

## Spell

“You don’t have to tell me if it makes you feel — if it makes you feel,” I tell him.

“Hell no, it doesn’t make me feel,” he laughs. “At all. It’s just over between Julie and me, and that’s all.” He puts his glass to his lips, and I watch the glass go to hand go to arm go to shoulder.

My hair grows down my neck for this moment, and has been growing for him, for months.

Last spring I saw them at a party, holding each other up, he swallowing the light, she throwing it back. And they looked altogether good, ripe to splitting, sweet to powder, and ticking, ticking. No one would’ve thought.

But I burned candles to bring about this breaking-up, for months.

We will never go to parties. If we do, we’ll send the guests spinning home, their nails ground into their palms, to waiting lovers. A stomach full.

When did he and Julie come to an end? He tells it to me this way. “It started right about the time summer broke. Remember? The trees in her front yard were full of those seed pods, like chocolate shavings. You know?”

I say, “I know.” It was a hot summer. Our summers will send grass flashing into fire, concrete buckling, make tires shuck their tread on the smoking interstate.

“It happened when some farmer decided enough was enough, and shot his wife and kids, all heavy and shining with the weight of all that, all that, all that . . . I don’t know,” he says.

“It’s okay.”

“I think I’m drunk.”

“I think so,” I say, and take his drink from him. We will have no need for anything but water, water.

The phantom crying, the aching arms, for months. All classic symptoms of a woman without her baby. Don’t laugh. Spells work.

“Maybe I should leave, go someplace new. Make a clean start. What do you think?”

I think it’s a straight shot to Missouri, your throat. And a further stretch to Indiana. Your mouth. We can go to the border for illegal fireworks and set them off inches from our hands.

I’ve been stockpiling fire, for months.

“That bitch.” He shakes his head, forehead on the cloudy bar. I take his hand. “You know, the day we split up the grass was as green as . . . something green. Stop me if I’m making you —”

“No, you’re not making me.”

Planting fingernails, arranging shoes, herbs from the co-op in poultice bags.

He brought me to their house once. She sat under those same trees. She was knitting, keeping off the devil's playground. And who could resist her invitation: to come on over here and sit down beside me?

"Still and all, she was quite a woman." His arm around me. "She could drive me to distraction. Just thinking of her could make me go harder than bone. God. Imagine me saying that to you. I'm sorry. But you've always been so good to me. What do you think?"

You will turn me to cartilage. I'll bend for you. I can see it, afternoons drawn out slowly, slick light through drawn shades.

"Here," he whispers, "why didn't I ever go for you?"

Now his breath is here for the taking. We will always breathe the same air, for I've been waiting to breathe, for months.

by Jennie VerSteeg