Chariots' Sisterhood Club, was Sarah's pet project even though she was only the secretary. It was a women's only club, the Chariots being the school mascot. They did a lot of community work, holding bake sales, raking leaves for the elderly in the fall, collecting cans for the food shelter. The president was one of the more popular girls at school, and people like Sarah joined CCS out of admiration for her.

"What's the announcement about?" Ana asked.

"You'll see. Jillian will be making an announcement in Advanced History. I wouldn't want to spoil the surprise."

"Oh, I just can't wait," Ana replied with mock enthusiasm.

"You might be surprised just how important this is." Sarah's face turned grave, and Kit could smell something like burnt almonds beneath all that sweetness. "A lot of high schoolers aren't serious enough about certain things."

"Hey, Sarah!" One of the other members of the CCS had come into the room at that point, thankfully distracting Sarah away from the group until Ana had to leave and class could begin. Kit kept her head on her desk during the morning announcements, her stomach still upset at being assaulted by something so overpowering this early in the morning. New people upset her schedule, and someone like Sarah could send her home for the day if it was too prolonged.

"Alright," Ms. Leary stood up from her desk to grab everyone's attention. "Before we begin this morning, Sarah Gordan is here to talk about an upcoming event from her club. Everyone pay attention." She nodded at Sarah, who stood up in front of the class with a practiced confidence, her big smile taking up most of her face.

"Thank you Ms. Leary." Sarah's smile gave way to a serious expression, and Kit smelled that burnt almond scent again.

“Now, I’m sure a lot of you have heard of mental disorders like depression, anxiety, and even the really scary kind like Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and Schizophrenia.”

Oh god. Kit’s eyes widened. Could her day get any worse?

“When we think of these things,” Sarah continued, “we tend to imagine someone homeless or some crazy person running around and shouting things that don’t make sense. But did you know that nearly twenty percent of teens in the United States have a form of Depression? Look around the classroom...”

Kit began to sweat. She didn’t think anyone was looking at her. She hoped they weren’t. Most of the other students didn’t know the details of her illness. Even Ana and Rachel thought she just got sick a lot and had a hyper sensitive nose. But this was coming up just after Jason and she had their argument. It was almost too much.

“...and so CCS will be making this week Mental Health Awareness Week. Flyers will be posted with which events are happening each day. Please participate as much as you can. You might end up helping someone, even a good friend.”

Sarah ended her speech with a smile. The class clapped politely so they wouldn’t have to be reminded to by Ms. Leary and suffer her disapproving look.

“Thank you, Sarah. This is indeed a very important topic, and one I hope you all take seriously.”

“Thank you for your time, Ms. Leary.” Sarah quickly left to her own class.

“Well,” said Ms. Leary, taking her place at the front of the room. “I hope you all got a chance to watch Senator Harkins’ speech last night. Let’s start off by hearing what you all...”

“You gonna be alright?” Rachel leaned over and whispered to Kit. Her head was still on her arms. The emotional stress of last night and Sarah’s speech compounded the earlier nausea from Sarah’s scent.

“No.” Kit sighed. “I’m going to the nurses’ office. Hopefully I’ll see you third period.”

“Alright. Feel better.”

Kit picked up her stuff and left the room as quietly as she could. The other students ignored her or at least pretended like they didn’t notice her leaving. It was standard practice for a few kids in the school who had health issues to leave without asking the teacher for permission whenever they felt the need. Kit remembered being jealous that those students got to skip out on classes whenever they felt like it. Now she knew better. She’s rather be healthy and bored in a classroom than sick and in the nurse’s office or at home. On top of feeling bad, she was going to have to make up her assignments anyway just so she could keep up with the class and graduate.

The school nurse looked up from her desk when Kit came in.

“Headache?”

“Stomach this time,” she said. The nurse made her fill out a form showing that she had come to the office. It would be put in her file, a special folder only the perpetually ill were assigned. Then she went over to one of the cots behind a white screen and sat down.

The worst thing about the nurse’s office was how boring it was to be there. Normally, Kit didn’t mind. When she had a headache, the most she could concentrate on was how much she wanted her head to stop hurting. With this stomach ache, though, she could still think as she sat there and felt bad, waiting for the scent and emotional residue to wear off. Kit looked over to her book bag on the floor for inspiration.

Well, homework was out of the question; no sense and stressing out even more when she felt like this. Sketching out Rachel's design also seemed too mentally taxing. Instead, she reached into the front pocket and pulled out a few, small square sheets of colorful paper and a binder.

Kit hated practicing origami in front of other people. Only Ana and Rachel knew she could do it, though she had been asked by other students who just assumed she could because she was Asian American, which was the exact reason she didn't want anyone else to know. The only reason she continued to buy the beautiful papers and fold them was because the practice relaxed her. Her mother had taught her how to make little candy dishes, cranes, and balloons, and she had read books and internet instructions to go on from there.

Since she wasn't feeling well, Kit mostly worked on simple things that would take her mind off of the situation. She had made three candy boxes and was working on a frog when the bell that signaled the end of the second period sounded. By then she was feeling well enough that she decided to meet up with Rachel in Math. She would have to wait for the second bell to ring, signaling that the halls were empty, before she could go, but in the meantime, she packed up her bag and papers so she wouldn't miss too much of class.

The door to the nurse's office opened and closed, and Kit heard footsteps coming in. She hoped it wasn't the boy with the constant allergy problems; his endless sniffing and hacking grossed her out.

There was the stale scent of guilt and a strong, candy sweet scent.

"Um, is Kit still here?"

"Ana?" Kit stood up to peer around the screen.

“Hey.” Ana’s smile was half-hearted, and Kit could see why. Standing next to her was Sarah. Kit’s stomach flip-flopped. What was she doing here? Did she come for Kit? They weren’t even acquaintances, so why should she care?

“What’re you doing here?” Kit asked, somewhat accusatory.

“I wanted to check up on you,” Sarah said.

“Um. Thanks?”

“How’re you feeling?” Sarah asked.

“Better.” Kit shrugged and tried to look well, hoping it would get Sarah to leave sooner.

“I’ve been asking Ana about you since I noticed you guys are friends and that you keep coming to the nurse’s office.” Kit shot Ana a look, and Ana’s face showed that she was sorry. Sarah apparently noticed, because she continued, “Oh, don’t get mad at her. I kept pestering her until she caved in. All she told me is that you get headaches all the time.”

“Yeah. That’s it.” Kit nodded.

“You know what they say,” Sarah said. “Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be.”

“What?”

“They’re just headaches, right? I get headaches every once in awhile, but after a few pain pills, I’m usually ready to go again.”

Kit frowned. Sarah’s flippancy was not something she needed right now.

“It’s not like that. They’re really bad.”

“Have you tried medicine?”

“No,” Kit bit back. “I just enjoy being in pain so much that I’ve never tried taking some ibuprofen or seeing a doctor or anything like that.”

“You don’t have to be snarky.” Sarah’s smell soured a little. “I’m just seeing if I can help. You know, the CCS has been doing a lot of research for this mental health week. Some teenagers get what are called ‘phantom pains.’” She made air quotes as she said this. “They’ll have such terrible mental problems that they’ll start hurting for no reason whatsoever, and doctors can’t find a cause.”

“I’m not crazy,” Kit said. Why wouldn’t anybody believe her?

“No, of course not!” Sarah looked offended that Kit would even think she believed so. “Everyone has their ups and downs in life. You might just be going through a down.”

“Sarah, I think we should go,” Ana said, tugging on Sarah’s arm.

“The pain,” she continued, ignoring Ana, “is caused by depression, usually. Have you been feeling upset recently?”

“I’m getting upset, now,” Kit replied.

“A lot of people with depression get angry when you confront them,” Sarah said. “We all like to think we can handle what life throws at us, but that’s no reason to feel bad if you can’t. Having only one parent could be a factor.”

Kit stood up, ready to explode at Sarah, when the nurse walked around the screen.

“That’s enough.” She put her hands on her hips. “Sarah, Ana, I think it’s time you two left now.”

“Yeah, the bell’s gonna ring any minute,” Ana said, pointedly looking at Sarah.

“Oh shoot, you’re right.” Sarah waved at Kit. “Think about what I said. Remember, you’re not alone. C’mon Ana, we don’t want to be late.” She disappeared as quickly as she had come, leaving Kit standing there and fuming.

“That was uncalled for,” the nurse said, looking at Kit with a worried expression. “I know she meant well, but it was wrong for her to poke her nose into a personal area like that. I’ll have a talk with her later.”

“You do that.” Kit picked up her backpack. “I think I’m going home for the day.”

“Are you sure? You shouldn’t let her ruin the whole day like that for you?”

Something about the nurse’s scent and her calm demeanor quieted Kit. She couldn’t seem to stay angry, not with this cool, almost mint-like presence surrounding her.

“You’re right.” Kit sighed. “I’m going to skip this next period, though.”

“Good girl.” The nurse smiled. “Don’t worry, Kit. They’ll find something for you eventually. This day and age, I’d be surprised if you went another year with your condition.”

“Thanks.” Kit sat back down on the cot. She almost felt hopeful, even though she knew the nurse was just talking to calm her down.

“Want me to stay back here with you?”

“No. I’m fine, now,” she said. “I might go home, though.”

The nurse nodded. “I understand. But why don’t you try waiting it out just another period? You’ve already missed so much school.”

Kit came close to crying at that.

“Alright,” she said, burying her head in her knees so the nurse wouldn’t see her shining eyes.

“That’s a good girl.”

“I’m not going to see Dr. Nobbe and there’s nothing you can do to make me!”

Jason stared as the door to Kit's room slammed shut. He sighed and scratched the back of his head. He was beginning to bald.

Sarah huffed, sending glitter in three directions, then huffed again at the resulting mess. The other members of CCS were busy with family plans or English projects, so she was the only one to stay after school today to finish up the new decorations the club members were going to put on their lockers. She'd run out of crafting paper at home, otherwise reruns of *Grace's Emergency* would be playing in the background while she outlined the pink, cutout hearts with red sparkles.

It was getting near seven. Ms. Parson was the CCS faculty advisor and trusted Sarah enough to leave her classroom key in her desk for Sarah to lock up with. Her mom wouldn't be off work until eight tonight. The windows were already dark, but Sarah liked being in the empty school. It made her feel like a teacher. Like an adult.

She cleaned up the glitter and looked over the cardboard box top lined with drying hearts one last time, just to be sure everything was in its place. After shutting the door, Sarah turned the knob to make sure it was properly locked before setting off down the darkened hallway.

Bang, bang, bang.

The pounding noise stopped her just as she was crossing in front of the faculty lounge.

Bang! Bang, bang!

There were janitors around, and some teachers stayed after hours to finish grading or other projects they didn't want to take home. Sarah looked around, wondering if one of them was trying to get her attention.

BANG!

The supply closet across the hall rattled on its hinges. Sarah walked over to the door and called out.

“Hello?”

“Hello?” a muffled voice replied.

“Do you need some help?” she asked.

“I locked myself in. Are the keys out there?”

Sure enough, when Sarah looked down, a set of keys was hanging on the handle, one key stuck in the lock. She turned the key and pulled, and the door swung open.

“Oh, thank you,” the other person sighed.

In the light of the closet, Sarah made out an attractive Asian woman who looked to be in her early twenties. She wore a pinstriped business suit that seemed just a little too professional for this high school.

I wonder if she’s related to that Kit girl, Sarah thought.

“I’ve been substituting for Mr. Falto,” the woman explained. “I guess I got a little lost. I was hoping to get some cleaner for the computer screens.”

That made sense. Mr. Falto was the computer science teacher and was always complaining about how the cleaning staff never took care of the computers. They would vacuum the floor but often leave the tabletops and computers dusty.

“That’s nice of you to do since you’re a substitute.”

“I can’t stand dirty things,” she said. “But you look a little young. What’s a student doing here so late? Clubs?”

“Yeah.” Sarah nodded. “I was just about to go home. You shouldn’t stay too late either.”

The teacher laughed; it was a nice laugh, the kind that only a beautiful woman like her could produce. It showed off her white teeth and made her black hair shimmer with her movements. Sarah felt her heart contract with jealousy. This was the type of woman who could be in movies or on the front covers of magazines. Despite all her hard work, despite all she did to make the world a better place, Sarah knew she would never be on the front of *Cosmopolitan*. And this ditz, a substitute teacher who locked herself in the supply closet, would just need to walk into the magazine's headquarters to find herself a job.

"Hey," the teacher said. "Can you help me find the window cleaner before you go? I've looked everywhere."

Sarah smiled, her jealousy replaced by a smug sense of competence. Even if she was on a magazine, Sarah would be the one making the camera before this idiot's face could be captured on film.

"No problem." She walked into the closet. "I think they keep it over--"

The light in the closet went out, and at the same time, Sarah heard the door slam behind her.

"What happened?" she called out. The teacher didn't answer.

"Hello?" Sarah groped around in the dark. "Ms...Ms...?" She hadn't asked the teacher's name. "M'am? Hello?"

She came into contact with a shelf. Trailing her fingers along the edge of the wood, she slowly made her way to what she thought was the front of the closet. Her right hand was held out so she wouldn't bump her face into the door.

But it never came into contact with anything. Sarah walked and walked and kept walking, and she knew something was wrong because even if she had gotten turned around, she should have felt the back of the closet by now.

“Is there anyone here?” she shouted into the darkness.

“This way.”

The voice sounded like that of the teacher but also didn’t sound like her. Sarah heard a higher pitched whine to it, like an animal shouting.

“Where are you?”

“Come this way.”

Sarah kept going forward, following the voice as it urged her on. Sometimes it seemed faint, and other times it seemed right at her feet. She began to sweat, small drops on her upper lip at first, then gathering at the back of her neck and head until pieces of her hair stuck. Her shirt felt cold and clammy and stuck to her back. She wanted to stop.

And then, she wasn’t in the closet anymore.

One moment it had been dark. The next, she was in a brightly lit room. Sarah blinked a few times as the sudden transition had disoriented her.

The room was the size of a gymnasium. Plush, cream colored carpet covered the floor, and the walls were also cream with thin, gold designs running from the floor to the ceiling, which was hard to make out because it was so high. Something shimmered and sparkled in the middle, and Sarah assumed it was a chandelier if only because the décor of this place reminded her of every Victorian era picture she had ever seen.

“This way.”

She looked down and saw a little red fox in front of her. It was looking over its shoulder.

“You’re already late as it is,” it said, then trotted off toward the center of the room.

Sarah followed it. Something nagged at the back of her mind, the idea there was something odd about a talking fox or this room, but that thought seemed like the pieces of a dream. Right now she was late for an appointment and needed to hurry.

In the center of the room was a large table covered in a red tablecloth that clashed horribly with the cream and gold surrounding them. Food sat on top of it, everything from main courses of gyros, hotdogs, and lamb to desserts like Twinkies, tiramisu, and bonbons. A whole deer carcass, stuffed like a roasted pig, lay surrounded by green bean casserole, blood pudding, California rolls, shredded wheat cereals, and bell peppers stuffed with rice.

“Holy cow,” Sarah whispered.

“You want some cow?” A very tall butler appeared at her side. “Ground, chopped, stewed, grilled, broiled, or sauced?”

“What’s going on?” she asked. “Why is there so much food?”

“It’s the mistress’ birthday, of course.”

“Oh.” Sarah frowned, trying to concentrate despite all the delicious smells surrounding her. “Was I invited?”

“I don’t see why else you’d be here,” the butler said. “Shall I show you to your seat?”

“Yes, please,” she whispered. This place was too gorgeous. Sarah felt like an intruder in her sweaty clothing and mussed hair. Red glitter from some previous event stuck to her arms.

“Here you are.” The butler pulled a cushioned chair from the table for her. After she was seated, he disappeared, probably to wait on the others.

That was, of course, when Sarah noticed the others.

“Oh my god,” she breathed.

There were actors, models, supermodels, musicians, diplomats, presidents, prime ministers, sports stars, and just about every face Sarah had ever seen on television, websites, or secretly adored. The table stretched on for miles, and yet Sarah could see every single person there. At one end of the table sat Grace Heady, star of *Grace's Emergency* with the hottie, on-again-off-again boyfriend, co-star Matt Walhban. Everyone was dressed as if this was a red carpet event, tuxedos and gowns shimmering in almost blinding light from above.

Grace stood up and tapped her spoon against her water glass. The room, which was already quiet, became silent as all eyes turned to her.

"I would like to make a toast," she said, teeth flashing. "To our hostess, the most kind and generous young woman to grace this world."

"To our hostess," the celebrities said, their voices monotone, and raised their glasses as one.

"To our hostess," Grace said. "A person of such beauty that paintings weep as she passes."

"To our hostess."

"To our hostess, a genius among geniuses." Passion began to build within her.

"To our hostess."

"A hero among heroes!"

"To our hostess."

"A saint for our dark days!"

"To our hostess."

"A leader in for our times!"

"To our hostess."

“On the most glorious day of her birth!” Grace was in a full frenzy at this point while hundreds of unseeing eyes watched her. “May health, wealth, and happiness find her...no! May they bow to her, their mother, for it is from her they have truly sprung. To Sarah Gordan, blessed child!”

Grace fell, hitting her chair on the way down, and disappeared under the table.

“To Sarah Gordan!” the table shouted, coming alive, and everyone began to clap.

Sarah had started when Grace first said her name, and now she blushed brightly as everyone began clapping for her. She was so embarrassed that it wasn't until several moments later that she realized no one was looking at her. They were all looking at the other end of the table as they clapped.

A giant purple birthday cake was wheeled to that end of the table. The girl sitting there smiled magnanimously at the guests as they continued clapping for her.

She was Sarah Gordan. She was everything Sarah ever wanted to be. She was athletically thin and slightly tan. Her black hair shimmered as if she had just come out of a shampoo commercial, and her white teeth glinted. No pimples stood out on her skin, but she did have that purple nose stud Sarah's parents forbid her from getting. Even her breasts were perfect; just a little bit smaller than Sarah's fatty bags, and perfectly round rather than that weird triangle shape hers always seemed to fall in.

The clapping stopped, and the other Sarah stood up.

“Thank you all for coming,” she said. “I trust everyone has enjoyed themselves. If not, let me know so I can properly punish William, here.”

Polite laughter washed down the table.

“Please eat up. Don’t leave anything behind. I’ll make hundreds of doggy bags if I have to.”

More polite laughter, and then the other Sarah sat back down, and the chatter of hundreds of voices filled the ensuing silence.

Sarah didn’t talk to anyone, stunned by the appearance of her fantasy self in her fantasy room surrounded by the stars of her fantasies. Everything was perfect except that her perfect version was over there and not here, or rather, her. It seemed cruel she should get everything she ever wanted and not get it all at the same time.

“Cake?” William asked. Sarah looked over to him and saw that, at some point, the cake had been rolled down the table to sit beside her. From this vantage, it towered over her, the top barely visible against the harsh light. Sweat beaded on her forehead again just at the reminder of the harsh lights.

“No thank you,” she said. “Maybe some water, though.”

“You should have a piece.” Matt Walhban was sitting next to her. “It’s your favorite.”

“White with raspberry filling,” William said.

“No, really.” Sarah smiled. “I’m fine.”

“The mistress insists,” William said.

“But I don’t-“

His hands were on her mouth, and with a force that made her jaw ache, he held it open. Matt held a slice of cake on a golden fork in front of her briefly before shoving it in her mouth. William then forced her lips back together.

The cake was sweet and tasted wonderful, but Sarah tried to spit it out anyway. William held her head firmly, though, and eventually she swallowed.

“Good?” Matt asked, holding up another fork.

“What the hell-“

William grabbed her mouth again, Matt shoved the piece in, William closed her mouth, and she swallowed.

“Here comes another.”

Sarah shook her head, refusing to fall for the trick a third time.

“Seems as though we have a trouble maker.” The other Sarah sat on the table in front of her between the Caesar salad and pot roast.

“I’m sorry, madam,” William said. “We tried to persuade her.”

Sarah almost yelled at him for that, but caught Matt in her peripheral vision just in time to keep her mouth shut.

The other Sarah made a clicking noise with her tongue and wagged her finger.

“Naughty, naughty. It’s your birthday, and you’re not going to celebrate?”

Sarah glared at her. The other Sarah just smiled back. Then, she opened her mouth.

Sarah’s mouth opened too. She tried to close it, but no matter how much she wanted to, she couldn’t.

“Oh, that’s interesting,” Matt said. He put a piece of cake in Sarah’s mouth. The other Sarah closed her mouth, and Sarah’s mouth closed. The other Sarah made chewing motions and finally swallowed, and Sarah’s mouth followed it exactly.

“No,” Sarah said.

“Open wide,” the other Sarah laughed.

They force fed her even though she begged them not to, even though she started crying after the 38th piece, even after her mouth started bleeding because the other Sarah accidentally bit

her own tongue at one point while pretending to chew. Her stomach felt bloated, and she thought she was going to throw up, and still it came, piece after piece, until the icing began to taste like purple dye and her teeth felt rotted by the raspberry jam. It seemed like cake was in her throat, and Sarah didn't know how she kept swallowing, but she did.

"Please, stop."

"Hm. What do you think?" the other Sarah asked. In her lap sat the red fox, and she stroked it behind the ears.

"With all that sweat," the fox said, "she looks like a glazed donut."

"Ha!" The other Sarah laughed. "A jelly-filled, glazed donut."

"Exactly," the fox said. "I think I'll have a bite."

Sarah watched the fox slide around crockpots and silverware to stand in front of her. It looked down at her distended belly. She pleaded at it with her eyes, but it didn't seem to see her. The fox bit into her belly, and Sarah exploded.

Sarah was startled awake by the clacking of brooms and mops falling over. She began hyperventilating, her breaths coming out too fast, nothing getting until she was nearly dizzy. Then the fear hit her full force, and she covered her mouth with both hands, screaming loudly into them.

It took her nearly an hour to get her sweaty, trembling body to stumble toward the closet door and let her out. The teacher was nowhere in sight, but Sarah was fine with that. She looked and felt a mess and didn't want to have to explain why to anyone. They wouldn't believe her.

The clock in the hallway said it was one in the morning. Her mother was no doubt frantic with worry. Sarah should call her. Yes. Now, where had she left her book bag?

As Sarah glanced around for it, her eyes came to rest on a CCA poster for their Mental Health Awareness week. A sharp pain in her stomach made her fall back to her knees. She curled up on the ground and tried not to throw up.

Three hours later, a janitor coming in for the morning shift found her there.

Part 3

Hamburger mixed with minced mushrooms and chopped onions, formed into small patties and baked. Kit placed two per a plate and covered them with a drizzle of ketchup and Worchester sauce. On the side were glazed baby carrots and white rice.

It was Jason's favorite meal. Kit's mother had made it at least once a week as it was one of the few Japanese dishes that pleased her husband. Hisa's dishes, even made with the same ingredients every other parent bought at the same grocers, always had a different taste to them, a flavor that made them distinct from the sandwiches and cookies the other mothers send their kids to school with.

Kit had woken up this morning with the bad taste in her mouth once again. She hoped it wasn't another symptom, that it was just a temporary problem from sleeping the wrong way or crying before bed. She didn't want to give Jason another excuse to send her off to Dr. Nobbe. The one good thing about today was that Sarah hadn't shown up at school to bother her again. Ana heard that she was sick.

Serves her right, Kit thought.

Jason would be home any minute now. Kit set the carefully arranged dishes on opposite ends of the table, just as the front door opened.

“Smells good,” was the first thing Jason said as he walked in. “What’d you make for dinner?”

“Hamburger. There’s some for you, too.”

“Make too much?” He walked into the small dining area set-off from the kitchen. The set table made him pause.

“This is...” he looked over the silverware set on napkins, “...nice.”

Kit shrugged. “Yeah. I got bored, so I thought, why not? We haven’t really sat down for a meal for awhile.”

Jason smelled like hot tar. Suspicious.

“You came home early from school?”

“Headache got really bad.” It was a lie, of course. She would still be a little nauseous if that was the case and probably still stuck in her room. But it was Jason’s own fault for not knowing since he never asked questions or bothered to help her when she was sick.

Kit walked past him into the kitchen. “What do you want to drink?”

“Water will be fine,” he said, and she heard him pull out a chair.

Kit attempted to make small talk throughout the dinner, and it seemed as though Jason tried to reciprocate.

“Rachel’s mom is engaged, now,” she said.

“To whom?”

“Donny Setler. He owns the computer business on Welch.”

“Oh. Ok.”

And that would be the end of it. They, or at least Jason, had lost the art of conversation, the right phrases to keep it going. He smelled so boring and tired. It frustrated Kit because she

was doing all the work. Jason just ate, cutting up his meat and forking bits into his mouth, chewing slowly, swallowing slowly. He was driving her mad with his slowness.

“Kit?” Jason finally asked.

“Hm?”

“If this is about Dr. Nobbe again, look, I just-“

“It’s not.” Kit had been thinking about it since this morning, but she wasn’t sure what Jason would say. Well, it looked like it was now or never. She took a deep breath and put her fork down on her napkin.

“I want to meet my birth father.”

Jason stared at her.

Dammit, Kit thought. She had planned the conversation out while making the dinner. She was supposed to ease into it, starting with the easy, “I was hoping to talk to you about something,” and moving on from there. Well, she’d said it, and there was no taking it back now.

“I’ll be eighteen next month,” she continued when Jason didn’t answer. “An adult,” she emphasized. “So then you can release the information Mom gave you, and I can see if I can get into contact with him.”

Jason’s eyes went hard. Something sour filled the room, smelling like too much hot sauce poured over a steamer. It nearly made Kit gag.

“Why do you want to meet him?”

Kit’s eyes narrowed back.

“Because he’s my father.”

Jason grimaced.

“Why bring this up now?”

“Because I’m not crazy.” Kit’s hands clenched at the silverware. “Maybe it’s genetic. There might be something in his family history that can explain why I’m like this. Why these things started to happen.”

That was the truth. Part of her had always wanted to meet her father, but now, with the smells, it had become extremely important that she see him. If there was someone else out there in the world like her, someone who could tell what people were feeling just by the air around them, then maybe she wouldn’t start to have doubts that Jason and Sarah and the doctors were right.

“You don’t need to see him to get that information,” Jason said. “We can get a court order to look at his medical history.”

Kit couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“You don’t want me to meet him?”

“You don’t need to.”

“But he’s my father.”

“*I’m* your father.”

Kit smirked. There were words in her, words that she had wanted to say for a long time, but the right opportunity had never presented itself. Now she felt them rising up in her throat, begging to be released. She could not stop herself from saying them.

“No, you’re not. You’re not my biological father, and you don’t even act like a real dad towards me. You’re a terrible father.”

There was relief in finally saying that, as if a great pressure had been released. Kit found herself jittery, almost trembling, because she had spoken something forbidden, had put this man in his place.

But that feeling was short lived as it was superseded by Jason's very real reaction.

His face turned redder than Kit knew it could. The smell in the room changed from sour to almost nothing, like a flame that burned so hotly and purely that the only scent it gave off was heat. The swelling pride in Kit's chest dropped into her stomach.

"This is what you say to me?" Jason was loud without shouting, a tone he had only taken with Kit a few times before. "You think school is free? You think this food you made tonight is free? You think I leave this house every day to sit in some park and twiddle my thumbs? Well, Ms. Smart Ass?"

Kit's eyes widened. This wasn't how he was supposed to answer. Jason was an adult. He was supposed to act like one.

"I," she said. "I didn't mean--"

"You didn't think, is what you didn't do!" And now he really was shouting. "What about the medical expenses? You think that's cheap?"

Now he wasn't even being fair, and that made Kit angry.

"You think I wanted to be sick?" Her face felt warm, and her eyes began to sting, a prelude to crying. "You think I like getting headaches all the time and smelling weird things? I can't even go out with my friends! I have to stay inside this horrible house all the time and...and..."

Kit was crying, and she hated herself for it. But it seemed like only now she was beginning to realize how upset she was about the last few months, how much she missed her freedom and her friends and just living a normal life. The things she said out loud were things she hadn't really thought about, but as they came out, she knew they were all true.

“I just want to graduate high school and have fun, and I can’t!” she shouted at Jason.

“And you aren’t helping. You don’t even care about it.”

Jason was quiet while she sat there and cried. He smelled like guilt and frustration, and Kit hated that she could still smell him even as she was being bowled over by her own emotions. She stood up and started quickly toward her room.

“Kit-“

“I want to be alone,” she said and kept going.

The posters in her room crinkled from the air currents as she opened and shut the door quickly before falling dramatically onto her bed. In her head, Kit felt like a character in a movie, and she pulled her pillow to her face because that’s what people in dramas did when they were upset and crying on their beds.

She cried for another good fifteen minutes before she completely lost energy. It felt good, actually, to be so empty; she didn’t feel emotions, and the only thing she smelled was the cotton of her pillowcase. Kit lay on her bed in a half consciousness, aware only of how bone-weary and relaxed she felt. Even the moistness of her face felt refreshing.

Eventually the headache reminded Kit it was still there. Though Jason’s scents, while intense, hadn’t been very unpleasant in their smells, the crying added to her usually fragile state. Kit moaned as her eyes pounded, finally getting off the bed to pop a few pain relievers.

She didn’t have any water in the room, and the pills stuck to the sides of her throat as she forced them down, leaving her with a bitter taste on the back of her tongue. The dresser mirror reflected a pathetic image. Puffy eyes, red cheeks, soggy skin.

The headache only continued to get worse, even after she shut off the lights and pulled the comforter over her head. Her body was still exhausted, but negative thoughts continued to

break through the pain in her head so that even in the moments of physical relief, she felt anxious and pressed in.

Idiot. Jason's such an idiot.

Why does he care if I see my father or not?

He should be happy he can get rid of me so easily.

I'm not his real daughter.

Dammit, dammit, dammit. Why did I have to cry?

As she allowed these thoughts to swirl through her, Kit's headache hit her with a force that brought her to her knees. She gripped edge of her dresser, unaware of anything but the pain that made her head one very clear, sharp foci of hurt that radiated in trembling aches throughout her body. Her animal brain thought she was going to die, and an irrational part of her was fine with that if it meant stopping this feeling.

And then, nothing.

The pain stopped. Kit's chest heaved as she took in deep breaths, but otherwise it was if the headache had never been. In fact, she felt great. Her body was relaxed but energized, and there was a confidence in her arms and legs that she wasn't sure what to do with.

She stood up.

Wait.

She hadn't meant to stand up. There had been no thought or desire to stand, and yet her body had done it. And it continued to move without her input. She saw her right hand lift up, felt it touch her forehead as it brushed away the hair in her face. Her arms lifted, her hands linked together, and she stretched with a deeply satisfying feeling.

What's going on? Kit wanted to panic, but panicking required physical feelings in addition to mental thoughts. While her mind knew something was wrong, the lack of tight muscles, of adrenaline, of short breath, prevented her lower brain from really understanding why she continued to send signals that there was a problem.

It's all cool, her animal brain told her. We're not in danger. Stop worrying.

And still her body moved without prompting. It turned for the door, and Kit caught a glimpse of someone in the mirror. A young woman, beautiful and elegant, flitted into her vision and then suddenly disappeared.

Is that me? It was strange how she knew she should be alarmed but couldn't actually feel any sort of worry. But then she was out the door and moving down the hallway, back towards the kitchen. She could hear voices in the living room and then canned laughter. Jason must be watching TV.

Just shrugs off our conservation like it's nothing, Kit thought bitterly. Her body seemed to react to her anger, flushing with what felt like anticipation. There was no smell from herself, however. Kit realized she had become somewhat dependent on letting the scents tell her what to expect from others.

Not that this was someone else. This was her. But it felt like someone else.

Her body slowed down as it approached the sound. She glanced around the corner and saw Jason sitting on the couch, completely zoned out as the TV played in front of him. The corners of her mouth tugged upward, and Kit found herself moving faster than she thought possible. The next moment, she was outside the front door, knocking.

Jason didn't answer the first time or the second, and by the time he finally did come to the door, Kit found herself pounding hard, the flat of her fist stinging. He opened the door glowering.

"Yes?"

"I'm very sorry." Was that her voice? It sounded deeper. Smoother. "I know it's late, and I hate to bother you."

Kit paused in the conversation to let him reassure her. Jason didn't answer.

"Anyway," she clasped her hands behind her back, pushing her chest out, "my car and cell died at the same time. My friend always yells at me for not charging it, but I keep forgetting. Do you mind if I use your phone to call her? I really need to get to work. I'll just have to do something about the car later."

Jason sighed, then stepped to the side to let her in.

Some part of Kit was annoyed, but she couldn't tell what she was annoyed with. It seemed like Jason. But the part that was annoyed, like her body, didn't feel like a real part of her. It was like a floating emotion that came from some other source that was also inside her.

She stood in the entry while Jason went to find his cell phone. When he came back, Kit accidentally brushed her fingers against his as he handed it over. Jason shifted uncomfortably, and Kit felt pleased.

Wait, pleased?

Gross. Ew. No. Kit wanted to pull back, to run and leave this situation. Just what was she doing? Was this some weird dream?

"Thanks so much," she said. She turned her side to Jason as if to be discreet and dialed a number she didn't know. Someone answered after the third ring.

“Hello?”

The voice was female. Kit covered her mouth and the receiver with one hand to muffle the sound.

“Hi, Amy,” Kit said.

“Who?”

“It’s Kara.”

“I think you have the wrong number.”

“My car broke down outside of Wallace Street. It’s probably the battery again. Can you come get me for work?”

“Um, listen, there’s no Amy here-“

“Yeah, I’ll just figure something out with it later. I can’t be late for work again. Eric already has enough issues with me as it is.”

“Are you trying to get out of a date or something?”

“Uh-huh.” Kit glanced over at Jason and smiled politely.

“Oooo...ok, well, sure, uh, Kara? I’ll be there to pick you up really soon.”

“Thanks so much. I’ll be sure to pay you back with some cookies or something.”

“No problem. Bye now.”

“Bye.”

Kit hung up and gave the phone back to Jason.

“Thanks. Do you mind if I hang out in here while I wait? I hate to impose even more on you, but it’s kind of cold outside.”

“No, that’s fine.” Jason put his phone in his pocket. “If all you needed was a ride, I could give you one.”

“Don’t worry about it. Amy is on her way here anyway.”

Kit hugged herself and looked around the room.

“Nice place. You a lawyer or something?”

“No.” Jason smiled awkwardly. “I’m in insurance.” What he meant, Kit knew, was that he worked at a desk all day managing a department at a nationwide company.

“Really?” Kit smiled back warmly. “I’m studying to be an accountant. I guess it’s not really the same thing. Do you deal with numbers all day?”

“All day.” Jason nodded. “Would you like to come inside and sit down? How long will your ride be?”

“That would be great. My shift is at a bakery. I stand for, like, eight hours straight. It kills my calves.”

Jason led her toward the kitchen, and that’s when Kit smelled it. A subtle change in the air, a hint of some emotion she didn’t understand. It smelled like oranges and white rice and wet stone.

The lights in the house went off.

“What the hell?” Jason said.

Kit felt herself glide away from him. Her body, still out of her control, was now moving in a way she didn’t understand. Despite the darkness, she could see fairly well, at least the shape of objects. Everything seemed higher up. The couch loomed over her as she jumped onto the cushions and crouched behind the armrest. She coiled there, her body trembling with excitement.

It was time to play, some part of her said.

“Hello?” Jason called from the dark. She watch him grope towards the wall. “Kara? Are you there?”

Something in the darkness moaned.

Kit’s body quivered, nearly delirious with anticipation. Soon she would be avenged, some part of her thought.

“Kara? Was that you?”

There was another moan. It came from the kitchen. It was followed by a gasp and then heavy breathing.

“...Kara?”

A spotlight suddenly came on. Abstractly, Kit remembered that her kitchen didn’t have spotlights. Yet her body told her this was perfectly acceptable, to just go with the current reality and worry about the details later.

Writhing in the light on the kitchen table were two figures. They looked like human shadows, the edges of their shapes blurring at the edges when the light hit them. One lay on the table, the other bent over it, their waists connected. They were intangible, their bodies bleeding into each other, sometimes parts going completely through. Their hand connected and became one, then separated back into two distinct shapes. The edges of the top’s knees grew out of the bottom’s hips and then disappeared back into the curves of their bodies. When the top bent over, the lines of their chests melted together in the spotlight. Depending on the angle, Kit could see through them to the other side of the kitchen like looking through muddy water.

Jason stared at the forms as they gasped and moaned and moved.

“What...what is this?” he asked. “Who are you?”

The bottom form began to gain substance. At first the edges refined, then defined themselves into curves of breasts and hips and cheeks. Then the shadows began to melt off those curves, leaving behind milk tea skin and almond eyes.

Oh my god, Kit thought. Jason's eyes bulged.

The bottom shadow left, and in its place was the form of her mother, naked on the kitchen table as the other shadow continued to fuck her. Her dead mother. The mother Kit last remembered at ten years old, laying in bed, sallow cheeked, skin covered with the sheen of sickness.

Stop it! Stopstopstopstopstopstop...

The forms on the table wavered for a moment, flickered in and out of reality like a television with bad reception. Some part of her mind became angry, and then Kit felt as if she had been hit hard. Mentally stunned, she watched as her mother became more solid.

"God, yes!" her mother yelled. "Do that again."

Jason continued to watch, and Kit wondered if he was being held by the same force she was. He wouldn't just let this happen.

Do something! she urged him. *Get him off of her!*

The top form became defined as well. Soon the shadow was running down its body, revealing pasty white skin covered with brown freckles and nothing else. The creature was humanoid, but it had no defining features otherwise. No face. No hair. No wrinkles or lines. It was as if someone had taken human skin and stretched it over the form of a doll.

It made noises, though, breathing harshly as it thrust its hips, grabbing at Kit's mother's shoulders, breasts, and sides. Kit felt ill.

Stop it, she asked one last time.

Jason snapped out of whatever mental fugue he had gone into. Shouting, he tackled the thing off Kit's mother.

"Jason!" Hisa yelled, sitting up, and though Kit had seen her mother naked before, had just watched her having sex with...with something...the full frontal view just added to her distress.

Jason and the thing wrestled on the ground of the kitchen for a moment, but Jason quickly gained the upper hand. He straddled the thing and began punching its head.

"How dare you!" he yelled. "How dare you!"

"Jason. Stop it." Hisa didn't move from the table, just continued to stare down at the fight. Her face had gone neutral, and her words seemed half-hearted.

"Don't fight," she said deadpan, the way Ms. Slater might announce the beginning of class.

Jason kept punching. His fists made a sharp sound like in the movies. The thing struggled but didn't hit back, seeming more concerned with escape than winning.

"You don't touch my wife." Jason's chest was heaving, and his face was red. "You son of a bitch, how dare you."

"Here, honey." Hisa handed Jason an axe. Kit's mind fractured again as it tried to connect this reality, where an axe could appear out of nowhere, with a reality where she knew that wasn't possible. Jason took the axe without looking and began swinging. Kit thought of when she was eight and had accidentally watched a part of *The Shining* and how terrified she had been that night, watching the door, waiting for Johnny to come bursting through.

The thing came apart like putty. Where Jason swung the axe, pieces would fall off, neatly cleaved like soft dough, no blood, no bone, no muscle. Jason hacked at its head, then its

arm, and seemed to enjoy especially cutting up its penis and pelvis. Eventually the thing stopped moving and lay on the kitchen floor in twenty or thirty pieces.

“Good job, honey,” Hisa said. Kit realized then that she had never heard her mom call Jason “honey.”

Jason stood next to the table, his breathing labored, his shirt clinging to him, sweat dampening in circles beneath his arms.

“Why?” he asked. “Why did you do it?”

Hisa shrugged.

“Because.”

Jason turned to stare at her.

“That’s it?”

Hisa stared plainly back at him.

“You weren’t enough, I guess.”

Kit moved. She jumped over the arm of the couch and trotted over to the kitchen. Her gait was different; something felt off about her legs. Jason didn’t seem to notice her as she began nosing through the parts on the floor.

I’m a dog? she thought. Somehow it still surprised her though she felt at this point she shouldn’t be surprised by anything.

Finding the piece it wanted, her body sat down and barked at Jason. He finally stopped staring at Hisa and looked down. He frowned, then placed a hand on the side of his face.

“A fox?” he said. “What...what’s going on?”

Kit grinned up at him. Recognition crossed Jason’s face.

“You’re...”

The piece at Kit's feet moved.

Jason stumbled back, dropping the axe on the floor. The pieces of the thing quivered around him and Kit like blobs of fat that had been shaken. Parts of them began stretching upwards and outwards. They molded over themselves, legs forming, heads, eyes, arms, hands and fingers. When they were finished, two dozen infants sat on the floor of the kitchen where the thing had been. Some were Japanese, some were black, some were white, some Hispanic, some male, some female, some neither. None of them looked like Jason.

Kit was terrified.

Her body was delighted.

One of the babies looked up into Jason's terrified face. It smiled and pointed up at him.

"Dada!"

As one, the babies all turned and looked at him. As one, they smiled.

"Dada!" they said, and the volume of all their voices shook the room.

"No." Jason backed into the cupboards. "I'm not your dad."

"Dada!" the babies cried and began crawling toward him.

"Get away." He pressed himself against the wood.

"Aw, aren't they so cute?" Hisa said, scooping one up into her lap.

"Dada. Dada," the babies chanted, grabbing onto Jason's legs, tugging on his pants.

Those that couldn't reach him sat down and held up their arms, asking to be picked up.

"I'm not your father," he told them. He tried to move out of the way, but the babies had a tight grip on his legs. Instead, he fell to the side, landing on his right arm. Kit heard a crunch, and Jason cried out.

The babies descended on him as a pack, crawling on top of him, grabbing whatever was available, a shoe, a finger, a lock of hair. They tugged and hit and laughed while Jason struggled beneath them.

“Dada!”

“Dada!”

Kit knew it was time. She didn’t know what for, but she walked over to Jason and the baby horde. Carefully, she picked her way over the squirming, shrieking infants until she was face to face with Jason.

Beneath the mass, he stared up at her in terror.

“Kara?”

She grinned again.

“You look delicious,” she said.

She bit into his cheek.

Jason tried to yell out, but with her pinching the skin of his face, his voice came out warbled. And then, he passed out.

Kit felt the muscle come apart in her teeth, tasted the blood on her tongue. She pulled her head back, and the flesh ripped from Jason’s face. She chewed at it and swallowed.

“Wonderful,” she said, licking her lips.

What are you? the real Kit asked from within her body.

“Vengeance,” the fox replied. “Now he won’t ever bother you again.”

Kit realized that kitchen was back to normal now. There was no trace of her mother, the babies, or the ax. Even Jason was perfectly fine, the hole in his cheek gone as if it hadn’t been

there in the first place. If it weren't for the taste of blood on her tongue, Kit wouldn't believe any of it had happened.

Oh god. Kit would have shuddered if she could. She remembered the taste in her mouth when she woke up. *Have you done this to anyone else?*

The fox laughed.

What kind of monster are you? Kit asked.

"That was a good meal," the fox said, ignoring her question. "But I don't think it was filling enough. I think you're just about ripe enough now."

Kit felt pain. Not a muted, bodiless pain but real, searing agony. Her head pounded and there was an enormous pressure inside of her skull, as if her brain was growing and pushing against the bone. She thought her skull was going to split in half.

There was a sharp cracking noise, and Kit felt as though she had been hit with a very heavy object. The pressure was gone. There was no more pain, just the sensation of falling and then hitting the living room floor.

Four black paws padded into Kit's vision, past her face and disappeared as they went up toward her head. She felt a liquid running down her forehead but didn't think about moving. It was easier to lie there. She was becoming drowsy, closed her eyes, and eventually lost consciousness.

Jason woke up with a gasp. His eyes darted frantically around, looking for the monster babies, Hisa, the fox. They were gone. The lights were on, and the kitchen looked the same as it had when Kara first came in.

Kara. She was a fox. Or a monster.

Jason wiped a hand down his face and took a deep breath.

Bad dream. There was no fox or Kara or babies. You had a seizure or something and passed out.

Despite this, Jason was trembling as he climbed to his feet. The sight in the living room made him go still.

Kit was lying on the ground. Her head was split open, the skull broken along the joints to leave a gaping hole. The fox had its snout buried in the hole.

Jason whimpered, though it sounded more like a rabbit being strangled. The fox jumped, then quickly turned its head to look at him. Its fur was stained with blood.

They regarded each other for a moment.

“What?” Jason asked.

The fox licked its lips. It then glanced back at Kit’s body for a moment, surveying for any leftover morsel. Satisfied, it turned and ran.

“No!” he yelled.

Jason chased after it, down the hallway and out the backdoor. By the time he caught up, the fox was already across the backyard. It stopped at the tree line and looked back once more, its eyes glowing beneath the moon. Then it darted among the trees and disappeared.